

## Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 1: Activism and Trajectory

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 1: Activism and Trajectory

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Walter D. Mignolo is William H. Wannamaker Professor and Director of the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University. He is associated researcher at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Quito, since 2002 and an Honorary Research Associate for CISA (Center for Indian Studies in South Africa), Wits University at Johannesburg. Among his books related to the topic are: *The Darker Side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (1995, Chinese and Spanish translation 2015); *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality* (2007, translated into German, Swedish, French, Rumanian and Spanish), *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (2000, translated into Spanish, Portuguese and Korean); *The Idea of Latin America* (2006, translated into Spanish, Korean and Italian) and *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011). Currently, Walter is working on two books, one co-edited with Catherine Walsh: *On Decoloniality: Analysis, Concepts, Praxis*, the other is entitled *Decolonial Politics*.

This interview is in two parts. Part two is here.

### **Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in the field of cultural theory?**

In general, the most interesting are the varieties of creative thinking and doing (publications, exhibits, artists, organizations, web networks) coming from the non-European regions of the planet and from immigrants in Western Europe and the US. I see a parallel between two apparently disconnected spheres of life: the closing of five hundred years of the forming and consolidation of Western Civilization (since the Renaissance and its darker side, coloniality) in the political, economic, diplomatic and military sphere and the closing of intellectual domination of Western thoughts (meaning Western Europe and the US, that is, the North Atlantic) and the rapid disobedient attitudes and creativity. This originates from millions of intellectuals from all walks of life that have been classified as lesser humans or not quite human due to their race, gender and sexuality, religions, languages, and not-being from the First World.

In particular, I would say that the most exiting debates are in the variety of de-westernizing and decolonial forces. I am not saying that Western Civilization is ending; no, what is ending is the pretense of Westernizing the world. I am not saying that capitalism is ending. No, I am saying that is no longer controlled by former Western Europe and Anglo-US. Decoloniality at large is taking place in the growing emerging global political society, that includes intellectuals, scholars, artists, curators and all sort of organizations of people who realize that they do not have anything more to expect from the State, the banks and the corporations.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

I went to the university in the mid-60s, at the peak of the Cold War. First, I studied philosophy, then moved to literature, and also engaged in anthropology, to finally go to Paris at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s to study semiology (related to discourse analysis and literary theory). This was a result of my encounter with

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structuralism and post-structuralism which in Argentina and South America slowly gained ground, adding to Third World debates on dependency theory and liberation theology.

The world for me at that point was composed of two spheres: Third World issues and French intellectual debates. Third world issues were not of course of concern in Western Europe. Decolonization had been the hot debate in France in the 50s, and early 60s (Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* with Jean-Paul Sartre's preface was published in 1961). By 1966, the wind had changed, the turmoil of 1968 in Paris and Prague were still there, but that was not a Third World problem. Those were problems within the First World (France) and the Second World (Czechoslovakia). So, I was trying to figure out all of this while working on my dissertation.

I moved to the US in 1974. Still a Cold War but with a different configuration. In the US I 'discovered' the so-called Hispanic population (now Latino/as), and without knowing it I was seen as one of them. Although I have white skin and blue eyes, my accent betrayed me!! See, racism is larger than skin color. It is a classification. Racism is epistemic; a pre-packaged classification of people where some classify and the rest are classified. Once you are classified, you have to figure out where you have been classified in the racial horizon of coloniality. So at that point, semiology and all the French debates that were so exiting a few years ago began to fade away. I shifted my focus to investigate colonialism, beginning from where Western colonialism that started in the land that they, the Europeans, baptized America and more specifically with 16th century South/Central America and the Caribbean. In North America, meaning, North of Mexico, the 16th century was practically empty of Europeans. It was in the 17th century that contingents of Pilgrims arrived to the North East of today's US.

The encounter with the 'Hispanic' made me understand immigrant consciousness, which I couldn't see in Argentina. I 'felt' that my family and myself did not belong to the country, but I did not have an explanation. At that point semiology became a tool to understand myself, and the history of people like me, that is, people dwelling in immigrant consciousness. From there came the concept of 'colonial difference' and 'border thinking' that I learned from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* (1987). If reading Roland Barthes in Argentina motivated me to go to Paris to study under his supervision, Gloria Anzaldúa, whom I did not know at the time of course (her book was published in 1987), motivated me to change direction: from semiology through a long route to the encounter with modernity/coloniality and, consequently, decoloniality.

