

# UC Irvine

## UC Irvine Previously Published Works

### Title

More Colonial and Postcolonial Discourses

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9183635r>

### Journal

Latin American Research Review, 28(3)

### ISSN

0023-8791

### Author

Seed, Patricia

### Publication Date

1993

### DOI

10.1017/s0023879100017003

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# MORE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSES

*Patricia Seed*  
*Rice University*

The three responses to “Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse” raise significant questions for studying such discourse but with significant similarities and differences. Hernán Vidal and Walter Mignolo embark on commentaries that endeavor in part to define a new position of engagement for intellectuals, while Rolena Adorno retains traditional academic distance. Yet all three responses provide colonial and postcolonial discourse with a historic trajectory. Showing that a trend has roots in the past, even if accounts of those roots differ, is a grudging way of acknowledging its legitimacy in the present. Although such a process is an interesting phenomenon of academic life, in this instance it leaves me, a historian by training, in the unusual position of arguing for the tangible difference between the contemporary world and our understandings of it. Perhaps that in itself is symptomatic of how the current trend toward interdisciplinary inquiry differs from those of the past. Our traditional disciplinary practices are much more at risk in the present.

Hernán Vidal’s observations about the construction of the public sphere in the contemporary postcolonial world are particularly acute: “[S]tudying the institutional organization and production of workshops on poetry, theatre, handicrafts, body language, and religious and feminist consciousness-raising [is] associated with creating this public sphere for the marginal.” The concern with the public sphere and its redefinition is perhaps the single most significant dimension of the study of postcolonial discourse. In many areas of Latin America, no dialogue occurs between official and popular cultures and there is no voice for the marginalized. Hence Vidal’s definition of the need to articulate the voices of the marginalized introduces a significant role for intellectuals and scholars to call attention to or provide forums for voices traditionally excluded from the public sphere.

Vidal’s focus on the traditionally marginalized has the potential to transform the definition of the public sphere in Latin America. What I would like to stress are some of the complexities of that task in the contemporary era. First is the struggle for definition within marginalized groups themselves—the tensions within a group over the process of constructing

social, aesthetic, and political identity.<sup>1</sup> The second equally complex problem is the local group's engagement with the transnational culture.<sup>2</sup> Although some elements of that transnational culture have been identified by dependency theory—the cultural hegemony of Coca-Cola, blue jeans, and the rest—the present situation is more complicated. For example, the enormous popularity of *telenovelas* produced by Mexico's Televisa in the former Soviet Union, China, and Eastern Europe raises intriguing questions about how an immensely popular Latin American cultural form is transforming public cultural spheres in Eastern European countries. It also raises questions about whether any specific Eastern European or Chinese concerns will be transported back to Latin America. In the field of music, reggae, a form deriving from Afro-Caribbean music, became popular in Europe and North America but is now being appropriated and reinvented in Hawaii, aboriginal Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> This outcome is not an example of resistance and accommodation according to dependency theory but a more complicated story of cultural interactions between the local and the global, the regional and the transnational, one in which certain elements of Latin American culture may themselves come to play a hegemonic role and in which the vectors of power are not predefined by the simple dichotomy between what were recently called First and Third Worlds. Cultural production as well as political power are more diffused in the contemporary era, and Vidal points us in the direction of one of the significant contemporary sites for examining local cultural production and articulating the points of view of its producers.

Another site for studying cultural production is introduced by Walter Mignolo. Like Vidal, Mignolo also wants to see a more dynamic relationship between intellectuals and the field of literary studies. His concern with the "locus of enunciation" raises one of the most important methodological considerations in the study of colonial and postcolonial discourse. As he notes, criticism of colonial discourse from the center of the empire differs from that articulated at the "core of resistance to the empire." In Mignolo's "locus of enunciation," academic identity becomes

1. Interesting accounts of these struggles from within contemporary South American aboriginal communities are Alcida Ramos, "The Hyperreal Indian," forthcoming in *Critique of Anthropology*; Claudia Briones, "Disputas y consentimientos en la identidad étnica de los Mapuche argentinos," manuscript, 1990; and Briones, "The Race for Authenticity, a Contest without Winners," manuscript, 1991. Another example of such tensions is the ongoing Cuban-Chicano conflict over the "Hispanic" identity within the United States.

