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### **“The Xeno-Episteme and post-Otherness”**

*“Decolonial thinking strives to delink itself from the imposed dichotomies articulated in the West, namely the knower and the known, the subject and the object, theory and praxis. [...] It exists in the borderland/on the borderlines of the principles of Western epistemology; of knowing and knowledge-making. The inside (Western epistemology) fears losing its status of rational mastery by promoting the importance of emotion over reason. [...] Well, that is what disobedient conservatism means: to disobey ‘scientific’ classifications of human beings and to conserve the fundamental role of sensing (aesthesis) and emotioning in our everyday life, as well as in the high decisions by the actors leading states, corporations and banks and the production of knowledge”.*

*Walter D. Mignolo<sup>1</sup>*

In the quest for musing on what post-Otherness might be, let’s begin with the question of what or who is the “Other”? The English dictionary defines it as: “to refer to a person or thing that is different or distinct from one already mentioned or known about” or “that which is distinct from, different from, or opposite to something or oneself”. Talking about the social Other, thus implies a person that is different from one already mentioned or known about; in this context I’d like to concentrate on the notion of the Other as “different from the already known”.

Who defines who and what is known or not known? Who sets the parameters for familiarity, “the already known about” and the registers that define it? Obviously it’s a matter of perspective. Am I not the Other if I shift myself beyond the border

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<sup>1</sup> Mignolo, Walter D., *Coloniality Is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality*, Afterall Issue 43, Central Saint Martins University of the Arts London, 2017, P.42

of what is defined as the assumed “known”, but that counts as allegedly unfamiliar and not known on the other side? Questions like “What is that Other from the other side of the imaginary borderline? Is it frightening, scaring, threatening? Or maybe the Other might even be desirable, intriguing, sexy and appealing? Mysterious, challenging, enriching, enlarging?” are not productive in this exploration and just reconfirm the binary thinking structure, engrained in the lens of discrimination and which fosters social distinctions. Otherness is “a quality or fact of being different” as the English dictionary reveals. Is Otherness enrichment, a chance, and an opportunity to widen one’s set apparatus of knowledge?

Is the Other only defined within the dichotomy between biotic and abiotic? Political theorist Jane Bennett reflects beyond this dualism and ponders upon: “We are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes. If more people marked this fact more of the time, if we were more attentive to the indispensable foreignness that we are, would we continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?”<sup>2</sup> With Bennett—and as a biological fact— humans are constituted by microbiomes, the Other; the human self is then made up of things, of Others that are different from ourselves.

Overcoming binary biological definitions of the Other can be one approach for thinking about post-Otherness; so can contemplating the construction of emotion (it’s dualistic assumption of being interior and exterior) be productive in the exploration of the subject.

Scholar and theorist Sara Ahmed gives a complex account of the thought on emotion in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. In our Western cultural history, emotions have been devalued, denoted as soft and reduced as blurring one’s capacity for judgement, turning one’s actions into reactionary and dependent and hence as inferior to rational, logical and therefore autonomous thought and action. Instead Ahmed offers an analysis “of affective economies,

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press Durham and London, 2010, P. 112

where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation [...].”<sup>3</sup>

Thinking about the construction of “Othering” in regards to her approach on the relationality and sociality of emotion is rather essential. She argues that emotion is not solely taking place in the interior, but also is expressed and shared (e.g. via laughter, crying etc.) and equally affected by exterior triggers that are “impressed” upon us (which can also be non-material, like memories, objects etc.). In this intra- or interstitial space between the subject and object in which an impression and affect is happening, judgement and evaluations are taking place that lead to an emotion.

