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To cite this article: Gianmaria Colpani, Jamila M. H. Mascat & Katrine Smiet (2022) Postcolonial responses to decolonial interventions, *Postcolonial Studies*, 25:1, 1-16, DOI: [10.1080/13688790.2022.2041695](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2022.2041695)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2022.2041695>



Published online: 18 Apr 2022.



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INTRODUCTION



Postcolonial responses to decolonial interventions

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the terms ‘decolonial’ and ‘decoloniality’ have been deployed in an expansive manner and have gained increasing traction across many theoretical and political domains. Therefore, a critical assessment of the specific decolonial vocabulary is both timely and necessary. The relationship between the decolonial and the postcolonial especially requires more critical scrutiny than it has received so far. This special issue takes a step in this direction by staging critical dialogues between postcolonial and decolonial approaches on different terrains. While decolonial theory tends to operate as an expansive and centripetal force, pulling within its orbit a variety of other theoretical and political formation, our focus is on the original formulation of ‘decoloniality’ – or the ‘decolonial option’ – within the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) group. In this introduction, we outline some of the main objections that decolonial critics have formulated against postcolonial theory, and we argue that these critiques have been instrumental in defining the decolonial option itself. While advocates of decoloniality have been very vocal in their critiques of postcolonial theory, we note among postcolonial critics – with some exceptions – a predominant tendency either not to respond to these charges or to downplay them in favour of reconciliatory moves. As an alternative to this tendency, we stress the value of a postcolonial *critical* response to the decolonial intervention. We argue that postcolonial theories still have something to offer to a *critique* of the present and the past. In the face of the decolonial claim to have radicalized or surpassed postcolonial theory, we suggest that the postcolonial must speak back and reclaim the value of its critical apparatus in the context of the unfinished struggle for decolonizing knowledge and the social unconscious of postcoloniality.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial; decolonial; delinking; affirmative sabotage; critical dialogues

In the last decade, the terms ‘decolonial’ and ‘decoloniality’ have been deployed in a very expansive manner and have gained increasing traction across many theoretical and political domains. The student movements for the decolonization of the university that resonated globally from Cape Town to Oxford, the much-debated controversies about the decolonization of cultural heritage and Western museums, and the widespread protests for decolonizing public spaces, both in the Global North and in the South, all testify to the

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increasing relevance of decolonial activism and scholarship worldwide. These developments are a reason for optimism: they demonstrate a renewed momentum to challenge persistent colonial legacies. At the same time, given the ‘buzzing’ of this call to ‘decolonize’ – which, as Priyamvada Gopal notes, seems to have even morphed ‘into acceptable institutional jargon, with university administrations seemingly open to putting it down as an action point on the managerial agenda’¹ – a critical assessment of the specific decolonial vocabulary is both timely and necessary. In our view, the relationship between the decolonial and the postcolonial especially requires more critical scrutiny than it has received so far. This special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* takes a step in this direction by focusing on the original formulation of ‘decoloniality’ – or the ‘decolonial option’ – within the Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality (MCD) group. It is in this context, and particularly in the work of key figures such as Walter D. Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel, that the decolonial perspective has come to be explicitly defined as a *critique* of and an *alternative* to postcolonial theory. Thus, we believe that a postcolonial discussion of the decolonial option is a necessary starting point for a broader critical dialogue between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives.

Since the boundaries of decoloniality appear to be exceptionally porous and flexible – because of the current widespread circulation of the term but also, perhaps more importantly, because of the expansive use that some of the major theorists in the MCD group make of the concept – it is imperative to specify further the target of our critical response. Thus, in this introduction, we go on to outline, in broad strokes, some of the main objections that decolonial critics have formulated against postcolonial theory, and we argue that these critiques have been instrumental in defining the decolonial option itself. Next, we discuss the ways in which the decolonial option tends to operate as an expansive and centripetal force, pulling within its orbit a variety of other theoretical and political formations – from anticolonial revolutionary thought to Black and women of colour feminisms. In outlining this dynamic, our goal is to clarify that the target of our critical intervention is the decolonial option itself, not this larger field of theoretical and political formations. Having so circumscribed our target, we proceed to discuss recent attempts at staging dialogues between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. While advocates of decoloniality have been very vocal in their critiques of postcolonial theory, we note among postcolonial critics – with some exceptions – a predominant tendency either not to respond to these charges or to downplay them in favour of reconciliatory moves. As an alternative to this tendency, we outline the value of a postcolonial *critical* response to the decolonial intervention.

