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# Magical Terms: On Defining and Positioning the “Decolonial” and “Queer” in Archival Practices

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Collection

Reimagining the Archive

Terminology

↓

During the conference, we were moved to see the deep and sometimes shallow use of the term decolonization. The conference asked this guiding question that illustrates the importance of *effort*, of labor in the action of decolonizing: "What kinds of (new) models and methods exist that seek to question archival practices in an effort to 'decolonize' the archive?" For our contribution, we offer a short reflection on the use of terminology related to the decolonial. For us, the effect to decolonize the archive—or any other domain—harkens back to how the efforts to "queer" tended to expand rather than narrow down accompanying methods. It strikes us that to decolonize, like queering, can become used as a "magical term" that has a particular power when invoked by a researcher: it makes the work called for or carried out seem relevant and necessary. At the same time, these concepts often go undefined, and therefore risk being emptied out of meaning and actual critical action. We would like to focus on how concepts, practices, and methods require the trouble of being parsed and reflected on, even when—especially when—the work is tough and troubling.

In positioning our response in this way, we would like to elaborate on the question we asked of ourselves when researching for our presentation: what is the importance of positionality in queer and decolonial practices? To the question, *does one's contemporary identity-based socio-political position offer a lens through which to research archival materials?*, we can answer a resounding yes. Yet, the "elephant in the room" problem is often methodologically how to account for these differences in positioning. Further, in working together as two differently positioned researchers, we are also curious how one might try to overcome the gap between one's race, colonial history, and sexuality that might be seen as at odds with or conforming to normative politics and archival practices. Finally, in closing, we will gesture to how Betty Paërl, and our attempt to research her life, scattered among several specialized archives, helps us to reflect on the triangle of positionality formed between researcher-archive-collaborator.

**1. Magical Terms**

Magical thinking is when one believes that one's own thoughts and desires can influence the world. Magical thinking might be considered committed by researchers who in merely citing an on-trend concept like queer or decolonial and believe that it does the work of "queering" or "decolonizing." We gesture to the history of how unmarked or undefined terms like "sexuality" or "human," or "human sexuality" for that matter, would be implicitly standing for heterosexuality or white man if left unscrutinized by researchers. The choice might be to either not say the term and do the work, or invoke the term as a full-fledged concept with its own histories and signatures, that is, as dated and signed by certain users/theorists. For us, the worst-case scenario is to use the term so lightly or so loosely that the only effect is you feel you can pat yourself on the back for knowing it is on-trend and "believing" that you have done enough just saying it out loud.

So, by now you might be wondering, what do *you* mean by decolonial? This question can be raised with a number of different tones: is it an attack or an ask for clarification? Terms are rarely understood in the same way since each discipline and even within disciplines, various speakers add nuance and layers of analysis to every concept. What might be supposedly obvious to some will not be obvious to all. The question calls for the researcher to be clear about the meaning and what the term actually involves, i.e. the way it relates to what the archival researchers think that they are doing.

We can turn to the discussion about decolonizing and engage with it on the macro level and find micro examples. For instance, Walter Mignolo insists on the decolonial option, as the ability to delink from the colonial mentality and knowledge systems ("coloniality") and relink to other knowledge systems that are suppressed or under erasure. How does the archive you work with organize and elevate knowledge systems that privilege some forms of knowledge while eliding others? How might your research questions be orientated towards or radiating from coloniality? Where can you delink, and what would you relink to in an act of epistemic disobedience? More provocatively, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang might ask, can we even decolonize

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the master's house? Indeed, colonial archives, physical or imagined repositories where certain colonized people were studied, catalogued and regulated are precisely the sites of imperial power that people who invoke the term "decolonization" wish to critique. Tuck and Yang point us to the way "decolonization" has been used metaphorically (as in efforts to diversify archival materials) that fails to engage the material process of decolonization (as in the repatriation of Indigenous land and life).

**2. Positionality**

A related issue is the ways in which researchers can neglect positionality as a vital step in parsing their avowed use of concepts and framing their analysis of materials with those concepts.

Here we think of a positionality triangle that is key to acknowledging the various acts of epistemic violence when speaking on behalf of historical personages or events. The researcher forms a triangle with the archive and with their collaborators, such as those who assist and aid the researcher like the keeper of the collection, head of an archive, curator, librarian, actual historian, or other researchers. In terms of materials, the researcher might also be said to "collaborate" or think together with them, as "thinking objects."

As a Black, queer non-binary and male presenting person born in Curaçao, Wigbertson Julian grew increasingly more interested in finding instances where the histories of queer individuals and groups from the postcolonial Dutch territories interlaced. As a white, non-binary queer person based in the Netherlands (born in the U.S.), Eliza was eager to know what role did trans and non-binary persons play in these histories? What kinds of alliances were made, and solidarity practiced? When Wigbertson Julian chanced upon a figure, the white (we later found out) transgender woman Betty Paërl, who seemingly was active in these histories, we sought to combine our personal positionalities with the method of decolonization and the politics of transing. Our combined research agenda was to compare and perhaps find links between her earlier work, which was critical of the neo-colonial relationship between the postcolonial territories and the Netherlands, to her public writings on gender transition, and her later work as an SM dominatrix and sex-positive activist. And if we examine her dual gender/sexuality and anti-colonial activism in an analytical framework, how should this be done and why?

