

Countering the Legacies of Colonial
Racism: Delinking and the Renewal of
Humanism.

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Countering the Legacies of Colonial Racism: Delinking and the Renewal of Humanism

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Authors writing in the traditions of postcolonial, decolonial, and black thought usually share the assumption that legacies of colonial racism are prevalent and therefore in need of being critically addressed and undone.¹ What adherents of these strands of thought do not always agree upon, though, is the best way of fulfilling this task—even though they at least partly draw on the same theoretical sources. In what follows, I will trace major elements of this disagreement and discuss some of their theoretical and political implications. To this end, I will focus on the work of three select authors: Walter D. Mignolo, who explicitly argues from a Latin American, decolonial perspective, on the one hand; and Achille Mbembe and Paul Gilroy, who write with a particular interest in African postcolonies (Mbembe) and the transregion of the Black Atlantic as well as Great Britain (Gilroy), on the other hand. All three authors decidedly draw on the work of Frantz Fanon when thinking about countering the legacies of colonial racism. As I will show, their respective interpretations of his work

¹ What is the relation of postcolonial, decolonial, and black thought? Drawing a clear distinction between these traditions seems somewhat arbitrary, and elsewhere (Kerner 2012) I have both drawn on canonical African American theorists as postcolonial theorists and introduced decolonial thought as one among various strands of postcolonial studies, in this case from Latin America; the editors of the influential compilation *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Moraña 2008) have, as the subtitle of their book indicates, taken a similar decision. Walter D. Mignolo, by contrast, who is currently among the most prolific—or maybe *the* most prolific—proponent of decolonial thought, claims a clear distinction. According to him, postcolonial thought refers to the former *British* Empire only and, furthermore, theoretically draws most of all on post-structuralism and postmodernism, which he holds to be Eurocentric and therefore unsuitable for decoloniality (Mignolo 2011, xxvi). This depiction of postcolonial thought differs considerably from the decidedly broader one that is predominant within postcolonial studies. See, among many other publications that could be referenced in this regard, Ashcroft et al. (1995); Bartolovich and Lazarus (2002); and Bancel et al. (2010).

differ as much as their take on how current, persisting or re-actualized forms of colonial racism might best be fought or even overcome.

1. Fanon on Colonial Racism and Anti-Colonial Struggle

Frantz Fanon's first monograph, *Black Skin, White Masks*, decidedly addresses the psychological effects of racism—both with regard to everyday life in the French colonies of the Caribbean and to black Antillean migrants' experiences in the French metropole. Fanon diagnoses passiveness and aggression, feelings of inferiority and overcompensation among the possible effects of racist experiences. According to him, the basic situation of blacks in the French empire was characterized by alienation, the feeling of being locked in one's blackness. Whites were locked in their whiteness, too; but they, by contrast, would often consider themselves as superior, and therefore functioned as a yardstick for black people's aspirations and actions. This, again, would lead to an "internalization or rather epidermalization" of inferiority (Fanon 2008, xv), and further to a split of consciousness, that led blacks to constant struggles against their own image (Fanon 2008, 170).

Concerning racism's modes and mechanisms, Fanon decidedly offers a systemic rather than a mere actor-centered view, as he deliberately stresses the importance of epistemic aspects, the realm of knowledge and the cultural. In the colonies, language and education are of particular relevance in this regard; according to Fanon, to speak a particular language means "assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 2008, 2). And he holds that all colonized people, or "people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave," position themselves in relation to the "civilizing language" (Fanon 2008, 2) and attempt assimilation to the cultural values of the metropole.

Within the metropolises, by contrast, racism operates precisely by denying assimilation to colonial migrants. Metropolitan racism, according to Fanon, works by classifying and essentializing, by imprisoning the colonized in their own visible appearance, an appearance that is associated with cultural inferiority (2008, 15, 18). Metropolitan racism therefore works by complete disregard of individuality, of an individual's aspirations and iden-

tifications. According to Fanon, such discursive strategies lead to personal misrecognition as well as the misrecognition of black culture, civilization and history (Fanon 2008, 17).