Decolonial critiques of postcolonial theory

Initially, and up to the early 2000s, the debate about relations between Latin America and postcolonial theory had a rather open character. While taking note of the ‘marginalization of Latin America’² in the postcolonial field, attempts were made to articulate the specificity of scholarship on the legacies of colonialism in and from that region. In this special issue, Olimpia E. Rosenthal reconstructs these early encounters and debates. However, as Rosenthal highlights, scholars associated with the MCD group have increasingly positioned their approach in contradistinction to the postcolonial. In a 2007 special issue of *Cultural Studies*, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo speaks of a ‘radical difference

between on the one hand post-colonial theory and post-coloniality in general and decolonial projects on the other hand'.³

This claim of a 'radical difference' has taken different forms. Sometimes, it is coupled with a recognition of the shared political and intellectual horizon of postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. In this vein, Mignolo has elsewhere commented that the postcolonial and the decolonial should be understood as 'complementary trajectories with similar goals of social transformation'⁴ for 'both walk in the same direction, following different paths'.⁵ However, the decolonial option is most often positioned as an *alternative* to postcolonial theory and as a corrective to its perceived problems and limitations. For instance, the editors of the collection *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* state that their aim is to expose and challenge 'the philosophical and ideological blind spots of postcolonial theories'.⁶ At its strongest, this has culminated in a call to 'decolonize' postcolonial theory itself.⁷

Why is postcolonial theory in need of decolonization, according to these critics? What are the perceived 'philosophical and ideological blind spots' with which decolonial thinkers take issue and against which they position themselves? Ramón Grosfoguel calls for 'the need to decolonize post-colonial studies and move beyond the "imperialism" of English-centered postcolonial literature towards an epistemic diversity of world decolonial interventions'.⁸ Here, the Anglophone legacy of postcolonial theory and its origins in the context of the former British Empire are foregrounded. The underlying argument is that concepts developed in one context cannot be straightforwardly extrapolated or applied to a different context with its historical and geopolitical specificities – in this case, Latin America. Hence Mignolo warns: 'if indeed postcolonial theories claim globality, if not universality, it may be problematic. For such a claim will reset the imperial pretensions that postcolonial studies critiques imperialism for. It would become an imperial design as any other'.⁹ The suggestion is made that postcolonial theory is at risk of operating as yet another imperial or colonial enterprise – essentially falling into the same traps that it aims to criticize. In his contribution to this special issue, Josias Tembo addresses this argument as it plays out in the African context.

Thinking from Latin America is thus presented as an other entry point. In the words of Catherine Walsh,

It is the 'place' of Latin America that helps to make visible 'the forms of subaltern thought and the local and regional modalities that configure the world' (Escobar 2000, p 116) that Western theory (including in its metropolitan postcolonial versions) and the dominant geopolitics of knowledge tends to hide.¹⁰

Here, postcolonial theory is subsumed under Western theory and presumed to share in its flaws. In this vein, decolonial critics often position postcolonial theory as an essentially *Eurocentric* critique of Eurocentrism. The close association of postcolonialism with post-structuralism and deconstruction is key in this critique. Grosfoguel focuses on this association when he claims that postcolonial theory 'departs from the monotopic and monologic practice of the Eurocentered episteme'.¹¹ According to this argument, the close engagement of postcolonial thinkers with authors such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan allegedly turns the postcolonial field into a particular province of a Western and Eurocentric canon. At its strongest, this is even understood as a 'betrayal' of its aims.¹²

The decolonial approach, by contrast, is positioned as able to ‘epistemologically transcend, decolonize the Western canon and epistemology’.¹³ In Mignolo’s work, the move of transcending the Western canon – which postcolonial theory is perceived to be stuck in – is conceptualized in terms of a ‘delinking’ from that canon through a practice of ‘border thinking’.¹⁴ These notions are discussed at length in this special issue in the contributions by Gianmaria Colpani on Marxism and Katrine Smiet on humanism. In her contribution on human rights, Sara de Jong implicitly addresses the problems of ‘delinking’ by focusing on the alternative option of ‘suturing’.

