Thinking and Engaging with the Decolonial: A Conversation Between Walter D. Mignolo and Wanda Nanibush

This conversation is part of an evolving discussion that has unfolded via a series of public events and seminars held in Toronto over the past two years and following the reflections that Walter D. Mignolo offered in his 2016 essay ‘Coloniality is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality’.1 The Afterall editorial team invited Mignolo for a second time to continue to discuss these issues with another thinker deeply engaged in the questions and politics of decolonisation: Anishinaabe curator, image and word warrior, and community organiser from Beausoleil First Nation Wanda Nanibush, who is also co-editor of this edition of Afterall. The intention is to offer a kaleidoscopic reading and thinking of the decolonial that, we hope, is captured in what follows. Animated by their own histories, backgrounds and scholarships, both thinkers offer their views on topics that include diverse modes of subjugation, distinct colonial wounds and the meaning and practices of sovereignty and ‘delinking’.

Wanda Nanibush (writing from Palestine): The prefix ‘de-’ in decolonisation means to remove, reduce or produce the opposite of colonisation. It seems the first step would be to understand colonisation as the theft of land and liberty from Indigenous peoples. This connects any process of decolonisation to the prefix ‘re-’ in restoration, reparation and restitution of Indigenous lands, bodies, cultures and communities. For this reason, decolonisation means letting Indigenous people lead. Decolonisation involves unlearning and changing what colonialism is based on in terms of private property, manifest destiny, ‘discovery’, Enlightenment, Eurocentrism, Cartesian dualism, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, positivism, sexism, racism, individualism, extraction, classism, violence and control. Decolonisation should challenge all that is thought to be proper and normal in current settler colonial states. Decolonisation involves a centring of Indigenous ways of being, knowing and loving. In this we assert sovereignty, no longer asking for recognition of it.

Walter D. Mignolo (writing from Mexico): I agree with you in the meaning that you give to decolonisation regarding the history of land dispossession since the early sixteenth century in the Americas. However, my concern is not with colonialism but with coloniality. In the decolonial frame in which I operate, the major and vital move is to delink from the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP), a machine that generates injustices, disavowals, silences at all levels. Delinking from coloniality (shorthand for CMP), means delinking from the enunciation in which knowledge is fabricated and managed (languages, institutions, actors) to legitimise dispossession and control in all the domains of the instituted (politics, economy, knowledge, racism and sexism, and the ontologisation of nature, all of which impinges on land dispossession). A few years ago, I participated in a workshop in a fine event in Toronto focussing on Decolonial Aesthetics. At the end, a young, white Canadian man approached me and asked: ‘I am a white male Canadian – if I delink, where do I go?’ He had learned from the workshop that after delinking from coloniality, many participants had a place to go: the land that was expropriated from the First Nations, for example. But, to what could a white male

1 Public events included the symposium ‘Kinship, Community, Comunidad’, organised by contributing editors Wanda Nanibush and Charles Stankievech, and the 2016 panel discussion ‘Global Indigenous?’, both of which were supported by Afterall, the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto, and the Art Gallery of Ontario where Nanibush is the inaugural Assistant Curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art. See also Walter D. Mignolo, ‘Coloniality is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality’, Afterall, no.43, Spring/Summer 2017, pp.39–45.
Canadian who happened to be born, without asking, in a settler family, could relink? I ask myself the same question: to what could a white male from Argentina, born and nurtured in a large family of Italian immigrants, relink? Without myself knowing or asking, I encountered coloniality in this way: the corporal sensing of it first and the semantic and theoretical meaning later. There are many directions that each of our relinkings and re-existings can take, given that this process lies in what unites the human species: our bodies. It is through our bodies that reconnecting to land and earth is possible and necessary. It is imperative to delink from the principles of a civilisation that trained us to block our bodies in order to give privilege to our minds, simultaneously with land conceived and instituted as private property.

The non-Eurocentric diversity that CMP attempts to domesticate is neither reducible to Eurocentric uni-versality nor to a non-Eurocentric uni-versality. Decoloniality takes us to the kingdom of pluri-versality. The task ahead lies in the ‘diversity of the common work’. All of us who have been touched by coloniality, who have felt and are aware of colonial wounds, are being called by decoloniality. It is the healing of colonial wounds, and rebuilding a world over the ruins of a civilisation that is crumbling and can only exist through transforming the magnificent energy of living into ‘natural resources’ and ‘human resources’.