It is noteworthy that Fanon's vision for overcoming such epistemic aspects of colonial racism and the alienation it induces is decidedly existentialist. It thus differs substantially from standpoint-oriented, identity-politics approaches to anti-racism.² In fact, Fanon is rather wary of attempts at deducing one's destiny from one's history. According to him, black as much as white people could overcome their alienation only when they refused "to let themselves be locked in the substantialized 'tower of the past'" (Fanon 2008, 201).

Racism as Fanon conceptualizes it is not restricted to epistemic aspects, though. The other crucial component is economic. Overcoming the alienation of blacks therefore required the combination of subjective endeavors on an individual basis with material struggles (Fanon 2008, xv). What was needed was nothing less than "restructuring the world" and "a change in social structure" (Fanon 2008, 63, 66).

As is widely known, a few years after the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon joined the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria; his writings also focused more and more on economic and political aspects of colonial and postcolonial constellations. This is certainly true for *The Wretched of the Earth*, a substantial part of which is an ardent critique of colonialism. Fanon characterizes the colonial situation as "exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer", the colonial world as a compartmentalized world, divided in two, Manichaean and petrified (Fanon 2004, 3, 15). Colonial exploitation and segregation are achieved by openly displayed police and army violence (Fanon 2004, 4) as well as by racism. "This compartmentalized world [...] is inhabited by different species," Fanon describes the effects of such racism, namely the association of group membership and social status: "You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (2004, 5). To the colonizers, the colonized symbolize the

²The fact that Fanon was rather skeptical about identity politics, including black political and cultural movements, didn't hinder political activists, for instance of the Black Power movement, to rely on him in such a regard (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, xi–xii). For a discussion of Fanon's take on identity politics, see Kruks (1996), for his complicated relationship to anticolonial nationalism and his existentialism, Lazarus (1999); for a discussion of his "postcolonial cosmopolitanism," emerging from colonialism's contradictions and therefore "a part of Europe's history as much as the history of the colonized," see Go (2012, 221).

absence or even the negation of values. Taken to its extreme, this logic leads to acts of dehumanization, of reducing the colonized to an animal-like state (Fanon 2004, 6–8). Therefore, Fanon characterizes colonialism as “a systemized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity” (2004, 182). True decolonization therefore required the overcoming of colonial differentiations, a complete destruction of the Manichaean colonial world—an “agenda for total disorder” including “the creation of new men” (Fanon 2004, 2).

2. Colonial Divisions, Decolonial Delinking: Walter Mignolo

Decolonial thought, particularly the work of authors engaged in the *modernidad/colonialidad* project, is characterized by a decidedly critical stance towards Western epistemology, which in this tradition is held to be inseparable from its colonial and thus racist underside. Walter Mignolo characterizes the effects of this darker side of Western epistemology as highly damaging, as having inflicted what he calls the “colonial wound” (2005, 8). Developing this notion, he refers to the thought of Frantz Fanon—namely the *damnés*, the wretched of the earth, as “the wounded of the imperial/colonial world order” (Mignolo 2005, 108). According to Mignolo, coloniality names

“the experiences and views of the world and history of those whom Fanon calls *les damnés de la terre* (‘the wretched of the earth,’ those who have been, and continue to be, subjected to the standards of modernity). The wretched are defined by the *colonial wound*, and the colonial wound, physical and/or psychological, is a consequence of *racism*, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify.” (2005, 8, original emphasis)

As this quote demonstrates, colonial racism, as Mignolo defines it, hinges on discourse, namely on Western discourse. With this conceptual decision, Mignolo deliberately parts from Fanon’s own claim that there is an interlink between ‘race’ and social status or class in the colonial world. The “damnés in the sense of humiliating people racially (the colonial epistemic and ontological differences) transcend class,” Mignolo states (2011, 121);

for Jens Kastner and Tom Waibel, this in fact marks an elimination of Marxism from decolonial theory (Kastner and Waibel 2012, 37).