Crucial in this consideration is therefore the understanding that emotions are relational, and circular in affect (a feeling that is expressed outwards, “impressed” upon another surface of a body, to then re-affect); she calls this concept the “inside-out model”. The “outside-in model” is the reverse approach, that emotions are not created by the individual but by the external, the social and the conditioning that comes with it. Ahmed considers both models as problematic as they reiterate the dualistic notion of “me” versus “we”. With this theory she is joining sociological and anthropological approaches that emotions should not be considered psychological states, but rather as “social and cultural practices.”<sup>4</sup>

She argues: “In other words, emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects. [...] [E]motions create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated. The objects of emotion take shape as effects of circulation. [...] [E]motions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See: Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004, 2014, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, P. 8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid P.9

<sup>5</sup> Ibid P.10

Her analysis of emotion as sociality and as performativity helps us to create a criticality on “how we become invested in social norms [... and] how emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination”<sup>6</sup> and hence to “Othering” or thinking about post-Otherness.

Ahmed argues that norms surface *as* the surface of bodies; “norms are a matter of impressions, of how bodies are ‘impressed upon’ by the world, as a world made up of others. In other words, such impressions are effects of labour; how bodies work and are worked upon shapes the surfaces of bodies.”<sup>7</sup>

In setting norms and normative standards, emotions become a working surface for manipulation by hegemonic (e.g. nationalistic or capitalist) structures of alignment (e.g. history, race, gender etc.), and for setting the criteria for “being part of/belonging to” or “not belonging to” (e.g. nationalistic, racial, gendered etc. self-identification). It allows for setting parameters for the demarcation of “the Other” which is “not us” and which can e.g. be utilized to be read as a danger to “what is ours”.

Emotions work on this interstitial plane, of shaping the surface of the individual and collective bodies. They involve the subject, but are not reducible to it, they are relational to the object and then form the subject by the very contact it has had with objects or Others. Ahmed states “feelings do not belong or even originate with an “I”, and only then move toward others.”<sup>8</sup>

This momentary in-between space of “im-pression” on the surface of the individual or collective body, this moment of creating evaluation and emotion, is the space that hegemonic structures —like e.g. cognitive capitalism— dock on to, manipulating, stimulating and using it as a rhetorical instrument.

Just to think about the highly complex algorithms that detect our behaviours and emotions in our digital patterns of movement; design and marketing formats that affect and lure us into further consumerism; general media and news coverage; and of course politics that can transform emotions by projections and by defining normative practices as the parameters for belonging and not

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid P.12

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P.154

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, P.208

belonging and for inclusion and exclusion. “Political discourse is powerful as it can turn intangible feelings into tangible things that you can do things with.”<sup>9</sup>

Modernist, nationalist, capitalist and hegemonic power structures in general create categorisation, binary thinking, dualisms and hence Othering to secure their self-interest. By taking the position or at least an approximation of consideration of the position of the “opposed” Other, an empathic change of perspective can become a form of resistance towards the established dichotomies.

Walter D. Mignolo reminds us that the engrained epistemological classification, the dichotomy and demarcation among human beings goes back in history to the time of formation of the nation state; back to the Age of Enlightenment when reason and logic started ruling our cultural history, and the states became secular and were no longer ruled by monarchs or the church, and when the “Rights of Man and of Citizen” became established along with it. The categorisation between “believers” (Christians) and “unbelievers” was replaced by the classification of “national” and “non-national” and thereby by “Othering”; an evaluation of higher and lesser human being was established. Mignolo states that this epistemological classification, the national, heteronormative regime of Othering, is the root to deeply engrained racism still today.<sup>10</sup>

“Othering” implies creating dualistic categories and structures of demarcation, mostly employed for hegemonic, normative and homogenising power constructions, for example regarding the migratory phenomena and politics (like recent European developments in the refugee crisis which is moreover a crisis of borders), but also in micropolitical everyday life dynamics and mechanisms; power structures in families, schools, or regarding gender, identity, religion etc..

The notion of binary epistemological classification can equally be expanded beyond nationalities and geopolitical borders (beyond racial and ethnic constructs of the Other) to the geopolitics and the colonisation of the (social and individual) body by neoliberal and immaterial cognitive capitalist politics.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, P.227

<sup>10</sup> See: Mignolo, Walter D., *Coloniality Is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality*, Afterall Issue 43, Central Saint Martins University of the Arts London, 2017, Pp. 39 – 45.

