

Decolonizing: The Curriculum, the Museum, and the Mind



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Table of Contents

Series Introduction
Lolita Jablonskienė
and Ieva Pleikienė
p. 8

Introduction:
*Decolonizing: The
Curriculum, the Museum,
and the Mind*
Marquard Smith
p. 10

Decolonizing Knowledge
and the Question of the
Archive
Achille Mbembe
p. 44

Imagining *Otherwise*
Danah Abdulla
p. 84

Shaping Collective
Memory: 'Vilnius' everyday
life', a Photoalbum
Ieva Mazūraitė–
Novickienė
p. 98



All on the Ground
Michelle Williams
Gamaker
p. 118

Decolonizing through
Post-Socialist Lenses
Almira Ousmanova
p. 136

Discussion
p. 162

Afterword: Nobody Wants
to Deal with this Shit
Internally
Teresa Cisneros and
Andrea Francke
p. 196

Biographical notes
p. 226

Colophon
p. 238

Afterword: Nobody Wants to Deal with this Shit Internally¹

**Teresa Cisneros and
Andrea Francke**

198

Andrea Francke: (AF):

Our brief is to raise issues, discuss the debate around decolonization from the perspective of the Americas. We can do this through an artistic, activist, academic point of view, or perhaps best a combo of all of them. Marq added that our thoughts on border thinking would be interesting, and also a bit about fucking up the institution.

Teresa Cisneros (TC):

I began thinking with democracy in the centre, because it feels that the decolonizing project, at least

¹ When Marq asked Teresa if she might consider writing an afterthought to this publication, because of her collaborative practice she invited Andrea to be in conversation with her. Their conversation took place in Hackney, London, in Teresa's flat under an English grey sky over coffee and teas. The conversation continued over wine and lunch, following no particular order and it is similar to the conversations that Andrea and Teresa engage in when they meet to chismear.

in the case of this project here, is to aspire towards democracy.

AF:

The Post Soviet and South Africa perspectives framing this book are interesting in the context of decolonization and in relation to democracy. In Latin America, the thinking that emerged in relation to decolonization doesn't move towards democracy.

TC:

How do decolonization and democracy sit together? They seem disparate to me. Thinking of Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 80s and how the US interfered in their governance to establish democracy, but it's really neo-colonial rule.

AF:

What does that have to do with decolonization?

TC:

It doesn't. Quite the opposite, it's democracy as colonisation! So then the question becomes: what is the democracy the contributors to this publication look towards when speaking of decolonization?

AF:

More generally, it's questionable how decolonizing is appropriated and universally applied. Concepts which are experience- or situation-specific are transformed by academia, culture, and the arts, and then applied everywhere. Latin American decolonizing theory is a situated conversation trying to understand and act in the world through the embodied experience of living in a world created at the moment of colonization.

199

TC:

Decolonization is not a universal in concept or application. When it's used in this way it generally doesn't feel reflective or antagonistic enough; it needs to be complicated.

AF:

Decolonizing just becomes a moral good. Decolonizing is a good thing so we do it and call what we're doing decolonizing, so we're doing a good thing. It's a 'virtuous circle', but a vacuous one composed of empty rhetoric.

TC:

That's true, whether it's inclusion/diversity work across the board, repatriating objects in museums, or decolonizing the curriculum in higher education. For instance, the 'Why is my curriculum so white?' project initiated by the National Union of Students is framed as
200 decolonizing, but can the curriculum be decolonized? The curriculum uses a colonial framework, so you can change the curriculum but that doesn't change the framework.

AF:

On the other hand, it's confusing how different theories and uses of 'decolonization' are mixed and interact. You have the Latin American texts from Anibal Quijano in Peru and US based Latin American scholars, such as Maria Lugones and Walter Dignolo. Then there are African scholars and activists such as Mbembe. African states' history of independence struggles and decolonization is different from Latin America. The 'theory' has a meaning directly in relation to the activism. Mixing these two concepts – of the decolonial in Latin American and Africa as it is 'situated' with regards to 'theory' and/or 'practice' – blows my mind and I find it hard to follow.

TC:

The Americas had a colonisation akin to erasure as the Spanish arrive with a desire to re-inscribe the land. Africa is a different project. How then does decolonizing apply to England, what is it to decolonize here?

AF:

Who is being decolonized? I think decolonization in England becomes a strategy: 'How can I keep my whiteness at the centre without having to carry any guilt?'

TC:

Or white innocence, the 'it wasn't my intention' line. Because 'I know your pain', 'I understand your pain'. But my white construction is the status quo, and it does not change.

AF:

And I can change the curriculum and teach some black scholars but my whiteness is still intact.

TC:

Still white people using white power.

AF:

Going back to Quijano. I think we need to read what Quijano wrote beginning in the eighties as part of a larger movement of thinkers that have similar projects from very different perspectives. You can trace affinities between Quijano's *Dominación y cultura*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *The New Mestiza*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Hortence Spillers 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', among others. Everybody's breaking things apart and questioning self-evident truths from their own bodies and experiences. Quijano

said we needed to lay claim over all the concepts that have been imposed on us. They are ours.

TC:

They are proposing a different set of questions, not taking what they're told is the question. Fundamentally coloniality/whiteness dictates the questions. Colonisation is about power through infrastructures and administration, it ensures we move towards said power, it creates the framework. Quijano is saying: should we be moving in that way? However, in much of the decolonizing discourse today academics or cultural workers are moving in the 'white' way. They talk about undoing, reconstructing, but they're still playing the same fucking white games. It's the same shit again and again.

