

## Postcolonial Critique and Decolonial Desires in Caribbean Studies

The current field-imaginary of Caribbean Studies is driven by a set of complementary and, at times, contradictory forces – not only along the lines of regional (ethno-)political, language, and economic differences and divisions but also in terms of the conceptual and theoretical frames with which it is approached. While it becomes increasingly difficult to assess or discuss anything like the ‘state of the art’ even within – precariously delineated – sub-fields such as Anglophone Caribbean Literary Studies or Caribbean Cultural Studies, there has been a noticeable shift in emphasis within international scholarship from ‘postcolonial’ to ‘decolonial’ terminology over the last decade.

This shift is not without some irony, since it arguably was the very ‘decolonial’ impetus and referential framework of anti-colonial movements and politics which in many ways enabled ‘postcolonial’ thinking in the first place. Viewed from this angle, the ‘decolonial’ can be said to constitute both a precursor to and a descendant of ‘postcolonial’ critical approaches. Yet, they tend to be conceptualized as separate schools of thought with distinct trajectories. Postcolonialism is mainly associated with work based on the trailblazing studies by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (cf. [Bhambra 2014: 115](#)), whom Robert Young has famously referred to as “the Holy Trinity of colonial-discourse analysis” ([Young 1995: 163](#)). The *Grupo Modernidad/Colonialidad*, or “modernity/coloniality school,” in turn, draws on work produced around Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory as well as on critical theory and is frequently associated with Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, and Walter D. Mignolo (cf. [Bhambra 2014: 115](#)). While postcolonial and decolonial approaches both perform inquiries into the politics of knowledge production in their contestation of the colonial world order and its aftermaths across multiple modernities, decolonial thinkers emphasize their reliance on alternative epistemologies and the “coloniality of power” (*colonialidad del poder*, cf. [Quijano 2000](#)). They tend to extend the timeframe of inquiry back to the late fifteenth century and focus their geographical orientation southwards to the context of the Americas in the plural (cf. [Bhambra 2014: 219](#)), in which the Caribbean has of course played a crucial role.

At the very latest since the eighteenth century and with increasing uprisings against the Transatlantic system of enslavement and colonial oppression, the Caribbean has been at the forefront of anticolonial movements. The Maroon Wars in Jamaica, the Haitian Revolution, or the Cuban War of Independence are but a few of the better-known examples in the long and contested historiography of Caribbean decolonization. The ‘Atlantic world’ in which these events and processes took place was marked by conflicting positions and aspirations, as Verene Shepherd has pointed out:

The enslaved struggled for freedom and respect; the non-sugar entrepreneurs strove for upward social mobility in a sugar planter’s world, the Creole resented being cast into “local” social status and the coloured struggled for civil rights. At the same time, there was no unified white or free-coloured group pursuing a homogeneous economic ideology. While some whites supported the plantation economic model, others pursued a divergent economic path that was out of step with what we have come to view as the “global” needs of empire. (Shepherd 2004: 49)

From Simón Bolívar’s “Carta de Jamaica” (1815) to José Martí’s “Nuestra América” (1891) to Marcus Garvey’s *UNIA* or Walter Rodney’s speeches and writings (e.g. Rodney 1972), Pan-American, Pan-Caribbean, and Pan-African movements have intersected in their efforts at political decolonization. Within a broad range of different positions and politics, since the 1930s, Caribbean thinkers, writers, and critics have furthermore highlighted the necessity of not only political and economic but also of cultural and epistemic decolonization, not least through the highly influential cultural politics of a great variety of artistic and social movements and diaspora networks.

