

Intersubjectivity and Memory. The Philosophy of Liberation in the Postcolonial / Decolonial / Neocolonial Equation

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***Abstract:** The present work refers to the problem of identity, cultural memory and the recurrence of these aspects in contemporary art, also aiming at the implications of the postcolonial issue. The presentation of some cultural personalities whose studies had a decisive effect on the general perception of the existence, inevitable consequences and reconfiguration, in various forms and manifestations, of the segregationist phenomenon, aims to expose a scientific perspective with a defining role in highlighting, awareness and assuming fundamental aspects of the subject in contemporaneity. The identification of cultural barriers generated by the certainty of hybridity, as an inherent consequence of the resistance to colonial influences, but also of the assimilation process that occurred over time, as coextensive factors of postcolonialism, constitute aspects of the discourse of emancipation of national identity that interfere with imperial standardization.*

***Key-words:** postcolonialism; the segregationist phenomenon; hybridity; cultural memory; decolonial aesthetics;*

Introduction

In the attempt to theorize and synthesize the defining key concepts for the segregationist phenomenon, subject to a sustained research of the last decades, a series of studies analyze the problem of cultural identity, but also of the general perception of indigenous traditions, taken up in the artistic discourse that reflects, through the character its mutual, the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized.

The theoretical framework responsible for the conceptualization of this phenomenon, related to cultural, national and ethnic identity, explores the idea of concretization, from the perspective of the artistic act, of a culture marked by a heterogeneous spirit, by ideological schism, uprooted by its interferences, hybridized by the loss of identity, devalued by the gregarious spirit imprinted by the political system, defined as peripheral in relation to the apartheid society, marked by instability, uncertainty and contradiction. The reverse of these realities, however, invokes, at the same time, a patented civilization of versatility, revelatory of transcultural experiences, capable of metamorphosing the engrams of the past and generating singular artistic investigations, by creating a genuine postcolonial cultural biography.

1. The Philosophy of Liberation in the Postcolonial / Decolonial / Neocolonial Equation

An important contribution in the context of postcolonial studies, relevant within the present research from the perspective of approaching different aspects of colonized

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civilizations, but also due to the concepts he explores, is brought by Walter D. Mignolo². His analytical research on the phenomenon of colonial globalization, liberation philosophy, Eurocentrism and political, economic and cultural imperialism led to the development of the concept of "decolonial aesthetics".

Starting from the philosophy of the liberation (in the sense of economic, political and social autonomy, cultural emancipation and psychological independence), the concept of decolonization aims at the pluriversity of the forms of dependence to which the former colonized regions are subjected, through the lens of world systems theory, but also of discrimination and inequality, including in the post-colonial era. The production of a distorted perspective on indigenous civilizations, the application of unequal standards, the adoption of flawed stereotypes and paradigms were methods of suppressing the individual, of his devaluation and marginalization, with a real impact on the self-image, but also on the collective perception.

As a result of the implementation of a colonialism whose cultural impact is comparable, as an influence on those exposed to this process, with economic and social domination, the phenomenon of suppressing imperialism is considered the central objective of the affected regions. As a unique form of ethical liberation, the discourse of decolonization is associated with the extensive process of self-valuation of the individual, of reconfiguring the self-image, of re-evaluating one's own culture, considered, by the colonial tradition, marginal, peripheral and primitive. A long process of segregation based on race, ethnicity, anthropology is discussed, having a real impact on the preservation and development of cultural traditions, all the more difficult to revoke.

Modernity is perceived as a concept that, at the moment of its appearance and formation, aims at the colonization of space (of non-European regions) and time, a phenomenon that occurred during the Renaissance period. In the conception presented by Mignolo, the Middle Ages represent a temporal and spatial gap, which mediated the labeling as pagans of those who did not share the belief in a single god and as barbarians and primitives of those who led their existence in the peripheral, non-European areas. Thus, the colonization of pagans and primitives took shape as an imminent phenomenon governed by Eurocentric hegemony, which placed ab initio in an antagonistic relationship established in the context of the spatio-temporal relationship, the barbarian civilizations, trapped in the peripheral past and the modern central core³.