I am apprehensive about decolonizing. I don't get the 'lets strip things back' and restart, where are we trying to get to? I think we need to be reconditioned without forgetting the past but not returning to a past. It's not 'I'm going to unlearn coloniality so I can get to the position which allows me to access a life-style'. Doing that follows a colonial administrative path.

Mignolo uses delinking: to decolonize you have to delink, meaning there has to be a shift from thinking there is a universal into recognising other philosophies, knowledges, ethics, politics, ways of being. Such an unnamed space has various ways in mind; western ways don't teach us to think like this, they teach us thinking that is always singular.

Another issue is that the people doing the 'decolonizing' still maintain their power. They don't want to give up their fucking power. To decolonize is to give up power or share it. What would it mean to give up power and share agency?

AF:

Power is linked to centrality and the subject at the centre. Thinking about Anzaldúa's borders and margins and the subjectivity that develops when you are always already between cultures or categories. Never being at the centre is not comfortable but how can we learn to be uncomfortable if that hasn't been forced on us? If people want to decolonize they need to learn to be comfortable *not* being at the centre of every fucking concept. I never think about galleries, universities or the curriculum in relation to decolonizing. I think about people and movements in South America who only do things in Spanish because they don't want to speak to the fucking 'centre' (implied irony). They do their thing. Like Feminismo Comunitario or Sylvia Rivera Cusicanqui. They don't translate their work into English. Because time and again people (academics and artists) come and appropriate it. They find it and decide: 'this is about me!', and suddenly they place themselves at the centre and push these voices out.

TC:

In the decolonizing museums 'sector' some are centring indigenisation or similar experiences but the voices doing this are white (you can be BIPOC but think through whiteness). I think: 'how dare you colonialist take *our* (I'm not saying I'm indigenous but I am brown from a colonised space) tools to decolonize?' Shouldn't they flip it and say: 'if you want to decolonize why don't you have my job?' They should be using their tools on their terms, not taking my tools, or 'letting' me borrow their tools.

AF:

Maybe they should be saying: 'lets eliminate my job'. Maybe 90% of the jobs white people hold in the arts and cultural industries are useless.

TC:

Middle management especially – shit, I'll do myself out of a job. The tools of decolonizing are a problem. We should start by asking who is most disenfranchised because of colonisation, and instead we should be thinking through collectivity; through forms that are not self-centred, white western, or capitalist, but collective.

White majority institutions want to decolonize, undertake repatriation and restitution without doing the real fucking work. It's done in name only, it's just 'shuffling papers' to make superficial efforts. Nobody wants to deal with this shit internally. To actually decolonize is to ask: 'what can I do from my position?' And, you know what, the answer might be as simple as: 'okay, I cannot decolonize'.

204 I exist in a colonial state. I studied arts administration, mastered colonial administration, and came to understand its methods. And growing up on the border and being an othered subject I learned to think with several positions at once. A white straight abled bodied person can't. Because they'll never fucking know because they've never had to. So as much as they want to write about decolonizing they don't actually apply it to themselves because they don't know how to or maybe don't want to because that would mean giving up or sharing power.

AF:

What does it mean to assume decolonizing is the tool that everybody needs to apply to themselves? When did British people decide they needed to decolonize themselves? I find the operation weird because it's so extractivist at its core. What are you doing? You go to Africa, go to Latin America, you appropriate the concept, then you occupy it and then you decolonize your museums. What does that mean?

TC:

Then produce knowledge that's not theirs, own it, modify it, and be the expert in it.

AF:

Then they have consultants, 'experts' with the zealotry of the recently converted, and that come and decolonize their institution.

TC:

205 Colonialism or coloniality. Decolonizing itself simply becomes a destination enforced in a specific way. It becomes a communication tool. There's a group of professionals in London whose destination is to decolonize and detoxify museums. Can a museum be detoxed? What the fuck does that mean when museums are inherently toxic? Recently Tate Britain had an exhibition on Baroque British paintings and members of this group and the public were triggered when they saw a painting depicting black slaves. The group said Tate had a responsibility to give trigger warnings and that seeing the painting caused people trauma. On their Twitter they linked to the NHS for mental health support. I was like: 'for fuck's sake seriously; a fucking trigger warning sign is what you want!?!?!'

AF:

Who are the people triggered? Because if you are black or brown you go through the world being triggered every day all the time. Who are these bodies for whom this symbolic thing is so painful and causes trauma?

TC:

I also thought: 'how dare you take my fucking agency away by putting a trigger sign up?' I can choose. Perhaps they could request the context of

the artworks be made clearer. Someone can't assume that something is triggering. There is something around decolonizing here that is about taking people's agency away. People in power decide who has agency and who doesn't. I was pissed off with this situation because I thought: 'who the fuck are you to police me?!?' If I believed their intention was to reconstruct a museum, then that's an interesting proposition because you're thinking beyond one group and their singular glory.

