8 Decoloniality

Between a travelling concept and a relational onto-epistemic political stance

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Prologue

When I first discovered for myself the concept of coloniality and the decolonial option in 1999, it was still relatively unknown outside Latin America and rather restricted US circles, and easily confused with postcolonial theory and anticolonial movement as more established phenomena. In the next 30 years, decoloniality has become increasingly well known and popular in the world, has travelled to different continents, and in the last five years has turned into a new buzzword that is being attached to any hip and at times pretentious intellectual endeavours. Everyone is decolonising everything these days. Decoloniality, decolonial thinking, decolonial option[1]—there are zillions of texts written on the topic. In parallel with this academic movement there are also numerous social movements and activist groups which use the slogan of decoloniality but understand it differently. Yet decoloniality is not a new universalist metatheory that one can attach to anything just as it is not a situational tactical slogan used by specific disenfranchised groups in their fights with the state or the corporations. Moreover, decolonial thought was shaped as a contextually specific discourse. The conditions that made possible the formulation of decolonial thinking in the first place are worth revisiting before we try to understand what potentials does decoloniality have in the future, and is it or should it be applicable in other places like Nordic Europe?

How decoloniality emerged: a historical, geopolitical, and theoretical context

A central concept of decolonial thought is "coloniality"—a special kind of imperial/colonial relations that emerged in the Atlantic world in the 16th century, and brought imperialism and capitalism together thus launching modernity as an overarching global project, with the help of racial taxonomising, management of knowledge production and distribution, shaping of subjectivities, and sexual and gender identities (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012). The concept of coloniality is what makes the decolonial option ultimately different from other discourses dealing with colonialism, imperialism, and respective resistances. The idea was first coined by Peruvian sociologist

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Anibal Quijano (1992) at an uneasy moment of the collapse of the state socialist system and discrediting of the socialist utopia, the last grand social utopia of the 20th century, and the arrival and assertion of neoliberal global capitalism as the only legitimate narrative on the planet.

In fact, decolonial thinking the way we know it could not possibly emerge in the previous anticolonial and Cold War era, just as it could not emerge before the postmodernist theoretical injection. The collective neoliberal West was enthusiastically celebrating its victory in the Cold War and producing shallow, short-lived but provocative slogans such as the infamous "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) and fantasising about the imminent global world of erased borders and happy consumers. The global left was confused and discouraged and has not been able to offer any convincing social and political models since then and has mainly preoccupied itself with lamenting the losses and rapidly becoming the phenomenon of the past 20th century. A rather lose group of mostly Latin American and diasporic researchers who came to be known as modernity/coloniality collective formulated their first ideas in this rather grim context of partial defeat and a realisation of the impossibility to immediately (or any time soon) implement ideals of equality and social justice.

Conceptually they were entering the scene when post-constructivist ways of thinking had already become normative. Decolonial voices largely fit into this general epistemic modality of discarding any universalist ideals, grand utopias, and master narratives. This made them different from the more conventional Marxist critique of capitalism (even if some of the original Latin American decolonialists considered themselves to be Marxist) as from the start decolonial thinkers were not interested in bringing to the world a new Truth with a capital letter, not imposing a new common and shared happy future for all people regardless of their differences. In fact, I believe that decoloniality only starts properly as an original and powerful critical discourse when it reworks and overcomes its own previous Marxist and theological delusions and this, for obvious reasons, happens only after 1989 when a distinctly different political and epistemic modality begins to arrive. Bitterly aware of the impossibility of reaching a decolonised condition any time soon, the initial Latin American and later additional voices coming from other regions of the world, have helped decolonial thinkers to increasingly reflect on some loosely bound, pluriversal, relational, differential, locally grounded patterns through which decoloniality has emerged as an open process and not as an attainable or even definable result (Annus 2019; Boatcă 2016; Kalnačs 2016; Karkov 2015; Stamenkovic 2015).

In this sense a decolonial refusal to concretise and spell out the elements of any future utopian society that decolonialists might be after, is not a fault but an intentional stance which nevertheless makes it vulnerable for critique. The pessimistic and negative context from which decoloniality sprang proved to be positive in the long run as it made decolonial activists and thinkers to not only regroup in the new situation but also look more deeply into the broader and more fundamental reasons behind this temporary defeat. This allowed