WN: I fundamentally agree with the notion of delinking and that decoloniality is an epistemic and ontological endeavour for everyone to ‘unwind ourselves from the white words we have become’ as Gerald Vizenor once said. It is very much about the ties between capitalism, colonialism, racism, heterosexuality, rationalism and a universality that hides its particularity. My problem is in thinking that we are all subjugated by it, and all working our own paths to an ‘outside’ that will create a ‘pluri-versality’. We must be careful to understand that we are subjugated differently.

The impacts of colonialism are different for those bodies that benefit from it than those whose labour, bodies, emotions, lands and children are taken without permission. Is there not a difference that the theory of decoloniality needs to account for? How does it account for this difference? Thinking that ‘Europeans are indigenous’ – what does that do to those who experience CMP as theft of their bodies, lands, families, futures and children?

I am thinking about the context of Palestine because that’s where I am physically while I write. I think the physical occupation in Palestine makes the importance of who is enunciating so visible. Is the form of delinking and decoloniality the same for Israel as it is for Palestine? This question is related to your discussion of the naturalisation of nation-states and capitalism as our only options. Isn’t the point of nation-states to be vehicles for capitalism? Most nations that have been on the winning side of settler colonialism function like corporations more than governments. The national project here in Israel/Palestine is still about the creation of wealth for some and poverty for others through the expropriation of lands rich in resources. Both countries claim they are fighting for the freedom of their people, but only one country is able to assert their freedom. Today, isn’t the failure of independence in many African countries tied to the fact that resource extraction is still following the same colonial path as at the height of imperialism, a path that does not benefit Africans? The global powers still extract from those with less power.

There are contradictions everywhere. Here, because of Islam, homosexuality is banned and yet finds spaces to exist and be accepted but not without fear of reprisal. In Israel

Words like return, resurgence and rewriting all have embedded in them a colonial idea of time where we have not had continuity and contemporaneity or even modernity, even if otherwise than its European versions.

2 I was born in Argentina, from two Italian families and in a region (La Pampa Gringa Chica) where Italian immigrants landed.

3 By body, I mean the water and the minerals in our cells, the air, the food and the light it needs to survive from birth to death. Our body also needs to co-exist with other bodies, not only to collaborate in our biological survival, but in coordinating our behaviour to achieve our preservation.

4 Colonial wounds are not of the same scale and therefore felt in the same way. But all are inflicted by the same devise: the CMP.

homosexuality is not completely acceptable socially but has found space under the guise of being part of a modern democracy. The more oppressed a people are seems to coincide with a hardening against the internally different.

To fight a bigger power, one often feels the need to be one as a ‘people’. And yet if we resist that kind of nationalism in the name of decoloniality, resistance remains diffuse and small. I believe in this – that power can be taken from the CMP simply by coming from underneath and robbing it of its base so it collapses from underneath. In a way, it can be like an empty signifier attaching itself to any-body. But some people cannot wait for that because life and death is a daily experience. Doesn’t that also need to be accounted for?

WM: Thinking that Europeans are indigenous means, for me, that Europeans are people like anybody else and not the prototype of human and humanity that they invented for themselves and used as measuring stick to classify and identify ‘Indians’ first in the Americas and then since 1640 ‘Indigenous’, the non-European population of the planet who were on the land that they wanted. The indigenous were ranked as lesser humans, sexually and racially. And that is racism, an epistemic classification of people to control, dominate and dispose. Indigenous is a European invention to classify non-European populations. It is defined in the dictionary as ‘born or originating in a particular place’. As in the case of the Third World, at some point indigenous people appropriated the name to their own geopolitical affirmation. However, my intention was not to let modern/Eurocentric politics of naming get away with it. Instead, I intended to highlight that their own indigeneity was silenced when, racially, they name as indigenous the non-European dwellers of the land they were appropriating and expropriating.

Regarding your point about the differences between colonial wounds and decolonial enactments, I have always been very careful – although perhaps unsuccessful – in saying that my thinking on decoloniality is grounded in the immigrant consciousness. I am fully aware that in the Americas, the colonial subjugation (in your words) and the colonial wounds (in my words) are significantly different among First Nations in South America and Central America, Africa and the Caribbean to the US and Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Different times, different imperial powers. Africans and the African diaspora also carry a different intensity of the colonial wound, and so do immigrants (and of course, refugees). It is not my intention to say that all colonial wounds are the same, or that all subjugated people are or should be responded to in the same way. All I am saying is that the CMP is a machine that generates injustices and colonial wounds. These wounds were and are inflicted on many people on the planet. The fact that coloniality is a consequence of imperial global designs doesn’t mean that all touched by it are converted into uniform human beings. For example, the way in which ‘Two-Spirit’ people respond to modern/colonial heteronormativity (theological-Christian and secular-liberal) is different from how non-indigenous LGBT are enacting transnational perspectives to decolonise sexuality.

