

Pedagogies of Relationality

By **ROLANDO VÁZQUEZ**

Rolando Vázquez is associate professor at the Utrecht University who works on decolonial thought. For the last twelve years, Vázquez has been running the Decolonial Summer School together with professor Walter Mignolo.(1) He co-authored the 'Let's Do Diversity' report under the direction of Professor Gloria Wekker at the University of Amsterdam.(2) Recently, he published the book *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*. On 26 May, we invited Rolando to join our final session of 2020/2021. Rolando listened to our conversation during the first hour, which was partly structured by characteristics taken from the 'White Supremacy Culture' article, written by Tema Okun in 2001.(3) Below is a shortened and edited version of his response to our conversation during the second hour of the final session.(4)

Let me try to speak a little bit about the 'White Supremacy Culture' article that you have discussed in the past hour and the keywords you chose. I think it is a very rich document, and it has very practical advice. My only discomfort is to put it all under the term 'white supremacy', because

I think this document is speaking about many different types of oppressions, including capitalism, patriarchy, sexism, and individualism.

The critique of 'white supremacy' and the critique of slavery in the US and anti-black racism is coming from the Civil Rights Movement, which is a particular cultural archive with important differences to the cultural archive of the Netherlands and in Abya Yala (Latin America), for example. That is not to advocate an 'either/or' position but rather to say that there is a plurality of paths and that we have to work with contextual thinking. Also, I'm hesitant about the 'antidotes' that the document offers: an antidote means that you are 'within' the illness and resisting it – but we are speaking about *going beyond* the illness and doing something different, not just resisting it.

When I speak as 'we' and 'our', I refer to the decolonial teachers and scholars I have been working with for years, like Arturo Escobar, Catherine Walsh, Jean Casimir, Gloria Wekker, María Lugones, Walter Mignolo, to name the elders among them. Many of us come from Abya Yala. Many of us are educators working on pedagogy and have been in conversa-

tion with critical pedagogues; one notable example is that Catherine Walsh hosted Paulo Freire when he was in exile in the US. We're particularly interested in developing pedagogies of what we have called 'relationality', 'positionality', and 'transition'.

There are important points in this 'White Supremacy Culture' article. 'Either/or' thinking is what is behind what we call dichotomic forms of thinking, where there are only dichotomies and these dichotomies are not organised in a just way but are used to produce hierarchies. Modernity, as the western system of civilisation, is characterised by a dichotomic thinking that introduces hierarchical differences. For example, the dichotomy of gender – male or female – is not just a dichotomy but is a hierarchical difference, where the male will be regarded above the female, similarly to 'human/nature', 'culture/nature', or 'human/earth'. These are all forms of organising knowledge in dichotomies in order to introduce hierarchy and domination.

But the 'antidote', or the way to *de-link* from dichotomic thinking, is relationality. How can we think in terms of relations instead of 'either/or', in dichotomies, or in fixed categories? Obviously, this is very difficult to teach in the classroom. How to move away from the dichotomic mind that produces so much power for teachers, institutions, and students? The western education system itself is based on dichotomic thinking, which creates domination and separation. We are

separated from Earth, from our community, from our inner life, our ancestry, our temporality. Individualism is produced by that separation; we can only become an individual through separation. And that thinking is a result of tremendous violence, from the moment we are a new-born, all the way through education, we are suffering from that separation to the point where a university student doesn't know where their food comes from, doesn't know how to cultivate the Earth, even when their grandparents knew. The words 'land' and 'soil' are words that almost don't exist in the university.

One of the big tasks for a pedagogy of relationality is to first review that separation. I also call it a pedagogy of humbling. How do students begin to learn their condition as individualised, as being forced into an individual, single subject? As María Lugones used to say, it is a difficult thing to go beyond your individualism. It is not a soft experience, but it can be done with care. A caring that *discomforts*, a caring that *shakes this ignorance*. When we speak of supremacy, we speak of ignorance and arrogance. People that don't know anything beyond their individuality, they don't know the Earth or the world of others, but they believe they know. This is a type of arrogance that I think the term 'white supremacy' doesn't fully convey. The whole education system is designed to create dominant subjects. You go to university or art school to become powerful in society. The unlearning is not an easy thing,

it's something you have to endure and go through.

Students who are forced or invited to engage and position themselves undergo big questioning. They suddenly begin to see themselves in a way that they didn't see themselves before. What are we, beyond the subject, the self-identity that is created through education and social media? There are many that we are and that we don't want to know about. The movement of positioning, which we pursue through the pedagogies of positionality, is a way to undo that position of privilege and abstraction.