AF:

The way museums function is also situated, and can illuminate the thinking of decolonization in different places. Much like Mexico, in Peru we have an indigenous past that feels heroic. It does not allow the denial of the cultural and intellectual value of the people present before colonization. Therefore, whiteness had to find a way to relate to that and own it. Archaeological and historical museums are an important part of the infrastructure that ensures the past is shared, but race is strategically distributed. We do have some interesting recent examples such as a museum reflecting on the Internal War years, the Lugar de la Memoria, la Tolerancia y la Inclusión Social (LUM). I think you could see it as a decolonial 'take' on the museum. It's a museum as a place that is alive and holding space for politics, epistemological disputes, and social justice.

TC:

The museums you mention are political and living. As opposed to museums organised from a colonial positionality that are usually dead. For instance, Mexico's museums created a heroic indigenous identity, which is problematic, without indigenous people in the conversation. Remember there was lite colonisation in Mexico's making. We know the Aztecs

for a reason: because they colonised too. How do we sort those layers of colonisation?

AF:

I wouldn't necessarily agree that the Aztecs colonised. I like the idea of colonisation being a specific process. Groups have power and conquer but not every power relation is a colonising one.

TC:

To some extent, it can be said the Aztecs colonised others across Mexico, wiping them out through assimilation and integration. Taking people as tribute for sacrifice, monetary tributes and then culturally assimilating them through violence.

AF:

I still wouldn't say that's colonisation and that's one of my problems with the use of colonization to cover very disparate processes. For example was the Soviet Union involved in a colonisation, or as some have said in this book, an occupation? 207

TC:

What do you call it when one group takes over another through power? Do we name it differently?

AF:

We name it differently for different places and historical moments. For example, in the case of the Incas in Peru; there was an empire and they conquered many peoples and territories, but their administrative processes were different from the Spanish processes. Their economics were different from colonial extractivism. Bodies were managed differently. It was an empire, but I don't think we should name the process colonization.

TC:

It conflates what we are talking about, but I sort of agree with you. I think there's a romanticisation of decolonizing and colonisation, especially towards the Americas. For instance, when decolonizing is thought of as going back to the before. Stripping away the colonisation that happened to 'return' to these spaces in those times. What are we returning to?

AF:

Feminismo Comunitario in Bolivia have this critique: Why do white people in the US and Europe think there's something to go back to? A feminism led by indigenous and mestizo women, they're asking: 'What are they talking about?' Oppression has always existed. Their feminism is constructed around the idea that we need to constantly fight oppression but the fight is always circular. We have solutions, make change then other oppressions emerge and we deal with them. We're always moving towards and realising how to be and do better as we go.

TC:

There is no one solution or singular end. Recently I met a white composer who shared a story about receiving a grant from the British Council for South America. His plan was to redistribute the grant to local people. The project was to create an archive of ancestral stories from carvings on a cave. No extraction. During the project, the carvings were destroyed by a mining business as a way to destroy indigenous claims to land. The composer offered to recreate the cave by using the memories of those who knew the caves and to create the cave via 3D printing with contacts in Madrid. This became the project on their terms; that's to say, on the terms of the local people, influenced by the white composer who can access certain technologies.

AF:

It just sounds shitty, it's what someone told you they wanted on their terms.

TC:

Maybe I'm naïve, but I find the negotiation of intention and non-extraction interesting. Who are we to judge what indigenous people want. The artist co-presented with a local activist at a conference where she was asked by a white man why she would want this plastic cave. She said: 'why wouldn't I, you don't think we have access to this technology or want it?' We presume someone is telling them what they want. I thought the cave as archive for land rights via a fucking 3D object in Madrid was wild. The local people will use the fucking technology because this is how they can claim their land and history, it's the only way they can prove they exist. It's relayed to me by a white man who co-claims the project and has agency.

AF:

OK, but decolonizing as a process remains intact. Funding from external agencies is not redistributing, it's a dependency or co-dependent. I read agency from a nihilistic perspective so it's always limited. But agency is having the capacity to react to things, we all have it and it's not like some of us have agency and some of us don't.

TC:

Agency as in 'he has the power because he is a white man from the UK'. I think of agency in terms of how I make decisions based on how they affect others. Collective agency, even if spoken through one person. What's nihilistic about what you are saying?

AF:

Agency is spoken through belief in the self. If you attain a level of power, you can actually do what you want. You make the decision. I find agency in that sense an unhelpful concept. That's what I mean by nihilistic. Humans can never achieve that level of selfishness. We all impact the narrative, many agencies like the British Council, the host, the activist, the artist, there are many layers. The redistribution of money is a problem. British Council money comes from the lottery or taxes from working class people. We're actually missing something: decolonization as an idea that questions the concepts and the structures of how things are.

TC:

We're not addressing the before, when the British Council gets created to redistribute money as diplomacy. What about the bodies that exist there, that have been affected by British colonialism? It's convoluted, with regards to positionality and navigating institutions that are created and framed through colonial infrastructures that, currently, are most widespread, whether that's in the work place or more widely across society. What position does a body that's been colonised through education or society have? My education was white Western, but my Mexican parents taught me another way of being. A body fed two ways. What does it mean to navigate spaces as colonised bodies knowing you will be recolonized when for instance you start a job? I'm talking about what it means, and how it feels to be required to think through certain structures to survive those structures.

There's something interesting here about decolonizing and surviving. Thinking about the positionality I occupy because of education or whatever, I've survived

somehow. I have very little privilege, but could be perceived to have it. I started life as a working-class immigrant from the border. But somehow figured out how to navigate these structures by being in constant self-reflection and critique. A colonised body, but also a colonising body. People don't reflect on their own fucking colonising. I'm a coloniser and I admit it. I cannot undo it. I can just rethink it in a different form.