Finally, postcolonial theory is often framed as elitist, excessively theoretical and apolitical. For Mignolo, ‘post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy’.¹⁵ In other words, the postcolonial field is portrayed as a project belonging to the ‘ivory tower’ of the academy, whereas decolonial interventions are positioned as strongly rooted in political activism and movements. Through these framings, decolonial critics associated with the MCD group have depicted their own decolonial intervention as crucially parting ways with, and *moving beyond*, postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies. The implication is that where postcolonial theory is found lacking, a decolonial intervention can offer a new and more compelling intellectual and political direction. At the same time, while this distancing from postcolonial theory provides the decolonial option with one of its *raison d’être*, decolonial critics have also engaged in an equally significant yet opposite movement, pulling within the orbit of their project a variety of other theoretical and political formations. That is, at the same time as decolonial critics have defined the boundaries of their intervention to a significant extent by taking distance from postcolonial theory, they have also blurred those boundaries by engaging in a number of expansive moves. In the next section, we briefly outline and question some of these moves in order to further circumscribe the target of our critical response.

The expansive moves of decoloniality

First of all, decolonial critics tend to recode *anticolonialism* as decoloniality. To be sure, the relation between the decolonial option and the historical process of anticolonial struggle and formal decolonization is ambiguous. For example, Mignolo argues that ‘Decoloniality has its historical grounding in the Bandung Conference of 1955’,¹⁶ whose most enduring legacy – he claims – is a radical delinking from modernity. Yet, not only does this claim overlook the convergence of liberal, nationalist and socialist ideologies in the anticolonial project of a ‘Third World’ born in Bandung but, in the same essay, Mignolo also states that decoloniality ‘emerged at the very moment in which the three world division was collapsing and the celebration of the end of history and a new world order was emerging’.¹⁷ These contradictory genealogical moves – one locating decoloniality as coextensive with the formation of the ‘Third World’ project, the other locating its emergence in the wake of the collapse of that project – are symptomatic of an ambivalent stance that seeks to invoke the revolutionary spirit of anticolonialism even as it frames the actual struggles for decolonization as ‘epistemologically’ limited. As Mignolo claims elsewhere, despite the ‘enormous contribution of decolonization (or independence) ... [t]he limits of all these movements were those of not having found an opening and a freedom of an other thinking’.¹⁸

Nonetheless, decolonial critics are much firmer in rewriting anticolonial *thought* as part of their genealogy, hence repositioning anticolonial figures such as Frantz Fanon as decolonial thinkers *avant la lettre*.¹⁹ This is partly grounded in Fanon's own analyses of the limits of anticolonial nationalism and his prescient vision of the future failures of postcolonial nation-building.²⁰ Such a recoding of Fanon is a move that postcolonial theory has enacted as well, most notably Homi K. Bhabha in his influential foreword to the 1986 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks*,²¹ which in turn generated substantial debates (also within the field) about the postcolonial readings and misreadings of the anticolonial tradition.²² Thus, a discussion that we do not take up in this special issue but which would be productive terrain for further critical dialogue concerns the convergences and divergences between postcolonial and decolonial uses and abuses of anticolonial thought. What is important to remark here is that our intervention is directed at the decolonial option, not the anticolonial tradition – in spite of decolonial efforts to enlist Fanon and other revolutionary anticolonial figures into the project of decoloniality.

More broadly, decolonial critics have tried to rewrite large parts of what has been called the 'Black radical tradition',²³ including Black and women of colour feminisms, as part of the decolonial project. For example, Nelson Maldonado-Torres offers the following expansive account of what he terms 'the decolonial turn':

Decolonial thinking has existed since the very inception of modern forms of colonization – that is, since at least the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries –, and, to that extent, a certain decolonial turn has existed as well, but the more massive and possibly more profound shift away from modernization towards decoloniality as an unfinished project took place in the twentieth century and is still unfolding now. This more substantial decolonial turn was announced by W.E.B. Du Bois in the early twentieth century and made explicit in a line of figures that goes from Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon in the mid-twentieth century, to Sylvia Wynter, Enrique Dussel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lewis Gordon, Chela Sandoval, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others, throughout the second half of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century.²⁴

