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Abstract

This talk, *On the Coloniality of Thought and Ancestral Materiality*, opens with the "Age of Discovery" as a way to problematize how this celebrated movement of expansion also meant the loss of worlds and the loss of Earth. We reflect on how the movement and orientation of Western thought correspond to the expansion of colonialism. The coloniality of thought refers to how Western thinking displaces other worlds of meaning out of the domain of the thinkable. In our present, this mode of expansion has reached its finitude vis-à-vis the geology and temporality of Earth. Decoloniality brings forward the task of re-orienting thought: turning away from thinking as expansion and abstraction, and toward the time of Earth and the time of matter—toward ancestral materiality and telluric thought.

Key words: Coloniality of thought, Expansion, Re-orientation, Ancestral Materiality, Telluric Thought

Coloniality and the Age of Discovery

The 'Age of Discovery', from the late 15th century until the 17th century, is an illustration of the project of modernity, of the project of civilisation of the West. It names, in a euphemistic way, the expansion and the conquest of the world. The idea of 'discovery' elicits a sense of pride and pleasure of expansion. It also speaks to the Eurocentrism that characterises the modern/colonial world. A Eurocentrism that, while claiming to discover the world, meant the loss of plurality of worlds, a movement towards 'worldlessness' which foreclosed the possibility of interculturality as that fertile space between and among worlds. The West was discovering, while others were being discovered. The West held the power of enunciation, while others were silenced or, at best, reduced to be the enunciated. Furthermore, the 'Age of Discovery' names a model of civilisation that is anthropocentric in kind, one that reduced Earth into an object of the human. It unleashed historical forces towards the loss of Earth, an 'earthlessness' manifested today in climate collapse.

Decolonial thought has been a struggle for the possibility of intercultural encounters, for fostering relationality and pluriversality. Our elder Professor Maria Lugones' notion of 'world travelling' helps us understand the challenges of overcoming the condition of separation imposed by dominant perception.

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> Through travelling to other people's "worlds" we discover that there are "worlds" in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resistors, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable (1987: 18).

We could add *exhibitable:* where 'the Other' is reduced to the object of the gaze of the 'discoverer'. Arrogant perception is at work in the 'discovering' of 'Others'. From Professor Jean Casimir, we learn how Haiti was born as a nation through intercultural encounters, overcoming, we could say, arrogant perception. The nation of Haiti came about in and through the relationality practiced between peoples with many different histories and, crucially, against the condition of oppression, against slavery. These intercultural encounters produced the birth of a nation based on a new form of relationality capable of undoing the conditions of reduction and separation of the colonial order. The logic of discovery is at odds with Lugones' world traveling , with the possibility of relational worlds.

To address the condition of earthlessness let us listen to one of the sacred texts of the Maya, the *Chilam Balam de Chumayel*, which was written during the early stages of the so-called 'Age of Discovery'.

> How hard is the serfdom that arrives with Christianity? It is already coming. The words, like the tongue, the words will be enslaved. The trees will be enslaved, the stones enslaved, people enslaved, when it comes (qtd in Lenkersdorf 114).

For the Maya scribes, the colonial project, or the project of modernity, was a project of destruction of Earth, a project of enslavement, not just of people but of Earth-worlds, that is, of non-anthropocentric relational worlds.

The coloniality of gender was also part and parcel of the 'Age of Discovery'. María Lugones tells us how coloniality guaranteed brutal access to bodies, particularly the bodies of racialised women (2007). From inception, the colonial difference has been articulated by the coloniality of gender, by that possibility of accessing the bodies of others for the pleasures of the normative 'self', of the 'discoverer'. Similarly, Professor Gloria Wekker in her path breaking study *White Innocence* explains how the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women on plantations was not the exception but the rule.

That the joy of 'discovery' implies the suffering of others becomes explicit in the letters of Gustave Flaubert. I will not quote him because it is horrendous, but in his letters from his trip to Egypt, he describes his sexual exploits with unabashed pride. Of course, he is just one example of a long tradition that runs from the 'Age of Discovery' all the way to today's sexual tourism. See for example, the work of Jacqui Alexander. A key question is to understand the articulation between a project of modernity speaking of discovery and of civilisation, while also promoting enjoyment of the suffering of others through tourism, through 'the exotic', etc...

