

Decolonial aesthetics: weaving each other

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In this conversation academic Rolando Vázquez discusses the notion of decolonial aesthetics with curators Teresa Cos Rebollo and Charles Esche in relation to *The Soils Project*. *The Soils Project*, currently on show at Tarrawara Museum of Art, Wurundjeri Country, Australia, is part of the eponymous, long term research initiative involving Tarrawara, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands and Struggles for Sovereignty, a collective based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It works through specific and situated practices that consider soil, as both metaphor and matter. A further iteration of the project will open at the Van Abbemuseum in Spring 2024 as part of Museum of the Commons. The conversation was first published by TarraWarra Museum of Art and was edited by Claire Williamson.

Charles Esche: The question of the decolonial obviously came and was born in the conditions of Abya Yala / the Americas. Maybe you could talk a little bit about what happens when it arrives in a settler colony like Australia, which is settled by different cultures, the British rather than the Spanish or Portuguese. How do we discuss this question of decoloniality in the context of Australia? How does decoloniality move from one place to another, and how does it change in the process?

Rolando Vázquez: I think it is important to recognise that decoloniality comes from the history of Abya Yala and from the colonial period that began with Spanish and Portuguese imperialism. That was a period that is distinct from other colonial periods and other forms of colonisation, like, for example, the settler colonialism of the British Empire in Australia. Decoloniality emerges as a thinking from the Global South, grounded in Abya Yala, and provides a non-western vocabulary that allows for different experiences from the Global South to relate to each other. Decoloniality enables conversations that are impossible to have within the dominant vocabulary and epistemic territories of the west.

Here we are not speaking of the languages of Spanish and English, etc., but we are speaking of their logics. Within these imperial grammars, vocabularies and

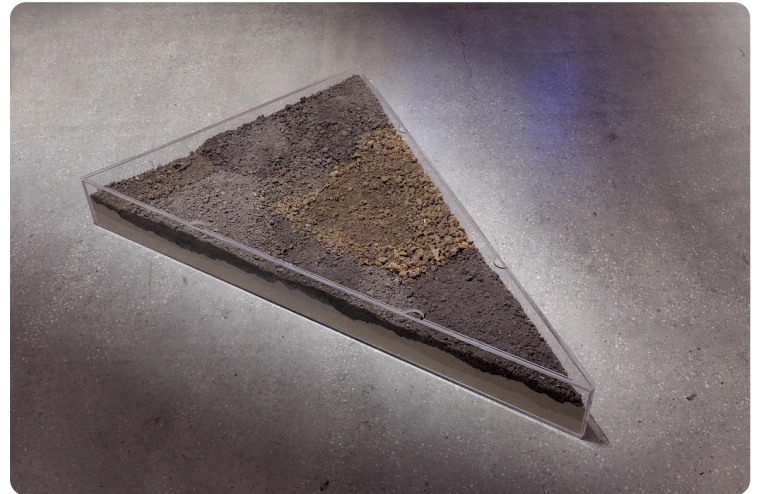
disciplines, the lived experiences of the Global South under oppression cannot be spoken and cannot be thought.

What decoloniality does is to open the possibility of a conversation from and between the experiences of the Global South by enabling an epistemic and aesthetic turn. An important step in this turn is the notion of coloniality conceptualised by Anibal Quijano. Unlike 'colonialism', the notion of 'coloniality' is not a western term but an analytics that emerges from the South to study and understand the dominant system from the perspective of the oppressed.

Decoloniality, of course, has long roots in authors such as Guaman Poma de Ayala, Fanon and Glissant, but crucially its location of thought is different from the currents of critique of the west (Marx, Foucault, Deleuze, Haraway, etc.). They are looking at the system of power critically but from a western perspective and from within its epistemic and aesthetic territory. Decoloniality, emerging from experiences of the Global South, enables a conversation across other worlds that have been suppressed, offering a vocabulary to speak of the dominant system from the outside and to uncover that there is a plurality of worlds whose existence has been under erasure.