Following the logic of “us” and “Other” in regards to consumerism, there is a dichotomy between for example the “successful and rich” (the one fulfilling the normative guidelines which one is made to believe to be desirable and worthy of imitation) and the “unsuccessful and poor” who remains outside the complex system of capitalist requirements that define what “success” means and what that desirable is, and is to be worked towards.

It is particularly neoliberalist capitalism that sets the bars high for the marketable product(ion) of the self, the making of the self a successful and saleable product. In this binary system characterised by neoliberal standards of achievement, you become the Other if you don’t comply.

Analogously it’s the market and capitalist requirements that decide who is “in”, who is “out” and who is the Other, the marginalised and inferior to the capitalist ladder of success, the one that per dictionary definition is “distinct from, different from, or opposite to something or oneself”. It is a colonisation of the mental and physical body of the subject and society.

Mignolo calls for *Civil and epistemic Disobedience* and to delink from the *Colonial Matrix Power*; to delink “from foreign powers’ control over lives goes hand in hand with rebuilding and re-existing under new conditions and modes of existence that are your own.”<sup>11</sup>

Thinking with Mignolo one can start on the micropolitical level to delink from the foreign powers’ control over one’s live via creating critical consciousness, beginning to re-exist and to create new conditions and modes of existence that are our own. Self-empowerment. “This means to figure out how to live their/our own lives instead of giving our time and bodies to corporations, our attention and intelligence to the unbearable mainstream media and our energy to the banks [...]”.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Mignolo pleads for *Decolonial disobedient conservatism* which “is the energy that engenders dignified anger and decolonial healing, and its main goals are to delink in order to re-exists, which implies relinking with the legacies

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<sup>11</sup> Mignolo, Walter D., *Coloniality Is Far from Over, and So Must Be Decoloniality*, Afterall Issue 43, Central Saint Martins University of the Arts London, 2017, P. 44

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, P.40

one wants to preserve in order to engage in modes of existence with which one wants to engage.”<sup>13</sup>

Inspired by Sarat Maharaj, independent curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and cultural anthropologist Regina Römhild propose the unknown, subaltern knowledge and intuitive capacity for thinking post-Otherness in their text “The Post-Other as Avant-Garde”.<sup>14</sup>

Sarat Maharaj proposes *xeno-episteme* as an alternative approach in the discussion of knowledge production. With his neologism he integrates the notion of “xeno” (strange, foreign, other) with “episteme” (knowledge), suggesting “both the idea of specific cognitive production and the search for a type of knowledge that does not avoid contradiction and difference and is not consumed by rational and empirical criteria.”<sup>15</sup> Maharaj himself elaborates: “Rather it is a force in its own right, always incipient in “whatever” spaces –windswept, derelict brownfields and wastelands– where intimations of unknown elements, thinking probes, spasms of non-knowledge emerge and come into play”.<sup>16</sup>

Xeno-epistemic, intuitive (and hence not approved by logical reasoning) and subaltern knowledge (subaltern to the Cartesian standards of rational and logic, separating the intellectual and sensory, body and mind) might indeed offer an alternative approach to think post-Otherness and to transcend normative systems of Othering. With Foucault in mind, Soh Bejeng Ndikung and Römhild suggest the Post-Other as a “possible heterotopia where distances dwindle more and more”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid P.40-41

<sup>14</sup> See: *Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Bonaventure and Römhild, Regina, “The Post-Other as Avant-Garde”*, in: Baker, Daniel and Hlavajova, Maria, *We Roma, A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, BAK Critical Reader Series, 2013, P. 206-225

<sup>15</sup> Alejandro del Pino Velasco, Summary of *An Unknown Object in Uncountable Dimensions: Visual Arts as Knowledge Production in the Retinal Arena*, a presentation by Sarat Maharaj 12 November 2003, art and wisdom conference, Seville, as part of arteypensiamiento project, organized by International University of Andalusia, in: Hlavajova, Maria, Winder, Jill, Choi, Binna (eds.), *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, BAK Critical Reader Series, 2008, P.135

<sup>16</sup> Maharaj, Sarat, *Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on “method” in visual art as knowledge production*, in: *Art and research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Volume 2, No.2, Spring 2009, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/maharaj.html>, last accessed 19 June 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Bonaventure and Römhild, Regina, The Post-Other as Avant-Garde*, in: Baker, Daniel and Hlavajova, Maria, *We Roma, A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, BAK Critical Reader Series, 2013, P. 215. Needless to say in the context of this publication, that artistic practice can be one of the playgrounds on which the pondering on the dissolving of the frame of the “self” and the “Other” can be played out.