2. Intersubjectivity and Memory; the Process of Psychological Colonization

The concept of "race" and its application justified, from the perspective of religion, color and access to knowledge (in its multiple senses) the relationship of superiority between colonizers and indigenous civilizations. As an accepted practice regarding faith and the physical, standardization thus placed in the realm of the irrational everything that imperialism considered rational. From a psychological perspective, the subversive effect of applying standards is indisputable. The psychological colonization imposed by the racist phenomenology that Frantz Fanon wrote about in "Les damnés de la terre" becomes explicable, and the exhortation to liberation therefore becomes a key element, shared from

² Walter D. Mignolo, Argentine-born theorist, professor and director of the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

³ Mignolo, Walter. 2009. "Coloniality: the darker side of modernity". In *IDEA Art + Society Publication*, # 33-34, pp. 175-186.

this perspective with the emancipatory discourse of Immanuel Wallerstein, Enrique Dussel and Albert Quijano.

The idea of neocolonization, exposed through the double perspective of the rejection of colonial culture, of revoking influences, on the one hand, but also of the inevitable repercussions imposed by imperialism, such as the appropriation of Eurocentric culture, respectively identification with it, emphasizes the continuity, in fact, of the initial process. Under these conditions, neocolonialism appears as a natural, undeniable addendum to geopolitical authority.

In the context of the neo-colonial dependence, current debates on the subject indicate an exercise of military, political and economic supremacy as a form of control over underdeveloped states. Exercising its influence including through education, religion and the media, respectively through cultural means, not just economic ones, the phenomenon can cause inherent changes in the mentality of those exposed, effects close to those of colonialism. Ethnic inferiority, predetermined devaluation, cultural suppression, complemented by the individual's own framing in an unfavorable, but predefined, ratio of primitive / modern acuation have created, by imprinting them in the "colonial mentality", a genuine theoretical framework responsible for the extrapolation of this process, related not only to one's own resources of cultural identity, but also to national ones.

3. The Problem of Racial Identity in Decolonial Artistic Practices

Connecting African and Caribbean histories with European ones, the curatorial project "Be.Bop. Black Europe Body Politics" manages, through the curatorial practices instituted by Alanna Lockward⁴, to provide a theoretical framework for the positive valorization of marginalized traditions and silenced cultures.

Held in Berlin, and being part of the project "Be.Bop. 2012" initiated by Lockward, the exhibition "Somapolitics of Black Europe: testimonials of an event", did not strictly target the problem of the black race (despite the suggestion in the title), but rather the identity crisis generated by the erroneous perception of it, caused by mental stereotypes. Therefore, the objectives were to restore some relevant aspects of identity, thus involving, as an option of liberation from a cultural and mental perspective, the phenomenon of decolonial aesthetics.

Exemplifying through artistic projects from different periods, which nevertheless encompass each of the ideas exposed in the Berlin event (recalling racial stereotypes and privileges, the politics of structural inequality, the control of consciousness), Teresa María Díaz Nerio underlines the role of such actions with decolonial impact⁵. The artist presents a genuine performance, in which directions of the oppressive system are targeted: exploitation through work and sexual consumption. "Hommage à Sara Baartman", made in 2007, illustrates the perception of the African woman, whose status is reduced to that of an object, placed outside modern times and consciousness, outside the principles of logic. Inducing the idea of the invisibility of humanity, of personal experiences, of the non-existence of self-definition (an aspect also explored by the project "Black Magic at the White House" by Jeannette Ehlers, 2009), of reducing one's own existence to the status of an object, Teresa María Díaz Nerio creates, through "Hommage à Sara Baartman", a psychological substrate of

⁴ Lockward, Alanna. 2013. "Black Europe Body politics. Towards an Aphropean Decolonial Aesthetics". In *Social Text Online Journal*.

⁵ Díaz Nerio, Teresa María. 2012. "Off with her laughter! Off with his laughter! Musing on Be Bop 2012: Delinking off Genocidal White Laughter", pp. 1-9.

the relationship between Eurocentric mental patterns and the exclusion of those who do not fit into the patterns.