And there is another aspect in which Mignolo parts from Fanon; he considerably broadens the notion of the wretched of the earth. For Mignolo, this notion does not name all those who are subjected to practices of European colonialism, like in Fanon, but all those who are subjected to the racist standards of modernity, which in fact transcend European colonialism. Accordingly, the decolonial project or option implies no less than the disruption of the discursive forms of coloniality and thus of Western modernity. This is to be achieved by challenging Eurocentric and modernist perspectives—which Mignolo holds to be the hegemonic mode of thought on a global scale—with recourse to critical perspectives that take the colonial wound seriously and use it as a starting point for imagining a different, a pluralized world (2005, 156).

Mignolo finds the intellectual resources for such an alternative epistemology in what he calls border thinking, the work of theorists and social movements connected to the wretched.³ He sketches such border thinking as inherently non-metropolitan, and in fact as an inevitable effect of the modern/colonial expansion—for the colonized had no choice but to critically reflect on their mode of life and on their master's way of thought (2005, 9). To Mignolo, border thinking entails and combines two major elements. First, acts of conceptual reclaiming and resignification, which are to counter the epistemic violence that modern/colonial knowledge has produced; an example is the work of Afro-Andean scholars, like Juan García Salazar or Edizon León, who stress concepts of “ancestry” and “*lo propio*,” one's own, against Eurocentric models of history (Mignolo 2005, 112–114). The second aspect is *interculturalidad* in the sense of epistemic plurality, which in many countries of Latin America implies the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. Mignolo attributes an inherent value to what he calls a “pluriversality” (2011, 222) of knowledge and values, since it counters the hegemony of modern/colonial thought; and he holds that it does so independently of the respective *contents* of the differing forms of knowledge he wants to see as co-existing. His prime example for setting into work *interculturalidad* are projects of bilingual, intercultural education,

³ One of Mignolo's prime models of border thinking is the writing of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, who in her bilingual and multiple genre book *Borderlands/La Frontera* portrays the U.S.-Mexican border as an open wound, as “*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa 1987, 3).

for instance the *Universidad Intercultural de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas Amawtay Wasi*, an institution of higher education in Ecuador that is closely linked with indigenous movements and in its teaching combines Spanish and Quechua knowledge systems (2005, 117–128); or the thought of the Mexican *Zapatistas* that links Marxist categories and indigenous cosmology (2000, 140).⁴

Mignolo is interested in border thinking and indigenous knowledge in the sense of what Michel Foucault in a lecture from 1976 has called an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”—as a return of buried historical contents and as a re-emergence of local “popular knowledge” that at some point had been disqualified as insufficiently elaborated, but that now, with its re-emergence, could become the basis of a locally grounded new form of social critique (Foucault 2003, 6–9; Mignolo 2000, 19–20).⁵ In this sense, Mignolo sees, in the perspective of those who have been silenced in the course of the making of Latin America, the possibility for “breaking the Western code” (2011, 225) and thus for radical change (2005, xv).

He calls embracing such perspectives “epistemic disobedience” and “delinking” (Mignolo 2011, 122, 224). Such delinking marks the stepping out of the hegemonic epistemic regime, the modern/colonial system, in order to create alternative visions and practices in the fields of economy, politics, ethics, philosophy, technology, and society (2012, 54, 81). It is a practice that according to Mignolo must necessarily be exercised from below, from civil and political society—or rather from those segments of it which are constituted by subjects who have been marginalized and dehumanized by the modern/colonial order and the racism it entails (2012, 188–189). Therefore, Mignolo’s vision for overcoming colonial racism is, in the first place, a vision for those negatively affected by colonial racism. It is only here, within the communities of the wounded and the silenced, that he sees alternatives in the making, alternatives that have the power to disrupt the hegemonic discursive order. As we will see, this vision differs considerably from conceptions proposed by Achille Mbembe and by Paul Gilroy.

4 It might seem contradictory that at this point, Marx is again on the horizon of Mignolo’s thought. But it comes up in his presentation of an alternative mode of thought, of border thinking. Mignolo’s own critical analysis of colonial racism concentrates on epistemic matters alone.