AF:

We live in coloniality and it's experienced differently wherever you are. In Latin America it's structured in a certain way. Here in the Empire coloniality functions in a different way. It's complicated how decolonizing gets used, in relation to decolonizing yourself, it's not possible! We live in coloniality, it's real. You can't wash colonialism out of your body. Time, education systems, museums, gender, sexuality, race are all part of coloniality. There's no essence of human outside of culture. I like decolonizing when it is used towards how we can rethink structures, redistribution, and, in a political way, actively look at reconstruction.

TC:

It's a reconstruction or reformation project. I'm thinking of Saint Teresa of Avila where she adds mysticism to the language of the church, it's a different way of feeling, being, intuiting. Reforming what is spiritual. To decolonize we have to reform, but first deconstruct: do this so everyone can access the same things for one another and on behalf of one another. It feels impossible, but I like the potential idea of a project in continuous process, decolonization as a process instead of a destination.

It's a process that can occur in institutions, it's why I appreciate them and policies: they are the language of being today. Decolonizing or reforming a system may

allow for different ways of being. Like border living which is being in the unbecoming, collective living, filthiness, corruption and community. In a state of undoing and redoing itself, it's unsettled, living on the threshold of death so unsafe it's safe. I want to bring this to London. I want to teach people to exist in that type of space or feeling. You and I, we do the work we do because of where we are from. I exist in a state of unbecoming because of my history. It's the best place to be. Unlike aspiring to become this one safe certain lone agent.

TC:

May be better to sit with the discomfort. To add to the complexity of all this, there's also the confusion around what happens when there's conflation of decolonizing with inclusion or diversity. This happens way too often, and is possibly due to ignorance or a lack of thinking politically. To simply 'include', to push an agenda of inclusion or diversity, is much easier than the challenge of having to actually shift a political system or yourself, right?

AF:

Back to Quijano, What he is asking is: what is art in Peru? Art is a Western category that through its own existence racializes and excludes local practices and ways of making/thinking. Then the big issue is not getting people from indigenous backgrounds into art school! It's about fucking redefining what art is! If you include all people in a definition or understanding of art then there has to be a constant dialogue. The more you include different people *with* their concepts of art, the more you need to constantly reconceptualize the definition of art.

TC:

Everything's becoming part of it, it's a way to include various ideas without watering any one of them down or erasing any one of them. It's not separate things in one.

AF:

Not inclusion, you can't just include people, you have to fucking rethink the whole thing from the ground up, to be able to hold it together. When people that were excluded get inside, they're going to change it again. And you're going to be constantly changing and redefining things. People included in the concept/institution should get to redefine it by being present. But what is happening now seems to focus on how to get people in, so they don't disturb or rearrange what we have.

TC:

To keep the status quo, fold them into it. As opposed to saying: how do you want to fuck it up, rethink it, reconstitute it, reform it? People don't want to lose their power, to replace their knowledge, and they're afraid to admit they don't know. It's how they are taught to behave. If you are taught to admit not knowing, it raises a different set of questions. In my institutional practice, I arrive knowing I don't know and propose questions, as opposed to offering solutions.

I'm interested in why certain things are not considered in institutions, that's why I love them. Think about how they behave; how they hire, work, and why they do what they do; why curators think within certain art constructions. I would rather get to the source of the problem, versus pretending I know what the problem is. In decolonization, many think they know what the problem is. It takes time, honesty, and vulnerability to admit you don't know. Where do you start? Do we fire

everyone in the institution, everyone who's part of the community, who's assembled? Do we challenge them on how maybe they've created the same hierarchy, that's the problem, right? We know we want collective structures, but somebody always has to be the fucking leader! So we end up in the same place again.

AF:

I'm a fan of institutions too, and Western colonial structures. Decolonizing in South America takes a political activist form. It's not destroying things to start from zero, it's a movement of adding things up. It may relate to our earlier discussion of democracy, but I don't have a problem with hierarchy. Structures are useful as you need to know who's in charge, who's doing what, and the process decisions get made through. A lot of times, when you speak here about decolonization or democratisation, it becomes a discussion in which everybody's obsessed with proving the way they work is horizontal, it's consensus. When it fucking isn't! Own the hierarchy!

TC:

It's related to power and democracy. People fucking vote without knowing what they're voting for, making bad decisions on behalf of other people because they vote for themselves. There's a romanticisation of democracy and consensus voting, because democracy is understood as a way of being and thinking which is individualised, one vote one person. I am not allowed to say, 'Andrea, have my vote', because people don't share this power and systems don't allow this. But in the act of voting I think we actually share agency. Agency, democracy and power are all linked. I trust people, I think we're all trying to do good for one another, but most people possibly don't think like this.

AF:

I'm unsure if it's a cultural or a personal similarity between you and me, both being from the Americas. We have the lived experience of embodied collectivity. It's not a fetish. I do a lot of collaborative work (because that's how I do things in my life not because the collectivity is a moral good). There's a basic rule: doers decide. If I'm not around, then my collaborators can make the decision, because doing shit takes a lot of work. The decision maker has to deal with the consequences. It's how you survive collaborating with people; parenting and friendship are similar.

TC:

It's queering situations of beingness with and for one another.

