BOOK REVIEW

Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press. Paperback: $27.95

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Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh illustrate the theory and praxis of decoloniality through this text. By drawing upon examples of decolonial movements in South America, *On Decoloniality* challenges the reader to question assumptions of Western epistemological predicates from perspectives that challenge the epistemic limitations imposed by the hegemony of Western and modern/colonial epistemology. These questions contribute to the process of "delinking," or decolonial thinking, advanced by *On Decoloniality*. However, the text continues a legacy of white settler scholarship that has not gone far enough in addressing concerns raised by indigenous thinkers like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Eve Tuck, whose epistemic, political and territorial sovereignty is at the center of the decolonial project.

Keywords: decolonial thought; decolonial praxis; epistemology; ontology; reflexivity

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh's *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* represents the first in a series on decoloniality published by Duke University Press. The book is divided into two sections: Part I, "Decoloniality In/As Praxis," attributed to Walsh and Part II "The Decolonial Option," written by Mignolo, illustrate the theory and praxis of decoloniality as conceptualized by the authors. Their examples from decolonial movements in South America challenge the reader to question assumptions of Western epistemological predicates from multiple perspectives. In doing this, the authors open a process of "delinking," or decolonial thinking, within the reader. *On Decoloniality*, however, continues a legacy of white settler scholarship that has not gone far enough in addressing concerns raised by indigenous thinkers like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Eve Tuck, whose epistemic, political and territorial sovereignty is at the center of the decolonial project. These critiques underline a potential paradox within Mignolo and Walsh's decolonial logic. This paradox of decoloniality as theorized and defined by settler authors, while partially addressed within the text through the authors' reflexivity, represents an avenue for future conversation between decolonial "gurus" Mignolo and Walsh and indigenous decolonial thinkers.[1]

Mignolo and Walsh define their interest in decoloniality within the context of "relationality" — "the ways that different local histories and embodied conceptions and practices of decoloniality, including our own, can enter into conversations and build understandings that cross geopolitical locations and colonial differences, and contest totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity."[2] Relationality within the context of decoloniality is premised on a more fluid onto-epistemic positionality that rebukes onto-epistemic sovereignties or hierarchies and instead embraces the existence of a multitude of simultaneous onto-epistemic claims. The authors are principally concerned with the concept of re-existence, which they attribute to artist and anthropologist Adolfo Albán Achinte (2008), as a central aim of decoloniality. In Albán's terms, re-existence is a mechanism by which we may "[question] and [make] visible the practices of racialization, exclusion and marginalization," "redefine … life in conditions of dignity and self-determination," and "[confront] the bio-politic that controls, dominates, and commodifies subjects and nature."[3] Walsh poses re-existence as operating in tandem with resistance: "to re-exist resisting and resist re-existing."[4] "Re-existence" entails the pursuit of dignity and liberation by people who have been enslaved, dehumanized, racialized, or otherwise discriminated against. The authors tie the concept of re-existence to reflexivity and politics of epistemology — essential themes that undergird their theoretical and praxical constructions of decoloniality.

Walsh and Mignolo come to these themes and goals from different angles. Walsh's section examines decolonial projects in Latin America, with particular attention to the negotiation of power between the state and indigenous actors. Part I attempts to reframe the way the reader engages with "the peoples, subjects, struggles, knowledges, and thought" that comprise Walsh's inquiry. As she put it, her work challenges the reader "to think *with* (and not simply *about*)" them. This challenge points to the epistemic limitations imposed by the hegemony of Western and modern/colonial epistemology (i.e., the totalizing effect of Western/modern/colonial epistemology that makes it exceedingly difficult to think beyond its own limits) — a political tension central to this work, as well as the potential logical impossibility that threatens to undermine it. Indeed, Walsh's intention to "disturb the notion that theoretical and conceptual frameworks must necessarily precede praxis, as well as the idea that meaning is only conceptually derived" points directly to the paradox of working from within an epistemological enclosure.[5] She sees the effort to escape from this enclosure as a "decolonial and decolonizing methodological-pedagogical-praxistical stance."[6]

