

Locating Decoloniality

A Statement on Decolonial Gestures in Live Arts and Academia

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On de-/coloniality

Terms like “coloniality”, “decoloniality”, “postcolonial” or “decolonial” enable us to address the disproportionate distribution of wealth, academic education and privileges in the world – at least on first sight. The more we implement them, the more we seem to unravel the hidden quality those terms embrace. However, we must be careful with the way we conceptualise “de-/coloniality”. If we are not, “de-/coloniality” becomes a buzz word, hiding the notion that every relation and every practice is always situated within a specific temporal and geographic context. By not stressing the biopolitical and geohistorical properties unique to a practice, the critical potential of “de-/coloniality” slowly erodes.

“De-/Coloniality” is – if nothing else – a spatial concept.¹ Labelling a practice as “de-/colonial” means largely to engage in a time-intensive reappraisal of the geohistorical and biopolitical contexts that inform said practice. *Some* practices become colonial or decolonial in *certain* geographic regions due to the geopolitical history those regions inhere. As underwhelming and self-evident as it sounds, detecting the underlying de-/coloniality of a practice goes hand in hand with committing to a geographic region’s history. Therefore, the concept of “de-/coloniality” has not only a spatial dimension² to it but entails for the researcher an intense and personal engagement with a geographic region.

As important as it is to rethink our understanding of de-/coloniality, as important it is to challenge the vocabulary we use in discourses around de-/coloniality: Why is it we sometimes rely on “de-/coloniality”, while other times we refer to “colonialism” and “postcolonialism”? The answer to that is as simple as it is complicated, and it lies in the history of the academic approach to colonialism itself. In the last decades, two schools of thoughts emerged out of the endeavour to theorise and analyse the cultural and sociopolitical effects of colonialism.³ Those schools of thoughts are widely referred to as “Postcolonial Studies” and “Decolonial Studies”. Postcolonial Studies established itself since the 1960s as scholars tried to describe the new artistic and cultural expressions after the British Empire and the French Colonial Empire began to partially abandon some of its former colonies.⁴ Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and Achille Mbembe are often mentioned as prominent postcolonial scholars. As a field of interest, Postcolonial Studies quickly characterised itself by a rigid framework: (1) It focused predominantly on certain geographic regions, namely India, the Middle East, West and Southern Africa and (2) it solely analysed a specific time period, being the 19th and 20th century.⁵ At least, those

1 Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge: Modernity, Empire, Coloniality,” *City* 8, no. 1 (April 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360481042000199787>: 29–56, 37.

2 Maldonado-Torres, “The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge,” 37.

3 Ann-Christine Simke, “Postcolonial Studies,” in *Theater und Tanz: Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, ed. Beate Hochholdinger-Reiterer, Christina Thurner and Julia Wehren. (Baden-Baden: Rombach Verlag, 2023), 327.

4 Simke, “Postcolonial Studies,” 327.

5 Azadeh Sharifi and Lisa Skwirblies, “Ist die deutsche Theaterwissenschaft kolonial? Ein Plädoyer für eine epistemologisch gerechtere Theaterwissenschaft,” in *Theaterwissenschaft postkolonial/decolonial: Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme*, ed. Azadeh Sharifi and Lisa Skwirblies (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2022), https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839455531_33, 33.

were the two main critiques uttered by a wave of newly perceived scholars that also worked on colonial experience(s), amongst them Arturo Escobar, Maria Lugones, Walter D. Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. These scholars were unsatisfied with how Postcolonial Studies framed colonial experience(s), mainly because the framing was excluding to a vast number of people(s) forcefully and violently subjugated by Europeans. The colonial experience(s) of Indigenous People(s) outside of the African or Asian continent as well as the colonial experience(s) of racialised individuals that lived before or after the 19th/20th century weren't explicitly acknowledged yet by postcolonial theories. Laying the foundation for Decolonial Studies, this new wave of theorists wanted to reframe the academic understanding of colonial experience(s). They did so by (1) extending the geographic regions that witnessed colonial subjugation, now including the Americas and the South Pacific and (2) widening the time period colonial relations endure, starting with the transatlantic expeditions in the 15th century and not finding an end until today.⁶ Decolonial Studies therefor emerges since the 1990s as a response to Postcolonial Studies, and at its very core is a critique on the field's excluding geographic and temporal framing of colonial experience(s).