touching upon the areas that have not been central in anticolonial discussions before, such as the production of knowledge and "aesthesis." The idea of "coloniality" reflected the disillusionment and transference of decolonisation rhetoric that was typical for the Cold War, from material political struggles to more imaginary and soft spheres such as knowledge production and aesthesis (Mignolo 2010; Tlostanova 2011). In Walter Mignolo's words it was "a response from the underside to the enforced homogeneity of neoliberal modernity and to the realization that the state cannot be democratized or decolonized" (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 106). The latter part of this comment throws light at the initial deep decolonial disenchantment with the state as an institution, in both its post/neo-colonial and, indirectly, in its socialist versions. It also reflects an effort to transfer the struggle into the knowledge production and distribution area and later to aesthesis. These two related areas of decolonial application are the areas where it is still possible to resist even in the harsh political context of neoliberal totality. Importantly they do not directly address economics, the tactics of seizing and transferring political power. They do not prepare for a close revolution or a fight for independence with some clear positive result in mind, but rather connect and work with people`s consciousness, aiming for a slow changing of the way they think and see the world and themselves. The latter is a much longer and subtler process, but its results are evident today, 30 years after the emergence of decolonial thinking. At the same time, in these 30 years certain kinds of academic decolonialism have drifted further and further away from the actual ongoing local struggles for land, languages, and the autonomy. As a result, globally there is a growing gap between decolonial thinking and praxis[2] which is contradicting the basic decolonial premise and opens the door for the appropriation, trivialisation, and depoliticisation of decolonial discourses by various status quo and mainstream intellectual groups and research schools. In what follows I will reflect on this decolonial epistemic turn and its advantages and pitfalls.

I also argue that the emerging prototypes of the possible future decolonial communities of change that would overcome the modern/colonial division into theory and practice, would have to arrive—and are in some cases already arriving—at the cusp of the intersecting yet diverging academic and activist decolonialisms. A new generation of decolonial thinkers is increasingly active today and successfully combines the bottom-up social movement element with an excellent command on conceptual academic decolonial works, often via art activism. Decolonising the Euromodern division into theory and practice it is necessary to work on bridging the gaps between the extremes of decolonial academism and decolonial activism. Thinking should not be different from acting and doing, they are equally important for advancing the decolonial agenda and need each other equally. The local decolonial initiatives neglecting academic decolonialism risk remaining narrow and short-lived stand-point positions with no links to other similar movements, whereas academic decolonialists need to learn from and with these movements, think together with them, and also make sure that decolonial writings do not

become instances of intellectual extractivism. Although this has been one of the key points in academic decolonialism, it is never enough to remind ourselves of its importance.

A decolonial shift to knowledge production and aesthesis

Elsewhere I have argued that decoloniality is attractive for so many different thinkers and activists because it critically analyses and questions the very modern/colonial mechanisms of knowledge production and distribution rather than just describing or condemning different historical versions of colonialism, racism, or classism or attempting to formulate some universal theory for these multiple and diverse cases (Tlostanova 2015a, 2015b, 2019). As one of the main moving forces of modernity, ontological othering evidently has epistemic roots because modernity arrives first as a self-legitimating knowledge generating system and not as an objective historical process. This ideational interpretation of modernity is what makes decolonial thinking different from most realist accounts, as it shifts the focus to the way historical processes are described and interpreted rather than to what they actually are or might be. Decolonial thought also claims that there is no objective knowledge. Knowledge(s) is/are always constructed by someone and in someone's interests, from a particular spatial, historical, and corporeal positionality. In its most extreme versions, academic decolonial thinking regards modernity as primarily a set of epistemic assumptions, premises, cognitive operations, disciplinary divisions, that were later ontologised and globally naturalised via familiar paths of capitalism, Christianity, racism, liberalism, neoliberalism, etc. And their denaturalisation and defamiliarisation is then regarded as one of the main decolonial tasks. Clearly, decoloniality in this version derives from the same origin as the poststructuralist critique and faces the same challenges of big promises of specific decolonial critical tools and lacking the actual original theoretical instruments for their implementation, and therefore sliding into the familiar Euromodern conceptual toolbox. Always accentuating the process and not the result in this essentialised academic decoloniality is another sign of its common conceptual roots with poststructuralism which, as Lewis Gordon suggests, makes it prone to fetishising and turning into idolatry with a typical moralistic investment (Gordon 2021, 16).

More specifically decoloniality attempts to put the usual subject/object hierarchy on its head and question the Western imperial epistemic duress which is complicit in maintaining the established knowledge production institutions and measuring rods, from a position of those who have been denied subjectivity and rationality and regarded as mere tokens of our culture, religion, sexuality, race, or gender. In this case stressing the subjective specificity of our knowledge (or in decolonial terms, the geopolitics and corpo-politics of knowledge) is different from a mere postmodernist claim at situated knowledges as it refers to our actual becoming epistemic subjects and looking at/reflecting on the world from the position of our own origins,

lived experiences, and education. Decolonial critique is pluriversal rather than universal, and constantly aware of its own positionality while addressing the "hubris of the zero point," which, according to S. Castro-Gómez, is a specific Eurocentric positionality of the sensing and thinking subject, occupying a delocalised and disembodied vantage point which eliminates any other possible ways to produce, transmit, and represent knowledge, allowing for a world view to be built on a rigid essentialist progressivist model (Castro-Gómez 2007, 433).