5 For a harsh critique of Foucault’s attempt to resurrect popular knowledge, as this endeavor would disregard both the effects of ideology and the power relation between intellectuals and the people, see Spivak (1988).

3. Conceptualizing a Renewed Humanism: Achille Mbembe and Paul Gilroy

Whereas Walter Dignolo suggests epistemic delinking for counteracting modern epistemology and the racism it entails, both Achille Mbembe and Paul Gilroy argue for the overcoming of racial differentiations and for inclusive modes of community and conviviality. While Dignolo takes up Fanon's diagnosis of the colonial Manichaeism, the division or compartmentalization of the world, and claims its continued relevance in current, post-independence times, Mbembe and Gilroy rather draw on Fanon's plea for a new, critical humanism and on his conviction that a better world requires the destruction of colonial divisions—and they call for acts of such destruction in the present. For Achille Mbembe, the way to proceed in this sense is via the formation of ethical communities that transcend colonial lines of differentiation, and thereby have the potential to finally undoing them. In his seminal work *On the Postcolony*, originally published in 2000, he had focused on the epistemic, or discursive dimension of colonial practices and their effects—primarily those racist difference constructions that European colonial powers used to render Africa as Europe's Other and that negated its peoples the status of full humanity. Mbembe characterized such difference constructions as a form of power inherently connected to violence. For this, he referred to their content, on the one hand: according to him, the reduction to physicality, ascriptions of irrationality and the animalization and bestialization that characterized colonial imaginations of the African population had brutalizing effects (Mbembe 2001, 14). On the other hand, such images of Africans did not only circulate in the sphere of the cultural, but were institutionalized in the course of the slave trade and colonialism; they were materialized in various ways. According to Mbembe, this made violence infuse economy, the private, language and consciousness; it became a cultural practice and constituted a spirit of violence with far reaching subjectivation effects (2001, 175).

It is now precisely against this backdrop that in his more current writing, including in his comments on the work of Frantz Fanon, Mbembe suggests the strengthening of the idea of a common human nature, an idea that for a long time posed—and maybe still poses—“a problem for Western consciousness” (Mbembe 2001, 2). Mbembe argues that Fanon's revolutionary theory should be interpreted within the context of a more general theory of the rise in humanity, *montée en humanité*, when he writes:

“The colonized has to propel himself, by his own force, to a level above the one to which he has been consigned as a result of racism and subjugation. [...] In this way, he restores the possibility, for him personally and for humanity as a whole, starting with his executioners, of new and open dialogue between two equal human subjects where, previously, there had been opposition between a man (the colonist) and his object (the colonized). From then on there is no more black and white. There is only a world finally rid of the burden of race, a world to which everyone has a right.” (2012, 24)

As this quote should make clear, when Mbembe speaks of a common human nature or the rise in humanity, he does not refer to Western humanism and universalism in an unbroken way. For not unlike Mignolo, he holds that postcolonial critique should uncover the racist underside that the Western tradition of thought has produced in order to be able to restrict its assertive claims to people of European descent (Mbembe 2009, 34). To Mbembe, what is needed for not reproducing the effects of the colonial order in the present is precisely a political culture that makes it possible for every person to regain subject status, to be recognized as a fellow human and to engage in person-to-person dialogue. Only such a culture of mutuality and the common would enable the disruption of violent colonial hierarchies, on the one hand, and anti-colonial counter violence and revenge on the other (Mbembe 2009, 35).