The third moment was the encounter with Anibal Quijano in the mid-90s who taught us that modernity was half of the story hiding its darker side, coloniality. Thus, modernity/coloniality. And he taught us that decolonization after the Cold War was no longer motivated to 'take hold of the State'. By that time, the decolonization in Asia and Africa had shown the reason of this failure: native elites taking control of the state and doing what the colonizer did, but in the name of nationalism. Quijano proposed that decolonization (now decoloniality) is an epistemic issue: epistemic reconstitution. What this means cannot be explained here. But the formula shall be retained. Others speak of re-emergence, re-surgence, re-existence. How you do it, would depend on your location in the colonial matrix of power. So there is no single blue print for epistemic reconstitution. And epistemic reconstitution means also changing your emotioning and your sensing not just your reasoning. And that is happening today on the planet, and that is exiting, as I mention before. This third moment enabled me to re-discover Frantz Fanon. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was translated into Spanish, in Mexico, in 1963. We read it, at that time at university. It did not say much to me at that point. But now after Anzaldúa and Quijano I was ready to go.

All these experiences allow me to explore and understand how the colonial matrix of power is being reshaped today. For once the colonial matrix of power is no longer controlled by Western institutions and actors who created it, transformed it and managed it for five centuries (Spain and Portugal, Holland, France and England, and finally the US were the drivers). Today coloniality is all over, and China, Russia, Iran, and the BRICS are disputing its management. Thus the "crisis" we all are living and experiencing now. De-westernization means the dispute for control of the colonial matrix of power.

So, here you have a short description of my own trajectory in the world order during and after the Cold War.

**You developed the concept of decolonial aesthetics. What place does it inhabit in decolonial thinking**

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### and practice?

Like in the case of decoloniality, I did my share in questioning the universal fiction named 'aesthetics', but the energy came from fellows in *the collective*. You start to realize that, for instance, 'politics and political theory' are indeed a Western/Euro-centered manner (both as right and as aberration) of conceiving governmental organization since Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Republic*. What did the millenarian Chinese rulers, *Huángdì*, for example, have to do with the manner in which Greeks conceived and theorized social relations? What would the Incas or Aztecs have to do with Plato and Aristotle?

The same with *aesthetics*. To make a long story short, I will mention but not outline *poetics*, which was the equivalent of aesthetics before Baumgarten and Kant. So, in *the collective* we asked ourselves a similar question to yours: What is the role of aesthetics in the colonial matrix of power? As any other aspect of the colonial matrix of power, modern Western aesthetics managed sensing of the beautiful and the sublime by controlling *taste* and the artist's *genius* to create a work of art. 'Ars' was the Latin translation of Greek *poiesis*. What are then the relations between art and aesthetics and poiesis and poetics? Poetics and aesthetics are philosophical discourses describing and regulating poiesis (making) and art (skill to make something). But all of that is very regional, that is, limited to the history of Europe and how Europe built itself on narratives tracing their origin in Greece and Rome.=

Western expansion was also the expansion of 'uct pictura poiesis' before the enlightenment and since the enlightenment expansion of artistic technique and art models and, concomitantly, of philosophical aesthetics. So that people outside of Europe were considered unable to understand and sense the beautiful and the sublime and therefore the 'civilizing mission'.

Therefore we began to analyze the Eurocentric philosophical aesthetic and how this knowledge and understanding formed, managed and controlled subjectivities. Non-Europeans were supposed to be educated to understand what Europeans did and said. So that, to respond to your question, imperial/colonial aesthetics (from Kant's modern aesthetics, to postmodern and altermodern versions) is a fundamental part in the formation and transformation of the colonial matrix of power, which means also, a powerful tool to silence non-Western conceptions of creativity and the corresponding place that such creativity has in the overall cosmo-sense of the civilization in question. What I have been telling you about politics and aesthetics is a fundamental decolonial task 'to get at the core of Eurocentric knowledge production.'