Among the figures mentioned in this passage, next to Fanon, Gloria Anzaldúa perhaps stands out, as her conceptualization of the 'new mestiza consciousness'²⁵ has enjoyed a significant degree of circulation (and re-inflection) in decolonial scholarship, most notably by Mignolo in his work on 'delinking' and 'border thinking'.²⁶ But the most serious attempt to incorporate US Black and women of colour feminisms into the decolonial project – not without remarking potential lines of tension – has been undertaken by María Lugones, whose decolonial engagement with the concept of 'intersectionality'²⁷ has generated, in turn, a number of critical responses.²⁸ In her contribution to this special issue, Luciana Ballestrin critically engages with Lugones' proposal of a 'decolonial feminism' and situates it within the larger field of what she terms 'subaltern feminisms', including Third World, postcolonial and women of colour feminisms. However, this special issue does not address the more general relation between decoloniality and the Black radical tradition. Suffice it to say that these remain overlapping yet different (and sometimes diverging) theoretical and political projects. Thus, the relations between them, especially if triangulated with postcolonial theory's own complex relations with race and Blackness,²⁹ would constitute yet another promising terrain for debate.

Since its emergence, the decolonial option has also significantly expanded its geopolitical reach beyond Latin America. In North America and Oceania, the language of

decoloniality has become widespread in discussions of Indigeneity and settler colonialism. This is due to decolonial critics' explicit moves towards Indigeneity but also to the reception of the decolonial option within the existing fields of Native American, Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies. Yet these remain autonomous fields and they should not be collapsed with decoloniality as a distinct theoretical orientation.³⁰ Additionally, the decolonial option has also reached geopolitical contexts that had remained hitherto the exclusive province of the postcolonial, such as South Asia,³¹ Africa,³² the Middle East³³ and Europe itself,³⁴ including the former socialist space of Central and Eastern Europe.³⁵ With the exception of Africa in Josias Tembo's contribution, in this special issue we do not engage with this new geography of the decolonial. However, it is worth mentioning in passing that such expansive moves partly contradict one of the early foundational claims of decolonial critics, that is, that the singularity of the Latin American experience required a distinct approach other than the postcolonial. The geopolitical expansion of decoloniality itself puts those claims to rest and illustrates that the critical confrontation between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives should not concern geographical differences but rather theoretical disagreements and their political implications.

Finally, 'decoloniality' has become a terrain of political identification for a number of struggles and movements both in the global North and in the South. Among these are a variety of movements and campaigns to decolonize universities, museums and heritage institutions, such as the Rhodes Must Fall student movements;³⁶ struggles against racism and Islamophobia in Europe;³⁷ Indigenous struggles in settler colonial contexts, such as the NoDAPL movement opposing the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota, United States;³⁸ and struggles internal to the Latin American left between, on the one hand, the left populism central to the 'Pink Tide' of the early 2000s and, on the other hand, new heterogeneous political formations gathered around issues of anti-extractivism and anti-authoritarianism and often led by feminist and Indigenous movements.³⁹ Our critique of decoloniality is not directed at these movements and struggles. On the contrary, we believe that a critical postcolonial engagement with the decolonial option contributes to the ongoing conversation about the meanings of decolonization that those movements are reactivating as we write.

The call for dialogue

In recent postcolonial scholarship that thematizes the relationship between postcolonial and decolonial approaches, the critiques levelled against postcolonial theory by decolonial theorists are often restated rather than engaged in any substantial way. Moreover, instead of focusing on their differences and open disagreements, postcolonial and decolonial approaches are presented as actually sharing a common ground and being complementary to one another. There are, of course, important exceptions to this tendency. On the one hand, critical exchanges between postcolonial and decolonial perspectives can also surface, if less explicitly, in the context of different yet related and overlapping debates. A case in point is the symposium on 'The Subaltern and the Popular' edited by Swati Chattopadhyay and Bhaskar Sarkar for this journal.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Latin American postcolonial scholars have been strongly critical from the beginning of the estrangement of Latin America from postcolonial theory promoted by the MCD

group.⁴¹ Olimpia E. Rosenthal addresses these critical dialogues within Latin American Studies in her contribution to this special issue.

