

Pathways and Crossroads of the Decolonial Option: Challenging Marx and Zeus with a *Rabo de Arraia*²⁹

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Abstract

This essay uses the expansion of decolonial studies in the so-called Decolonial Turn as a starting point to discuss a few recent significant criticisms against this project – notably those arising from decolonial feminism and counter-colonial thinking. The first criticism of the decolonial option refers to its rapid expansion, with a somewhat mythical portrayal of the Modernity/Coloniality project, thus risking the radical quality of initial ideas. Additionally, there is the pertinent criticism of the treatment initially given to the gender issue, which was not addressed by scholars considered to be precursors of this line of thought. Other powerful matters arose as decolonial thinking spread to different social science fields, including questioning the very possibility of criticism from academic circles. These criticisms generate profound reflections on this movement that intends to bring radical transformations to conservative academic knowledge production. Assuming that coloniality is constitutive of the present, we take these criticisms to look at decoloniality in the field of language studies. On that ground, we maintain that any epistemological breach must start from the contradictions of modernity. We believe that critical discourse studies improve understanding by situating intertextuality and interdiscursivity as inevitable aspects of every discourse, including academic theories and practices.

Keywords

Decoloniality, decolonial feminism, contra-coloniality, critical discourse studies.

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²⁹ *Rabo de arraia* is a type of roundhouse kick and one of the most common techniques of *capoeira*, one of the cultural symbols of Afro-descendent resistance in Brazil.

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Introduction

A crossroads can be a meeting point where two roads are joined, but it can also be a place where roads diverge, and new paths and possibilities can be chosen (Nascimento e Santana Junior, 2019: 68)

The decolonial turn, or decolonial option (Palermo, 2013), appeared over two decades ago and has spread like wildfire (or “like a plague,” in the words of one of its more sensitive theorists³²) across various academic fields in the humanities. The project, led by Latin American intellectuals, has imposed itself in research centers throughout the world, both in the global South and North. It has also infiltrated the funding agenda, and there are more than a few programs and research centers in the Global North with titles such as “Global South Studies,” some of which do follow the decolonial option. In contrast, others somewhat adapt, with contradictions, in order to fit into the new lines of funding.

Despite being championed by Latin American intellectuals, the burgeoning youth of decolonial researchers, who seemed to have helped the initial push for the decolonial project, were working in research centers in the Global North, specifically in the United States. Out of American institutions, from the colonial and imperial North, the so-called powerful decolonial criticism first gained ground beyond the Rio Grande, especially in former Spanish colonies, and then reached the former Portuguese colony only after it had already invaded the old continent. It is not the first time nor, alas, does it seem to be the last, that a warm current is only felt in Brazilian lands after sweeping the Mediterranean, rotating past the Baltic Sea, and mixing with icy Arctic currents.

It does not seem out of place to regret, once again, the fact that we are eternally looking up to the North, turning our backs on our neighbors in the South. In Brazil, whoever attended undergraduate classes in Social Sciences in the 1980s and 1990s are well aware that Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, or Orlando Fals Bodas were not names that could be easily found on the course catalogs of the mandatory subjects. It seems that today this has changed, but this has only occurred in the last decade, and it is a welcome change.

About five years ago, the first conferences on decoloniality in Brazil were seen as unique opportunities in Brazilian universities. It is the case of the pioneering initiative of the sociology department at the University of Brasilia, which brought to Brazil, for the first time, Latin American intellectuals who were being read as the founders of decolonial thought. Mostly men and a few women who still do not feature as stars at the conferences. A colloquium and publication carried out in 2016 are the result of this pioneering work by the University of Brasília (Bernardino-Costa and Grosfoguel, 2016). In the specific field of language studies, the Center for Language and Society Studies has also been holding colloquiums and decolonial study cycles since 2017 and introduce increasing momentum to critical discourse studies carried out at the University of Brasilia.

³² Because the observation was proffered in an informal conversation, we chose not to name the author.