### You have been part of *the collective* movement 'decolonial aestheSis'. What is the aim of this movement?

True is that 'decolonial aestheSis' is not a movement but an outgrowth of conversations that started in 2009 among people working around coloniality of power, which is a short hand for colonial matrix of power. It started in the PhD program at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, created and spirited by Catherine Walsh, where coloniality is a central topic of student training. The first follow-up was an exhibit-cum-workshop that took place in Bogotá in November of 2010 under the title *Estéticas Decoloniales*. It was again followed by an exhibit-cum-workshop at Duke University in May of 2011. From those meetings emerged the Manifiesto, 'Decolonial Aesthetics', as well as Be.Bop (Black Europe Body Politics) that has been running since 2012 with the last edition in 2016 (Berlin and Copenhagen). A report by its curator, Alanna Lockward, can be found in the volume of *Social Text* devoted to decolonial aestheSis.

But that is not all. Since 2010 Rolando Vázquez and myself started a Decolonial Summer School in Middelburg, the Netherlands, under the auspices of University College Roosevelt, University of Utrecht, in Middelburg (the Netherlands). This summer school is connected to all of the above, decolonial artists are part of the team. It was here, in summer 2012, that the special volume where we launched the terms "aestheSis" originated. In that volume we gathered a number of artists, curators and thinkers that were involved in the trajectory I just traced from Quito to Bogota to Duke to Berlin to Copenhagen.

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Now, why aestheSis? We started the argument based on “decolonial aesthetics”, stating that there is no universal aesthetics. What passes for such is “modern Eurocentric aesthetics” that willingly or not was part of the colonial matrix of power and, therefore, the measuring stick to rank people around the world and expect that all over the planet the ‘rule of aesthetic’ (like the rule of law) will prevail in Bolivia, China, Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, West Asia (today the Middle East) etc. And in some sense it did. Local elites around the world applied the rules to their own benefits: trying to be like the European gives them an edge over the population they controlled. Decolonial aesthetics initiated a decolonial argument, philosophical and not artistic, confronting and delinking from modern/colonial aesthetics, from Kant to the modern/postmodern take by Rancière (philosopher) and Bourriaud’s (curator and art critic) altermodern version.

With decolonial aesthetics we delinked from that debate. At that point we were working with ‘artists’ conversant with the decolonial project. The question I began to ask them was: What does a decolonial artist want? And what does decoloniality do for an ‘artist’?

When we start using ‘decolonial aestheSis’ we realized that aesthesis goes beyond art—aesthesis (sensing) is in everything with do. Aesthesis is in the sciences in everyday life, in the actors that rule banks and governments, in the military and the police officers. Aesthesis is unavoidably a crucial dimension of human living and doing. Theories are grounded on aesthesis. Sciences and theories are ‘rational’ constructs built on aesthesis, for scientists and theorists are not (yet) robots. And if you are a human being you ‘sense’ everything you do. Science and philosophy may be rational constructs but the basic assumptions, the premises, are irrational, that is, they are aesthesis. We reached this point because when exploring and arguing decolonial aesthetics we, contrary to Rancière, whose archive never goes south of the Mediterranean, north of the Netherlands and Germany and never beyond Greece, we started from all the places, regions, times, spaces that are left out by modern/postmodern (and in between) aesthetics and in that move we are able to discover the wide dimension of aesthesis.

Regarding Bourriaud, he realized the limits of modern and postmodern/aesthetics and works by Euro-centered artists in Japan, Canada, the US and Australia. One of his principles is that artists all over the world use the same technique. Yes, maybe some, but there are others who use the same technique but sense differently, their memories and their dignified anger facing coloniality find the way out through ‘artistic’ expressions moving away from the cannon of Western art and modern/postmodern/altermodern aesthetics. Here you have an example of what I mean: my responses to Euro-centered essays on *Las Meninas*. Keep in mind that distinction between modern aesthetics/decolonial aesthesis that are built on arguments (argumentative skills) and art (imaginative-creative skills). Art means skill.