But despite these exceptions, and especially as the decolonial option comes into contact with postcolonial theory beyond the borders of Latin America and Latin American Studies, the dominant tendency seems to be an effort to bridge the divide. Gurinder Bhambra's article 'Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues' published in this journal, is perhaps the most visible among these efforts.⁴² At the moment of writing, Bhambra's contribution is the most read and cited *Postcolonial Studies* article, suggesting a high impact and a strong interest in the theme among readers.⁴³ As the title already indicates, Bhambra's intervention is invested in building and strengthening the dialogue between the two fields. In her framing, decolonial theory is presented as offering an important expansion of postcolonial thought by extending its geographical and historical focus.⁴⁴ Bhambra writes: 'Postcolonialism and decoloniality are only made necessary as a consequence of the depredations of colonialism, but in their intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance they offer more than simple opposition. They offer, in the words of María Lugones, the possibility of a new geopolitics of knowledge'.⁴⁵ In this passage, which closes the article, the two fields are presented as political and intellectual allies that have the same goal and are tackling the same issue, albeit in different ways.

In a similar vein, in their preface to a special issue of *Feminist Review* dedicated to postcolonial and decolonial feminisms, Priti Ramamurthy and Ashwini Tambe call for a more sustained conversation between postcolonial and decolonial approaches, since they note that the two often 'speak past each other' while at the same time they 'build on similar ground'.⁴⁶ Ramamurthy and Tambe do recognize that there may be fundamental 'intellectual incommensurabilities' between the postcolonial and the decolonial.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, they emphasize that the two approaches must work together, and that the strengths of each must be deployed to 'do the tough work that lies ahead'.⁴⁸

Finally, the collection *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, edited by Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker, potentially complicates these dialogues by invoking points of convergence *and* divergence as well as triangulating between postcolonial, decolonial and Black scholarship.⁴⁹ However, in spite of what the title suggests, the focus is squarely on the joints rather than the fissures. As the editors write in their introduction: 'Rather than mapping the respective fields and emphasizing the fissures between them, we propose to work through and make visible the possible points of dialogue and mutual recognition, that is, the joints between those fields'.⁵⁰

These three examples reflect a broader tendency among postcolonial critics who decide to engage with the decolonial option. While aiming to address both 'joints *and* fissures', 'convergences *and* divergences', 'common grounds *and* incommensurabilities', the focus of these interventions inevitably comes to lie on the former rather than the latter. It is in this sense that we understand these dialogues as reconciliatory gestures that focus on commonalities and common grounds rather than highlight differences and disagreements. The assumption seems to be that this is the more generative and productive move. While agreeing with Kiran Asher and Priti Ramamurthy that 'simplistic readings that set up postcolonial and decolonial in stark opposition'⁵¹ may not be in themselves productive, this special issue nevertheless starts from the conviction that a

genuine dialogue between postcolonial and decolonial theory requires a critical examination of the points of tension. In our view, in order for the conversation between postcolonial and decolonial approaches to be more fruitfully developed, it is exactly these potential incommensurabilities and points of friction that need to be explored and investigated further, rather than disavowed.

In other words, such reconciliatory gestures might be at least premature, especially when articulated by postcolonial scholars themselves, who therefore seem to be unable or reticent to face their decolonial critics. In this way, the specific contribution of postcolonial theory to these potential dialogues disappears from view. The result is a reproduction of a framing that implies, as Ramamurthy and Tambe themselves point out, ‘the eclipsing of postcolonialism, which [is] increasingly becoming viewed as *passé*’.⁵² Against this framing, we propose a postcolonial critical response to the decolonial intervention that must clarify the specific contribution of postcolonial theory to these debates.

The postcolonial speaks back

Taken as a whole, this special issue stages a series of critical encounters between postcolonial theory and decoloniality. On the one hand, the essays gathered here reaffirm the contemporary relevance of the postcolonial perspective and the theoretical virtues of its original contribution by showing that the ‘surplus value’ of the postcolonial is to be found precisely in those aspects of it that are usually targeted as its alleged limitations by the proponents of decoloniality. On the other hand, by revisiting the conceptual arguments formulated by decolonial critics to contest the legitimacy of the postcolonial, the essays also expose and interrogate the most controversial aspects of the decolonial option from a postcolonial perspective.