The experience of the María Lugones Decolonial Summer School has been to realise how decolonial epistemology and aesthesis enable relations across oppressions that are disabled or destroyed by the predominance of the relation to the dominant system. When we think of the dominant system in terms of its own vocabulary, concepts and thought, we are still thinking within it. Even when we are strongly against the dominant system we find ourselves bound to it. But we spend little intellectual and political energy to engage in what María Lugones would describe as knowing each other across oppressions.

The decolonial is not about becoming dominant. It's about creating the possibility of conversation, of learning from each other across oppressions without reducing the difference of every context. This is also the analysis we learn from the political thought of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. They say that there is one big 'NO' to the world based on universality that has no space for other worlds. One 'NO', a common opposition to the system that excludes difference. In its place, they embrace the pluriversal as a response to the one dominant system. What the dominant system did was to reduce difference, to destroy plurality.



Badan Kajian Pertanahan (BKP), *Cultural Acknowledgement of Land Ownership #1*, 2023. Installation view, *The Soils Project*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2023. Courtesy of the artists.
Photo: Andrew Curtis.

Decoloniality doesn't draw a single response but, rather, enables coalitions against oppression. It says 'NO' to the world that has no space for other worlds and enables other worlds to coexist in the pluriversal.

The thinking of decoloniality coming from Latin America has a different route than the postcolonial response to primarily British and French colonialism. Put simply, the postcolonial is an important strategy for opening up and pluralising the notion of modernity so that other histories can fit within it, such as saying that Indian history is also modern history. However, the decolonial does not seek to open the canon of modernity to be inclusive of other 'modernities' in that way. Instead, it wants to overcome the notion of modernity that is inseparable from coloniality. The decolonial posture is about going beyond the modern, beyond the contemporary, and not about claiming a place in it or diversifying it.

CE: Speaking from my point of view, it's fascinating and useful to see what occurs when decolonial theory born in Abya Yala encounters other theories or even ways of being. You talked about the postcolonial, which is part of Australia's thinking, but I feel the decolonial has the capacity to change the conversation also in Australia or western Europe. Speaking personally, the decolonial gave me a voice in moving away from an old Marxist analysis and starting to listen and learn from conversations that begin south to south but may also take place from south to north. In the context of Australia, which is a settler colony built on genocide and erasure in the most violent way, there is a strange coexistence of north and south consciousness that might be fruitful territory for decolonial thinking.

For the *Soils Project*, which was born in discussions with Victoria Lynn in Melbourne and expanded through a two-week workshop in Healesville, Victoria, the concept

and practice of 'weaving' was something we shared, but from different positions. It was introduced by Aldo Ramos from Pluriversity, who brought it from Latin America, and was then picked up by Brooke Wandin, bringing it from an Aboriginal Indigenous context, and Yurni Sadariah, bringing it from Adat (Indigenous/ Customary) culture in Sulawesi, Indonesia. In the workshop, 'weaving' became a language that could be shared and a technique that encouraged coalition building that in turn led to discussions about what was common and what was different. It seems important that those conversations used a material that western art history marginalises as a craft. What I also find interesting, while admitting a very limited knowledge of the Aboriginal experience, is that the postcolonial idea of inclusion has pushed people to try to establish land rights within the legal structure of the Australian states despite the fact that those legal structures are firmly anchored in colonial power itself. Even the idea of the foundation of the state is something that can only exist within a concept of the colonial. Decoloniality allows us to think about coloniality as a present condition rather than existing solely in the past. It allows a questioning of the trajectory and place where change might happen, and I think it can help build coalitions with activists such as Uncle Bruce Pascoe and Uncle Dave Wandin, both of whom are working to re-establish Aboriginal land knowledges, or Zena Cumpston with her work on the use of indigenous plants. I am still in shock at the way that what you have called colonial 'arrogant ignorance' so easily dismissed Aboriginal knowledge of plants and destroyed the agricultural system of pre-invasion Australia. What we see now is that while plants from the northern hemisphere behave in unsustainable and often destructive ways, certainly in the long term, there is still a huge mainstream reluctance in Australia to learn from other epistemologies about their own environment.