English-language Caribbean writers and critics in this vein include Claude McKay, C. L. R. James, John La Rose, Kamau Brathwaite, and Sylvia Wynter (cf. Donnell 2006). The most well-known *Négritude* writers are Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, to whom one needs to add the frequently overlooked women writers Suzanne Lacascade, Jane and Paulette Nardal, and Suzanne Roussy-Césaire (cf. Sharpley-Whiting 2002). René Depestre’s writing also looms large in this context as an ambiguous critic of *Négritude* (cf. Depestre 1980). *Antillanité*, *Créolité*, and *Créolisation* writers include Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant, with narrative interventions into and critique of their conceptualizations by women writers like Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau (Gaillot 2007: 7–8). The influences of Latin American *Modernismo* and *Criollismo* are important in the Spanish-language Caribbean not only for writers and poets such as Nicolás Guillén, Luis Palés Matos, and Manuel del Cabral or the broader *Negrismo/Afro-cubanismo* movements but also for the *Movimiento Antillano* (cf. Paravisini-Gebert 2004),

not to forget Cuban women's testimonies, most famously that of *Reyita* (cf. [Castillo Bueno 2000 \[1997\]](#); [Sanmartín 2014](#); [Ueckmann 2015](#)). Dutch-language Caribbean writers positioned on various ends of questions regarding cultural and political decolonization, in turn, include Nicolaas (Cola) Debrot, Albert Helman, Anton de Kom, and, more recently, Cynthia McLeod, as well as Papiamentu writers and poets Frank Martinus Arion and Henry Habibe (cf. [Arnold 2001](#)).

The discourses of creolization, *métissage*, and *mestizaje* have come to depict an equally wide range of critical conceptualizations of the region. Caribbean critique furthermore frequently relies heavily on the works of Frantz Fanon (e.g. [1952](#) and [1961](#)), – who has also been appropriated as both a 'postcolonial' and a 'decolonial' critic *par excellence*. However different their respective positions, politics, and approaches may be, one key concern that most of these writers and critics arguably share is what Mignolo has captured in the "conceptual formula [...] 'I am where I think,'" which addresses the geopolitics and body politics of knowledge through "the intimate connection among biography ('I am'), geography ('where'), and knowledge ('I think')" ([Lionnet/Shih 2011: 29](#); cf. [Mignolo 2011](#)). Based on the importance of such geopolitics and body politics of knowledge across the wide variety of Caribbean thought and writing outlined above, one can certainly state that notions of knowledges in the plural as positioned, situated, and embodied feature prominently in Caribbean contexts *avant la lettre* of feminist standpoint theory (cf. [Harding 1991](#); [Haraway 1988](#)) and related debates.

What is at stake in much of this legacy and enduring critique emerging from the Caribbean is nothing less than the very concepts of culture and knowledge themselves, exemplified in questions surrounding the roles and functions of cultural production in their respective specific as well as wider socio-political contexts across the diverse and disparate spatio-temporal relations that have marked and continue to influence the region. Critical junctures in concepts such as transculturation (cf. [Ortiz 1995 \[1940\]](#)) notions of fluid or hybrid identity formations (cf. [Hall 1990, 1992, 1995](#)), or conviviality (cf. [Gilroy 2004](#)) have been shaped decisively by Caribbean thought and have been appropriated in and transferred to cultural debates across the globe. This broad and disparate realm of cultural inquiry requires inter- and transdisciplinary approaches and, at the same time, alerts us to the urgent tasks of not only literal but also conceptual translations as well as the necessity of continuous re-assessment and reflexivity. Both localized in-depth analyses as well as multilingual, transversal, and pan-Caribbean perspectives and conversations are needed in order to challenge the confines of disciplinary comforts or sub-regional boundedness. Such conversations, however, need to constantly offset particularity and generalization and are prone to misunderstandings.