What I would like to stress as noteworthy is that for Mbembe, this vision for the future implies both sides of the former colonial split.⁶ Different from Mignolo, who advocates acts of delinking and for whom hopes for a better future are restricted to contexts that search for alternatives to modern/colonial logics, Mbembe’s aim is to establish ethical communities precisely in those contexts that were characterized by colonial differentiations and hierarchies before. This demands a recognition of “black people’s capacity for self-making, self-reference and self-expression” as well as “versions of whiteness that are [...] constituted [...] around an ethics of

⁶ In his monograph *Sortir de la Grande Nuit*, Mbembe draws on both Jean-Luc Nancy and Frantz Fanon to develop a notion of “déclousion du monde et montée en humanité” (2010, 55). He refers to Fanon’s reference to a zone of non-being, which is also employed in decolonial thought, for instance by Ramón Grosfoguel (2011). But while for Grosfoguel this zone is synonymous with a social position of those oppressed (see Grosfoguel 2011, 99), Mbembe interprets Fanon’s zone of non-being as race itself: “cette zone de non-être qu’est, à ses yeux, la *race*,” he writes (2010, 69, original emphasis). The déclousion he is advocating for is precisely the breaking out of that zone: “*sortir de l’enclos de la race*,” leaving ‘race’ behind (2010, 69, original emphasis).

mutuality and human solidarity” (Mbembe 2009, 36). This means that while Mignolo renounces the European tradition and argues for processes of delinking from it, Mbembe rather holds it accountable; according to the latter, postcolonial thought “calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all of that responsibly (Mbembe 2009, 38).

Mbembe’s drawing on Fanon to gain a notion of a “new form of critical humanism” (2009, 38) is compatible with the work of Paul Gilroy. Already in his book *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*, the basic driving force is a post-racial notion of the human, a “radically nonracial humanism” (Gilroy 2000, 15). With this notion, Gilroy particularly criticizes current forms of black culture and community which he holds to be based too much on quasi-biological models of solidarity and which he therefore characterizes as being depoliticized. In *After Empire*, which was published four years later, Gilroy follows up on this criticism and shifts his perspective on British society in general. Here, he refers to the notion of conviviality to sketch out a positive political vision. This vision draws on the daily interactions in the heterogeneous reality of post-colonial cities; it thereby transcends multicultural affirmations of ‘racial’ and cultural differences. But like Mbembe, Gilroy formulates requirements that must be met before this scenario has an actual chance of realization. To him, the conviviality he envisions requires the former empire to deal with its colonial past, and to particularly acknowledge that current social conflict in connection to migration and integration stem from this past and can only be understood and solved within this horizon (Gilroy 2004, 2–3). The establishment of a postcolonial political culture therefore requires precise analyses of the connections that in the course of history were constructed between notions of ‘race,’ culture, civilization and nation, as well as the will to substantially revise these notions. Furthermore, what is needed, according to Gilroy, is the realization of a worthwhile liberalism—a liberalism that reflects on its colonial sedimentations and implications and that counteracts ‘racial,’ ethnic and national boundaries. Racism and antiracism would have to be treated as political issues and to be freed from their societal shadow existence as matters of personal preference or choice; the constitutive entanglements between European modernity and colonial and imperial experiences would have to be acknowledged, and the influence of black literature, culture, art and music on European life would have to be stressed, including the important role that a turn to African American

cultures played for the cultural reconstitution of Europe after fascism (Gilroy 2004, 162). Gilroy holds that the most important element of this program is anti-racism—not in the sense of an acknowledgment of cultural diversity, but rather as an engagement against the reification of ‘racial’ differentiation of any kind (2004, 167). To him, the strongest forces that oppose a culture of conviviality are racism and nationalism (2004, 112).

The point that I would like to stress here is that Gilroy, like Mbembe, but unlike Mignolo who pleads for acts of epistemic delinking and intellectual independence, believes in inclusive solutions; not ‘only’ for postcolonies, but also for the metropolises. He does, like Mbembe, stress that such solutions require the metropolises to change: to him, modern self-perceptions that do *not* acknowledge the long history of global interdependencies, colonial legacies of racism, and the need for deliberate acts of fighting it render an actualization of a culture of conviviality unlikely. But it is crucial that Gilroy, when thinking about ways of countering colonial racism, explicitly addresses the metropolises, formulating a catalogue of concrete demands for them to fulfill. It is crucial because this means that like Mbembe, he holds them accountable. He would probably not be inclined to raise this demand did he not have at least a slight bit of hope that they can, and might, change for the better.