Fig. 1. Teresa María Díaz Nerio, *Hommage à Sara Baartman*, performance 40', video 5', no sound, 2007, Art Labor Archives, photo: Sarah Gerats (source: <https://blackeuropebodypolitics.wordpress.com/2012/07/31/preview-at-duke-university/>)

Starting from the history of the real character⁶ (whose name, put into question, denotes the lack of privilege to be identified), the performance deals with human degradation, slave exploitation, as a practice of colonizers and sexual primitivism, based on a racist ideology on civilizations indigenous. Displayed ostentatiously, in a derogatory way that emphasizes similarities with the real person, the living sculpture induces both the idea of voyeurism (in the sense of an audience avid for the bizarre, provocative nudity) and the human condition invisible beyond the exterior of the black, skin-like costume. A non-existent identity, lost in the eyes of those eager for exploitation, thus establishing the ambivalent character of the performance: displayed like a trophy of an erotic exoticism that borders both the bizarre and otherness, it illustrates a primordial idea of colonialism – that of barbarism, the lack of humanity and civilization, of unconditional primitivism.

⁶ Sara Baartman (1789-1815), a real person, representative of the indigenous Khoikhoi population of South-West Africa, was the subject of exhibitions in England and France at the beginning of the 19th century under the title of "Hottentot Venus". Since his real name is unknown, he remained in colonial history under this identity (referring to the idea of a barbarian slave, as translated from the Dutch name Saartjie Baartman), marked by his existence as a bizarre object of visual attraction, part of the entertainment industry. Considered at a level of development equivalent to that of an ape, parts of its body and skeleton were on public display until the 1970s at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Also, the character was the subject of some illustrations from *Histoire Naturelle des Mammifères*, a compendium that includes her alongside representations of animals. Through the Sara Baartman case, racism is scientifically validated, considering both its lifetime and posthumous exploitation.

The problem of racial identity that Díaz Nerio's performance imposes is explored by various activists of the decolonization phenomenon. The film directed by the actor and screenwriter Abdellatif Kechiche, entitled "Venus Noire" (2010), deals with the controversial subject of the character Sara Baartman, implicitly of racial or gender prejudice, inducing, like the tribute sculpture, the ethical aspect of the problem: the viewer becomes himself complicit to colonial practices, avid for visual extravagance. In this way, the idea of awareness is contextualized, which targets not only aspects of the historical past, but also of a present in which racial exploitation and gender stereotypes still persist.

The postcolonial perspective of the case creates a precedent contested by a number of actions and artistic endeavors, such as Quinsy Gario's "Zwarte Piet Is Racisme". In the style of anti-Blackface activism, the Zwarte Piet character, associated with the image of the black man with specific but exaggerated features, wearing intense black make-up and brightly colored clothes, is evocative of the tradition of slavery in the colonizing states, focusing on taking over standard elements from Eurocentric popular culture. The excessive laughter of the character, thus outlining the prominent lips, is of a disturbing strangeness that contrasts with the drama of the entire context, recalling the theatrical expositions of the Blackface characters, but also the voyeurism of an audience attracted by the exoticism of otherness.

Such projects aimed at the existence of ethical standards, of course, call for institutional support and legitimization of a phenomenon that is still persistent in contemporary reality. The idea is related to Simmi Dullay's project, "Uprooting and Belongings: Mapping the Black Body in Exile" ("Uprooting and Belongings: Mapping the Black Body in Exile", 2012)⁷, which creates the decolonial framework through which the trajectories imposed by the "logic colonialism". Subtextually, these approaches aim at a pertinent psychological analysis, inducing the issue of racial consciousness and dehumanization. The correlation with "Painful Cake"⁸ (2012) by the Swedish artist Makode Linde involves the specific perception of the phenomenon, with tradition in most civilized states. Pastiche image of the minstrel Blackface (also found in Quinsy Gario's *Zwarte Piet Is Racisme*, with the character's excessive black make-up and exaggerated, strange laugh as common elements) invoking racism, exploitation and consumption, Makode Linde's project highlights the strengths of a society marked by racial, linguistic and religious patterns.

Metaphor of the rejection of otherness, which seeks to assign a common identity, the performance evokes the Eurocentric historical vision of the classical female canon imposed by the Venus of Willendorf, highlighting the anatomy. What is emphasized, through the controversial project, is an aspect similar to "Hommage à Sara Baartman": the complicity of the public, the identical reactions of those watching the action; and in "Painful Cake", and in the real case of Sara Baartman, identified by the performance signed by Teresa María Díaz Nerio, there is an obvious complicity of the audience that cheers the performance, just as now as at the beginning of the 19th century. In different contexts, the idea of a precise

⁷ Dullay, Simmi. 2012. „Uprooting and Belongings: Mapping the Black Body in Exile - Connecting Slave Trade's legacies in Scandinavian Countries". In *Be.Bop 2012. Black Europe Body Politics* project, ed. by Lockward, Alanna & Mignolo, Walter, pp. 17-19.