With this discursive shift however, Decolonial Studies saw itself forced to elaborate on a new vocabulary to describe those colonial experience(s) taking place outside of the British Empire and the French Colonial Empire. Ultimately, even if the underlying power relations and the logic of domination were the same, those colonial experience(s) didn't fit into what historians call "colonialism". Eager to denominate what "colonialism" represented for Postcolonial Studies, Aníbal Quijano introduced the concept of "coloniality" for Decolonial Studies. The Peruvian sociologist defines coloniality as a matrix – a certain set of relations, practices and believe systems – that systematically regulates and represses "the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives".⁷ Only this matrix allowed colonialism to flourish as governmental system during specific points in history and space, by privileging European epistemologies over those of different geographic regions. As Quijano insists, coloniality is always linked to "a colonisation of the imagination",⁸ it colonises the minds of the dominated.⁹ Decoloniality, then, would be a matrix – a set of practices – that enable the "de-linking",¹⁰ "de-centering"¹¹ and "de-privileging"¹² of colonial European ways of knowing, of being knowledgeable and of producing perspectives. Decoloniality, refining with Quijano, triggers above all a process of "epistemological decolonisation".¹³

On de-/coloniality and academia

Even though an academic discourse is continuously forming around de-/colonial theories, one could argue that there is no genuine, globally valid de-/colonial practice by itself. Decolonial practices form in relation to the knowledge systems and ontologies of certain territories and geographical regions as well as in relation to the historical and geopolitical contexts those regions inhere. Decolonial practices, therefor, not only differ depending on the geographical region but also on the context they are embedded in. For instance, the practice of calling sea- and landscapes

6 Sharifi and Skwirblies, "Ist die deutsche Theaterwissenschaft kolonial? Ein Plädoyer für eine epistemologisch gerechtere Theaterwissenschaft," 33.

7 Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and modernity/rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (April 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>: 169.

8 Quijano, "Coloniality and modernity/rationality," 169.

9 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 1986).

10 Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (December 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>: 1–23.

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

12 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

13 Quijano, "Coloniality and modernity/rationality," 177.

by their Māori names caught David's attention in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Ever since the European imperial project took off in the early 17th century in Te Moana nui a Kiwa (Pacific Ocean), the colonial practice of renaming bodies of water and islands after Ingarihi (English), Pāniora (Spanish) or Tati (Dutch) authorities was key to subjugate and colonise Passifika Peoples' minds. So, when people in Aotearoa refer to colonised bodies of water and islands by their Māori names, they de-link and de-center colonial ways of knowing and navigating the Earth geographically. This practice, amongst many other things, de-privileges and disorients how Pākehā (people of European descent) are knowledgeable about the globe. The practice itself reclaims bodies of water and islands that are central to the geographical region's knowledge systems and ontologies. On a completely different level, Johanna is interested in a specific artistic project that becomes decolonial by reclaiming popular social dance in the cultural landscape of urban regions in the Bolivian Andes and in its global diaspora. *Archivo Technocumbia* is a website hosted by the Bolivian choreographer Sharon Mercado Nogales that works both as an artistic creation and an archive dedicated to a pop culture phenomenon.¹⁴ Technocumbia is – as the name suggests – a mixture of the music and dance styles of cumbia (especially cumbia Andina) and European techno. It originated in the 1990s in close connection to a television show produced in La Paz, Bolivia. The *Archivo Technocumbia* website provides access to music and video playlists, interviews with several technocumbia groups, texts and a podcast. Although or rather because of the popularity of technocumbia, practiced within an urban community of Aymara and Quechua descent, it never got considered as an artistic practice. Mercado Nogales reconfigures this perspective by not simply collecting, archiving, and commenting on the material, but by integrating the material into her own choreographic and artistic work, as well as into her teaching practice. The project thereby makes implicit social orders visible and questions or subverts them. In connection to Diana Taylor's concept "The Archive and the Repertoire", the website can be described as both an archive and a repertoire, in that the pop-cultural phenomenon of technocumbia is archived as a non-written and historically marginalised practice of cultural knowledge within an artistic-research project.¹⁵ Or, in other words: the *Archivo Technocumbia* reveals epistemic hierarchies and subverts them at the same time, and in this specific context and sense is decolonial.