Earlier in this introduction, we discussed the major charges formulated against postcolonial theory by its decolonial detractors: a persistent Eurocentrism, insufficient engagement with non-European sources and weak political impact. These critiques in fact share a common assumption, for they all identify an ambivalence in postcolonial theorizing as the primary cause of its alleged lack of radicalism. The ambivalence implicit in the polysemic meaning of the very prefix ‘post’, with its cloudy political implications, was debated throughout the 1990s after the inception of the field as a new scholarly province of the Humanities within the Anglo-American academia.⁵³ That debate, in many ways, pointed out that postcolonial theory had not adequately addressed the very ‘politics of location’ underlying its own denomination. ‘Is there something about the term “post-colonial” that does not lend itself to a geopolitical critique?’, asked Ella Shohat in 1992,⁵⁴ highlighting the significant shift occurring between the traditional vocabulary of anti-imperialist resistance and the ‘pastoral’ semantics of the postcolonial. Shohat’s argument at the time resonated with several interventions by Marxist critics of the field, who articulated similar perplexity about the pitfalls of postcolonial theory and politics.⁵⁵

While the decolonial charge of political ‘quietism’ may seem to echo this earlier debate, the ambivalence for which decolonial critics reproach postcolonial theory refers to what they see as the intrinsically ‘corrupted’ and harmless texture of its critical apparatus, resulting from the postcolonial’s deep conceptual entrenchment in the legacy of European thought. If Marxist critics have accused postcolonial theory of embracing

postmodernism and disavowing some of the radical legacies of modernity (including Marxism and anticolonial nationalism), decolonial critics on the contrary accuse the postcolonial of not distancing itself *enough* from the heritage of Western modernity, while claiming a somewhat unsustainable in-betweenness at odds with the task of decolonizing knowledge and the geopolitics of knowledge production.

Decolonial critics are right in pointing out the profound theoretical indebtedness of postcolonial theory to poststructuralism, deconstruction and Marxism. No ‘delinking’ is invoked by postcolonial theorists insofar as delinking is not conceivable from a consistent postcolonial perspective. If the postcolonial is indeed the ‘child of a rape’, as Gayatri C. Spivak once suggested, ‘that baby cannot be ostracized’.⁵⁶ As a consequence, the postcolonial condition cannot but tarry with the double-bind from which it originates, namely the colonial violation. According to Spivak, the latter constitutes, in spite of its deadly scope, an ‘enabling violation’ from which postcolonial theory can actually spring. In a similar vein, while writing about Fanon’s reprise of Hegelian dialectics in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Edward W. Said recalls the ‘partial tragedy of resistance [that] must to a certain degree work to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire’.⁵⁷ For Said, the ‘tragic’ yoke of postcoloniality is not something to be regretted here but rather a matter of fact that he cannot but acknowledge and which is reflected in his own thorough engagement in *Orientalism* with Antonio Gramsci, Foucault and the Western philological tradition.⁵⁸

Unlike decolonial theorists, who systematically stress the need and urgency of a radical break with the persistent influence of colonial modernity and interpret such a *coupure* as the quintessential decolonizing gesture, postcolonial theorists argue, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, that ‘European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations’.⁵⁹ Its indispensability prevents easy rejections of the Western tradition even as it registers its epistemic violence. Most importantly, this double-bind reminds us of the intrinsic impossibility for postcolonial theory to dismiss the very categories of thinking that preside over its own emergence. Therefore, for Chakrabarty, ‘provincializing Europe is not a project of rejecting or discarding European thought’, but consists of ‘relating to a body of thought to which one largely owes one’s intellectual existence’.⁶⁰ This translates into ‘the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect [*sic*] us all – may be renewed from and for the margins’.⁶¹ In other words, postcolonial theory implicitly follows Spivak’s invitation *not to accuse nor to excuse* the legacy of the Enlightenment but to *abuse* it by producing previously unforeseen uses of its theoretical patrimony.⁶² It is through this ‘affirmative sabotage’ of Western knowledge that the postcolonial performs epistemic disobedience at its best.⁶³