AF:

That makes me think how decolonizing is fashionable now. Five years ago this book would be on queering instead of decolonizing. What is useful in changing the terms? Are we expanding our way of thinking and acting through those changes? Or are we just moving on to the next thing. I like queering and I use Queer Theory a lot in my thinking. It's useful to think in relation to an embodied lived reality. For instance, in relation to my family and child, that my child is not only mine, that sometimes others have to make decisions for him too. Is there even a point in calling that something?

TC:

It goes back to a Latin American way of understanding collective thinking and being.

AF:

Collective dependency.

TC:

Interdependency, raised on the border I was taught the philosophy: 'If You're Okay I am Okay'. Decisions you make are on behalf of the group. You know your actions impact others, this is how I move in the world. I lived it in how my parents acted as counsel to our family of 100 relations. It's beautiful to see this roll out in real time, like waves. The phone calls, the calling out for support, this familial way, the relations which are different in the Americas, perhaps indigenous practices, it's not white Western.

Kim Tallbear writes about such relations. It was comforting to read her, to know there's a term to describe how I had been living and live which is for her 'caretaking relations'; I just use the term relations. What does living in relation mean? Not the relationality of the fucking art world. It's how to live with humans, non-humans, animals, nature, etc. Such decision-making considers your relations, not just yourself. It's how I practice and possibly why I always work collaboratively, this is why we're here in conversation. I don't want to write on my own, I choose not to write on my own. I was never taught to write on my own. I studied Ancient Philosophy that went against what I was taught growing up because it was so individualistic; and it was challenging studying with only white men. Different from that, the relations, decision-making, the interconnectedness, the 'we're never alone', all this is a way of being foreign to coloniality.

I'm interested in being-together-ness. Holding everyone, arriving and living together. In that togetherness, we permission each other to make decisions for one another. It's not Western, this trusted permissioning. For instance, I worked with a group of professionals as advisors on a work project. It was a way for me to admit I needed collaborators, but also

to invite critique and critical conversations, giving them permission. I needed others to think with me and in the process created a space of mutual trust for critique.

AF:

Returning to the concept of positionality. I'm trying to teach BA students how to be in a group discussion and hold marginal or border positions. How can I resist the temptation to occupy the centre? How can we all share a position of not knowing and being together? I haven't found the proper pedagogy or narrative to explain this. Natasha Trotman in your advisory group at the Wellcome Collection on Inclusive Practices during one of our discussions referred to a ceremony of power amnesty. I love this idea because I can understand how painful it is not to be in the centre and then to hold the centre empty.

TC:

We are not taught how to do this in Western cultures.

AF:

Is there a pedagogical framework to retrain ourselves to share and to recognise that our relation to the centre and to the margins is very different? I grew up as a white person in Latin America and became a brown person by moving here so those dynamics have become quite visible for me. That there are different forces that regulate who can occupy the centre: gender, race, citizenship status, etc. People are raised to believe the centre is what you should aim for to exist as a human. Students that have experienced the world always being the 'universal' or 'neutral' subject at the centre find it difficult – to admit they don't have access to what they would need to understand something, or that something is not for them. So instead they are defensive and want to shut shit down. They will say

that those things are not art, or they are not good, or they are not 'credible'. They don't know how to sit at the margin and listen.

TC:

It's knowing power doesn't just lie at the centre. Because I've been othered. In Mexico I am too white, in the US too Mexican, and here I'm a queer brown immigrant. The only space to occupy is the margin. There's power knowing you occupy the margin, owning it and saying it feels good here. You understand you can challenge the centre, because you can organise those around you and reconstruct the centre.

AF:

So much nicer to be on the margin.

TC:

218 I was taught or conditioned to live in communion and on the margins. The centre is not the goal, it's to commune with those not allowed to have a voice. The value of communing with others is to live, die, laugh, feel one another's pain. It's compassion. It's not self serving; unlike for instance thinking of decolonizing through psychoanalysis which helps keep your ego intact, unlike methods where you have to radically reconstruct yourself in relation to others. At work I ask if it's possible for my white colleagues to behave differently, even if it goes against their custom of holding white colonial power in their bodies? Seeing the world through their whiteness shows their ignorance. Power can come from being vulnerable, open, honest, in how you position yourself for the sake of your relations. Like unbecoming in public: what I mean by this is I will make myself vulnerable for the sake of the real work, the work that really needs to be done, and by doing so I illustrate to others that it's okay, that you can stay intact when being honestly critical. You

know, asking the question, 'what makes white people uncomfortable?', and then seeing them cry, I think to myself: 'those are your tears not mine. My people have cried enough.' It's OK to be simply showing them another way to be, even if they think it's unbecoming because you show all your cards whilst they sit there with their stiff upper lips. That is productive work. I appreciate behaving differently, there's a comfort accepting we're all the same ultimately, we're all going to die so you might as well fucking rock it while you're here. What else is there?

AF:

What you may be asking is if it's even possible to decolonize an institution. Personally, I don't understand what that means. But if that process was possible, then you would have to work on the body on the inside of the institution – both the human bodies themselves and the institution itself as a body. You can't just do it abstractly.

