

Decolonial Aesthetics in Theater and Performance

Theatrical Strategies of De-linking

Workshop with Walter Mignolo and Rustom Bharucha

Where: International Research Center “Interweaving Performance Cultures” | Freie Universität Berlin | Grunewaldstr. 34 | 12165 Berlin-Steglitz | info@theaterkulturen.de

When: June 11–12, 2019

‘Within different genealogies of re-existence ‘artists’ have been questioning the role and the name that have been assigned to them. They are aware of the confinement that Euro-centered concepts of arts and aesthetics have imposed on them. They have engaged in transnational identities-*in*-politics, revamping identities that have been discredited in modern systems of classification and their invention of racial, sexual, national, linguistic, religious and economic hierarchies. They have removed the veil from the hidden histories of colonialism and have rearticulated these narratives in some spaces of modernity such as the white cube and its affiliated branches. They are dwelling in the borders, sensing in the borders, doing in the borders, they have been the propellers of decolonial transmodern thinking and aesthetics. Decolonial transmodernities and aesthetics have been delinking from all talks and beliefs of universalism, new or old, and in doing so have been promoting a pluriversalism that rejects all claims to a truth without quotation marks. In this regard, decolonial transmodernity has endorsed identities-*in*-politics and challenged identity politics and the self-proclaimed universality of altermodernity. Creative practitioners, activist and thinkers continue to nourish the global flow of decoloniality towards a transmodern and pluriversal world. They confront and traverse the divide of the colonial and imperial difference invented and controlled by modernity, dismantling it, and working towards ‘living in harmony and in plenitude’ in a variety of languages and decolonial histories. The worlds emerging with decolonial and transmodern political societies have art and aesthetics as a fundamental source.”

--- Walter Mignolo et al. (= Working Group: Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality):
“Decolonial Aesthetics (I)”, 2011.¹

The workshop DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS IN THEATER AND PERFORMANCE. THEATRICAL STRATEGIES OF DE-LINKING—organized by the International Research Center ‘Interweaving Performance Cultures’ at Freie Universität Berlin—aims to examine the notion of ‘decolonial aesthetics,’ coined and developed by Walter Mignolo and others, in relation to theater and performance in general and in particular to processes of interweaving between performance cultures. For two days, the notion of ‘decolonial aesthetics’ will be examined critically from three specific research perspectives:

- 1) with a focus on specific examples, i.e., case studies from the field of theater/performance,
- 2) in relation to processes of interweaving between performance cultures,
- 3) in relation to knowledge and epistemologies of theater and performance.

¹ Source: <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/> (last visit: 4/8/19).

Day 1 | June 11, 2019 | Case Studies

The workshop will start with an exploration of individual case studies, specifically from the field of theater and performance. This deliberate methodological choice was made because we assume that ‘decolonial aesthetics,’ especially in the performing arts, are necessarily always specific in terms of time and place: In the highly dynamic and differentiated field of performing arts, it seems impossible to imagine one timeless ‘decolonial aesthetic’ being presented by various artists around the globe unanimously. Instead, we have to assume that there existed and that there still exists an enormous plurality of decolonial theatrical/performative aesthetics, each one inevitably bearing the marks of its specific time and (cultural) location. If this is indeed the case, then what connections exist within this abundant diversity of theatrical/performative aesthetics that could justify the application of the umbrella term ‘decolonial aesthetics,’ as put forth by Walter Mignolo, Alban Achinte and Pedro Pablo Gomez (Colombia), Alanna Lockward (Dominican Rep./Germany), Rolando Vazquez (Mexico/Netherlands)? What separates *and* connects ‘decolonial transmodern aesthetics and thinking’ around the globe today and in the past—specifically in the field of theater and performance?

Asking these questions, we also keep in mind Mignolo’s argument “that there cannot be ‘aesthetics’ without adjective.” Because ‘aesthetics’ without adjective, Mignolo explicates, “are particular modern or postmodern aesthetics passing for universal (i.e., Kant, Hegel, Rancière). Hence, ‘decolonial aesthetics’ begin by delinking from the universalization of particular modern/postmodern aesthetics, reminding us that ‘aesthetics’ is a philosophical concept, while theater and performance belong to the sphere of ‘art’ (skill, making, poiesis). Delinking implies a constant double operation: questioning the very foundation of the term ‘aesthetics’ and questioning the very foundations of the concept of ‘art’ (i.e., theater, performance). Decolonial thinking—and decolonial aesthetics is one venue of decolonial thinking—always starts with not taking anything for granted and not asking what things are (what is aesthetics, what is theater, what is performance, what is art?) but asking how these categories came to be, who introduced them (actors, institutions), with what purposes, what the need was, what ‘frame’ the concepts create in the constant flows of life.”