For example, I always bring my students face to face with what I call the 'ethical question': can we live an ethical life when our well-being and our sense of self is dependent on the destruction of Earth and the suffering of others? When we look very concretely at our clothes, electronics, what we're eating, capacities for travelling, we are directly implicated in the suffering of others. Who is working for us? Who is picking the cotton of my clothes? Who is weaving it? Who is packaging it? We don't want to see all those people that are making our lives possible. One of the big steps in this pedagogy is to recognise that our sense of self and our sense of enjoyment in life is complicit with the suffering of others and the extraction from Earth. We are not innocent individuals that are saving the planet because we say so, we are much more than that but we don't want to recognise that ourselves.

Here in the context of the

Netherlands it is of course very important to speak of whiteness. But whiteness, in the pedagogies we speak about, is a call for positionality. It is not a racialising term but a positioning term. Who are we in relation to others? We are all positioned. We cannot be everywhere. To speak of whiteness is not driven to racialise somebody, and to put them in a condition of inferiority as in a racial discourse or in a degraded moral position. To be located in whiteness is to be in a position in the world that allows for many privileges, and that makes you an implicated subject; implicated, for instance, in the reproduction of colonial difference and the suffering of others. Western academia will preach for the neutral objective third person position, or the singular vantage point of the author – the position of the external observer of the world. When you teach positionality you're telling your students and yourself who you are in the world as a historical subject: you are somewhere on the axis of discrimination, along the axes of race, gender, economic class, abilities and disabilities, religion... Positioned knowledge moves away from the 'either/or', we all have a position and all our knowledges are valid if we have a position: I accept that there are other knowledges than my own. The struggle is not one of competition but for the possibility of plurality, for understanding the knowledge and experience of others. In that way, I become more than myself. That is relationality, which is exiting the position of individuality. And also, exiting

the pretension of total objectivity, which is directly connected to the 'worship of the written word'. When the west colonised parts of the world it came with the text, and the text was considered the truth. People who had no text were deemed as ignorant or inferior.

For relational forms 'the vernacular' becomes very important, not the text, but the vernacular, the oral, the dialogue. The vernacular is always already relational: there is no vernacular language without listening. Whereas the text tends to be mono-directional: there is one position of power that enunciates the world. When considering decolonial pedagogies, we propose to put the emphasis not on the author or the enunciation – on who speaks and the power of speaking or designing the world – but on a different power, a relational power, the power of listening, the power of reception.

What would it mean if art schools could teach to listen and to receive the difference of others? María Lugones and Audre Lorde speak about the importance of not eliminating difference because we are not going for one world or for the universal, we are not seeking to establish dominant differences, the 'either/or'. They say we need to work with 'non-dominant differences', which is fundamental for moving towards plurality and relational forms of understanding. Plurality assumes that there is not just one way, and that's why we speak of (decolonial) *options*. For example, a movement like the Zapatistas

doesn't need decoloniality, and they don't need our vocabulary to do what they do. There are many other alternatives in the world, so when you call something an 'option' you're assuming that you're not bringing the only truth and neither that you claim a single truth. I want to make this clarification, because in the western mind it is very comfortable to say, "Okay, there is not one single truth". But this is not about relativism. It is not about "every truth goes" and the privilege of choosing your truth, which is a type of malfunction of performativity where you can perform whatever identity you choose. That is, often, a form of privilege. When we call for positioned truths, we are not calling for relative truths, we are undoing the master narrative and the dominant universal narrative, we call for positioned ways of knowing.

The first exercises in my classes are very often about positioning who we are as social-historical beings. You didn't choose where you were born, you are from somewhere and descend from some others, and what is that? What can you do with that? It's not a prison but it is a truthful grounding of who you are, and you are working with that because you are working with your body. Your body is the memory of that grounding even though we have forgotten to connect bodies and to listen to our bodies as a source of knowledge.

Going back to the white supremacy document, in the list there's also the word 'progress'. That's an easy one in the way that

the idea of progress has been criticised. We have said that progress is complicit with coloniality, with the suffering of others, and that there is no history of global capitalism without the plantation, without slavery, without extraction from Earth, without the killing of animals, the destruction of ecosystems, so the myth of progress is really a fiction. Whose progress and at what cost?