The hubris of the zero point is the core of the Eurocentric epistemic contract that was launched as a result of a self-referential and self-legitimating epistemic system disavowing all other systems as non-belonging to modernity and therefore irrelevant (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012). Decoding the specific manifestations of this typically modern/colonial aberration which is coding everything non-rational and non-European as nonmodern and non-pertaining to the sphere of knowledge, and suggesting the means for the elimination of this aberration, is perhaps the most important part of the decolonial agenda.

Decolonial gnosis or border thinking is a specific cognitive instrument that helps in realising the locality of Western epistemology and lets our assumptions shaped on its basis move beyond the normative models of knowledge production and dissemination. It is an epistemic response to coloniality formulated from the colonial difference and therefore escaping the totality of modernity's control. The initial impulse of decolonial gnosis is often a discrepancy between having to live in the colonial matrix and never really belonging to its memories, feelings, and ways of sensing and cognition. The gap between the corpo-politics of knowledge and perception, and the established mainstream ways of knowing, is what prompts the negotiating border thinking and acting as an in-between positionality of neither/nor or both/and.

The same delinking logic is detectable in decolonial aesthesis. Positioned at the intersection of being and knowing through the body, as an imperfect instrument of perception that mediates our cognition, decolonial aesthesis is an ability to perceive through the senses and the process of sensual perception itself—visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, etc. Setting aesthesis free lets us delink from the dominant politics of knowledge, being, and perception, which is grounded in the suppression of geo-historical dimensions of affects and corporalities (Tlostanova 2011). Significantly, decolonial aesthesis is not confined to the art sphere, but rather spreads over the way we sense and perceive the world, playing a key role in the knowledge production.

A decade ago, Walter Mignolo rephrased the famous Cartesian dictum "Cogito ergo sum" into "I am where I think":

> 'I am where I think' sets the stage for epistemic affirmations that have been disavowed. At the same time it creates a shift in the geography of reasoning. For if the affirmation 'I am where I think' is pronounced from the perspective of the epistemologically disavowed, it implies 'and you

> too,' addressed to the epistemology of the zero point. In other words, 'we are all where we think,' but only the European system of knowledge was built on the belief that the basic premise is 'I think, therefore I am,' which was a translation into secular terms of the theological foundation of knowledge (in which we already encounter the privilege of the soul over the body) to secular terms.
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> (Mignolo 2011, 169)

Although radical delinking combined with the corpo- and geopolitical dimensions of knowledge production are still perfectly sound decolonial claims, what has increasingly disturbed me is how can we, decolonial thinkers, implement them. I believe that denouncing Eurocentrism decolonial thought at times tends to still paradoxically reproduce its main conceptual premises, not so much content-wise but discursively. It takes place in the still binary mode of thinking that tends to discard the important nuances for the sake of singling out the general structures and tendencies. This urge leads to homogenising and effectively demonising the collective West, often as a convenient rhetorical gesture rather than a seriously grounded argument. This tendency is also expressed in temporal models that problematise linearity yet still reproduce the progressivist historical scheme (albeit with a focus on the eulogised past). In recent decolonial texts, the previously much more anthropocentric decolonial notions are increasingly balanced with thoroughly conceptualised inclusion of nature and even life as such into the sphere of exteriority and shifting the human being to its deserved humble status (Vázquéz 2017; Walsh and Mignolo 2018). Yet the construction of arguments itself remains surprisingly Euromodern. Partly this is due to the academic writing requirements which remain logocentric if not positivist and therefore ensnare the academic decolonial thinker into a vicious loop of having to use the master`s tools to dismantle his house. This is also why non-academic decolonial writing and art activism, with their polysemantic metaphors and complex and non-straightforward semiotic nodes, are more successful in capturing decolonial sensibility and agendas than any academic text could ever hope to do.

Hijacking the decolonial jargon for colonial(ist) purposes

A focus on knowledge production and aesthesis makes decolonial critique broader and more profound than the anticolonialism of the Cold War era as it aims to question the terms and not the content of the conversation. Yet this ideational bent is also what makes decoloniality vulnerable—it is too often and easily translated into the language of mainstream critical theory, in fact, reduced to it. A mistake or intentional malice of the mainstream appropriators of decolonial thinking is largely that they hijack its frame and main concepts and terms, yet take themselves out of the thinking process, effectively delocalise their argument in the familiar Eurocentric mode, and never stress in what capacity are they applying decolonial thinking. Therefore, one of the

disturbing developments in decoloniality is its hollowing out, trivialisation, and appropriation by generally mainstream status quo thinkers who tend to confuse it with a delocalised critique of rationalism, logocentrism, progressivism, and modernity.