The Completion of Western Thought

We have seen how 'discovery' works as a euphemism that hides the violence of coloniality. Yet there is something else about the 'Age of Discovery' that is very telling. It is an index of the movement and directionality of 'Western thought'. The 'Age of Discovery' not only conceals suffering it also characterizes the movement of Western thinking, leading us to question its directionality, its orientation. To show how the movement of Western thought is connected to the logic of expansion, I will lean on Martin Heidegger, one of the integral figures of European continental philosophy. He is important here because he named the question at hand with great clarity. He analysed the logic of 'Western thinking' and foretold its ending, but he could not see what comes next. He could not foresee what comes after the end of Western thought.

In one of his famous essays, 'On the End of Philosophy', Heidegger speaks about the unfolding of a world civilisation based on Western European thinking. The project of civilization and , its euphemistic form, the 'Age of Discovery' is an expression of what Heidegger explicitly names 'Western European thinking'. The 'Age of Discovery' appears then as a completion of western European thinking, as a completion of its metaphysics.

Heidegger writes, 'Its development is in full swing today in all regions of beings' (433). The age of modernity, the modern project of civilisation, has reached almost all realms of life. It has extended its power to the point that indigenous Abya Yalan thinkers say again and again that they are struggling to keep the civilisation for life against the civilisation towards death, towards earthlessness and worldlessness.

The logic of instrumentality, of technology, and its rationality, has extended itself to all geographies and territories, all epistemologies and knowledges, over aesthetics and the control of everyday life experience. It has replaced relations by introducing instrumental mediations into our lives, technological mediations, mathematical mediations. The way we eat, the way we dress, even the things we dream and desire, have become mediated by instrumentality. Mediated by systems and less and less through our relations, we are separated from what we might call 'relational worlds' (Escobar). The movement of expansion that the 'Age of Discovery' names, corresponds to the growth of that aggregated system of instrumental rationality that has been steadily replacing relational worlds and Earth-worlds. Heidegger insightfully asks, 'What task is reserved for thinking at the end of philosophy?' meaning, what task is reserved for thinking at the end of *western* philosophy? '[T]the mere thought of such a task of thinking must sound strange to us. A thinking which can be neither metaphysics nor science?' (436). It is indeed strange to think of a beyond Western philosophy, a question that cannot be thought from within the confines of the epistemic territory of modernity. Yet we should indeed face the question of the task of thinking beyond modernity, beyond the metaphysics of modernity. I am here today to say

that, almost a hundred years after Heidegger posed the question of the task of thinking after Western philosophy, the answer is coming to clarity.

Finitude and Thoughtlessness

The end of metaphysics: the end of the metaphysics of presence, of the metaphysics of rationality, is the end of Western philosophy's movement of relentless expansion. It's expansion has reached its limits and is facing its own impossibility. We know that the end is historical, concrete, and real. We know, too, that there are answers that do not come from within its epistemic territory, but from a beyond Western thinking.

I will speak about the limits of Western thought, of its turn towards 'thoughtlessness'. In a parallel way to how anthropocentrism and the alleged ownership of Earth results in 'earthlessness,' and to how the monocultural affirmations of Eurocentrism turn into 'worldlessness', we can say that the affirmation of Western thought —and its movement of expansion into all realms of life— has turned into 'thoughtlessness'.

First, let us speak of the limit that comes in the awareness of the finitude of Earth. We might call it finitude, or we might call it the awareness of the wholeness of the body of Earth. A wholeness that is not infinite. The body of Earth does not correspond to its projection as endless, as a limitless realm for expansion, exploitation, extraction, and the infinite futurity of progress. We are now conscious of how non-viable are our notions of progress, consumption and extraction that assume Earth as limitless. The geologic limit to growth that the finitude of Earth brings to the fore is also, and has to be, thought of as a limit to Western thought and its mode of being as expansion.

Another limit to Western metaphysics is posed by Earth's ancestrality; by the precedence of Earth and the consciousness that our bodies are Earth, that we carry the water of Earth, the minerals of Earth, or rather, that the water of Earth, its minerals, its life, carries us. That Earth sustains us. As our friend Valiana Aguilar says, if we eat and drink, the Earth is sustaining us and the territory is within us. Yet, in our anthropocentrism, we have forgotten that we are still Earth-bodies. An awareness of Earth, of the 'ancestrality of Earth', is an awareness of a time that doesn't belong to the realm of Western philosophy. The temporality of precedence affirms that, beyond immanence and transcendence, there is a temporality that precedes and that is sustaining us. Futurity is not sustaining us, neither is artificiality, nor speculation. What is sustaining us is the life that precedes us.