With these arguments in mind, the workshop will specifically ask:

- What could be seen as historical and contemporary examples of ‘decolonial aesthetics’ in theater and performance? What qualifies these examples as cases of ‘decolonial aesthetics’? Can and should we differentiate between ‘decolonial aesthetics,’ depending on time, location, and aesthetic strategies?
- When and how have ‘decolonial aesthetics’ emerged in theater and performance? What and who has contributed to their development?
- What characterizes ‘decolonial’ doing and thinking, specifically in the context of theater and performance? Who is experiencing this ‘decolonial’ dwelling, sensing, doing, and thinking—performers, audiences, critics, scholars?

Another central research question to be explored on the first day is the relation between the presumably existing diversity of theatrical/performative decolonial aesthetics on the one hand and historical and contemporary processes of interweaving between performance cultures on the other. With regard to this particular relation, our two central research questions are:

- Have processes of interweaving between performance cultures ever worked as propellers of decolonial thinking and aesthetics? If so, when and how?
- When and how can practices of interweaving between performance cultures generate decolonial experiences and knowledge? And, again, by whom specifically—performers, audiences, critics, scholars?

Day 2 | June 12, 2019 | *Knowledge & Epistemologies of Theater and Performance*

On the second day, the workshop will focus on the relation between ‘decolonial aesthetics’ and theater/performance as “fundamental source(s)” of different types and forms of knowledge for both artists and audiences. As the citation given above demonstrates, Mignolo et al. repeatedly stress the close relation between “decolonial aesthetics” and “decolonial transmodern thinking,” which raises the research question if theatrical/performative aesthetics can indeed generate ‘decolonial’ knowledge and epistemologies. And if so, how and for whom?

Walter Mignolo and Rustom Bharucha, former Fellow at the International Research Center “Interweaving Performance Cultures” (2010-2012), will open the debate by impulse talks, both addressing the relation between ‘decolonial aesthetics’ and knowledge in relation to theater/performance. After a moderated discussion between the two scholars, the panel will be open for all workshop participants. Our central research questions are:

- How are epistemic orientations articulated, (critically) reflected, and maybe even radically challenged in/by theater and performance?
- How can theater/performance generate alternative epistemologies and facilitate ‘border thinking’?
- How can the existing diversity of epistemologies of theater and performance be acknowledged and even reinforced by academia, i.e., by international theater and performance studies?
- How can ‘epistemic interweaving’ be developed as a methodology to investigate and to theorize ‘decolonial aesthetics’?

Detailed Program

Tuesday | June 11, 2019

10.00 Welcome

Artist Perspectives

10.15 **Monika Gintersdorfer**
Co-Director of the "Gintersdorfer/Klassen" Performance Group

10.35 **Nebou N'Diaye & Katalina Götz**
Actors at Hajasom e. V. - Center for Transnational Arts, Hamburg

10.55 **Tanja Ostojić**
Performance Artist, Berlin & Belgrade

11.15 **Discussion**

12.00 Lunch Break

Dramaturgical Perspectives

13.00 **Rebecca Ajnwojner**
Dramaturge at Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin

13.20 **Fabian Larsson & Julien Enzanza**
Dramaturges at Ballhaus Naunynstraße, Berlin

13.40 **Julian Warner**
Cultural Anthropologist, Dramaturge & Artistic Director, Munich & Berlin

14.00 **Discussion**

14.45 Coffee/Tea Break

Curatorial Perspectives

15.00 **Virve Sutinen**
Artistic Director of "Tanz im August," Berlin

15.20 **Martine Dennewald**
Artistic Director of "Festival Theaterformen," Hannover

15.40 **Alya Sebti (tbc)**
Director of ifa-Galerie Berlin

16.00 **Discussion**

16.45 End

Wednesday | June 12, 2019

10.00 Welcome

Knowledge & Epistemologies of Theater and Performance

10.15 **Rustom Bharucha**

Author, Professor for Theater and Performance Studies, School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi (2012-2018)

11.00 **Walter Mignolo**

Professor and Director of the Center for Global Studies and the Humanities, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina

11.45 Coffee/Tea Break

12.00 **Discussion**

13.00 End