In 2013, Luciana Ballestrin published an article presenting Decolonial Studies to the Brazilian public. The text renders an account of the Modernity/Coloniality project, erected to the mythical place of origin of Decolonial Studies. It includes a review of the supposedly main authors writing about the new-fangled and powerful line of research: nine Latin American men, two of whom are based in the USA, and one Portuguese man, one Latin American woman, and one American woman based in Ecuador, as well as an important American scholar, Immanuel Wallerstein, whose World-systems theory was raised to the condition of the theoretical substratum of decolonial thought along with Dussel's Philosophy of Liberation and Quijano's Coloniality of Power (Ballestrin, 2013).

Aiming an accurate picture of the speed of the "Decolonial Studies expansion" and the issues surrounding its spread across the world, we may compare it to Cultural Studies, the previous academic trend that capitalized on the hope of revolutionary transformation in the production of academic knowledge. Coined in the late 1960s, Cultural Studies took over the world and remained for the following three decades, imposing itself, for example, in Latin America only during the 1990s, just before the advance of Decolonial Studies, and in the USA about a decade earlier. According to the narrative of one of its main authors, the predominance of men also marked the trajectory of Cultural Studies, leading to internal criticisms and internal rupture initiatives that culminated in the publication of *Women Take Issues* in 1978, when Cultural Studies also dictated agendas for research in the Global North (Hall, 1992).

1. Decolonial Feminism and Other Criticisms

The expansion of Cultural Studies and the massive increase in funding sources led to reflections regarding its revolutionary potential. The spread of the decolonial option also brought along the first critical assessments, which becomes implicit in the characterization of the expansion of the decolonial option as a "plague." A plague spreads over the surface, and does not leave deep roots - thus runs the risk of losing its radical quality.

However, also like Cultural Studies, the object of the first criticisms was not only the dissemination and institutionalization of the decolonial option, nor these criticisms were the most important. The initial reflections on the imbrications between gender and race were criticized by authors who would come to propose decolonial feminism. The very gestation of Decolonial Studies, dominated by male intellectuals, was criticized by militant intellectuals, mainly from Caribbean women's movements. Some of the male intellectuals of the Modernity/Coloniality project were taken as "spokesmen" for decoloniality. Albeit involuntarily, they could be repeating a pattern of male oppression, which, through the monopoly of speech, increases the silence of several decolonial movements led by black and indigenous women in different places in Latin America. This is the tone, for example, of the criticism proffered by the Dominican intellectual and activist Ochy Curiel against the elitist and androcentric tendencies of currents of subordinate studies conducted by the main scholars of the Modernity/Coloniality project as well as the theoretical bases of Decolonial Studies. Citing Curiel:

Neither Fanon nor Cesaire address categories such as sex and sexuality. Contemporary Latin Americans also do not write about these topics (Mignolo, Quijano, Dussel). Though they place race as a criterion for classifying populations that determine positions in the sexual division of labor, they only mention *en*

passant the relationship between sex and sexuality. Moreover, they do not refer to the contribution of many feminists in this line of thought. (Curiel, 2007: 93).

Curiel proceeds to argue that, even without using the term coloniality, racialized feminists have, since the 1970s, deepened feminist criticism from their understanding of the imbrications of the diverse systems of racial, classist, sexist and heteronormative domination. However, even if the contribution of these racialized Afro-descendent and indigenous feminists had not denied, their names did not appear in the bibliographic references of recent decolonial reflections, thus the operation of silencing voices through discursive strategies of the unsaid. Even more radical is the criticism of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who points to the construction of “a small empire within the empire” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 58). She extrapolates the criticism of silencing by denouncing the appropriation of ideas, especially in the analyses she proposes of the “world upside down,” by Waman Poma, and about internal colonialism and the epistemology of oral history.

The year 2007 seems to be a starting point for more gender-centered reflections within the modern/colonial system. Even though Curiel’s criticism is broader, María Lugones’ criticism of Quijano’s coloniality of power is more often cited (Lugones, 2007). Later, she extends the criticism to Mignolo’s concept of colonial difference, and to Maldonado Torres’ coloniality of being. She develops then her idea of gender coloniality and of decolonial feminism (Lugones, 2014).