As our examples show, each geographic region on Earth and each social configuration experiences coloniality in a specific way, so each geographic region and each cultural-political context will come up with its specific decolonial practices. There is a gulf of differences between de-/coloniality the South Pacific and de-/coloniality in the Andean Region, but both regions develop practices that draw attention on epistemic hierarchies with their subversive character. This highlights that Quijano's understanding of coloniality as a matrix is a relational concept. Modes of producing knowledge, perspectives and practices are always linked to specific historical, geographical, cultural and political contexts. They are therefore malleable, permeable and mutable. Situated colonial and decolonial practices stand in a constant relation, one concept determines and forms the other. At the same time, the differences between singular decolonial theories and practices need to be emphasised; there are certain decolonial theories which do not encompass singular decolonial practices, and that there are decolonial practices which are not theorised at all. The (academic) discourse around decoloniality is not necessarily a tangible decolonial action. This twofold perspective on the interdependency or rather distinction between de-/colonial practices and theories highlights the spatial condition of these concepts¹⁶ – without space there is no practice. It also reveals the scope of differences between a theoretical and a practical pursuit on de-

14 "Archivo Technocumbia," website from Sharon Mercado Nogales, accessed October 22, 2025, <https://technocumbia.info/>.

15 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

16 Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge," 37.

/coloniality, between reflecting on knowledge production and resisting within a matrix of knowledge and power in specific contexts. The Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui relentlessly critiques the described condition of the term decolonial, for example when she writes:

For me, [decolonial] is a rather infelicitous galicism that hurts my ears, and since I mistrust all forms of branding, I have come to dislike the unintelligible, elitist, and utterly boring debate that it has provoked up to now. Above all, I find the term practically useless for action in the streets and for engaging with concrete indigenous struggles. It has, nevertheless, been cleverly adopted by new aspirants to internal colonialist power, [...] and this is an even more pressing reason for remaining outside its lure.¹⁷

Rivera Cusicanqui's critique highlights both, the interdependency as well as the difference of de-/coloniality and the according theories and practices. She signals on the "new" hegemonic matrixes of power resulting from the theorisation of so called decolonial practices. These on the one hand reaffirm (Western) academia as dominant structure in knowledge production and dissemination, on the other hand they point at an incorporated discourse on decoloniality as part of political strategies for perpetuating power. Nevertheless, de-/coloniality is a concept that helps to analyse hegemonic structures of phenomena that, in example, are situated in performing arts (which in the context of neoliberal funding policies are linked to a Western understanding of the artistic and cultural work).