A different but no less misleading confusion arrives when decoloniality is eroded and merged with some generalised anti-racist and anticolonial rhetoric that might have a completely different genealogy, ideology, and philosophy (Liinason and Alm 2018; Liinason and Cuesta 2016). Two examples of this tendency can be found in recent texts by Leon Moosavi (2020) and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) which I regard as indications of the ongoing blurring of the decolonial paradigm and its turning into an all-encompassing boundless anything-goes discourse where the word "decolonial" is increasingly metaphorical rather than strictly terminological. Moosavi`s article is a review work, or perhaps a selective analytical compilation that joins the rising critique of decoloniality as a new buzzword, yet fails to differentiate between the anticolonial, postcolonial, and decolonial discourses and their respective historical and geopolitical genealogies, dynamic contexts, and mutual relations, which is evident in the way the author confuses or neglects to separate decolonisation and decoloniality. Paradoxically, the author himself attempts to jump into the decolonial bandwagon, although from the position of the South. It is less ethically and politically problematic than the Northern appropriation, but it still leads to a blurriness and homogenising of categories and concepts.

Similar tendencies are evident in a much more decolonially informed work by Ndlovu-Gatsheni that offers an excellent genealogy of Africana anticolonial critical thought and agency yet for some reason still attempts to write it into the decolonial discourse and claim its space and visibility there. Once again, a very specific terminological meaning of decoloniality is replaced with a blurred and boundless metaphoric interpretation. I am also uncomfortable with the implied principle of inclusion—this time not to the mainstream Euromodern canon but to a fashionable decolonial one. As in Moosavi`s case, here too decolonisation and decoloniality are confused indicating a general move to indiscriminate lumping together the anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial positionalities.

More and more initiatives, projects, conferences apply the term "decolonial" or "decolonisation." There is an increasingly large number of efforts to decolonise museums, universities, public institutions, as well as many other aspects of life such as sexualities (Bakshi et al. 2016), diets (Mailer and Hale 2017), nature (Demos 2016), design and urban spaces (Kalantidou and Fry 2014). However, in some cases the use of decoloniality is not entirely justified. The problem is not only the lack of actual knowledge of the genealogies of decolonial ideas and struggles, but also a depoliticisation of the originally radical decolonial paradigm and its lumping together with, first of all, postcolonial theory. On a closer inspection, many recent decolonial events appear no more than a neoliberal epistemic appropriation. Decolonisation becomes a buzzword abused in the titles of books, conferences, and research initiatives which

in many cases are detached from the reality of decolonial struggles in the peripheries of Europe, among the indigenous people or in the Global South. It is especially true of European countries, where this discourse has arrived with considerable delay except for the marginalised events organised by a handful of decolonial thinkers themselves or their few European counterparts.[3] But all these seminars, summer schools, conferences either remained for a long time in the periphery of cutting-edge European-style modern/colonial research and therefore remained ignored and invisible on a larger mainstream scale, or were quickly remade and restructured to fit the more conventional postcolonial, multiculturalist, and generally highly commercial modes. It is only in the last few years that the word "decolonial" has started to dominate the mainstream conference and research European environments in highly problematic ways (8th Conference on the New Materialisms 'Environmental Humanities and New Materialisms: The Ethics of Decolonizing Nature and Culture', Paris 2017; Decolonizing transgender in the North—4th Nordic transgender studies symposium, Karlstad 2016; Decolonizing North Conference and Exhibition, Stockholm 2017). Decoloniality has been also appropriated by mainstream art institutions and theories, losing its element of contestation, and turning into nicely packaged and easily digestible postcolonial goods treated through familiar Orientalism, exoticisation, demonisation, and other such Eurocentric knowledge frames (McClintock 1992). Even more disturbing is the fact that the ultra-right rhetoric has hijacked the decolonial readings of the past as its core agenda, to apply it in a dangerous reanimation of ethnic-cultural, religious, Eurocentric, nationalist, and other mythologies normalising rootedness and othering non-belonging (Morozov 2015; The Return of the Colonial 2020; Tlostanova 2018).

In some sense this European decolonial trajectory is reminiscent of an earlier example of intersectionality which has gone from a radical black feminist stand-point discourse (Hull et al. 1982) to a blurred and depoliticised reinterpretation within contemporary European mainstream feminism where it has become a position of belonging to some vague common global transnational feminist culture (Carbin and Edenheim 2013). As in the case of intersectionality then it is crucial to ask—who speaks in and of decoloniality in Europe today and from what position is the enunciation made? Who enunciates decoloniality? Is this enunciation a birth of a new discipline—decolonial studies? And in what intersection of decoloniality does the enunciation take place? Why is it often the case that the European discussants of decoloniality stand above the issues they discuss as the observers and remain untouched by the intersections and power asymmetries in question? It is much more important to focus on different tangential genealogies of knowledge, being, gender, perception, and, once again, to shift the emphasis from the enunciated to the enunciation.