Lugones uses coloniality of power as a starting point but proposes to overcome a view that she considers narrow regarding the modern/colonial construction of the gender dimension based on patriarchal control of sex and its sources and resources, a view that is shared by Quijano (Lugones, 2007: 189–90).

In other texts, Lugones proposes a reflection on the construction of decolonial feminism, backing both her affiliation and her criticism of Quijano made in 2007 and, supported by the coloniality of being and colonial difference, proposes the idea of gender coloniality, defined as

concrete, intricately related exercises of power, some hand to hand, some legalist, some inside a room where indigenous uncivilized-female-bestial women are forced to weave day and night, others in the confessional. Differences in the concreteness and complexity of power that are always circulating are not understood as levels of generality; corporate and institutional subjectivity is equally concrete (Lugones, 2014: 948)

Emphasis on the discursive aspect of gender coloniality, since the clash of dominance/resistance of racialized women is also perpetuated by force of law and religion and by undervaluing these bodies, points to the relevance of discursive-oriented analyses that unravel the many forms of upholding and perpetuating the exercise of power.

Following Lugones’ criticism, Curiel proposes a reflection upon the need to engage in deeper discussions regarding the practices, pedagogies, policies, and methodologies that prevent the decolonial option from being limited to merely epistemological criticism. Curiel wonders “to what extent we reproduce the coloniality of power, knowledge and being when race, class, sexuality are converted only into analytical categories” (Curiel, 2019: 45), and proposes the path of constructing

a colonial feminist methodology that begins with the recognition and legitimization of “other subordinated knowledge”. Curiel warns, however, that this recognition and legitimation:

They cannot be inputs to clear epistemological guilt, nor is it just a matter of citing black, indigenous and impoverished feminists to give a critical touch to research and the knowledge and thoughts that are constructed. It is about identifying concepts, categories, theories that arise from subordinate experiences, which are generally produced collectively, which have the possibility to generalize without universalizing, to explain different realities to break the collective imagination that this knowledge is local, individual and are unable to be communicated (Curiel, 2019: 46).

The separation between scientific knowledge - produced in academic institutions - and traditional, or popular, or practical knowledge - produced by people living their lives and facing their daily routines - imposes a powerful challenge to achieve Curiel’s proposal to build categories and concepts from subordinate knowledge. This is because we are trained in universities to recognize the legitimacy of epistemological construction only in very restricted areas of the full range of human knowledge. Construction, in this case, as in many others, assumes the prior and attentive effort of deconstruction.

Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, another prominent Dominican theorist and activist, follows Curiel and Lugones’ proposal to decolonize feminism from the understanding of European white feminism as part of coloniality. She also maintains the need to develop decolonial criticism in a deeper level, beyond a merely epistemological exercise. To this end, Espinosa seeks, through contributions from black and indigenous racialized feminisms, the radicalism of criticism and decolonial praxis.

Even though she shares the criticism of and recognizes some initial absences of Decolonial Studies concerning gender, Espinosa believes in the potential of the decolonial option to “advance in a counter-hegemonic epistemology attentive to Eurocentrism, racism and coloniality” (Espinosa Miñoso, 2014: 7). She emphasizes, however, that this can only be achieved in practice when relations between epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies are not lost. According to her:

Although for this approach, I resort to contemporary philosophical production and contributions from decolonial criticism, what moves me are not merely theoretical goals – if there is such a thing – but urgently practical goals. I do this because of my conviction that all action is based on interpretations of the world, which are simultaneously prescriptive of the world. Therefore, I am interested in unveiling what has supported our feminist practices and the contribution of our political practices. To the world, we are making possible through our actions. (Espinosa Miñoso, 2019: 2009)

Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso also draws our attention to the relevance of language, thus discursive studies, in the field of decolonial feminist criticism, by sustaining the generative relations between the interpretations of things in the world and the possibilities of political action in the world. In her most recent publication, Espinosa Miñoso reaffirms her ties to the decolonial option and its theoretical foundation traced to authors such as Quijano and Santiago Castro-Gomes. Furthermore, she includes a genealogy of experience in her methodological proposal by revisiting authors framed in the canons of colonial critical theories, such as Michel Foucault. She considers that, if the Foucaultian genealogical contribution can propose an anti-enlightenment criticism in the context

of coloniality, perhaps it can also help reveal the commitment of European feminism to coloniality. However, it is necessary always to be cautious of the implications that the use of the genealogical method could have on radical anti-racist and decolonial criticism (Espinosa Miñoso, 2019).