⁸ Belonging to the artist Makode Linde, the controversial project "Painful Cake" was made in Stockholm in 2012, with the stated aim of establishing connections between the stereotypes that exist as a result of the colonial system. The performance captures the action of the Swedish Minister of Culture, Lena Adelsohn-Liljeroth, as she cuts fragments of a cake, the appearance of which is personified by the image of a distorted African body. Characterized as rebellious and provocative, Makode Linde's project provoked fulminant reactions, as a result of the intended ideas - the exploitation and consumption of races considered inferior.

demarcation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object (without the terms being random) is subtly highlighted, which evokes timeless reactions⁹.



Fig. 2. Makode Linde, *Painful Cake*, performance, Stockholm, 2012, foto: Marianne Lindberg De Geer (source: <https://africasacountry.com/2012/04/africa-is-a-country-interview-with-makode-linde>)

Outlining the concept of the show (similar in the cases presented), the relational artistic experiment is outlined, each of the central characters having a predefined role, in correlation with the others. As a performance in which the reactive factor was essentially targeted, Makode Linde's "Painful Cake" project unfolded in relation to the decisions and responses of each participant: the action of the Minister of Culture, the photographs taken by Marianne Lindberg De Geer (without knowing what was coming, according to his own confessions) and the role that the artist himself had, otherwise the only premeditated one. As a reflection of colonial reality, the roles are similar: the audience cheers as the action unfolds, the whole endeavor thus becoming a legitimization (of course symbolic) of the macabre ritual of mutilation. The ambiguity of the scene is thus enhanced by its paradoxical character: in the context of an exhibition that re-edits the sinister spectacles of the 19th century, the previous social and cultural experiences of the collective memory are reactivated.

According to this perception, the real subject, with an obvious psychological impact, aims at the perpetuation of the colonial ideology in relation to the rhetoric of modernity. Dissociation from racial stereotypes, from the perception based on derogatory images whose perpetual relevance is indisputable, becomes possible, under these conditions, through the lens of decolonial awareness and liberation.

According to the idea of a global perception of the real dimension of the problems of identity and belonging faced by decolonial aesthetics, in relation to the ideology of colonizing structures, we exemplify the actions carried out by Jeannette Ehlers, also a participant in the approach initiated by Lockward in Berlin. Under the title "Say It Loud!",

⁹ Mignolo, Walter. 2012. „Be.Bop 2012. Black Europe Body Politics. A reflection”. In *IDEA Arts + Society journal* #42, ed. by Ovidiu Tichindeleanu & Alanna Lockward.

with a protestant tone (paraphrasing James Brown's 1968 song "Say It Loud! I'm Black and I'm Proud"), the Danish artist releases, in 2014 (March - May), a project on African colonialism and slavery at Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center. The opening of a decolonial exhibition in the city whose historical economic development was largely based on the transatlantic trade (including of slaves, involving deprivation of liberty and forced relocation), constitutes an act of accountability of the collective conscience and historical rehabilitation.

Presenting notable works by Jeannette Ehlers, including the recent performance "Whip It Good", launched in 2013 at Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin, and later at Vestindisk Pakhus (The West India Warehouse) in Copenhagen - an artistic re-enactment of the brutal corporal punishment of the period of slavery, the project "Say It Loud!" presents, in a reactive manner, the recurrence of the problems faced by the indigenous people during the colonial period. Through video projections, animations and performances, the subject of the slave trade and existence on the plantations is explored as a form of protest related to the personal history of the artist (daughter of a Danish mother and a father born in the West Indies) . Given this fact, as a tribute to the act of rebellion, the exhibition aims at a confrontation of histories, as his personal experiences definitely overlap with the collective experiences. By presenting practices of the past, topical issues, relevant in the daily present, such as identity and belonging, are treated.