Whitewashed and sanitised "decolonial studies" that fail to see the profound differences between postcolonial theory and decoloniality and often substitute decoloniality for deconstruction yet keep the Euromodern epistemic framework intact, is what we find 30 years after the launch of the

decolonial option in European—and especially in the Nordic—contexts. The latter requires specific attention as they somehow differ from other European responses to decoloniality. Therefore, in the next section I will briefly address some of the specifically Nordic issues with decoloniality.

Decoloniality in the Nordic context

One of the main problems in the Nordic context is the way postcolonial and decolonial paradigms are consistently mixed and confused by many researchers without realising their fundamental epistemic differences. One example is the Linnaeus University Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, which announces on its webpage that it aims at a more "balanced and empirically sound historiography of global encounters throughout modern history" in which the non-European others will be presented as active participants of "concurrent" i.e. ultimately competitive relations (Centre for Concurrences 2021). The concept of concurrencies is disturbing from a decolonial perspective. Claiming anticolonial justice the concurrencies model unproblematically reproduces the main aberration of modernity—that of agonistics, additionally erasing or muddling the power asymmetries involved. Through an essentially colonial prop of comparative studies, it hides the godtrick positionality, and turns the drama of enforced and homogenising coloniality into a false narrative of many coexisting and competing powers. What is more is that this text lumps together the hastily invented colonial studies with the appropriated postcolonial ones, thus erasing even a small critical element in the postcolonial paradigm that has been linked with the geopolitics and corpo-politics of the postcolonial researchers themselves. This ultimately limits the postcolonial once again via its narrow temporal understanding. In other words, this approach reinstates epistemic coloniality with its characteristic subject/object division and fails to problematise the involved (predominantly white and privileged) researchers as producers of knowledge and their position within modernity/coloniality. Such an approach lacks a pluritopical (Mignolo 1995) or multispatial (Tlostanova 2017) hermeneutics that could help us understand something which does not belong to our horizon through a dialogic and experiential (not merely interpretative) learning from the other. In such a multispatial model, the understanding subject is placed in a colonial periphery or imperial semi-periphery, in a non-European tradition, or other marginalised space, disturbing the habitual Western vantage point and questioning the position and homogeneity of the understanding subject. Refusing to make a preference for either cultural relativism or multiculturalism, multispatial hermeneutics accentuates the politics of the embodiment and the construction of space for formulating and expressing one's active positionality. Although the understanding subject should presume the truth of what he, she, or they claim to understand, this subject should also admit the existence of alternative politics of space with equal claims to truth. Multispatial hermeneutics is grounded in relativism in the understanding of cultural and epistemic differences, yet this relativism is always written into

the complex matrix of intersectional power asymmetries which means that it is always aware of the geopolitics and corpo-politics of being, thinking, and sensing, that it takes into account the so-called positionality as a specific genealogy of subject formation and its political and ethical stance. The latter, however, may evolve into a problem and also shows genealogical links with poststructuralism as convincingly argued by Lewis Gordon:

> Poststructuralism functions within decoloniality as a colonial element or form of coloniality … For decoloniality this problem becomes acute where theory is undertheorized. Where this is so the result is often an appeal to theorists with the addition of a *position* or an issue. That position, often formulated as positionality—is often a moral one offered as a political intervention.
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> (Gordon 2021, 15)

But even if Gordon is right in pointing to the hidden pitfalls of decolonial sliding into moralism instead of politics, multispatial hermeneutics is still relevant as it rebels against the totalitarianism of the monotopical model and intends to let the others speak, reason, argue, and create as equals to the same, and from their own body and experience, thus subsuming the imperial reason that taxonomised them as others. This approach is alien to most postcolonial studies researchers and centres in the Nordic countries. Under the token inclusion of certain topics, they are largely marked by a blindness towards their own specific colonial trajectories (and especially the imperial difference) and the complexity of the struggles as well as the diversity of indigenous peoples that I will briefly address below.