Mignolo's section examines the distinctions between decoloniality and decolonization. He emphasizes that "each of us is responsible for our own decolonial liberation," revisiting and building on concepts introduced in his earlier works such as *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (2011).[7] These concepts include the colonial matrix of power, Western epistemic hegemony, colonial difference, and the slash that simultaneously divides and binds modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. Mignolo's examination of the epistemic foreclosure manifested within imperial language is particularly compelling. In focusing on the etymology of particular words including "colonialism," "human," and "nature," he implores the reader to unsettle the colonial/modern assumptions that undergird their own onto-epistemic formations.

In Part II, Mignolo encourages the reader to think critically and reflexively about their own epistemological and ontological positions—the lenses through which they come to know and to understand reality. Two passages stand out as particularly compelling in asking the reader to reorient and "delink" — Mignolo's use of "the puppeteer" as a metaphor and his discussion of upending Eurocentric narratives.[8] For Mignolo the puppeteer serves as a "pedagogical metaphor:" "You do not see the puppeteer (the enunciator); you only see the puppets (the enunciated)… . What you see and hear is the content of the conversation."[9] Making reference to an onto-epistemic frame, he writes, "In order to 'see' the terms of the conversation, you would have to disengage from the illusion and focus on the puppeteer behind the scenes, who is regulating the terms of the conversation."[10] Here knowledge (defined within the colonial matrix of power) is conceived as both one of the puppets (the enunciated) and the puppeteer's production of the scene (the enunciation).

Using the metaphor of the puppeteer, Mignolo exposes the modern/colonial lens that permeates perceptions of truth and reality, distorting and denying knowledges and subjectivities. Mignolo's discussion of the modern/colonial Eurocentric imaginary, and the relationship between epistemology and ontology that it reinforces, requires the reader to turn Western onto-epistemology on its head. He explains that if we could "understand the configuration of the ancient Chinese or Aztec civilizations, as they mapped themselves and as they mapped the rest of the world in their own imaginary," then we might draw different conclusions, hold different knowledges, understand hierarchies of knowledge differently, and come to different onto-epistemic conclusions. Instead, Mignolo explains, "we tend to look at ancient China and ancient Mesoamerica and ask questions about their knowledge…based on our *own* categories of knowledge and being."[11] Here Mignolo reiterates the near impossibility of seeing outside of a Western/modern/colonial epistemological frame.

Mignolo's portion of the text examines etymological links between European language and coloniality, articulates the problem of enunciation through the example of the puppeteer, and illustrates how epistemology is manifested through ontology. Through these examples, he encourages the reader to reexamine the formation of their own onto-epistemological stance. In doing so, Mignolo opens space for the reader to initiate a process by which the "totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity" may be unsettled.[12] This unsettling process entails "epistemic and emotional (and aesthetic) delinking," which is central to the dismantling of the colonial matrix of power. Mignolo's contributions in this work connect with Walsh's in his approach to unsettling the colonial matrix of power through reflexive practice.

Reflexivity is an essential element of decoloniality. In this work, both authors map their own epistemic positionality. Walsh is particularly adept at explaining the implications of the "locus of enunciation" — the epistemic position, or positionality, from which she thinks and writes — in decolonial processes of "thinking and doing *with*." Walsh points to the work of cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa who described the paradox of the decolonial project as "how to write (produce) without being inscribed (reproduced) in the dominant white structure and how to write without reinscribing and reproducing what we rebel against."[13] Walsh explains that "recognizing this dilemma and continually struggling with it … are central not only to my pedagogy-method, but also to the ways I conceive, consciously address, and give praxis to my locus or place of enunciation."[14] Although Mignolo's own reflexive work is less prominent than Walsh's in this text, his discussion of epistemic foreclosure by the imperial European language and ideology is an example of the dilemma Anzaldúa described. While Walsh primarily describes the importance of reflexivity to the decolonial project, Mignolo immediately links reflexivity to praxis. Walsh