Other more recent criticisms of the decolonial option are more skeptical of the revolutionary possibilities of Decolonial Studies. They do not seem willing to make any concessions to any critical thinking within the framework of coloniality. For these more recent criticisms, Decolonial Studies cannot be revolutionary, as they share the same colonial epistemology; they possess the same methodological assumptions about the production of knowledge. Only a radically different epistemology could produce the kind of radicalism needed to break with coloniality.

One of these new trends has been presented as counter-colonial and not as decolonial, because, according to one of its thinkers, it can only decolonize whoever has colonized, so for colonized people, the option that remains is counter-coloniality and not decoloniality. Nascimento and Santana Júnior mention the ideas of counter-colonialist Nego Bispo in order to argue that:

we can understand that to be decolonial is to be colonial, because combatting knowledge that is said to be universal with the same epistemology means to attest to its superiority, its hegemony. It also implies revering this form of certified synthetic knowledge. (Nascimento e Santana Junior, 2019: 69)

However, although apparently a rupture, even the incipient and sharp counter-colonial criticism does not break the central assumptions of decoloniality. Apparently, it is also seeking to surpass, in this case, synthetic knowledge overcome by organic knowledge. The call for other epistemologies, centered on philosophies of Afro-Pindoramic civilizations, does not sound strange to the criticism based on the idea of the coloniality of knowledge. It is not far removed from the appeal for epistemologies of the South, which is part of the decolonial option, notably in the powerful texts by Ramose (2010, 2018), but also in Cusicanqui's indictments (2010, 2018).

Criticisms of Decolonial Studies are concurrent with their dissemination; even though, in academia, they did not reach the same audience and popularity that Decolonial Studies achieved, when they emerged, as myth, from the Modernity/Coloniality Project. However, in the criticisms, there is no denial of the relevance of decoloniality and its central theses on coloniality. In general, the criticisms highlight the need (or the (im)possibility, depending on the nature of the criticism) to overcome some aspects of coloniality within the very decolonial option linked to that project, as this would bring in some contradictions.

On the other hand, if we assume that coloniality is constitutive of the present, it is in its entrails, we will have to admit that all criticism, all deconstruction, and every break will have to start from these contradictions because there is no other way to overcome them. Here, also, critical discourse studies provide a deeper understanding by portraying intertextuality and interdiscursivity as inevitable aspects of every discourse, including theories. A critical theoretical practice that is admittedly interdiscursive will have to assume the limits of criticism coming from academia only and, as a result, guided by the need to build deeper partnerships. In the words of Santos:

On the day universities learn that they do not know, on the day universities choose to learn indigenous languages – instead of teaching them –, on the day universities choose to learn about indigenous architecture and choose to learn about the uses

of plants from the *caatinga* in the Brazilian Northeast, on the day they are willing to learn from us, just as we have learned one day from them, then we will have a confluence. A confluence of knowledge. A balanced process between the diverse civilizations of this place. A counter-colonization. (Santos, 2018: 51)

2. Decoloniality, worlding and wording

Although initial criticisms of the decolonial project often refer to questions about its expansion and the initial treatment given to the gender issue, other potent issues have been emerging with its spread across different disciplines. These criticisms provoke more reflections within the movement that is still emerging as a revolutionary light in the conservative field of academic knowledge production. Vanessa Andreotti's paper is an excellent example, in every way, of opening another front of issues that the decolonial option will have to face if it succeeds in maintaining its initial revolutionary intention (Andreotti, 2020). As an excellent example, the article serves not only to provide us with its reflections but also to lead us to others that, in large part, guide the writing of this essay.