TC:

219 You can heal/cleanse the building but colleagues need to be undone and reconstructed. Institutions cannot exist in themselves, they exist in relation to a cosmos of institutions, and institutional practices and behaviours. Begin to deal with one, but that one is still in relation to those behaving badly and upholding oppressive systems! I'm interested in the idea of an institution undoing its bad behaviours and patterning. Can an institution for instance require its collaborators, those it's in relation to, to undertake a process of undoing in order to learn new behaviours? Where I work, we fund science research, I've suggested that the grants we offer include charters for grantees to undergo bad behaviour retraining.

AF:

I love it. The fact that you can say, 'I'm undoing bad behaviours', that we don't have to jump into 'decolonizing' – the word, idea, the empty rhetoric. The word itself becomes an excuse! It's really not the same as actually correcting bad behaviour: a simple way is paying cleaners a proper wage, it's practical and it can happen. It's not hiding behind an academic term. Decolonizing feels like an esoteric process, a ritual that you can perform to an institution and then it will be good.

TC:

Decolonizing has to be embodied because it contains the erotic and spiritual, it's how we see and feel. The erotic is how we come to relate to one another and in turn love one another which is how we form community/collectively. And the spiritual links to how we are in caretaker relations. We hold institutions in ourselves and are colonised. We are all things at once. I think to myself: how can I embody this notion of decolonizing that also considers the erotic and spiritual everyday? It's not a workshop and you're done. It's a way of being and living. Being in a constant state of reflection, intuition, and self-critique.

AF:

Maybe when you get rid of the word decolonizing you can be more self-reflexive and politically self-reflective about how you behave and participate in the world and in constructing the world. You can examine things in a practical way and have actual effect. I'm thinking about Cynthia Cockburn's *In the Way of Women* and her examination of organisational change in the 80s in relation to feminism, work, and power. Is creating change employing 30% more female managers? Cockburn discovers the biggest impact would be to pay cleaners properly as most are women,

however most female managers would not increase their pay as the impact is invisible and disproportionately increases costs. The cleaners are worthless people. It's easier to convince an institution to hire three female curators versus doing the real work. A problem with decolonizing is it's often used to avoid thinking about the fundamental things, like for instance the employment ecology around black and brown cleaners rather than an institution's addition of yet another female curator, for instance. Instead of taking ownership and responsibility for thinking politically with others.

TC:

A lack of imagination and a desire for institutional power can lead to believing power lies in a type of victimhood I see performed by white women and BIPOC women as well. The notion that if they claim a victim position the world will bow to them, and I see it performed so that this one person benefits the most or is the named hero in an action and they access power and enact the same bullshit that the white colonial machine behaves through, and then still treat other women in a shitty way. But what is the problem, is it men, is it whiteness, is it coloniality? Or could it be that it's fucking unknown? Or that some have never had to know? Do we need to re-educate colleagues to comprehend the world in a different way to believe a cleaner is equal to their colleagues? Cleaners are dehumanised, like what the Spanish did to indigenous populations. In institutional practices, some people are not seen as humans.

AF:

They're all women fighting for their positions.

TC:

It's different though because cleaners for instance are a category of women not registered. It's easier to 'decolonize' by bringing in BIPOC curators and educators, etc., but for me it's uninteresting to invite in othered bodies simply for being othered. I don't care what you look like, as long as you're challenging institutional practices to make them equitable. It's easy to invite the colourful, some of whom just want white power. I prefer to think with decolonizing as a redistributive power. Collectivity centres redistribution. We're taught in the West to be selfish, egocentric, it's tied to colonial behaviours and administrating bodies for the few. There's also this thing about language and power in the rhetoric and deployment of decolonizing that concerns me.

AF:

222 Yes, using words, including those of the discourse of decolonizing, including by its advocates, yields power and can be used to shut people out. It seems to be constructed to make you feel stupid if you don't know the meaning or its genealogy.

TC:

Sometimes English is undecipherable, maybe it's because my native tongue is Spanglish. Processing in a third space, I only knew Spanglish was two languages when I entered formal education. I find academic writing a bit off, because it presumes you have to have a specific understanding, and that you already have it. I think fuck that, how about I just make sense of it, how can I do what I need to do and what needs to be done with what I have?

AF:

I think there is a lot of value in dealing with academic writing in this way, As refusal instead of extractivism: instead of: queering is about me, decolonizing is about me, the undercommons is about me, everything is mine. I look at the centring of these concepts and I'm happy to refuse them. I don't use decolonize, intersectionality or self-care. I have issues with how those terms have been appropriated and occupied (and emptied out in the process), but I also feel they are not the right terms for me. And I think a lot of those terms are used to shut down conversations. As if once you name something the problem is miraculously solved.

TC:

I question the concept, it's embodiment, and it's understanding. I need to ingest the concept, map it on my body to see how it fits. What you've just said makes me think of writing and why I don't write, and I like the idea that it's a politics of refusal. I'd rather talk about how I do things, as that's the thing I know, not theory. Writing feels extractive for someone like me. There's a desire, especially by white people, to write about everything, but what if you don't name your ways or don't hold up writing as the medium through which your doing is communicated? Simply how the fuck am I supposed to write the who and how of me? For me, Anzaldúa recognising that theory-making is informed from life, makes sense. I just don't want to centre myself as my ways are informed by all my interactions with everyone from my Mami to my friends. I am me because of everybody else. A collective collection of knowledge from many encounters, an exchange. People want to claim they do it solo, don't acknowledge the exchange. They talk about the change but not about extraction or potential mutual benefit.

