Reflections on the Future and Past of Decolonisation:
Africa and Latin America

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Let me start by saying that I have read Mbembe’s original 2001 publication and parts of the updated version, as well as Mignolo and Walsh’s book. I am also familiar with the literature of the Proyecto Modernidad/Colinialidad.4 The reflections contained in this article arise, in turn, from my reading of Appadurai’s reflections on the two books, from observation of the online debates in the

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1 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Beyond Domination: The future and past of decolonization’, The Nation, 9 March 2021


4 The Proyecto M/C was one of the most important critical thinking groups in Latin America during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It consisted of a multidisciplinary network of intellectuals from different generations and origins. The group lasted for about ten years and brought together Aníbal Quijano (who coined the concept of coloniality of power), Edgardo Lander, Fernando Coronil, Santiago Castro-Gómez, Oscar Guardiola Rivera, Arturo Escobar, Zulma Palermo, Javier Sanjinés, Freya Schiwy, Ramón Grosfoguel, Agustín Lao Montes, Walter Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, Enrique Dussel, María Lugones and Nelson Maldonado-Torres.
Decolonialidad Latino Americana Facebook group of scholars, researchers and students set up following the launch of Mignolo and Walsh’s book, and my own personal academic and activism experiences in Brazil.

What intrigued me at once was the contrast that Appadurai makes between Mignolo and Walsh’s ‘radical opposition’ and Mbembe’s ‘dialectical relational’ with regard to European ideas of modernity. This needs to be set alongside the very different reception of their approaches in Brazil. While Mignolo and Walsh identify Indigenous epistemologies and claims as the only escape route from the logic of colonialism (coloniality), Mbembe points to a dialogue between the coloniser and the colonised. In Brazil, critiques are made of Mignolo, and, at times, Aníbal Quijano,5 for what is considered their epistemic extractivism. These critiques come not only from scholars such as Ramón Grosfoguel6 or Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui,7 but also from representatives of the black movement. Most of the critiques are based on obvious and dubious observations: Mignolo and Quijano’s whiteness and their physical location in the Global North. On the contrary, Mbembe is idealised as ‘the black African voice’ and considered as the radical thinker to engage with. Since radicalism is often linked with nativism and questions of authentic identity, a curious effect of this interpretation is that Mbembe appears as advocating Africa’s precolonial identity. This is exactly the opposite of what Mbembe’s work does, and Appadurai makes some strong remarks in his article that, ‘Mbembe has little patience for any cultification of the Indigenous’.

There is no Afro-Brazilian art student I have met who is not enthusiastic about Mbembe’s thoughts. This is definitely a good sign; an expression of the growing debate about racism, hidden for too long in Brazil. The current political situation does not leave space anymore for denial. It is also a reflection of two factors: firstly, the complexity of the relation between decoloniality and globalisation in the South; and secondly, the relation between publishing policies and the circulation of critical thought. Considering, on the one hand, the concept of ‘Afropolitan’ that Mbembe deploys,8 from the position of black knowledge workers and creative intellectuals it embodies a legitimate claim for a long overdue inclusion in the global market of cognitive capitalism, as well as in the debates on western modernity that they seek to escape or resignify. The relation between the desire for inclusion in the global market and the desire to escape from universal modernity is, I believe, the major contradiction between decoloniality and modernity. This is evident if we agree with propositions that metropolis and colony are ‘co-constitutive elements in a rising world capitalist order’,9 and that modernity is associated with a distorted vision of progress, development and civilisation.10 On the other hand, the prevalence of this enthusiasm towards Mbembe’s work by

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6 See Ramón Grosfoguel, ‘Del “extractivismo económico” al “extractivismo epistémico” y al “extractivismo ontológico”: una forma destructiva de conocer, ser y estar en el mundo’, Tabula Rasa, Bogotá, Colombia, No 24, enero-junio 2016, pp 123–143.


the black movement can perhaps be explained by suggesting that there has been only a partial reading of his work. The debate in English cannot be accessed by everybody, and the realities of translation, publication and therefore circulation, place limits on approaches to the argument. Even if Mbembe is the most commented on and translated African thinker in Brazil, there exists an evident, perhaps voluntary attention on his work concerning necropolitics. Necropolitics has become an omnipresent word in Brazilian public discourse as much as the word ‘decolonial’, and both, unfortunately, often suffer from an emptying of meaning. However, the debate regarding Afropolitanism is almost totally missed, or limited to a specific niche of intellectuals. This aspect is even more curious if one thinks about the popularity that Afrofuturism has achieved, with the launch of the Marvel Black Panther mega production for example. Confirming its elusive nature, the debate avoids engaging with different layers of cultural and entertainment production, power and modernity. Like a meteor, it appeared and disappeared, without, however, ever being related to Afropolitanism and globalisation. I agree with Appadurai’s observation that Mbembe presents the ‘becoming black of the world’ as an antinomy – associated, on the one hand, with Europe’s loss of centrality and the emergence of the Afropolitan class, and, on the other, extending the black condition to all subordinate humanity that capital no longer needs, as defined by necropolitics. Thus, his work can fit both the demand for internationalism by Afro-Brazilian knowledge workers, as well as the nativist claim by the Afro-diasporic movement. It opens up the possibility of re-engaging with Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, two central movements in black politics since at least the nineteenth century, and of rethinking contemporary African debates on identity not only through opposition (to the West) but in relational terms as the idea of Afropolitan may indicate.12