The call for decoloniality in the field of Discourse Studies in the Latin American context was raised by the vice-president of the Latin American Association of Discourse Studies (Associação Latino-Americana de Estudos do Discurso - ALED) at the opening speech of the entity's international conference in 2017 (Resende, 2017). Following this same path, Andreotti proposes a division between two distinct orientations about language: one that considers language as the entity that constitutes the world (wording the world) and the other that considers language as another entity that constitutes and is made up of other entities in the world (worlding the word). For the author, from a discursive perspective, Decolonial Studies would be tied to the view constituted by coloniality, which understands language as an entity that constitutes the world as it represents it (wording the world). The only option that would have been developed until now by Decolonial Studies would be to explain the world in order to transform it through explanation, hence through language. Thus, Decolonial Studies would be imprisoned, themselves, in a worldview that is founded by and a founder of coloniality.

As a counterpoint and example of another view of the relationship between language and the world, the author offers us a sensitive interpretation of language perception, within the Maori people's worldview, as an entity among others that conform to themselves and the world (wording the world). According to her, among the Maori, language and human beings are two entities engaging in a non-hierarchical coexisting relationship, which illustrates a paradigm of a language that, instead of writing the world, is itself part of the world. Language speaks when we speak the language; language allows us to be in the language, and be the language.

The example of the Maori worldview is useful to the author as a counterpoint and anchor for her objective in the article, as she conducts a crucial point of reflecting on the revolutionary limits of Decolonial Studies as a whole and, more specifically, as a revolutionary option for Discourse Studies. The question is asked, in a thought-provoking manner, by the article itself, when the author admits to the paradox of only having the option of presenting a world view founded on *worlding the world*. The path of the word, that is, the path of *wording the world*, is the only one possible in the academic production of knowledge. It is precisely in this paradox that we find the crossroads

of the decolonial option, around which our reflections, always open and unfinished, are guided in this essay.

There are many contradictions (some obvious, others not so much) in academic movements that wish to revolutionize, especially when they assume that academia is a structuring part of the inequalities and injustices to overcome. It seems to be more influential in Decolonial Studies, which declare the university as a central gear in the process of the coloniality of knowledge and, therefore, of the coloniality of being and power. How to overcome this founding contradiction seems to be the question that is searching for an answer.

The paradox that Andreotti’s text (in this volume) mentions is agonizing, and precisely for this reason, it seems to put us in a dilemma, a trap from which we cannot escape. The questions posed are disturbing because they open up many others, including the matter of whether the questions posed by the author are the best or the most urgent to ask, and why we believe that answering them in the context of academic research may be in any way relevant.

Critical discourse studies aspire to be able to substantiate critical explanations of particular social issues based on language, precisely owing to the relationship that language shares with other social elements – with the world beyond language; with subjectivities engendered in language and in embodied constitutive mobility; with the relationships between people and people with the non-human entities that surround them. Understanding language as both part of the social world and the result of the social world is what makes this effort complex, and discourse becomes an elusive object. Andreotti’s criticism is disturbing not because of the nature of the discursive studies – since wording the world and making the word mundane are aspects of language recognized in this field – but because of our assumed place as human beings in this complexity. We cherish the illusion that we are the ones who word the world and that we are the ones who render the word worldly. However, many traditional peoples – like the Maori, in the example mentioned, but also the Krén (Krenak, 2019), the Yanomami (Kopenawa, 2015) and several other peoples (Munduruku, 2008) who live in the territory now known as Brazil – call our attention to our illusory centrality, and to how much we lose in possibilities of understanding and imagination and creation when we put ourselves in the center - “in the image and likeness”.

Conclusions (or better yet, Enquiries)

Is there nothing in coloniality that can be used in the decolonial rupture? Is coloniality a historical process without contradictions or rough edges capable of bringing its ruin? A yin without yang? Would a movement born from coloniality not be able to break from it? Thinking in terms of colonial tradition, wouldn’t Cronus be able to dethrone Uranus and, in turn, be dethroned by Zeus? Wouldn’t any historical formation carry the germ of its demise?