Can post-Otherness be understood as a “heterotopian imaginary in practice”? An imaginary that affirms difference and contradiction, a realm that gives space to rethink and evade normative and hegemonic conditions. An imaginary in practice that operates in realms beyond the binary and dualistic dichotomies of hegemonic powers and politics; and that flourishes within the realm of experience, the untranslatable, experimental and beyond the margins of semantics and rationalistic thought? Can post-Otherness function as a reflexive idea that extends the post-colonial discourse based on the systemic idea of “Othering”?<sup>18</sup>

Can post-Otherness then be comprehended as the moment in which socio-psychological mechanism of “Othering” –and the binary categorization that comes with it– is overcome? This moment can be a concept, a proposal and a practice in a broadened sense to decolonize and de-subjectify the (social) body from these structures and to change one’s understanding of relationality to the Other and –with practice– eventually also one’s actions; becoming an intersubjective agent. Extending the systemic postcolonial, capitalist, racial and gendered Othering to the micropolitical and psychological realm of Othering, in which the “I” supposedly feeds on the Other in order to define and demarcate its ego and own identity.

Post-Otherness thus can also operate as a conception or a strategy that is linked to creating critical consciousness to negotiate the “ego-identification” of the “I” and its ego-shell, to overcome the binary and dualistic structures of creating the demarcation between the self and “the Other”.

Eastern Philosophical rational can be enriching in the context of such contemplation: when the ego-driven “I” demarcates itself from the Other, it stops a dialogic process of listening, and with it, the understanding of “the Other”. The demarcation equally obstructs the acknowledgement that there is an interrelation between the self and the Other. An interrelation that exists outside

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<sup>18</sup> With postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, Othering is systemic in the sense that it is the process of differentiating the subaltern from the ruling imperialist power, during which the colonizer categorizes herself as a constituted subject in the power relations. See Römhild, Regina, *Post-Other Interventions*, a talk and conversation, at Galerie Wedding, January 2016, as part of curatorial project POW (Post-Otherness-Wedding) by Solvej Helweg Ovesen und Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, <http://galeriewedding.de/post-otherness-interventions/>, last accessed 16 June 2017



(and despite) hegemonic normative structures and power relations –which create categorisation, evaluation, judgement of difference, alterity and ultimately social injustice and exclusion– but an interrelation that subsists in a pure humane sense.

Zen Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh for example comprehends human beings as “inter-beings”. The concept of Inter-being is understood from the perspective of the philosophical foundation of Zen Buddhism, that nothing constitutes as a separate independent self but rather that everything is made up of things and interconnected with everything. Inter-being is assumed not simply as “co-existing” but rather as being mutually intertwined and inter-dependent with everything; within human relationships but also in relation to non-human beings and the natural world at large.<sup>19</sup>

This thinking might assist in overcoming the ego-shell that has stopped listening to (and understanding) the self and it’s complex interdependent relation to the world around and to the alleged “Other” and with it the ability for an empathic change in perspective. Through practice of critical consciousness on the very micropolitical level, for example through listening with awareness and therefore understanding the self and the Other, respect and appreciation of multiplicity of singularity and alterity can become a starting point for overcoming Othering.

Although post-Otherness might still be an imaginary concept, if anything far from being an established and a lived reality, it does allow for a heterotopian and xeno-epistemic imagination and awareness, that with time and practice might become reality.

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<sup>19</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh gives the sunflower as an example, that while looking at it, we not only see the sunflower, but with awareness, we can also see the other elements that constitute the flower: the sun, the clouds, the soil etc. without which the sunflower could not exist.