AF:

Maybe that's how decolonizing links to the idea of the moral good. You don't have to talk about what it actually is because it is just a good thing.

TC:

There is very little space to unsettle decolonizing in this though.

AF:

What we do in our everyday lives is more interesting, living not performing inside an institution. I love Feminismo Comunitario's tv show *¡Despatriarcalizacion ya!* in Bolivia (available on YouTube) which centred feminism, queerness and indigeneity. It doesn't have to be an art project or an academic enterprise.

TC:

224 It's not named or a special thing. This living and doing that can't be commodified – it refuses commodification. Refusing may be linked to knowing collective living/community. You don't have to participate in the ways of here when you are here, but refusing to do so may be easier for us because we're coming from Latin America. I say I practice from where I am from not where I am at, and I have no desire to become from here. The here, England, people just have a different sensibility. I am not of this place. I will always be from over there.

AF:

Is this a Latin American thing? Or is it more personal, about for instance in my case growing up in my mother's bohemian life-style as a way of being in the world? My mom's relations with people are not like most white middle class relationships. Coming here, there are specific ways of living or being. Like

my coming out from a heterosexual coupling formation through divorce became linked to embracing a queer way of living. Have the ways I think about family, friendships and ways of being always been like this? Or did I learn them here?

TC:

You call it queer, I don't call it anything. It's having relations, it's an everyday way of being. My parents weren't bohemian types, but I grew up always thinking in collective ways. Is this linked to class or survival?

AF:

Or the desert thing?

TC:

The desert thing, of course, you can't survive without collective trust and collective decision making. Can you transpose that sensibility into these colonial spaces or adapt them without naming them? I don't use 225 the word queer, because I wasn't taught to name these sensibilities or practices. Because that's taxonomical and colonial. Like my parents being Curanderos, I could see how they counselled our community but never realised it had a name until recently.

AF:

I name everything, I don't have a problem with this. The Curandera and curanderismo practice is not named? You just recognise it?

TC:

I name it now because I was asked to, but to name it allows it to be commodified, which it's not supposed to be. You realise you have grown up not naming practices of life and then you encounter coloniality and everything has to be named to be owned.

AF:

I used queering as a process after divorce to justify a new family form. My child couldn't understand why we practiced family in a different way from my ex-partner. I needed something for him to be able to hold on to and allow himself to recognise that the people around us that we love, that we depend on and depend on us are our queer family. You realise when you have to name things, that you're doing it either to understand them or to defend them.

TC:

In England you have to define everything. Things fit differently for me. People want to use their colonial administrative ways. I have no interest in using them how they do, because we're all taught administration through our own cultures. I studied arts administration, so I know their ways and I know my ways, and I twist them up. I tell colleagues they can name my practice for the sake of the company, but I refuse to be part of that naming.

AF:

Refusing is a great underappreciated strategy. We fetishize visibility and productivity. As if presenting something is more important than actually doing it.

*

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These are three references that are important to me and that are hardly ever accessed within the mediation of US and Europe-based academics. Just a few of Quijano and Cusicanqui's texts have been translated, and those seem to float in the ether of English-based theory. This not only reproduces extractivist power relations but means that they are usually decontextualized and things are missed by not accessing the writing in Spanish. Feminismo Comunitario has explicitly refused translation. In this theory context, English-only speakers lie at the margins, whether they feel comfortable or not.

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227

226

Biographical notes

Danah Abdulla

Dr Danah Abdulla is a designer, educator, researcher, and Programme Director of Graphic Design at Camberwell, Chelsea, and Wimbledon Colleges (CCW), University of the Arts London. She has previously held positions at Brunel University London and London College of Communication (University of the Arts London). Danah is a founding member of the Decolonizing Design research group, and the Creative Director and Editor of *Kalimat Magazine*, a non-profit publication about Arab thought and culture. She holds a PhD from the design department at Goldsmiths, University of London. Danah's research is particularly focused on decolonizing design, possibilities of design education, design culture(s) with a focus on the Arab region, the politics of design, publishing, and critical views of social design.

Teresa Cisneros

Teresa Cisneros is a Chicanx Londoner. Originally from 'La Frontera', the Mexico-Texas border, she practices from where she is from not where she is. A curandera and arts administrator by choice, currently she is Inclusive Practice Lead at the Wellcome Collection, part of agencyforagency, and recently at The Showroom she curated Object Positions to explore cultural equity, decolonial processes, and colonial administration (2016-18). Cisneros has worked with numerous art institutions and universities including Nottingham Contemporary, Tate, Goldsmiths, Iniva, Central St. Martins, and University College London to explore care, policy making, colonial infrastructures, institutional change, and rethinking museums. In 2018, she published *Document0*, a series of scripted conversations exploring art institutions, diversity, and administration. She is interested in reconstructing systems and cultural institutions to begin working towards forms of transformational and institutional justice by holding staff accountable for their bad behaviours. Cisneros centres her life and work practice in collaboration, caretaking relations, and collectivity.