While resisting decolonial appeals to delink, postcolonial theory also maintains a sceptical attitude regarding the decolonial emphasis on *relinking* with knowledges traditionally diminished and despised by modern colonial narratives of progress. Spivak’s intervention in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’⁶⁴ can be considered as a paradigmatic ante-litteram response to such decolonial moves. Concluding that it is impossible for hegemonic discourse to retrieve the silenced voices of subalterns from the colonial archive, Spivak assigns to subalternity the function of acting ‘as a reminder’ against all simplistic intellectual generalizations aimed at restoring the word of the natives.⁶⁵ Thus, subalternity epitomizes an aporetic limit to the inextinguishable will to knowledge of the Western

subject (as well as the Western-trained postcolonial intellectual), embodying its failure to satisfy its imperial desire for Otherness. From this postcolonial perspective, the decolonial enterprise of fully retrieving pre-colonial and non-modern cultural and social formations to play them against the unfinished project of Western modernity relies on the illusion that something could have escaped the totalizing colonial remaking of the modern world and its epistemic violence. Alternative modernities and native traditions can only be retraced through the prism of the colonial violation, which has intrinsically altered and mediated their pre-colonial outline.

Hybridity – a crucial trait of the postcolonial condition – stands for a radical postcolonial rebuttal of any sort of essentialism on the terrain of cultural identities. Bhabha's concept of hybridity indeed testifies to the postcolonial stance par excellence, insofar as it aims at countering any 'essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures', while at the same time reclaiming for the hybrid the powerful role of challenging and unsettling the homogenizing projections of colonial domination.⁶⁶ Along the same lines, Spivak's plea for 'strategic essentialism' in fact reminds us that cultural identities can only be deliberately essentialized and reclaimed in the political field but do not display any authentic substance as such.⁶⁷ Similarly, Achille Mbembe's notion of the 'becoming black of the world', which he deploys to grasp the living conditions of the disenfranchised under current neoliberal capitalism, can be considered as a paradigmatic instantiation of the postcolonial case against essentialism. According to Mbembe, while historically 'the term "Black" was the product of a social and technological machine tightly linked to the emergence and globalisation of capitalism ... to signify exclusion, brutalisation and degradation', the contemporary capitalist engine has introduced new techniques of subsumption that have been expanding far beyond the boundaries of racial categorizations.⁶⁸

This radically anti-essentialist approach to race and culture, which allows Mbembe to extend the 'Black' condition to the ranks of all the underprivileged, simultaneously implies that neither race nor culture can be considered as unassailable shields protecting and preserving postcolonial subjects from the all-encompassing grasp of capital. Similarly, Spivak's 'politics of translation' encourages us to resist 'capitalist multiculturalism's invitation to selfidentity', while denouncing Western translation strategies for promising immediate access to the natives' language and imagination.⁶⁹ In other words, Spivak's critique of the colonial pretension of gaining immediate access to the colonized world is not counterbalanced by the postcolonial affirmation of a native subject armed with self-transparency. Access is not an option for the colonizer, just as transparency is not an option for the postcolonial subject. Since colonialism has violently introduced an inescapable fissure in the (post)colonial world, including by injecting the colonial gaze into the self-perception and imagination of the (post)colonial subject, *translation* between imperial and subaltern languages – across idioms as well as conceptual universes – has become the unsurpassable horizon of postcoloniality, which does not allow for the retrieval of untouched and untranslated non-Western epistemologies. According to Souleymane Bachir Diagne, it is translation itself that encapsulates an enormous decolonizing potential and that may incarnate the decolonial gesture par excellence against the monoligualism of colonial conquest, which measures all languages against its own standards.⁷⁰