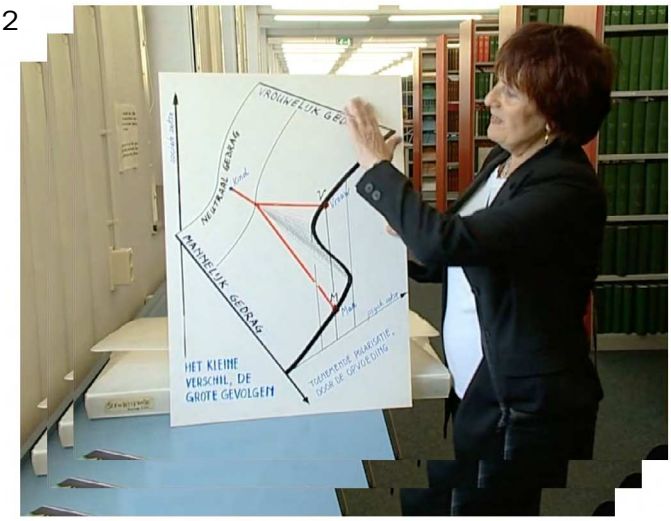
**3. Betty Paërl**

Our joint research venture led us to reflect on these questions—of magical terms and pauses for clarification, of positionality and the need to consider one's practice. Namely, the life's work of Dr. Betty Paërl (1936–present) was at the cross point of at least three different vectors of activism and thinking: the liberation of sex/gender, sexuality, and former colonies, and these together with the collaboration with diverse groups and her partners. For example, she became an active member of the Suriname Committee, which was founded in 1970 by Surinamese and Dutch people in the Netherlands to promote solidarity with the Surinamese and Antillean people at home and abroad.

With her then-wife, Hetty Paërl, she made three political documentaries in 1973. Their starting point was the social engagement of the Surinamese committee with the workers on the Mariënburg sugar plantation and with the Maroons living in the Brokopondo district. It was the result of around three months' travel. They shot the films on 8mm, which required a double recording system. We think it significant that Paërl handled the Super 8 camera while her then-wife Hetty recorded the sound. Whereas working across different archives emphasizes the researcher who must see in stereoscope, that is, with two images that blend to generate a 3D view, their making of an 8mm audiovisual film brings out the importance of creative, political, and technical collaboration to create complex insights into the workings of neo-colonialism. Their duo-collaboration and camaraderie on the films also translated into the books written by Paërl. Betty wrote the texts while Hetty took charge of the illustrations. The illustrations, which also served as pamphlets and posters, summarize the grotesqueness and absurdity of the neo-colonialism of these Dutch companies, and their cartoonish bosses.

Paërl obtained a PhD in mathematics in 1968 and used the mathematical modeling of "catastrophe" to frame her life experience: a small difference in behavior, given social polarization of gender, can have big consequences, as seen in the clip of her on the following page on NPS' *Urbania* from 2001. Her example, and likely her own experience, is that a presumed man wearing lipstick can be hounded by colleagues, lose her wife, and be ripped from her child.

Following her social, legal, and medical gender transition, Paërl left working at the University of Amsterdam in 1988 as a math teacher and found intellectual stimulation in the dungeon. As a professional SM dominatrix and journalist, she made a career enacting and analyzing power exchanges. She was a journalist for the BDSM magazine for lesbian and bisexual women *Slechte Meiden* (1983–1990), the magazine of the national LGBT organization COC, *SEK* (1983–1987), the Dutch lesbian magazine *Diva* (1985), and the magazine of the lesbian SM group *Wild Side* (1993–1994).




Betty Paërl explains the mathematical modeling of "catastrophe." (Source: *Urbania: Een Stadstriptiek*. NPS. 6 Nov. 2001. Television.)

Open Video ↗

So, our investment has also been to locate Betty's work in various elsewheres and to make the connections that might not seem apparent at first. We refused to stop at the easy station of perceiving her as a transgender woman, but also as SM dominatrix who engaged with feminism and lesbian politics, or only as a white (passing) man/later trans woman who actively engaged in the liberation of Suriname and the empowerment of Suriname's workers. Refusing to use magic words, then, we aim to analyze the various sites of struggle, located in different archives across different periods—so as to describe her to be as three-dimensional as possible. This would bring about thinking of history, her history and the history of the struggles she was involved in, as more than a single focus on queerness or decoloniality.

We offer these thoughts to you in homage to her, to honor her multi-positional activism. But also, because we experienced the direct, caught-in-the-act-of-researching need to complicate these power dynamics of being siloed into telling single stories based on practices of "single-focused archiving" that divided her history across specialized on-site archives.



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