Andrea Francke

Andrea Francke is a Peruvian artist based in London. Her work focuses on the political implications of categories constructed through (and for) knowledge-making processes. Although Francke's work is mainly framed as social art practice, she has recently traded a paradigm of visibility for one of invisibility. Her most recent projects focus on smoothness, the production and maintenance of infrastructure as a way to redefine categories and produce long-lasting political change. Current projects include: the development of the evaluation framework for Gasworks' Participatory Residency as FOTL, her collaboration with Ross Jardine; FRAND, a play and toy-making collaboration with Francis Patrick-Brady; and 'Knowledge is Made Here', an education project with Sara Greavu that looks at local intellectual production and activism in order to develop theory with young people in Derry. Previous projects include 'Invisible Spaces of Parenthood', 'Wish You'd Been Here', and 'The Piracy Project'.

Lolita Jablonskienė

Dr Lolita Jablonskienė is a contemporary art critic and curator based in Vilnius. From 2000 she headed the Contemporary Art Information Center (CAIC), which spun off from the Soros Foundation, and joined the Lithuanian Art Museum to work for Vilnius' forthcoming National Gallery of Art (opened in 2009). In 2002 she was appointed Chief Curator of the National Gallery. Jablonskiene was the Commissioner of the Lithuanian pavilions at the Venice Biennial in 1999 and 2005. She has curated contemporary art exhibitions in her home country and abroad, contributed art critical texts to Lithuanian and foreign press, and is Associate Professor at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. She is currently writing a book on the development of contemporary art practices in Lithuania during the 1990s.

Achille Mbembe

Dr Achille Mbembe is Professor in the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. He is co-founder of Les Ateliers de la pensee de Dakar, has held honorary professorships at UCL Berkeley, Yale, UC Irvine, Duke, Harvard, and been awarded numerous awards including the 2015 Geswichter Scholl-Preis, the 2018 Gerda Henkel Award, and the 2018 Ernst Bloch Award. Professor Mbembe's extensive publications include *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001), *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke University Press, 2016), *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), and *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

Ieva Mazūraitė–Novickienė

Dr Ieva Mazūraitė–Novickienė is a curator at the Art Information Centre, National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, Lithuania. A researcher of Soviet era Lithuanian photography, she is author of articles including 'The analyses of photography concept in the discourse of Lithuanian photography of 1960s' in *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* (2014) and 'Medium of photography as artistic problem in late Soviet Lithuanian photography' in *Menotyra* (2016). She's curator of exhibitions including 'A Place of Images: Lithuanian Photography in Illustrated Magazines of the 1960s-70s' (2013) and a retrospective of Algimantas Kunčius, 'Visual Scripts' (2015).

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Dr Almira Ousmanova is Professor at the Department of Social Sciences at the European Humanities University (Vilnius, Lithuania) and Director of the Laboratory for Studies of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art at EHU (<https://www.viscultstudies.org>). She is an author of *Umberto Eco: paradoxes of interpretation* (2000); and editor of several collective volumes: *Anthology of Gender Theory* (ed., with Elena Gapova, 2000); *Gender Histories from Eastern Europe* (co-edited with Elena Gapova and Andrea Peto), *Bi-Textuality and Cinema* (ed., 2003); *Gender and Transgression in Visual Arts* (ed., 2007), *Visual (as) Violence* (ed., 2008), *Après Simone de Beauvoir: Feminism and Philosophy* (ed., Topos, 2010), *TechnoLogos: the social effects of bio- and information technologies* (ed., with Tatyana Shchytsova, Topos, 2014). *E-Effect: Digital Turn in Social Sciences and Humanities* (ed., with Galina Orlova, 1/ Topos, 2017), *Roland Barthes' Time* (ed., with V.Fours, Topos, 1-2/2019).

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Ieva Pleikienė

Dr Ieva Pleikienė is an art researcher. In 1995 she graduated from Vilnius Academy of Arts (VAA) with an MA in Art History and Criticism, and in 2005 defended her PhD thesis in Art History under the title 'Lithuanian Small Graphics. Forms of Artistic Communication by Mail (1960-1990)'. Since 1995 she has been working at the Institute of Art Research in VAA. From 2005 to 2010 and from 2015 to 2019 Ieva held the position as Head of the Doctoral Studies Department of the Academy. Since 2019 she has been a Pro-Rector of Studies at VAA. She is a member of the Lithuanian Society of Art Historians, and her major research interests, on which she's published widely, are Lithuanian art of the Soviet period, marginal art phenomena, and art and politics.

Marquard Smith

Dr Marquard Smith is Professor of Artistic Research at Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania, and Programme Leader of the MA Museums & Galleries in Education at UCL, London. Marq is Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Visual Culture*, a Board member of Arts Catalyst, and of the Live Art Development Agency. As a curator, his recent exhibitions include 'How to Construct a Time Machine' (MK Gallery), 'Solitary Pleasures' (Freud Museum), and 'Do the Right Thing' (Titanikas Gallery, Vilnius). As a writer, Marq has published over twenty books, edited collections, and themed issues of refereed journals on arts education, research-as-praxis, and the archival impulse, as well as on the art, visual, material, and immaterial culture of 'the human' in capitalist modernity.

Michelle Williams Gamaker

Dr Michelle Williams Gamaker is a moving image and performance artist. With a focus on 'fictional activism', her work explores the fiction-making machine of 20th century British and Hollywood studio films by restaging sequences to reveal cinematic construction, and recasting characters to propose alternative endings that counter their often doom-laden plight. Michelle is Lecturer in BA Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Chair of Trustees at Pavilion in Leeds, and was co-founder of the Women of Colour Index (WOCI) Reading Group with Samia Malik and Rehana Zaman (2016-19).

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