Should we expect revolutionary propositions that do not have their paradoxes? Are we not always waiting for a new orthodoxy, and what would be the advantages and issues of a new orthodoxy? Or, in decolonial terms, is it not the case of taking on the challenges of Euro-American modernity from the outside, from otherness, from other places that bring new solutions that incorporate and overcome modernity in other terms? (Dussel, 2016). Or, still, in counter-colonial terms, relying on the words of one of its most revered scholars, it is necessary to “use the enemies’ weapons for our

defense, lest we turn our defense into a weapon. Because if we turn our defense into a weapon, we will only know how to attack. And if you only know how to attack, you will always lose” (Santos, 2018).

In short, it seems that we are really at a crossroads and we have to decide where to go from this point. Among the many paths possible, criticisms seem to point to at least two: one suggests that the only possible radicalism must involve the negation of everything that is in any way related to coloniality. As a methodology and as an epistemology, this path leads us necessarily to the negation of the principles of contradiction and totality, which is largely present in the philosophy and art linked to the modern world and, therefore, the colonial world, and are mainly found in philosophies and critical arts. Following this path seems to lead us to have to invent a *new hubris from ground zero*, or a new and diverse hubris from multiple grounds zero, if the multi-universal intention is achieved. Criticisms that intend to be detached from Decolonial Studies point to this path. However, they are not able to follow it, because this is a path of *wording the world*, which was paved by the epistemologies of coloniality, as Andreotti brilliantly reminds us. This path seems to lead us, then, to a labyrinth, from which we could not leave with Ariadne’s help. We would have to find a new way out.

Yet another way is to refuse giving up anything that can be useful for us to overcome coloniality, not even colonialist weapons. This path could lead us, for example, to not renounce the principle of contradiction and the perception of transience present in all historical formation, including coloniality. This path is what decolonial feminism seems to follow, which, through its radical criticism, has challenged and overcome the initial propositions of decoloniality in its terms, without renouncing the foundations of decolonial criticism, by incorporating it into racialized feminisms. It is also not a path unknown to counter-colonial criticism, which also points to the need to appropriate colonial weapons. It seeks to capture, with a *rabo de arraia*, Zeus’ lightning bolt, while still benefiting from Marxist analogies of capitalism, thus overcoming both of them with decolonial (or counter-colonial) experiences that have accumulated ever since the colonial enterprise appeared and the modern world-system was formed.

Almost two decades ago, Jean Godefroy Bidima introduced a dossier with articles aimed to overcome a paradigm of identity on which the African philosophies of that time were based. He proposed that the crossing should take place from the combination of objective historical possibilities given, and from new subjectivities that push historical subjects to other places. Therefore, he maintained that at the crossroads between objectivity and subjectivity, something new could arise (Bidima, 2002: 12). For Bidima, the emergence of what is specifically human, in the experience of the world, according to Ernst Bloch’s proposition, appropriated by Bidima in the following quote.

World experience means that the world is thought-proof like thought is world-tested. For thought, the book of world experience is open to everyone. However, it happens that African philosophical discourses are required to prove their originality, their purity, their adamic stage where they would not have been contaminated by anything else. (...) an African philosophical discourse that refers a European philosopher for example would be inauthentic, an awkward reflection of what has been said so well. (...). In this approach, we limit the field of experience of the African philosopher. If it is admitted that the African

philosopher shares the same humanity as the others, the experiences of others can therefore serve him and especially the books of the world are also open to him. (Bidima, 2002: 13)

Bidima’s proposition for contemporary African philosophies helps us think about the necessary passage of coloniality towards a decolonized world. It is hard not to be reminded of Dussel’s Transmodernity (Dussel, 2016) when we use Bidima’s text to think about decoloniality. Wouldn’t Transmodernity emerge from what is specifically human from the colonial and decolonial experiences of the world? Would Transmodernity not be a Tupinambá arrow or a Mapuche spear to cut the fabric of modernity, starting from non-modern experiences that drag with it what stuck in modernity towards another world?

The questions posed point to possible paths, and many questions challenge and will challenge the decolonial option. Perhaps it is more urgent to find the right questions, whose answers can keep the decolonial project as a revolutionary option, as yet another entity among others capable, perhaps in communion, perhaps in confluence, of guiding us to another world. Because what seems more likely is that a decolonized world cannot be the same world that was once the world of coloniality.

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