On de-/coloniality and performing arts

Focussing on artistic works and practices that are connected to de-/coloniality, the word "gesture" and the derived concept "decolonial gesture" seems to become relevant frameworks to discuss modes of producing, resisting and living within the global networks of contemporary performing arts. Walter Mignolo discusses this term in his Essay *Looking for the Meaning of "Decolonial Gesture"*, published in 2014. A "gesture" is a bodily movement that expresses or underlines an idea or a feeling. A "gesture" might also be an action that expresses an intention, although it might have little practical effect. A "gesture" is hence performative and not necessarily based on words. The nexus with the adjective "decolonial", and the connection to a performative bodily movement, makes the term "decolonial gesture" interesting for discussions within the field of dance, theatre and performance studies. Mignolo in his essay juxtaposes *one* Western understanding of performance as mimesis and representation to other performative acts of expression, like rituals and ceremonies. Within Mignolo's understanding of decoloniality as an option "that co-exists with other options in a given universe of meaning",¹⁸ decolonial gestures (de-linked from Western "performance") are part of decolonial options, as well as decolonial options are constituted, seen and understood through decolonial gestures. Decolonial gestures are, as Mignolo summarises, "all gestures (fictional and non-fictional, artistic and non-artistic) that explicitly confront the colonial matrix. If the confrontation is implicit, it would be the process of interpretation that brings a given 'gesture' [...] in the decolonial frame".¹⁹

In the arts, a decolonial gesture can therefore happen on different levels within the matrix of power and knowledge, it can be a (physical) gesture by an artist, an artistic work, or an artistic practice. The relation of a decolonial gesture to de-/coloniality displays hegemonic understandings of what is valued as an artistic work and thereby points critically on specific structures of power related to institutional networks, economic frames, and aesthetic-discursive fashions. In

17 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "The Potosí Principle: Another View of Totality," *Decolonial Gesture* 11, no. 1 (2014): <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-11-1-decolonial-gesture/11-1-essays/the-potosi-principle-another-view-of-totality.html>.

18 Walter D. Mignolo, "Looking for the Meaning of 'Decolonial Gesture'," *Decolonial Gesture* 11, no. 1 (2014): <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-11-1-decolonial-gesture/11-1-essays/looking-for-the-meaning-of-decolonial-gesture.html>.

19 Mignolo, "Looking for the Meaning of 'Decolonial Gesture'."

other words: because of the focus on performativity and despite any critique on decoloniality, decolonial gesture is an interesting concept for the field of live arts.

About the authors

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David Castillo is a PhD candidate in Dance Studies at the University of Bern, where he visits the doctoral program Global Studies. As undergraduate, he worked with the directors René Pollesch and Stefan Pucher at Schauspielhaus Zürich. From 2019 to 2021, he was assistant director at Staatstheater Braunschweig, where he realised research-based performances. His [artistic work](#) can be seen at Lichthof Theater Hamburg, Rote Fabrik Zürich, Staatstheater Braunschweig, Theater im Burghachkeller Zug, Schauspielhaus Zürich, Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz and Berliner Ensemble. Since 2024, David works on his dissertation in the SNSF project [Social Choreographies](#) at the Institute for Theatre Studies (University of Bern). His PhD thesis examines the bodily experience of climate change in South Pacific islands n ations like Aotearoa/New Zealand, Kiribati and Tuvalu. In 2025, he was invited as guest PhD student to Te Kura Toi/School of Arts at the University of Waikato (Aotearoa/NZ).

Johanna Hilari

Johanna Hilari is a dance researcher and dramaturge. She grew up bilingual (German and Spanish) in La Paz, Bolivia, and studied dance and theatre studies at the University of Bern and at the University Paris 8. She completed her PhD in 2022 at the Institute for Theatre Studies at the University of Bern. Since 2024, she works as a postdoc in the SNSF project [Social Choreographies](#) at the Institute for Theatre Studies, University of Bern. Her postdoc project examines decolonial practices of Latin American choreographers, who work within the European field of theater and dance. Since 2013, Johanna has been working as a freelance dramaturge in the fields of contemporary dance and performance. In 2023/2024 she worked as dramaturge for the 'Danse & Dramaturgie CH' programme initiated by Théâtre Sévelin 36, Lausanne, currently she collaborates with the choreographers Johanna Heusser and Baptiste Cazaux. She is co-chairs the Jury Konzeprförderung (a multy-year funding) of the City of Zurich and is a jury member of the Federal Performing Arts Jury.