Postcolonial Studies has been criticized for theoretical and institutional mediation through the ‘west’ or ‘Global North’ as well as for viewing formerly colonized countries and regions exclusively through their colonial histories in terms of a center/periphery binary and in relation to western modernity. The ‘postcolonial’ is thus seen as “the master signifier in all analyses under this field and therefore also ties the Caribbean to ‘Otherness,’” as Marsha Pearce has phrased it. In response to this, she instead suggests a “Caribbean Cultural Studies ecosystem” to accommodate the region’s diverse conceptual and theoretical perspectives (Pearce n.d.: 2–3). The Caribbean generally appears as a site both inspired by and ‘creolizing’ or adapting ‘western’ theories and discourses *and* as a site of radical inquiry and critique of the explicit or implicit assumption of their universality. Hence, the region can be seen as fluctuating between these two poles as what I refer to as a site of ‘universal particularity.’ In many ways, these poles are aligned with the lines of critique of ‘postmodern,’ ‘poststructuralist,’ or ‘postcolonial’ discourses as shaped mainly by western systems of thought on the one hand and suggestions of alternative, ‘decolonial’ knowledge production on the other. That these perspectives cannot be neatly separated but are densely interwoven becomes clear e.g. in Rebecca Fuchs’ discussion of Cuban critic Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s ‘plantation machine,’ which is offered “as a manifestation of coloniality that is still present in Caribbean history, theory, and literature” (Fuchs 2014: 99; cf. Benítez-Rojo 1996).

Given the suggested entanglement of the discourses of the ‘postcolonial’ and the ‘decolonial,’ I invoke the notion of what I call critical ‘dis-order’ within Caribbean Studies as a means of challenging hegemonic and ‘disciplined’ perspectives on and approaches to the region. To ‘dis-order’ something implies an active undoing to enable a different order to emerge in its wake; yet it simultaneously captures the ‘messiness’ and necessary open-endedness of this process. On the more abstract level of epistemic dis-order, this ties in with what Mignolo calls “epistemic de-linking” and the very “acts of epistemic disobedience” that he describes as indicative of “de-colonial options” within a “particular and local history” (Mignolo 2009: 15). Tellingly – and within Caribbean Studies contexts certainly not surprisingly – Mignolo’s arguments and examples rely heavily on Frantz Fanon’s thoughts, observations, and theories (cf. Mignolo 2009: 7, 14, 16). Via Sylvia Wynter (2001) and Lewis Gordon (2006), Mignolo presents Fanon’s rendition of the “body that engages in knowledge-making to de-colonize the knowledge that was responsible for the coloniality of his being” as a prime example of epistemic de-linking and epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009: 17). Fanon, however, can be read both on the basis of and against the grain of ‘western’ phenomenological and existential theories or Marxist and Hegelian thought. This further complicates the categorical differentiation between ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ approaches or positions and

instead demands a focus on anti-colonial politics and thought as a common denominator. This is not only a question of positionality but also of address, since, as Tracey Nicholls has pointed out, Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* "does not speak to the West. It is Fanon conversing with, advising, his fellow Third-World revolutionaries" and implies that "decolonization can only happen when the native takes up his or her responsible subjecthood and refuses to occupy the position of violence-absorbing passive victim" (Nicholls n.d.).

A question related to the geopolitics of knowledge that was raised during the final discussion of the 2015 *Socare Junior Research Conference* "Cultures of Resistance? Theories and Practices of Transgression in the Caribbean and Its Diasporas" in Bielefeld is a case in point: One of the conference's main questions ("What does it mean to study the Caribbean from Germany?") indicated the need to address the significance of the location of inquiry (in this case Germany, Europe, or – more broadly – 'western' social and institutional spaces in the 'Global North') and the positionality of researchers *vis-à-vis* the Caribbean (or the 'Global South') within global knowledge systems. What had sparked the discussion was the observation that Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) is often invoked in quite discrepant Postcolonial Studies contexts and applied to examples which do not tie it back to its situated context of emergence. While concern was voiced against such a critical practice in order to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach to 'postcolonial' contexts and to stress the importance of local or regional contextualization, this very attempt to exercise critical caution was perceived as dismissive of the relevance of Spivak's theoretical framework as such. What is at stake in this example, however, is not only the question whether or not the cautionary remark had actually been dismissive of Spivak's text or was justified in its demand for thorough re-contextualization; what is crucial is the manner in which the question was subsequently answered in the plenary, namely with a very *defensive* reaction as to the *intentionality* of the remark rather than its theoretical implications. The overall question, i.e. how localized perspectives can and need to be positioned, re-contextualized, and re-theorized within critical dialogues, remained curiously unaddressed. Such defensive response mechanisms cause many similar debates to remain caught up in the vexing but crucial question of theoretical and epistemic appropriation.