WN: I think our difference is that I use words after re-centring Anishinaabe ways of being and thinking rather than from within a critique of Eurocentrism. Yes, you are right that the dictionary definition does in fact mean that to somewhere everyone is indigenous. It is also true that indigenous is a word not of our own creation, much like most geopolitical markers in the world today. However, I did not appropriate ‘indigenous’. Instead, I use ‘Indigenous’, and many Indigenous peoples around the world worked very hard to have an open dialogue of their rights at the United Nations (UN). To me the UN definition and what later led to UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) is the work of Indigenous resistance and an active creation of pathways for our own ways of being in the world. Indigenous with a ‘capital I’ is about sovereignty movements, land rights, the rights of the earth, return to Indigenous women’s role in our societies and much more dreaming that cannot be contained in a policy document. It seems there are differences we
name with the word Indigenous that is not part of the European definition and that create breaks in a colonial framework. Of course, there are limits to rights-based ways of thinking – we compromise using that language when a truly Indigenous point of view speaks more of obligations and responsibilities. Our responsibility for and to the earth is transformed into policies that give ‘human’ rights to the earth. I acknowledge Indigenous doesn’t exactly exist – we are specific philosophies and peoples, but our place within the CMP is named by the word Indigenous in a way your definition denies, even though you are coming to it from the position of delinking and relinking from CMP. It is true that ‘whiteness’ as a way of being can attach itself to any-body – including the Indigenous – as each struggles to have the same power in the same way. And yet there is still a difference. White supremacy is real and saying Europeans are indigenous sidesteps that, even while it may address the problem of time (indigenous as outside time) and eurocentrism (power to name and categorise).

WM: I agree, that is that: you embody Anishanaabe ways of thinking, being, doing. I do not. And I cannot situate myself as Aymara, Quechua or Maya-Kiché. We are inscribed differently in the CMP and so we respond differently. I situate myself as an immigrant (immigrant consciousness) of Italian descent in South America at the time of the Cold War: a Third World configuration that distinguished the Eurocentric critiques of Eurocentrism from the Third World (Africa, Asia, South/Central America and the Caribbean) critiques of Eurocentrism. This is crucial to me since the concept of coloniality (a decolonial concept) emerged precisely as de-centred critiques from the former Third World’s experiences in South America. There has to be difference between the meaning of decolonisation (as decoloniality) for you and for me, and I welcome it. I do not see this as a ‘conflict of interpretation’ in modern Western epistemology where the struggle is to win the truth, that is truth without quotation marks. For me, decoloniality means to do, think and live in a world with ‘truth’ (note the quotation marks).

In my previous comments I try to underscore the different trajectories that decoloniality takes around the planet since, in my thinking, the entire planet was and still is affected by modernity/coloniality. As I said in my previous piece in Afterall, following the felicitous expression of one of my graduate students, ‘coloniality is not over, it is all over’. In my case, I learned to see the world from my own family experience and its role in society. My father was a jornalero, and then we moved to a small town so I could go to school, where he became a ‘proletarian’. Without playing the victim – had my father been landowner, a medical doctor or a lawyer, I would have learned to see the world from a different perspective – it was perhaps for this reason that in my university years I joined Marxist groups, where I soon learned that my fellow Marxist peers had upper- or middle-class backgrounds. I believe that this disappointment helped me to embrace the general ideas of decolonisation when I encountered it. Since not everyone is subjugated in the same way, not everyone could submit to one universal model of decoloniality. Yours and my relation to indigeneity, land and decoloniality are different, as is our relationship to the gender dichotomy that modernity imposed on all of us.