4. End

The writings of Frantz Fanon have inspired a broad variety of interpretations.⁷ As I have attempted to show, such interpretative diversity also holds for the work of Mignolo, Mbembe, and Gilroy. All three authors take up specific ideas of Fanon to use them in their own theorizing on the legacies of colonial racism. Nevertheless, the ways in which they do this are quite distinct. Mignolo takes up Fanon’s notion of the colonial division as shorthand for describing power relations in our current world, which according to him still awaits decolonization. Furthermore, he uses Fanon’s expression of *the wretched of the earth* to give a unifying but formal, non-substantializing and non-essentializing name to the subjects of border thinking, the core term of his own thoughts on how to overcome the legacies of colonial

⁷ For an overview, see the essays in Alessandrini (1999) and in Gordon et al. (1996).

racism. Mbembe and Gilroy, on the other hand, rather take up a core element of Fanon's ethical-political concerns, his plea for a new form of humanism, and think about what would be needed to translate it into our current times.

All three authors share Fanon's conviction that overcoming colonial racism requires considerable renewal. But they noticeably differ with regard to the question of who the agents of such renewal might be, and where the epicenters of such renewal are likely to be located. Mignolo clearly favors delinking from Western epistemology; it is border thinkers that he pins his hopes on. Interestingly, in his latest book, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Mignolo claims that decoloniality, namely "long term processes involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power,' [...] should lead to the 'new humanity' claimed by Frantz Fanon" (2011, 52). He does not suggest how such processes might be realized beyond communities of border thinkers themselves, though. His claim for an epistemic pluriversality pretty much resembles a plea for a form of global multiculturalism, a system where all communities are free to flourish in accordance with their tradition, convictions, and beliefs. It remains unclear in his thinking if, and how, he imagines border thinking to transcend the context it stems from, how exactly it might help divest colonial power outside of the communities of those engaged in forms of decolonial thought.

At this precise point, both Mbembe and Gilroy considerably differ from Mignolo. For both of them, the plea for a new humanism involves everyone—including the former colonialists. Therefore, Mbembe as well as Gilroy do not exclusively address and direct their hopes and demands towards the former colonized or those communities that suffer from racism, like black communities. Rather, they deliberately argue in an encompassing way. They hold everybody accountable for the task of overcoming racism—this includes, in a particular way, white people, Europe, the metropolises. For both authors, colonial racism is a crucial, yet infamous, element of European history; but they can at least theoretically imagine a Europe, as well as former European colonies, combating and overcoming colonial racism. Mignolo, by contrast, treats racism as inevitable as long as, and wherever, Western epistemology is hegemonic. Within the realm of the West itself, he seems to see no way out.

This skepticism somehow resonates with his disinterest in possible hierarchizing or excluding elements in the non-Western epistemologies that

he embraces; the racism that Mignolo is interested in critiquing is modern/colonial racism in its pure form only. In this respect he diverges particularly from Gilroy, who has put great effort into his critical analyses of the politics of Black movements, which, despite his principle sympathy for such movements, he is far from approving on a general basis.⁸ While for Gilroy, potential actors and loci of anti-racism can in principle be found everywhere, at least within every nation and in every ethnically or racially defined group, he does not assume that in any group or location a politics of overcoming the legacies of colonial racism will necessarily be actualized.

For both Gilroy and Mbembe, the vision of a new, critical humanism entails transcending the divisions colonialism relied upon. Neither of them claims this to be an easy task, and in fact both authors provide lists of requirements for it to seem achievable. For Mignolo, who proposes de-linking, such transcendence seems unimaginable—at least in the near future. So while his decolonial option at first sight may seem considerably more radical than the scenarios Mbembe and Gilroy sketch out, in the end it proves to be the more pessimistic.

⁸ In this, Mignolo also differs considerably from Fanon, who, next to harshly denouncing colonial racism, warned of tribalism and the possible “racism of the young national bourgeoisie” after decolonization as well (Fanon 2004, 110).

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