What, then, does it mean for us to *end* such conversations where we should probably *begin* them, especially in international critical conversations? What does it mean for whom to theorize what, and which implicit or explicit assumptions do we make about our respective subject positions *vis-à-vis* our field of inquiry when we ask these questions? What kind of academic politics are at play when we use or perceive these mechanisms as tools of silencing? In the case of the mentioned conference, its title had a very deliberate question

mark behind “Cultures of Resistance?,” which was supposed to point out the danger of culturalizing resistance when talking about the Caribbean. For the most part, this question mark seemed to have been overlooked, however. Is the Caribbean thus ‘doomed’ to resist, as a participant of the 2013 Socare Junior Research conference in Hannover (“Crossing Thresholds: Decoloniality and Gender in Caribbean Knowledge”), had phrased it?

The discursive shift from the ‘postcolonial’ to the ‘decolonial’ points to similar lingering questions of positionality and address: Who creates visions, versions, and narratives and to what effect? Whose experiences are taken into account or glossed over? What are the spatial geographies of cultural and knowledge discourses and their respective cultural politics? What roles do Caribbean diasporas and transnational actors play in this context? How to account for international scholarship’s increasing emphasis on diversity, frequently at the expense of difference, and especially as far as rights to difference are concerned? How can one offset difference and exceptionalism? In sum, what are the respective epistemological and political implications of these and similar (re-)descriptions and (re-)theorizations? Engaging such questions demands a reshaping and active ‘dis-ordering’ of the very notion of ‘knowledge production’ itself, shifting the emphasis towards practices and socio-spatial relations with an acute awareness of the ever-present risk of discursive violence, appropriation, or cooptation. These questions and concerns have of course long been voiced in cultural theory and anthropology (cf. e.g. [Abu-Lughod 1991](#)) and are equally relevant in other contexts such as e.g. Chican@/Latin@ criticism or Chicanx/Latinx Studies or Ethnic Studies and Cultural Studies more generally (cf. e.g. [Yudicé 2003](#); [Flores 2009](#); [Flores/Jiménez Román 2010](#)).

At the same time, however, the ‘decolonial’ shift seems to indicate the promise of fulfillment of a deep-seated desire. Such desire is neither new nor unique to the ‘decolonial,’ as Young’s reflections on “Colonialism and the Desiring Machine” demonstrate – via Fanon as well as Deleuze and Guattari – with regard to colonial discourse analysis ([Young 1995: 159–181](#)). The tensions and affective dimensions inherent in the conceptual separation, exceptionalization, and perpetual ‘Othering’ of the Caribbean (cf. also [Sheller 2003](#)), however, are frequently glossed over in the redemptive vision and promise of a ‘decolonial’ rhetoric, which can paradoxically lead to a neglect of the very questions of power that are so central to its conceptualization. When neglecting questions of positionality (which, however, cannot necessarily be simplistically equated with the location of inquiry), critical complicity in effect risks reproducing coloniality through rhetorical containment. Rather than solving the conundrum of the ‘postcolonial,’ the ‘decolonial’ can thus also function as a means of discursive

sive beautification, especially if it is invoked rhetorically and not enacted conceptually or methodologically.