Instead, in the grammar of decoloniality, which sets delinking as its primary goal, a principle of transparency presides over identities and cultures. This is reflected in the fundamental role played by ‘body-politics’ in the decolonial conceptual constellation. As Mignolo explains, the practice of delinking needs a ‘different epistemic grounding’, namely what he calls ‘the geo- and body- politics of knowledge and understanding’.⁷¹ Both are conceived by him as ‘epistemologies of the exteriority and of the borders’ that engage with ‘the outside created by the rhetoric of modernity (Arabic language, Islamic religion, Aymara language, Indigenous concepts of social and economic organization, etc.)’.⁷² From a postcolonial perspective, on the contrary, no trace of exteriority or externality can be found in the geographies of former colonial empires. Moreover, the decolonial ‘politics of identity’, which Mignolo carefully distinguishes from identity politics,⁷³ in fact accomplishes a radical essentialization of the body and its experience. Such strong decolonial trust in the intrinsic ability of the native to reach the privileged standpoint of self-transparency, together with the decolonial claim that alternative situated knowledges may successfully delink from the colonial matrix of power, are in radical conflict with crucial underlying assumptions of the postcolonial perspective.

At this point, a question may still be raised about the vocation and purpose of the postcolonial endeavour: can the postcolonial still speak today, or is the standpoint of the postcolonial only an inert remnant of a body of scholarship that has been sentenced to death by the growing circulation of decolonial theories and practices? Our conviction is that postcolonial theories still have something to offer to a *critique* of the present and the past, for the most characteristic and sophisticated aspect of the postcolonial is to be found precisely in its critical disposition. The mission to ‘persistently critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit’ – namely the postcolonial condition – remains perhaps the most eloquent synthesis of the postcolonial project.⁷⁴ And like any other critical theory, part of this postcolonial project of persistent critique of the present and the past must be an equally *critical* engagement with competing theoretical projects. In the face of the decolonial claim to have radicalized or surpassed postcolonial theory, the postcolonial must speak back and reclaim the value of its critical apparatus in the context of the unfinished struggle for decolonizing knowledge and the social unconscious of postcoloniality.

The articles collected in this special issue take up this task by staging critical dialogues between postcolonial and decolonial approaches on different terrains. The first two articles focus on encounters between postcolonial and decolonial theory in specific geopolitical spaces: Latin America and Africa. Olimpia E. Rosenthal traces the contentious debates that conditioned the reception of postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies among Latin Americanist scholars. Rosenthal demonstrates how critiques based on (unreflected) identitarian grounds led to the dismissal of the postcolonial in Latin American Studies and paved the way for the formulation of the decolonial option. Josias Tembo investigates the position of African postcolonial theory in light of the calls for the ‘decolonization’ of postcolonial studies. Tembo engages African postcolonial theorists Valentin Y. Mudimbe and Achille Mbembe to challenge the epistemological moves that position decolonial theory as a different and stronger theoretical framework than postcolonial theory.

The subsequent articles engage the debate between postcolonial and decolonial theory around specific themes: Marxism (Colpani), humanism (Smiet), human rights (de Jong),

and feminism (Ballestrin). Gianmaria Colpani stages a confrontation between postcolonial theory and the decolonial option on the terrain of their respective engagements with Marxism. Colpani identifies the space of the ongoing and open debate between postcolonial theory and its Marxist critics as a vantage point from which to articulate a critical response to the decolonial intervention. Katrine Smiet examines the commonalities and divergences between a postcolonial and a decolonial approach to humanism through an examination of the work of Edward W. Said and Walter D. Mignolo. Smiet argues that the postcolonial approach is better positioned to open up a productive critical reconfiguring of humanism and a re-engagement with the question of the human. Sara de Jong brings Boaventura de Sousa Santos into conversation with Gayatri C. Spivak, mapping how each aims to reconfigure a liberal human rights frame by suturing it to alternative ethical systems, including responsibility-based systems and other conceptions of dignity. Luciana Ballestrin examines how the geopolitical division between North and South has influenced the global feminist debate, engendering a conflictual feminist discourse. Developing the notion of ‘subaltern feminisms’, Ballestrin argues that decolonial feminism can be understood as an articulation of different subaltern and Latin American feminisms. Within this framework, she proposes a critique of the decolonial notion of the ‘coloniality of gender’. Finally, the special issue closes with two interviews: a translated interview with Achille Mbembe on the notion of *brutalism* developed in his latest book,⁷⁵ and an interview with Gayatri C. Spivak on the pitfalls of delinking and other decolonial moves.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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