The precedence of Earth is out of reach for Western thought and reveals its movement of uprooting, its earthlessness. The production of abstraction through reduction, the movement towards artifice and simulation, are examples of the reduction of reality to what we can own and control and of the negation of the temporality of Earth as precedence. Here

again, Western thought encounters its finitude in its movement of affirmation while losing the possibility of thinking otherwise. It is what we are calling 'thoughtlessness'.

The Coloniality of Thought

Now, let us address the coloniality of thought. The coloniality of thought is a question that emerges in conversation not with the work of Heidegger but with Aníbal Quijano. When Quijano opens the question of coloniality, something significant happens: it enacts an epistemic turn. If colonialism is a Western term, coloniality is not. Quijano's conceptual work signals a delinking from Western philosophy to broaden the possibilities for thinking what has been unthought by the West.

The question of coloniality and of the colonial difference, advanced by Walter Mignolo (2011) and María Lugones (2007), help us observe the limits of western philosophy and its monopoly over thinking. It-tells us about the inadequacy of Western thinking to comprehend the erasure of coloniality: the displacement of other worlds out of history, out of historical reality, and hence the destruction of the possibility of plural or intercultural realities.

The coloniality of thought produces the 'unthought', or that which cannot be thought within Western thinking. Here, coloniality is the displacement of other ways of thinking out of the thinkable. Allow us to recall a beautiful conversation in one of our Middelburg Summer Schools, between Professor Wekker and Professor Lugones. They spoke about how, when they were pursuing their doctorates, the former in anthropology, the latter in philosophy, they could not find words to think about themselves, to speak about their worlds, to say what they needed to say. In those highly developed discursive fields, they had no voice. Their experiences, as women of colour, was displaced out of thinking, rendered voiceless. The coloniality of thought is the production and the displacement of experience out of the thinkable.

The awareness that reveals the limits of Western thought is an awareness of the colonial difference, the open wound that keeps on calling for justice. This wound, which Gloria Anzaldúa writes about, is a wound that is in the temporality of precedence. The wound of the colonial difference is not in futurity; rather, it is in the precedence of what has been lived, it is the enduring suffering of discrimination, violence, genocide, erasure.

With Professor Mignolo, we have been thinking through how Western aesthetics became a monopoly over experience, in much the same way that Western philosophy has held a monopoly over the thinkable. Hence, the impossibility until now of thinking erasure and displacement, of thinking the colonial difference. We could say that we need to decolonise philosophy to liberate thought. It is a struggle over the realms of understanding of what can be spoken, and it is a struggle for the coming to voice of what has been silenced, what has been foreclosed, and what remains inaccessible from Western thinking.

Directionality of Western Thinking

Western thinking is not just about expansion. It also has a directionality that needs to be overturned. Through the study of Iranian Sufism, Henry Corbin provides another view from outside Western philosophy, outside modernity. Corbin observes that the loss of the ascending vertical dimension in the West is replaced by evolutionary horizontal extension.

His analysis confirms the dominance of the thinking of expansion and horizontality, the thinking of evolution and linear time, of continuous progression and expansion. The very physical movement of colonial expansion finds its corollary in thought; this is the way Western thought moves. The movement of Western thought corresponds to the historical logic of imperial expansion.

Corbin explains the replacement of the vertical dimension with evolutionary horizontal expansion as a loss of orientation. When he thinks about the Orient in Sufism, he thinks not only of a geographical Orient, but of the possibility of an orientation in time and with Earth. A relation that connects us to the time and ground in which we are. We could say that the relation of precedence and to Earth discussed earlier, belongs to a 'verticality' that does not correspond to the logic of expansion, to the horizontality of Western thought.

In a way, the disorientation of the West, the loss of 'verticality', is one of the things that has prevented the possibility of intercultural relations. We recall here Raimon Panikkar, who explained that, because the West lost its own cosmology, it also lost the possibility of conversing with other cosmologies. The West affirmed itself as the place of reason and science in contradistinction to the cosmologies of other worlds. This eliminated any possibility of intercultural conversation or encounter, leaving only the possibility of domination, of dominant differences, where, for example, the Other is erased or turned into a spectacle, a site of pleasure for the dominant self.