As outlined above, the conceptual territory and constellation of Caribbean Studies is marked by the complexity of simultaneous localization and connectivity. While on the one hand, micro-studies zoom in – usually from distinct disciplinary frameworks – on the particularities of specific islands, population groups, or individual thinkers, artists, or texts, macro-conceptualizations tend to gloss over such particularities and instead invoke ‘Caribbeanness’ on a meta-level (cf. e.g. Benítez-Rojo’s elusive “certain way” of being Caribbean, 1996: 10–16) or are inspired by a decolonial critique of global coloniality as derived from world-system theory (cf. Grosfoguel 2011). What seems to be needed to mediate between these micro- and macro-levels of analyses that currently tend to dominate the field is an intermediate meso-level<sup>1</sup>. Such a meso-level of analysis could highlight connections rather than categorical divisions between the ‘postcolonial’ and the ‘decolonial’ in application to specific (trans-)regional contexts and across established disciplinary lines of inquiry. While ‘postcolonial’ analyses have tended to read specific texts as manifestations of or in relation to patterns within colonial discourse and its legacies, ‘decolonial’ critique frequently draws broader historical strokes and thus paints a different and more general picture. A further dialogue on their overlaps and shared aims as well as challenges (cf. also Bhabra 2014) could serve as such a mediating ‘meso-perspective’ that allows for a renewed focus on different as well as overlapping modes and imaginaries in and across Caribbean literary and cultural practices. Their comparison against carefully contextualized backgrounds might allow for a different ‘order’ beyond occidental modes of representation to come into being in the process.

The meso-level perspective can in many ways be aligned with the adaptation of a term from the fields of architecture and geography: the concept of “critical regionalism.” The adaptation of ‘critical regionalism’ by literary and cultural studies may be based on the need for a “revised and reconfigured idea of region” (Reichert Powell 2007: 19). Just as critical regionalism is focused on how to approach “this kind of contradictory moment where something unique and isolated seems to be going on, but something else – something complex and interconnected – is also happening,” the meso-level of analysis similarly

1 The notion of a meso-level has been invoked in the context of a systems/systemic approach to migration and migrant decision making, where “mesolevel” denotes “regional economies, ethnic territories marked by particular dialects, communities of shared values, religions, and patterns of everyday life” in the sense of an “arena” of socialization and having “to come to terms with larger socioeconomic forces” (Hoerder 2002: 19).

enables “a critical awareness of how [a] spot is part of broader configurations of history, politics, and culture” (Reichert Powell 2007: 18). In Reichert Powell’s notion of critical regionalism, the “very act of forging, through cultural criticism, the broader cultural, political, historical, and geographical connections around a particular text, image, or artifact of local cultural conflict” enacts such a new model of region (2007: 19). The meso-level thus allows for aesthetic particularities as well as common features of Caribbean literary and cultural practices to be shown in their multi-layered interconnectivity with complex historical and political contexts. It mediates, as it were, between ‘postcolonial’ readings that are tied back solely or predominantly to colonial legacies, on the one hand, and ‘decolonial’ frameworks that tend to invoke a singular or generalized condition of coloniality, on the other.

The liberatory desire that is articulated in both the ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ referential framework is not to be easily dismissed, however. ‘Dis-ordering’ has an important affective impetus and dimension, as it is a process that yearns for a language and a way of being beyond the confines of colonial histories and concepts derived from their lasting legacies. Such a yearning can be observed and articulated on either side of the colonial divide as well as in the messy territory of the ‘in-between’ – which is why complicity is a key aspect and concept that deserves much more critical attention in this context. The many as yet un- or understudied relations and circulations of Caribbean knowledges and artistic contributions that point to a long history of discursive and artistic mobility should not continue to sit apart in distinct disciplinary or language contexts. The manifold temporalities and spatialities of the Caribbean allow for, if not necessitate, transdisciplinary and cross-regional studies. Yet when engaging concepts and theories, one should always remain aware of the danger of reproducing colonial structures and knowledge hierarchies. The negotiation and facilitation of critical conversations thus indeed includes a decolonial willingness to ‘learn to unlearn’ (cf. also Mignolo and Tlostanova 2012),<sup>2</sup> in which desire seems to play a highly ambiguous but crucial role.

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<sup>2</sup> Mignolo has previously outlined the idea of decolonial “learning to unlearn” in adaptation of the principles of the Universidad Intercultural Amawtay Wasi (see <http://www.amawtaywasi.org>; Mignolo 2007).

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