You may know that Rancière in his latest book uses the word ‘aesthesis’. But the way he understands it is different to ours. While his book is from 2013, we, *the collective*, launched the project in November 2010 based on an article of mine published in 2009: *Aesthesis decolonial*. As you see, decolonial aesthesis is not a movement but it is part of the decolonial work that emerged and grew from Anibal Quijano’s foundational article of 1990, translated into English in 2007.

### What role does art play in exposing the politics of coloniality?

Allow me to answer this question by telling you a story. Jeannette Elhers is—in her own words—a Danish-Trinidadian visual artist born and raised in Denmark. *Whip it Good* is her first acting (commonly referred to as performance). Previous works are based on moving images and powerful sound tracks. *Whip it Good* has two outlets: one is a video and the other the lived acting in various public places, where people sit around on the floor. And in some cases, like in one of her performance in the Art Center/South Florida, people walking on the street could stop and see the event through wide glass windows. Public performances end differently than the video. In the video, Jeannette takes a last look at the canvas and drops the whip. In public performances, she stops and looks at the audience, offering the whip to them. The canvas is finished by the audience in very tense and dramatic moments. Jeannette did seven performances, seven days in a row in London. After that she put up an exhibit with the seven canvases.

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I am telling this story to engage you with Jeannette's own words on her "art" and particularly with *Whip it Good*. I will address through Jeannette's words (and of course together with her video and acting—which means, no distinction between theory and practice here: thinking is doing and doing is thinking), your question on 'art exposing the politics of coloniality'.

In an interview, Jeannette was guided by the word "catharsis", which was the goal of the Greek Tragedy according to Aristotle. Decolonial artists and thinkers translate catharsis to "colonial wound" for the simple reason that at the time of Aristotle, Western imperial/colonialism did not exist. And modern/colonial humiliations were not a human experience. The colonial wound refers to racism and sexism and the social classifications that ensue from them. Racism and sexism is a classification by people and institutions that control knowledge and have the power to classify and people who have no other choice than being classified. When you sense you have been classified as less, as lacking something, as not quite there, it hurts. And you may believe it. But one day you realize that the colonial wound has been inflicted by racist people and institutions in the name of humanity and democracy. So you get angry, and you begin to do something to confront that anger, with dignity. "Art" is one way of doing it. That is what Jeannette Elhers' creativity does, a process of healing the colonial wound, for herself and for the people who engage and endorse her work.

And for readers-viewers familiar with Spanish languages, I offer this interview with Maya artist Benvenuto Chavajay, from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. At the end he explains the colonial wound and "art" creative enacting for decolonial healings. Art is political to the core but it is also sprinting from the borders: one memory, rationality and aesthesis imposing itself over other memories, rationalities and aestheses. Decolonial art cannot be but decolonially political. I said that because there are other forms of arts that are political but not necessarily decolonial. And of course, they do not have to be. Decolonial is not a totalitarian totality. It is just an option. The decolonial option.

### How can the logic of coloniality be escaped?

Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr. was a Jamaican political leader, publisher, journalist, entrepreneur and proponent of Pan Africanism and he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League movement. His dictums are legend and are collected in books. One of them was: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, non but ourselves can free our minds." The sentence became better known through Bob Marley's magnificent 'Redemption Song'. I read and listen to him as a decolonial thinker, artist, philosopher and activist. We can no longer think that Luciano Pavarotti is a great singer and Bob Marley is a popular singer. They are both great, one in the greatness of modern culture, the other building decolonial culture.

So that is the answer: escaping from mental slavery (delinking) is the way to escape coloniality. However, escaping coloniality doesn't mean that from one week to the next you would be totally free from coloniality. No, it is a long process and for that border thinking, doing and leaving is of the essence. So escaping means that you began to embody what modernity taught you to despise. And what you embodied that was despised depends on where you are living the experience of coloniality, in South Africa or in China, in France or in Argentina, Croatia or Canada, etc. But also, how you are experiencing coloniality, racially and sexually. Briefly escaping means to delink and become a person who values the communal rather than the individual, values conviviality rather than individual success, values slow motion rather than speed (be first, be the first, not let them pass you, all these modern-postmodern-stories that trap your subjectivity).

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This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffman. Alvina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.