2. The term *transnational* dislodges the term *international*, the formal definition of political power as moving between state apparatuses, by recognizing other less official vectors of power. Similarly, *transnational culture* supplants the conventional one-on-one approach (moving from one group to another) to studying cultural influence in favor of a more fluid conception of cultural flows across national boundaries.

3. Steven Feld, "From Schizophrenia to Schismogenesis," in *Art and Anthropology*, edited by George E. Marcus and Fred Myers (forthcoming).

one of several positions from which to speak or write: "The question of whether the colonized can be represented may no longer be an issue, and it could be reframed in terms of dialogues from different loci of enunciation rather than as an academic monologue performed in the act of 'studying' colonial discourse and not 'listening' to politically engaged persons (whether inside or outside academia), writers from colonial, postcolonial, or Third World countries producing alternative discourse." His combined critique of the purely "written" sphere and the purely academic locus of enunciation argues for a more engaged role for intellectuals in studying cultural production.

Mignolo's point addresses the methodological issues facing a great many disciplinary projects in history, anthropology, and political and literary theory. Multiplying the loci of enunciation—from inside a group as well as within the transnational sphere—is indeed the major unresolved methodological issue facing the field of colonial and postcolonial discourse.<sup>4</sup>

In his comments, Mignolo diverges slightly from Vidal in his focus on the writing of a particularly interesting group of diasporic postcolonial intellectual figures: Edward Bratwhaite, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Gloria Anzaldúa, who like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said occupy fascinating boundary "loci of enunciation" and have been the leading figures in articulating a postcolonial discourse. Mignolo focuses on the individual writer, the singular postcolonial intellectual, framed in terms of an intellectual intersection of cultural experiences—the Caribbean and classical literature—while Vidal is interested in the sociocultural context of a collective social production. Both approaches are important, but each comes at the topic from a different angle. Mignolo's begins with the transnational space of cultural production and then reaches back to the local. Vidal's begins with the local creation of such productions and their intersections with national and transnational spheres.

To perhaps extend Vidal's socially oriented perspective on the local public sphere to Mignolo's observations on postcolonial intellectuals, we might consider how other media such as transnational or exile cinema and computer e-mail and bulletin boards foster transnational cultural and political identities for postcolonial intellectuals. Although neither e-mail nor bulletin boards are regarded by their producers as "writing" in the traditional sense, both employ an alphabetic script. Rather, their producers tend to perceive them as hybrid forms falling somewhere between writing and oral communication. Cinema and video, another set of contemporary

4. Two excellent recent treatments are James Clifford, "Borders and Diasporas in Late-Twentieth-Century Culture," lecture presented at the East-West Center, Honolulu, 18 Sept. 1992; and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

visual technologies, also play a significant nonwriting role in cultural production—both in its creation and its appropriation. In this respect, Mig-nolo is right in arguing that colonial and postcolonial discourse do not constitute an object of study in the traditional sense but a field of discourse broadly conceived, a field of speakers and writers, of quipu- and quillca-makers and interpreters, and also a field of filmmakers and viewers, keyboard tappers, and marginalized peoples, centralized ones, and those in between.