described their epistemological endeavor as "[shifting] our gaze to see from and through the cracks" explaining that this "[requires] considerations of our own explicit locations, of the questions of from where, with whom, and how we … act and move within, from, and with respect to the cracks."[15] She goes on to tie in reflexivity, acknowledging that the practice of seeing from and through the cracks allow us to examine "our own cognizance of the cracks and our own participation in the crack making."[16] Within this framing, the cracks also become their own locus of enunciation or the onto-epistemic position from which we see, think, theorize, act and produce.

A potential blind spot in the context of these cracks presents itself: *On Decoloniality* reifies the Western presupposition that ancestral knowledges and traditions develop in a linear fashion. It also paints indigenous peoples as traditional and embedded in the past, rather emphasizing their role as innovators of the future. The authors do not go far enough in recognizing and reconciling these dilemmas in their scholarship.

The impossibility the authors confront is reflected in critiques of decoloniality and decolonization as put forth by non-indigenous settler scholars in such works as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A reflection on the practices and discourses of decolonization" and Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor." Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) notes the continual exclusion and over-writing of indigenous scholars within decolonial scholarship: "Through the game of who cites whom, hierarchies are structured, and we end up having to consume, in a regurgitated form, the very ideas regarding decolonization that we indigenous people and intellectuals of Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador have produced independently."[17] In her discussion of the politics of academic legibility, she implicates Mignolo and Walsh as complicit in perpetuating the hierarchy and erasure of those whose onto-epistemic stance differs from the Western paradigm. In this text, Walsh responds to Rivera Cusicanqui's critique directly: Rivera Cusicanqui's argument that "decoloniality is part of a multiculturalist discourse and a new academic canon with its own 'gurus' (in which Cusicanqui, both Walter and I are included), negates the broad range of decolonizing practice that, as this part has shown, gives substance, significance, and form to decoloniality in/as praxis."[18] Despite Walsh's defense, *On Decolonialiaty* does not represent a disruption of the academic hierarchy that Rivera Cusicanqui identified due to their continued failure to meaningfully rely on the work of indigenous thinkers.

On Decoloniality provides insight into decolonial projects undertaken throughout Latin America, guiding the reader toward critical questions concerning the role of the state and the politics of epistemology within decolonial struggles. Further, this work is successful in its challenge to the reader to delink: the examples the authors provide force the reader to rethink the relationship between epistemology and ontology

as well as the imbricated nature of modernity/coloniality within their own epistemological framings. As with any decolonial work published by a Western university press, undertaken by settler scholars, and aimed at a settler readership, this work faces critical tensions, pitfalls of reification and reinscription, as well as potential impossibilities for decolonial projects to escape from the bounds of Western/modern/colonial epistemological enclosure. This work opens space for the continued exploration of these potential incommensurabilities and impossibilities. Decolonial scholars interested in reconsidering theoretical discourse, especially those whose work engages epistemic and ontological philosophy would find this text interesting. It may also be of interest to scholars seeking to reflexively examine the colonial framings of their own onto-epistemic stance.

Notes

[1] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A reflection on the practices and discourses of decolonization." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111, no. 1 (2012): 102.

[2] W. D. Mignolo & C. E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

[3] Cited by Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 18.

[4] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 95.

[5] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 19.

[6] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 20.

[7] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 106.

[8] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 144.

[9] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 144.

[10] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 144.

[11] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 147.

[12] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 1.

[13] Cited by Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 21.

[14] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 21.

[15] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 83.

[16] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 83.

[17] Rivera Cusicanqui, "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa," 103.

[18] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 103.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Tuck, Eve, and Yang, K. Wayne. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.