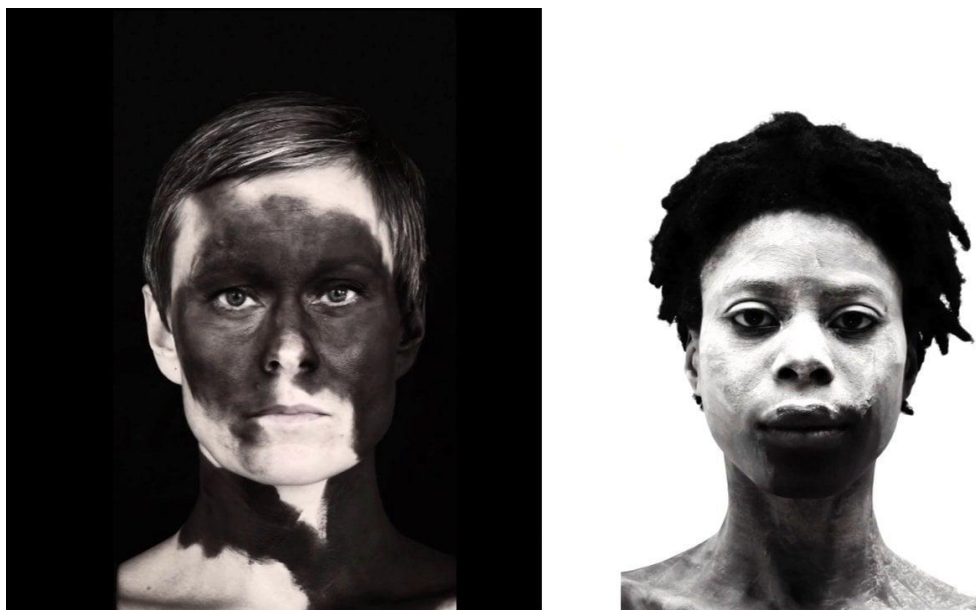


Fig. 3. Jeannette Ehlers, Patricia Kaersenhout, *The Image of Me*, video 6 minutes, during the video projection the poem "Lord Why Did You Make Me Black?" is recited by RuNett writer Nia Ebo, Black Magic Women Festival, Amsterdam, November 2012
(source: <https://vimeo.com/58037769>)

According to this perspective, Ehlers addresses the consequences of globalization visible in everyday reality, associating personal history with world history. By using registers from video techniques, the visual effects have the well-known psychological substrate, but also digital processes, animation and soundtrack, through which the suggestion becomes the message. Exiled not only outside space, distanced from the present (including physically, in the present case), but also captive in a past that projects him outside modern times, according to Walter Mignolo's assertion. The space itself acquires new valences, as the suggestion

invokes a parallel reality, mirrored, but not visible, to which the viewer has no access. We recall here the colonization of time and space conceptualized by Mignolo, which generates a spatial and temporal gap, an expression of the civilization caught in the peripheral past. Undoubtedly, the idea of atrocious devaluation of the individual is induced in Ehlers' work, so that not only his identity and belonging are non-existent, but also his own physical existence is in regression, becoming a shadow or reflection, as a result of the process of mental colonization.



Fig. 4. Jeannette Ehlers, *Atlantic (endless row)*, c-print, 2009
(source: <https://kunsten.nu/journal/ugens-kunstner-jeannette-ehlers/>)

Summing up experiences assimilated to the historical past, they are found in the present and the historical future, as the only alternative to perpetuate cultural traditions. In this sense, the paradigmatic reflections proposed by the creators, activists and writers participating in the project "Be.Bop. 2012" emphasizes the relevance of aesthetics in a historical framework in which identity ideas are reconstructed, along with strategies for reconstructing one's own present. Also, holding the event at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in Berlin is an important aspect, with a real impact on the economic flow, given the German colonial history (minimized, however, from the perspective of the small number of colonies in relation to the other colonizing states).

4. Conclusions

Subtextually, the projections presented by the artists involved, intended for the general public, not only the African one, have the role of providing a temporal connection between the experiences of the past (relating to the image of "black Europe" and the perception of civilizations based on mental patterns ingrained since the colonial period) and the consciousness of the present (under the auspices of neocolonialism). Reminiscences of the system of exclusion, introspection into one's own lived experiences and their employment in specific contexts determine the diversity of approaches, in a framework that aims to argue the complexity of decolonial artistic practices. The transdisciplinary character of the event, its plurivalence (through the prism of academic and curatorial approaches trained in an intercultural dialogue) evokes the relevance of memory, as a common element of artistic practices and published texts, in establishing some benchmarks of re-existence. A

contextualization of the works / video projections provides the necessary theoretical framework for an at least partial awareness of the phenomenon of decolonization, outside the disciplinary barriers, establishing concrete foundations, based on the experience of the past and the alternative of the present.

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