To respond to Adorno's academic query about resistance and accommodation, an abbreviated account of their emergence and waning is necessary. Such interpretations emerged between the 1960s and 1980s in Southeast Asian and African fields<sup>5</sup> as well as in Latin America with the discrediting of previous celebratory colonial and metropolitan histories that had endlessly attributed to imperial powers all the "advances" they desired to take credit for—whether in engineering (roads, dams, bridges), politics ("democracy"), or economics (gross domestic product and gross export figures). In a sense, these earlier celebratory stories were manifestations of the extent to which metropolitan and imperial organizations had controlled the production of knowledge about the colonial or dependent world. Thus narratives of "resistance" and "accommodation" represented efforts to challenge the idea of crediting colonial or metropolitan authorities with all the benefits by introducing the notion of contestation and indigenous agency. Such tales of "adaptation and response," relying on notions of oppositional identity as untouched, authentic, and unproblematically created, coincided well with the narratives that were being produced by the leaders of emergent postcolonial states as well as by those opposing the largely economic domination and occasional direct political domination of the United States in Central and South America. Often producing a political redemptive narrative based on liberation from an evil oppressor, such tales found congenial readerships not simply in Latin America but throughout current and former colonial worlds.<sup>6</sup>

Explaining the waning of such narratives would require a complex account, but to try to summarize the reasons for this change, what narratives of resistance and accommodation cannot do is explain the world as it is today. Nor can they explain how we arrived at our contemporary

5. A useful history of narratives of resistance and accommodation in Southeast Asian history is Robert Van Nief, "Colonialism Revisited: Recent Historiography," *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (1990):109–24 (published in Honolulu). See also Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 217, 228–30, 272–74, 311–17.

6. James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) was a compendium of strategies of the Anglo-American school of domination and resistance. It has been revised and updated in his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990). An excellent English-language introduction to Latin American intellectuals' rejection of the narratives of resistance and accommodation can be found in William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1991).

state. Communism has collapsed, and along with it the powerful political force undergirding the major moral critique of capitalism. But the story of the collapse of communism cannot be explained by the heroic efforts of a few “resisters.” Although Anglo-American journalists have tended to mythologize “resisters” according to the conventional hero-worshipping framework, a sense of unease lingers about the way in which these tales cannot explain why communism failed and why its power to engender moral critique has simultaneously been exhausted.

The other reason for the waning influence of narratives of resistance and accommodation stems from their inadequacy for studying or engaging with contemporary forms of cultural production. Cultural forms like the film productions of the Kayapo (an indigenous Amazonian people)<sup>7</sup> or Puerto Rican and Dominican theatre in New York can be neither explained nor understood by such categories. Resistance and accommodation gave us good guys and bad guys, black hats and white ones, but it cannot account for the popularity of telenovelas in not only Argentina and Colombia but Russia, China, and Poland. The variety of forms and even the changing media of cultural production as well as political vectors in the contemporary era all suggest a more complex postcolonial and post-imperial world. If a particular approach does not adequately engage with the present, it cannot create a ground for a satisfactory history because the ground of the past is always the present.

In my own current work, I have been engaged in writing a comparative history of early colonialism in the Americas—French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, and English.<sup>8</sup> Hispanic colonialism indeed exhibits distinctive features, but so do Portuguese, French, Dutch, Swedish, and English forms of colonialism. All of them have created through different languages and varying discursive practices the object of empire. All define and rule the conquered territories and peoples variously. But differences among European forms of colonialism—the problematization of the identity “European”—does not dislodge the fundamental insight that all of these actions reduced or eliminated the political, religious, and economic freedoms of indigenous people and often exterminated them in the name of advancing a form of “civilization.” I have found in the critical provocations of colonial and postcolonial discourse a useful way of critiquing the inevitable efforts at national self-congratulation with which every

7. Terry Turner, “Representing, Resisting, Rethinking: Historical Transformations of Kayapo Culture and Anthropological Consciousness,” in *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, edited by George Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 285–313; see also Rachel Moore, “Marketing Alterity,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8 (1992): 16–26.

8. My introductory chapter to this project, “Taking Possession and Reading Texts: Establishing the Authority of Overseas Empire,” appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (Apr. 1992): 183–209. It is reprinted in *Early Images of the Americas*, edited by Jerry M. Williams and Robert E. Lewis (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), 111–47.