As we have argued with my co-authors Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Ina Knobblock (2019), in an effort to answer the question of Sweden needing decolonial feminism, one of the recurrent themes discussed by the Nordic researchers in their struggles to define the role and place of the Nordic countries in the larger global imperial-colonial project or "the production of Europe" according to Loftsdottir and Jensen (2016, 1), is the so-called "colonial complicity." This is a term coined earlier by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and appropriated by the Nordic researchers who identify themselves as postcolonial (Ipsen and Fur 2009). Keskinen, Tuori, Irni, and Mulinari (2009) argue that the Nordic countries have been complicit in (post)colonial processes through a specific construction of national imaginaries and racialisation that have been closely tied to the Nordic welfare state models and notions of gender equality. These authors tend to see the persistent structural inequalities and racialised exclusions as a residue from the colonial period that is revamped and reimposed onto different marginalised groups in the Nordic countries, most recently onto migrants and refugees. Their interventions arguably have started to destabilise the previous homogenous image of Nordic—and particularly Swedish—colonial exceptionalism (Molina 2004; Mulinari and Neergard 2017). Yet, as we argued, the postcolonial rhetoric is interpreted by the Nordic scholars in specific ways, often far from the initial

interventions coming from the postcolonial subjects in the Global South, while the positionality of the Nordic postcolonialists themselves within the coloniality of knowledge is rarely taken into account or critically accessed. What is even more disturbing is the persistent conflation of postcolonial studies and decolonial thinking and/as agency which goes hand in hand with the chronic invisibilising of the discussions and contributions brought into the Nordic countries by decolonial scholars from elsewhere.

One recurrent issue with many Nordic interpretations of the imperial and colonial problematic is a lack of clear delineation between colonialism and coloniality—the core issue in trying to differentiate postcolonial studies from decolonial option. Even in their most critical versions, postcolonial studies remain within the established disciplinary mode in which a study presupposes a firm subject/object division. A successful and quick institutionalisation of postcolonial studies has required a sacrifice of choosing the side of the studying subject, not the studied object. The institutional disciplinary frame coded by the word "studies" does not presuppose, by definition, putting theory and life-world on the same axis and practising decolonisation in our everyday writing, thinking, and activism. This does not mean that postcolonial theorists neglect the corpo-politics and the geopolitics of knowledge, being, and perception, or that they do not take radically decolonising positions as activists-cum-theorists, it just means that their discipline does not require this kind of move on their part and it becomes a matter of a personal decolonial choice. As a result, what we mostly find in the case of Nordic scholars who call themselves postcolonial and recently have started to pick up some decolonial terms (Martinsson and Mulinari 2018), is that they strive to analyse coloniality through a postcolonial lens. They often fail to differentiate between coloniality as the darker side of modernity and an ongoing trace of epistemic biases and descriptive attributes of particular colonialisms. Applying decoloniality not as a mere replacement of colonialism but a totally different and independent concept would require a much more radical delinking and self-critique on their part, as well as venturing into the epistemic areas that postcolonial studies have never questioned before. As a result, the researchers are taken outside of their own argument, and remain unaware of their own (often complicit) positionality, thus reinstating the Euromodern pattern of representation and inclusion of the other and its interpretation in the language of the same, rather than a decolonial delinking from this logic.

Therefore, the belated Nordic toying with the decolonial is so far unconvincing as it misses the main point of decolonial critique which rejects representational models of telling *about* the other rather than thinking and acting *together* with other others. Hence comes the Nordic confusion of the postcolonial and the decolonial and a lack of focus on the crucial issues of situatedness and problematisation of representationalism. Additionally, not many Nordic postcolonial works testify to an awareness of the specific contextuality and historical locality of the postcolonial theory and its main concepts. In other words, it is not enough—and is at times misleading—to just

borrow certain postcolonial or decolonial terms and apply them to the Nordic local histories. The Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial mainstream is characterised by its specific, locally bound (though disguised as universal) frame, context, and conditions. It is marked by with such specific features as the overseas colonies, the clearly racially marked colonial and postcolonial others and today their contemporary descendants such as Afropeans, Middle Eastern, or Somalian refugees, but almost never (until recently) the local indigenous people. Importantly, the specific colonial trajectories and grounds of racial formations and divisions in the Nordic region itself, and the internal regional factors crucial for the shaping of human taxonomies and ideas of racial and national superiority and exceptionality, have hardly been part of the Nordic postcolonial discussions until recently, as if Sweden or other Nordic countries have not existed before the emergence of their celebrated national welfare state models and all the conflicting previous histories were erased and forgotten.