Another element that caught my attention in Appadurai’s analysis is the relationship established by the authors with the contemporary capitalist system and western modernity. All three authors agree on the functionality of the colonial system to the development of modern capitalism, and the failure of Marxism in considering cultural and epistemological domination. According to Appadurai, while the focus of Mbembe on the future does not require ‘the wholesale abandonment of the complexities of modernity’, Mignolo and Walsh focus on the past, so that they ‘do not have to resolve this tension’.13

For Mignolo and Walsh, the unique way to achieve decoloniality, not as a successor of colonialism but as an alternative to it, lies in the return to indigenous cosmologies, forms of life and knowledge, which, according to Appadurai, represents ‘the return to the precolonial splendour of the past’. In this interpretation, the topicality and urgency of addressing indigenous cosmologies and their claim to reinvent new forms of life, consumption and production – an urgency that the COVID19 pandemic has made more evident – are missed. Appadurai further states that the ‘market is a mostly ghostly presence in Mignolo and Walsh’s arguments’.14 Maybe we hear very little about the maritime explorations, oceanic trade and slave-generated profits in their work,

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11 See Laura Burocco, ‘Do not make Africa an object of exploitation again’, Image & Text, Vol 33, No 1, Pretoria, July 2019, pp 1–27
13 Appadurai, ‘Beyond Domination: The future and past of decolonization’, op cit
14 Ibid
but other forms of exploitation, related to the natural resources, consumption and labour, are addressed through a macro-political and economic criticism that expresses its own contemporaneity, as the wider discourses on Pacha Mama and the Anthropocene demonstrate.

In my view, it is impossible to separate contemporary capitalism from Indigenous epistemological claims, as concretely demonstrated by the examples Walsh presents in the first part of On Decoloniality. Indigenous epistemologies present themselves as a dialectic that opposes the values at the base of the contemporary organisation of the capitalist system. At the time of the European civilisation process, the African and Indigenous cosmologies were presented as primitive and as obstacles to modernity. We need to be careful not to reproduce a similar vision that places Indigenous people, and their epistemological worldview, as belonging to the past, and in this way denying their contemporaneity. The contemporaneity of their cosmologies corresponds to a declaration of belonging to the world in which we all live, and on which Western universalist modernity wants to maintain its monopoly. Ailton Krenak, an important Brazilian indigenous thinker, in commenting on the work of an English photographer, as late as 1994, asked: ‘In treating us as populations that are disappearing, how do you see us? Like dinosaurs’?15

For Mbembe, decolonisation focuses on future processes of mixture, flow and interaction between Africa and Europe, and more generally the West, as the condition of Afropolitanism. While I agree with Mbembe’s vision of the African continent as the place where ‘we can find an alternate modernity to the one we live in now’, I wonder how we can reconcile this vision with the reality of the inequality of geopolitical power relations in place globally.16 My main concern with Mbembe’s idea of Afropolitanism is that it seems that it does not look at Africa, but at Africa outside Africa, as many other scholars have also affirmed.17 Furthermore, it appears to look more at the diaspora in the northern hemisphere as the locus for alternative modernities. I do not think, for example, that the importance of a ‘passage’ through Berlin for the recognition of knowledge and artistic production by African-based artists can be underestimated or considered as neutral. The créolité to which Mbembe refers appears diluted in Afropolitanism, exactly because of the political economy of race and geo-politics to which it is subjugated.

15 Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, Leticia Vidor Reis and Carlos Silva (eds) Antropologia e seus Espelhos: A etnografia vista pelos observados, FFLCH/USP, São Paulo, 1994, p 14
17 See, for example:
I consider Mignolo, Walsh and Mbembe to share a positive expectation with regards to a possible future escape from Western universalism. Mignolo and Walsh do so by emphasising Indigenous knowledge as the main centre of innovation. This is an innovation that by not looking for a translation of western epistemological and aesthetic parameters, which have no meaning in Indigenous cosmologies, opens up to new autonomous forms, free from a term of reference that continues to frame an infinite race to development. This centrality corresponds to Mbembe’s idea of the biopower of créolité (although the African part of this créolité is not clear to me) as the result of the encounter of the colonised and coloniser. All three authors face the colonial matrix of power with which modernity is imbued. Mignolo and Walsh deal with the issue of how to make indigenous cosmologies the contemporary alternative to the failed Western capitalist system, while Mbembe presents the encounter between Africa and Europe as the future new frontier of aesthetics, creativity and cognitive capitalism.

At the base of these approaches remains a profound difference in their trajectories. While both intend to get rid of the Eurocentric understanding of modernity, Indigenous knowledge overcomes and perhaps even bypasses the very problem of modernity itself. It does not assume the centrality of modernity that is the lynchpin of Western knowledge. Indigenous cosmologies nullify the presumed contradiction between modernity/tradition, human/nature, the present/past. If we link modernity to progress, development, globalisation, and the underlying capitalist system that supports and organises it, meaningful decolonisation can happen only through a deep questioning and transformation of our forms of living, co-living, production and consumption. These should be considered not only under the shadow of the state or institutions but derived from peoples’ living practices. If we link Afropolitanism to cosmopolitanism, globalisation and the transformation of the production of value of post-Fordism capitalism, where culture and subjectivity are shaped by capitalism, Mbembe’s African modernity may, in my opinion, run the risk of being appropriated by another form of extractivism. While the divisions between north and south are increasingly diluted within the financialisation of the market and the convergence of the interests of global elites, in an echo of Foucault’s Society Must Be Defended18 African societies must defend themselves from the unequal power relations of cognitive capitalism.

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