European power seems to have rationalized its particular variant of colonialism as superior to those of its competitors. To perceive in such self-flattery the agenda of an inter-European competition for moral ascendance as well as political power is, I think, to develop a powerful critique of all forms of exceptionalism.

Although poststructuralism is founded methodologically on the opacity of language, its other central challenge has been unitary structures of identity, the “sovereign subject as hero.” In addition to the areas of literary and cultural production mentioned in the comments, this challenge has resonated in a distinctly political arena. In the effort to avoid a resurgence of not merely violence but the preconditions of violence and repression, some political theorists in Chile, Argentina, and Colombia have recently turned to poststructuralism’s problematizing of identity as a means of critiquing the coercive character of right-wing and military political rhetorics that insist on a single unified political identity. In this sense, poststructuralism’s attack on the hero—the unified subject—resonates with contemporary struggles to undermine political ideologies of both the left and the right that historically have sought to justify violence and the coercive repression of dissonant (different) political voices. A number of Latin American political thinkers are finding in postmodern rhetoric a means of legitimating inclusion of a broader range of interests and positions than formerly have been allowed to participate in debates and discussions in the public political sphere.<sup>9</sup> Although such efforts to redefine the public sphere may ultimately involve the widening of a somewhat narrow base of politically relevant actors rather than more comprehensive efforts at establishing dialogue with marginalized peoples, this appropriation of poststructuralist ideas does signal the relevance of contemporary intellectual issues for developing critical political strategies in contemporary postcolonial Latin America.

In attempting to create a historic trajectory for colonial and postcolonial discourse, we are trying to familiarize the new, to connect the emergent with the familiar. But one of the distinctive features of postmodernism is the effort, however imperfectly realized, to develop a critical self-consciousness of the present. Differing from the celebratory visions

9. See Vicente Durán Casas, S.J., “¿De qué ética hablamos? Ética ciudadana como ética del consenso,” and Iván Orozco Abad, “Ética y proceso de paz,” both in *Colombia: una casa para todos* (Bogotá: Ediciones Antropas, 1991), 69–86, 353–74. Also relevant are Norbert Lechner’s excellent “Un desencanto llamado posmoderno” and José Joaquín Brunner’s “Notas sobre cultura y política en América Latina,” presented at CLACSO’s twenty-fifth-anniversary conference, “Identidad Latinoamericana, Premodernidad, Modernidad y Posmodernidad.” Its papers appeared as a special issue of *David & Goliath* (Buenos Aires), no. 52 (1987). See also Fernando Calderón, *Imagen desconocido* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 1989). These essays are being published in English in *The Post-Modern Debate in Latin America*, edited by John Beverley and José Oviedo, a forthcoming special issue of *Boundary*, which is also to be published in book form by Duke University Press.



of the present and the future in liberal and Marxist redemptive narratives, this critical self-consciousness of the present fosters an interest in awareness of ruptures, acknowledging the unfamiliar and the existence of difference as well as similarity between the present and the past. Although this critical self-consciousness is usually applied to loci of authorial identification in political, social, or cultural terms, perhaps its most important contribution is a critical awareness of the position in historic time from which we speak or write. That may be the reason why I have found the notion of the continuing reinvention of the past rather than its recreation a fruitful point of departure.

Colonial and postcolonial discourse are less constituted fields than a series of creative explorations by political thinkers, literary critics, historians, and anthropologists responding to methodological provocations or challenges. Two of these are central: the idea that it is no longer possible to take for granted the ways in which meaning is created and appropriated (the opacity of language) and the questioning of the sovereign (singular) subject of political, cultural, and social authority. Both provocations provide new grounds for legitimating critical practices in the contemporary world and thus open a variety of vistas onto the questions of the creation of identity and difference in political and cultural production past and present.