Primarily this refers to the struggles of indigenous people and, first of all, the Sami, and the erased histories of the Nordic settler and internal colonialism. Thus, the numerous historical studies of Swedish and Danish colonial expansion, the *Dominium Maris Balticith* and the "Stormaktstiden" (Naum, Nordin 2013), seem to exist exclusively within descriptive factual historiography, and separately from any decolonial interventions and conceptualisations that operate with completely different notions and assumptions and therefore come to different conclusions. As Pernille Ipsen and Gunlög Fur accurately pointed out in their introduction to the special issue of *Itinerario* devoted to Scandinavian colonialism (2009),

> in general, historical writing has paid little attention to modern postcolonial dilemmas or theory. In fact, we suggest that popular historical discourses in Scandinavia have moved directly from no colonialism to post-colonialism without stopping at a thorough investigation of Scandinavian participation in and gains from colonial expansion and exchanges from the early modern period until the present.
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> (Ipsen and Fur 2009, 10)

To bridge this still prominent gap seems to be an important task for decolonial Nordic thought which is itself yet to be born. One of the most important elements of this specifically Nordic imperial-colonial configuration and trajectory is the unique model of its imperial difference that I will briefly trace below.

The imperial difference … Nordic style

Imperial difference and inter-imperiality (Boatcă 2012; Doyle 2013; Tlostanova 2003, 2018) as a complex and heterogeneous imperial hierarchy in modernity, have not received sufficient attention even within decolonial thinking itself, as decoloniality has mostly focused on the colonial difference

as a site of knowledge production and decolonial intervention. When we shift from the first-class modern capitalist empires, such as Great Britain or France, to make sense of the second-rate imperial entities that failed to win and carve a better position for themselves in the world system yet had to compete and struggle to keep their position in the global imperial hierarchy, we have a variety of resulting models. One is exemplified by Spain, Portugal, and Italy who, having lost to their more powerful rivals, became the so-called South of Europe—largely an internal European inferior, if not a colonial space (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012, 10–11). The Russian empire, Soviet Union, and the present Russian Federation represent a case of the external imperial difference rooted in a non-European religious, linguistic, economic, and ethnic-racial model, that in the post-Enlightenment modernity was destined for the outsider peripheral roles of the subaltern or a Janus-faced empire (Tlostanova 2003, 2008, 2015a).

The second-class modern empires mostly compete among themselves, rarely attempting to break through to get to the first imperial league (as the USSR tried and failed to do). This background of imperial drama, with its many characters that combined the imperial aspirations with inferiority complexes, dispersed, blurred, and indirect relations to the normative colonialist tools such as trade and missionary activism, further complicates modernity/coloniality, including its inter-imperial relations, and destabilises the habitual assumptions that are to be found in postcolonial and decolonial investigations such as a homogenised West, a no less homogenised or generalised idea of the other, conventional definitions of the imperial power, and subaltern resistance. In my view, it is through this frame of the imperial difference that the imperial-colonial history of the Nordic region could be complicated and revisited.

Sweden seems to be an interesting example of the internal imperial difference. Like the South of Europe, the North of Europe shares the main cultural, religious, ethnic, economic, and linguistic affinity with the European core, and therefore its imperial difference is always incomplete and partial. Agreeing with the shared Western beliefs, the official Swedish position, as several Nordic researchers of colonial histories accurately point out (Bryden, Forsgren, Fur 2017; Fur 2013), indeed stubbornly refuses to regard Swedish history as imperial. However, it is not enough to just mention the Swedish complicity or tacit agreement with the crimes of the first imperial league. It is also important to reflect on the larger picture of the global coloniality and the marginal—yet clearly imperial and superior—roles Scandinavian countries have played in this complex phenomenon as the above-mentioned special issue of *Itinerario* attempted to do as early as 2009.

Here are just some of the important elements in the specific Swedish trajectory of imperial difference that contemporary Sweden often chooses to forget in its rewriting of national history and self-image in a more attractive and positive way: the shrinking and early abandonment of the original overseas imperial appetites; their transformation into more hidden and complicit forms of trading in slaves and colonial goods; the shift to the ill-fated

Dominium Maris Balticith project marked, among other things, by the rarely addressed histories of the Swedish "benevolent colonialism" in Estonia (Tarkiainen and Tarkiainen 2013); its expansion in and annexation of Finland; the long-going rivalry for the Baltic territories with the future parts of the Czarist Empire and mainly the Novgorod Republic, that had not only an obvious mercantile but also a religious element (several Swedish crusades, Christiansen 1997) of converting the Orthodox Christian and pagan populations of the Baltic North-East into Catholicism; the massive dispossession of the Sami people of their land in the interests of settler nation-building and, later, industrialisation; and still rarely addressed histories of ethnic minorities and racialised European indigenous groups that happened to be caught in between the Swedish and Russian imperial rivalries and almost vanished as a result of their forced assimilating—and, at times, annihilating and relocating—tactics in both empires (Kurs 1994; Strogalschikova 2014), as well as the never-ending indigenous resistance and re-existence (Albán Achinte 2009). These groups include not only the better-known Sami and Ingermanland Finns, but also the forgotten and erased Vodians, Izhorians, Karelians, Vepsians, and many others. What is important to explore in the future is the actual ways and forms of the Swedish—and broader Nordic—compensation and re-channelling of the early suspended expansionist projects and internal European settler colonial schemes, that take place, once again, most easily in the epistemic and symbolic realms. This would not be applying decolonial thinking to the Nordic region but rather reflecting on how modernity/coloniality takes specific local shapes in the case of Scandinavian countries which, no doubt, will enrich decolonial thought and make it more nuanced and complex.