But there is also the temporal assumption of progress. Progress assumes that the way forward is the future, that we all need to dream of the future and that the future is the way to change things. And while that sounds quite obvious in the western mentality, the critique of the paradigm of progress comes hand in hand with a critique of modern temporality. Looking towards the fiction of the future – towards ‘utopia’ – has been responsible for the destruction of Earth and the killing of others, and the destruction of other worlds. All the power has been hinged on the belief that we as a civilisation will save the world with our futurity, our technological developments, artificial intelligence, and so on.

The philosophies of ‘Indigenous people’, of ‘first nations’, of Afro and Black and Maroon communities, have something in common: for them, the hope for the future is not ‘future’ in the western sense, it’s not based on a utopia, but the hope for the future is based on the ancestor, on remembering. And remembering is to put back, to *member back* what has been dismembered, what has been separated. The

moment we remember Earth, the communal, our tongues, our bodies, then there is hope. There is hope when we do not forget. Hope is oriented towards the search for justice for all those who have suffered for the construction of that ‘progress’. It is a struggle against oblivion. The paradigm of western modernity and civilisation has been one that is obsessed with the futurity of progress while at the same time it effectively produces oblivion. It produces an anaesthetised subject, a subject that doesn’t remember who they are because they don’t remember their connections, community, language. This individual thinks of himself as superior or as powerful, and he is very powerful in his capacity to destroy Earth and the life of others, but it is a very poor human condition. It is somebody who lives in an amnesic condition and has lost his community and relation to Earth; he is just looking for power and for individuality.

For us, that is not a model to pursue. And the pedagogies that we have been discussing (the pedagogy of humbling and of positionality, of relationality, the pedagogy of transition) are oriented to undo that logic. To help remember, to position oneself, to be able to take responsibility, to have a meaningful life and not just a ‘successful’ life. You may have a successful life individually, but you cannot have a meaningful life individually.

We oppose this logic of power hoarding by the individual. Instead of appropriating the worlds of others, like modern art did with the aesthetics of other

peoples of the world, and, for example, appropriating to create the latest abstraction for the avant-garde, we speak about the ‘power of reception’. What would it mean to become more capable of receiving the difference of the other, and letting it transform you? For us, this is the big task; the change from a paradigm that has been focused on enunciation and designing the world, to a paradigm of reception and listening to the radical plurality of the world. This is the task of transition. Can we enable our students and ourselves, through positionality and relationality, to work towards a transition from that very illogical individuality and its destruction of the world into a logic of caring as reception? What do we need in order to be able to receive others and to become broader than the individual, to become multiple?

We speak about the need to decolonise *aesthetics*, to liberate *aesthesis*, because we are thinking about aesthetics as a system of learning and controlling the representation and perception of the world. It’s about how we sense and perceive the world, how it is regulated by the dominant system and the principles of consumption. Aesthetics are also about the way our senses have been governed in order to be produced as individuals: the way we taste, the way we see, the way we dance. All that is produced by the dominant system. For example, our taste and the taste of our children today is produced by corporations and through the sugar plantation. Instead we search to

liberate aesthesis, to open other paradigms, other genealogies, other pluralities of sensing and perceiving the world.

This is also why we opposed using the Bauhaus as the name for the ‘New European Bauhaus’, recently initiated by the European Commission to build ‘sustainable futures’.⁽⁵⁾ Names are not just marketing things, they are like monuments: they include and exclude, and they are also tools of erasure. The Bauhaus really represents a core modernist tradition. By using that name it doesn’t allow, in our view, for the plurality of Europes. Europe cannot be reduced to what the Bauhaus is talking about today.

A second point is that the Bauhaus cannot be separated from the anthropocentrism that has been responsible for the destruction of the planet for the sake of designing, rationalising, and controlling the shape of the world. That’s something that we think we urgently need to overcome. There are many other traditions of material cultures that are not centred on the human destroying Earth.

The excesses of eurocentrism and anthropocentrism are highlighted when you take that name as a name for a Europe that needs to overcome climate collapse and the fragmentation of societies due to polarisation and racism. If we want a Europe that is plural and that is ecologically viable, we don’t need that paradigm that is anthropocentric and eurocentric.

In line with this, and also to come back to the issue of the

obsession with the future, we think that art schools could go beyond the paradigm of 'radical innovation'. The idea of 'the contemporary' is the logic of what is valid in the world and what is validated as being 'in the present of history'. There has been this fixation in the arts and design with 'the radical'. If something has already been done it's not validated, it's *passé*. But that division gets especially exercised across colonial difference. Our friend Fabián Barba shows how what is done now in Ecuador as contemporary dance is not seen as contemporary in Brussels, because it's seen as 'in the past', it is classified as something that the west has already done – even if it's not the case. When decolonial artists bring about memories that have been forgotten (like the work of Fabián Barba but also of Patricia Kaersenhout), where they bring ancestral memories to their work and bodies, they are working against the erasure by modernity of their cultures and their knowledges. That is not seen as contemporary because it doesn't fit this idea of 'radical novelty' that the contemporary should be about.