With Corbin's insight, we can see how the expansion of modernity, the expansion of Western thinking, and the 'Age of Discovery', all correspond to that loss of orientation and the loss of time. We experience what Walter Benjamin named the empty time of modernity: a time without grounds, a superficial now imbued with the fantasmagoria of the future. We experience the now of novelty and the loss of Earth. The disorientation of Western thinking and the absurdity of its endless expansion appear in the encounter with ancestral worlds, in the encounter with living Earth.

Decoloniality as Re-orientation

In response to the impetus towards endless expansion and the disorientation of Western thought, decoloniality undertakes the task of the re-orientation of thinking in relation to Earth and time. The relational movements of thought do not belong to the tradition of Western philosophy. Here, we want to bring to the fore two examples of relational thought: 'telluric thought' and 'ancestral materiality'.

The term 'telluric', a word we have in Western languages originating from 'tellus', meaning 'of the earth', helps us to name a way of thinking from and with Earth. The movement of telluric thought does not correspond to the reduction of reality to representation, to artifice. It doesn't create an abstraction of existence but enters in relation with existence. It is conscious of the relations that precede, it is conscious of its grounding. It is a thought that is always already positioned. It cannot be enunciated from a place of abstraction. Rather, it is positioned somewhere, and this position is not just identity and is not just geography, it is also historical, it is also ancestral. It remembers the relational-precedence that gives form, that forms what exists. It is in the mode of reception, the reception of remembering, and it has the possibility of re-membering what has been dismembered by the logic of separation.

This task of decolonial thought as a re-orientation and a moving away from the thinking of abstraction and expansion is what we are calling here 'ancestral-materiality'. It is about the temporality of matter, not matter as an object in the present only. I recall conversations with Professor Wayne Modest, where this has been key when thinking about the role of the ethnographic museum and the need to approach heritage not simply as collections of objects in space. The temporality of matter has led me to think about ancestral-materiality where 'matter', again returning to etymological roots, refers to origin, source, and to mother. Mother, origin, source, are present in matter but we have made of matter a motherless object, an object without provenance, without time. We have subjected matter to the timelessness of modernity, and reduced it to an object in the surface of the present, to an object of property. The commodity is an object with no time, one that has value only in the present of ownership. The fetishism of the commodity functions in this timelessness. Ancestral-materiality, on the other hand, cannot be reduced to property; it cannot be owned. We have been made to forget that we *owe* our existence to this ancestral-materiality that is sustaining us. And, yes, it is materiality. It is not something transcendental, it is There, but it is There with a history, it is 'theing'. It comes from somewhere, from ancestral histories that are not anthropocentric, that are World and Earth histories, such as the wooden floors here in the Aula of the University of Amsterdam or these stones. The stones on which you are standing are not only graves. They are natural stones from the mountains. There is an ancestral-materiality that we do not recognize with our Western eyes.

Unlike the movement of expansion and endless futurity of Western thought, ancestral-materiality and telluric thought signal a movement towards birth instead of

towards death. This movement towards birth is also present in works of key women philosophers from the Western tradition like María Zambrano and Hannah Arendt. Their work challenged the Western philosophical move towards death, the being thrown into the world towards death, that is key to continental philosophy in thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. Arendt and Zambrano realized that we have to think towards natality, because we are always already born. This reverts the logics of the horizon of death and the horizon of artificiality and futurity. Ancestral-materiality and telluric thought make us conscious of our life sustenance where matter is not an object but is what precedes us and what is sustaining us. The elders from Sierra Nevada of Colombia, the Iku peoples of the Pluriversity Umunukunu whom we're working with, are very clear that one of the urgent tasks today is the continuation of that life, of that matter that is threatened by the expansion of the world of consumption and the loss of Earth. One of the key challenges is the continuity of that which sustains life, which is being destroyed at a very rapid pace in the present.

The subject who lives in the age of expansion or in the modern/colonial system is a self that lives in separation. We have been separated from our communal consciousness, we have lost the ability to know that we are not self-made, that we are always made by and with others, including the language we speak, that we are in separation from Earth as humans owning Earth, and we are separated from time living in an amnesiac condition. How can we remember ourselves as Earth, ourselves as community, ourselves as ancestrality? When we remember we cannot become single individuals. Fred Moten asks, How can we go beyond the single individual? To remember here is not a conservative move, it is not a movement of owning. It is a broader consciousness of how we are in relation to Earth, to the communal, and to time. This also means a re-orientation, which we have named in these three ways: moving from owning to owing, from representation to reception, from separation to relationality.

Dixit

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