Taking decoloniality further, or let us make that other world possible

The examples addressed above are only one possible way to framing a decolonial lens in the analysis of Nordic history and contemporaneity which also potentially enriches decoloniality and prevents it from becoming a bronze monument to itself. Moreover, it is not only a historical reconsideration that is important for keeping decoloniality alive and vibrant, but also a more pronounced shift towards contemporary challenges that clearly go beyond the original decolonial focus on the intersection of race and capitalism, and incorporating more intensively the present challenges of climate change, increased chronophobia, defuturing, the changing human ontology (due to technological colonisation among other factors that leads to specific forms of rebranded racism and discrimination) and global unsettlement in which the geopolitical and colonial elements are accompanied by other overarching factors. In our urge to reclaim the rights for the past, for erased memories, in our struggle with the limitations of the presentist, lateral thinking, that "insists on immanence against history's melancholia" (Broeck 2018, 179), decolonialists seem to have overdone it and shut ourselves out of any discussions of the present and the future, in fact, leaving them to the very people

that are marked by presentism and immanence (Vázquéz 2017), a lack of political imagination, and a reliance on technocratic illusions of the privileged. The fixation on the (resurrection and reclaiming of the) past often prevents decoloniality from imagining the future and from detecting the tectonic shifts the world is rapidly going through. Therefore, not forgetting about the past decolonial community should also turn more actively to the present and to the ways of imagining a decolonial future. Engaging with the present and the future decolonial thinking could also start bridging the gap between academic decolonialism and decolonial agency and bottom-up activism. Today's situation urges decoloniality to move in the direction of relational agency unlimited to colonial difference alone avoiding both the extreme of imagined indigeneity and a confinement to the ivory academic tower.

This balancing should be constantly aware of the pitfalls of excessive stand-pointism (usually that of colonial difference) which may divide humanity in a potentially essentialist way. It is particularly misleading in the present context of the global and complex crisis as it closes the possibility for communal refuturing agency that is necessary for our survival as a species and of other species on Earth. Such an agency should be grounded in the principle of deep coalitions defined by Maria Lugones as follows: "Deep coalitions never reduce multiplicity, they span across differences. Aware of particular configurations of oppression, they are not fixed on them, but strive beyond into the world, towards a shared struggle of interrelated others" (Lugones 2003, 98). Such horizontal coalitions require maintaining complexity and heterogeneity rather than taking them to homogenous sameness on both universalised global and/or particularised local grounds.

At the moment, voices challenging the existing framework are many, but they are still compartmentalised and isolated from each other and fight their losing battles one on one with the Euromodern knowledge production system. What is needed is that various others discarded from modernity start to nurture a genuine interest in each other's ways of thinking and being, a drive to engage with each other's ideas bypassing the Euromodern endorsement. The sad incapacity to connect transversally is a sign of the successful modern/imperial divide and rule politics, generating inferiority complexes that are reproduced generation after generation within the catching-up logic. It is time we disassembled this frame onto which knowledge, or what is considered as such, is being planted rather than merely adding new information to the old carcase. The question is if decolonial infiltrations from within the exhausted modernity are enough, or is something more radical and strategic is needed? What is obvious is that decolonial thinkers should become more active in launching the change communities of redirective action (Escobar 2017) and refuturing (Fry and Tlostanova 2020) that would incorporate different actors from the Global North and South, and from the semi-peripheral spaces—scholars, designers, activists, members of the local communities, and artists, who would work together to make the possible other world come true.

Notes

1 Recent appropriators of decoloniality have even started to nonsensically call it decolonial theory although decolonial thinkers and activists have long been saying that theory is yet another modern/colonial concept from which it is necessary to delink. For a summary of these discussion see Walsh and Mignolo, 2018.
2 Examples abound not only in Latin America and especially among the Latin American and Latinx scholars in the US, but also in Russia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, see e.g. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui`s critique of academic decolonialism and its appropriation of her ideas (Cusicanqui 2012); the original and powerful re-existent decolonial artistic and/as activist agency in Kazakhstan as opposed to derivative, bleak and belated academic concoctions of postcolonial, orientalist and some decolonial ideas by academic circles in the post-Soviet space (Suleimenova 2019; Tlostanova 2020).
3 Here the *Decoloniality Europe* initiative is particularly worth mentioning as a positive example, as well as several conferences organised by the proponents of decolonial thinking in Europe.

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