Now, I want to draw attention to the genealogy of thought in which I am myself inscribed. Aníbal Quijano, to whom many of us working on the project modernity/coloniality/decoloniality are indebted, is neither of indigenous nor African descent. He belongs to the Peruvian nation-state and to ‘Latin’ America. His last name is clearly derived from earlier Spanish settlers and their Creoles and Mestizo as descendants. Quijano himself is largely indebted to José Carlos Mariátegui, who was also not indigenous, but to whom colonisation and the question of the ‘Indian’ and the question of land were all interconnected. As a Marxist, Mariátegui brought to the surface issues of land, racism and indigeneity. He was later marginalised by his peers who believed that Marxism was meant to deal with class and the industrial revolution and not with the legacies of early colonisation. Both the liberal state and Marxists mutated ‘Indians’ into ‘peasants’.

Why does an immigrant like myself find Quijano’s concept of coloniality conceptually illuminating and emotionally revealing? Beyond his connections with colonial legacies, at the same time that Quijano came up with the concept of coloniality as the darker side of Western modernity, there was another pressing debate (1960s to 1980s), namely the Third World (not even the second!). We were placed between Western Europe, the US (and perhaps

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7 Someone who works for people who own the land.
8 He did not grow up in indigenous ayllus or African gran comarca.
9 Quijano is also indebted to José María Arguedas, an anthropologist and writer of European descent who was nurtured by an Indian woman and who spent his infancy speaking Quechua with his indigenous friends.
Canada) and the indigenous and African population in South America, Central America and the Caribbean. Having been classified as people of the Third World was a particular kind of colonial wound that had a profound impact during my formative years. Nowadays, some of my (jealous?) critics ask about my decolonial positioning while working at Duke University. In my arrival to this country in 1974, I became an immigrant once again. From being a sudaka while studying in France, I was there received as ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latino’. These experiences shaped my understanding of what Quijano meant by ‘delinking’ (desenganche). Delinking from what – from the assumptions, principles and accumulations of meaning built upon the promises of modernity.

The second step of delinking is relinking. Relinking with what? According to Afro-Colombian thinker, activist and artist, Adolfo Alban Achinte to relink means to re-exist: not just in the sense of resistance but fundamental re-existence, for which there is no blueprint. It would be imperial to think that the necessary creativity once you delink from conceptual and emotional frameworks has been already mapped. It is up to the delinkers, so to speak, to work on their own relinking through their own memories, trajectories and forms of domination. However, I would say today that it is the essence to relink with earth, with Pachamama (mother earth) as it is voiced in the South American Andes.

This exchange makes clear that decolonisation (as decoloniality) in the twenty-first century is not a master plan for liberation but a myriad of delinkings to re-emerge and re-exists in whatever communal we (each of us) find ourselves wounded by coloniality, which again are not the same for everyone.

WN: The way we are both attempting to think the ‘world’s’ experience of colonialism and modernity – as inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing and yet subjugating differently – is not a closed conversation and would need more time to continue. There is still an unfortunate aspect to the production of knowledge that remains colonial today, which we need to delink from and that I have been trying to disclose through the use of active terminology. My use of the ‘re-’ is purposely political – the words restoration, reparation and restitution all have the uneven political field of colonialism embedded in them. Words like return, resurgence and rewriting all have embedded in them a colonial idea of time where we have not had continuity and contemporaneity or even modernity, even if otherwise than its European versions. I still maintain an Indigenous-centrism as a counterpoint to emphasise the ‘world’s’ responsibility to the earth and colonised peoples. The production of knowledge about decoloniality still marginalises the knowledge of colonised peoples at the extreme end of the CMP - those on the frontlines in the fight against extraction-based economies who have the precarity of isolation away from capitalist centres and its media where any kind of violence can occur. I think staying focussed on that space while attending to the many colonial wounds of all peoples is the only way for a pluri-versality to exist and that doesn’t profit from the labour of those who cannot adapt to the CMP as easily in order to enunciate their difference in ways that will change their precarity. Rather than universality or diversity of tactics and pathways, I am aimed at the edges, the extremes, the precarious and the most vulnerable as central and I am working from this perspective. To build a world from this perspective seems a different enterprise.

10 When I moved from France to the US, I stopped being a sudaka (a racist nickname referring to immigrants from South America). I was an immigrant for the second time, the first as a son of an immigrant, the second as an immigrant myself. Sure, I had a fellowship and went to Paris to work on my doctorat de troisième cycle. Nonetheless, I was neither French, nor German, nor British, nor even Spanish or Italian. I was seen as a sudaka. In the US I am Hispanic or Latino.

11 That is, theology in the Renaissance and science, philosophy and economy since the eighteenth century. Additionally institutional actors (social roles) and languages (Greek-Latin and modern European (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, German, French and English).