Of course, it has aspects of innovation because what they're doing others haven't done in that way, but their focus is not to innovate, it's to remember and to struggle against erasure. In that sense, decolonial aesthetic does not focus on the radically new, but its focus is on undoing the colonial difference that continues to reproduce oppression and the destruction of Earth. It's

concerned with the task of justice, and the task of justice is not primarily for the future, but it's a response to what has happened, to what is calling for justice. That's why it's also an ethical task. It is not deluded by seeking innovation *per se*, and being the latest and the most creative.

The temporality of modernity, the belief in progress and the future, implies that we will 'save the world' by creating radical innovation. And that is of course a false consciousness, because the more we are destroying the Earth, and the worlds of people – in the face of the loss of worlds, loss of languages, ecocide, loss of habitats, animals, species – we are actually destroying the possibilities for the future, because a language that is not spoken anymore has no future. An animal that has become extinct has no future.

We are living in a period that has an obsession with innovation, which is actually destroying the future. We are really experiencing the de-futuring of the world, we are consuming the heritage of the past towards the future. The more languages and cultures you destroy, the more ways of sensing – the more aestheses – you destroy, the more everyday life gets more and more normalised into the aesthetics of capital and the individual, the less possible futures are ahead. Paradoxically, we are living in a very dangerous time of the reduction of the possibilities of the future because of this fixation with futurity. The future is not coming from a great creative mind that will innovate

and find a new thing, the future is coming because the tree next to me can continue to live. If there are no more trees, there is no more future for those trees and for our relational worlds.

In this instance of contemporaneity, which is really just a fraction of a second in the life of Earth, we are consuming millions of years of heritage of Earth. The fossil fuel economies are economies of time in which the ancestral heritage of Earth, its long temporality, is consumed and depleted in the instant of the now.

And why do we do this? We have become very arrogant individuals who feel entitled to extract and consume. We don't think beyond our 'now' of the contemporary.

We don't think of the people that have handed our world to us or the Earth that hosts us and that we need to hand down to others. Many other cultures, for example Indigenous cultures, like the one Leanne Simpson describes in *Islands of Decolonial Love*, believe that the seed is the future.⁽⁶⁾ The seed is something that has been handed down and preserved through generations. It contains the possibilities of flourishing again, but if you destroy the seed and you just consume it in your lifetime, then there is no future for anyone else.

That is one of the most serious things I think art and design schools should teach. "Are you designing for a future that is dependent on the consumption of the Earth or the life of others? Are you designing for the

stewardship of the world?"

How to move from owning, being the owner of the world, into owing, into gratitude, into offering? Our friend Aldo Ramos works with offering, which is a very different mode of aesthetic that is not fixed on the representation of the latest thing. It's breaking away from the paradigm of the contemporary. That's why we call for the end of the contemporary and not the post-contemporary, or "what's new after the contemporary". We don't need anything new, we need to stop and remember and take responsibility.

(1) This year the summer school was renamed after Maria Lugones in honour of her passing.

(2) Gloria Wekker et al, 'Let's Do Diversity. Report of the University of Amsterdam Diversity Commission', 2016. Accessed through: <https://www.uva.nl/content/nieuws/nieuwsberichten/2016/10/eindrapport-commissie-diversiteit-%E2%80%98let%E2%80%99s-do-diversity%E2%80%99-gepresenteerd.html>.

(3) See: 'Reflections on 'White Supremacy Culture' by the editorial board and the study group members' (26 May, 2021) in this publication, and see: Tema Okun/dRWorks, 'White supremacy culture', 1999. Accessed through: https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf.

(4) Our final session on 26 May, 2021 was recorded. You can find it here: <https://tinyurl.com/5ye9y5s4>.

(5) See: Rolando Vázquez and Hicham Khalidi, 'Objections to the term "New European Bauhaus"', website of The Jan van Eyck Academie, 6 November, 2020. Accessed through: <https://www.janvaneyck.nl/news/call-for-action-objections-to-the-term-new-european-bauhaus>.

(6) Leanne Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, New York: ARP Books, 2013.