



Book Review:
Pedagogies of Re-Imagination and Unlearning:
Decolonial Cracks Within/Against Settler Colonial Canada

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Abstract:

This book review is a close reading of three book-length works by key, contemporary scholars in the field of settler colonial studies: Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh's *On Decoloniality*; Adam Dahl's *The Empire of the People*; and Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker's *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*. This review provides a critical account of the significance of navigating the complexities of modern settler colonial practices and frameworks within Western settler societies to better inform and navigate our own decolonizing processes. We identify settler logics, perspectives and foundational frameworks as key factors in our current educative practices. Through this, we debate the significance of unsettling our/selves to consider extensions of our identities through a decolonial lens and how we, as a society, contribute to ongoing colonial processes. The review also provides approaches to how these resources may be used to deepen our anti-colonial lens by considering these texts as an underlying basis to reflect upon current educative curricula.

Keywords: decoloniality; settler colonialism; pedagogies; colonialism; identity; curriculum

Recension :

Les pédagogies de ré-imagination et de désapprentissage :

Les dommages du décolonialisme au sein/contre les tenants du colonialisme au Canada

Résumé :

Ce travail est une analyse minutieuse sur les critiques des trois ouvrages écrits par des universitaires contemporains de référence dans le domaine des études décoloniales : La Décolonisation (On Decoloniality) de Walter Dignolo et Catherine Walsh; L'Empire du Peuple (The Empire of the People) de Adam Dahl; et Les Colons : Identité et colonialisme en 21^{ème} siècle au Canada (Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada) de Emma Battell Lowman et Adam Barker. Cette étude fournit un compte rendu critique de l'importance d'explorer les éléments complexes constituant les structures et les pratiques du système colonialisme moderne à l'intérieur des sociétés occidentales coloniales afin de mieux nous informer et nous diriger dans nos propres processus de décolonisation. Nous identifions les logiques, les perspectives et les cadres référentiels des colons qui sont des facteurs clés de nos pratiques éducatives actuelles. A travers cette analyse, nous discutons de l'importance de nous défaire nous-mêmes en considérant les héritages de nos identités sous un angle décolonial et comment nous, en tant que société, contribuons aux processus du système colonialisme actuel. L'analyse fournit aussi une approche sur la façon dont ces ressources peuvent être utilisées pour approfondir notre vision anticoloniale en considérant ces écrits comme un fondement sur lequel se reposent les curricula actuels.

Mots clés : décolonialisme; colonialisme des colons; pédagogiques; colonialisme; identité; curriculum

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- Dahl, A. (2018). *Empire of the people: Settler colonialism and the foundations of modern democratic thought*.
- Lowman, E. B., & Barker, A. J. (2015). *Settler: Identity and colonialism in 21st century Canada*.
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*.

Introduction

This book review essay grew out of a decision we made at the end of a course (at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto) critiquing settler colonialism in education, to continue reading and thinking together on this topic. We decided to do close readings of three book-length works by key contemporary scholars in the field of settler colonial studies. After compiling a potential reading list of ten books, we then selected three books that bring perspectives from the Americas of the South, the United States and Canada. We blogged and met in online seminars as we read each text, before coming together to write this essay. One of our aims is to give readers a sense of how each text contributes, within curriculum studies, to critical thinking regarding settler colonialism. We also wanted to share how each text informed our individual research interests and/or teaching praxis.

Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh's (2018) book, *On Decoloniality*, was the first text we read. From Duke University Press, this is a book opening a new book series regarding theorizations of decoloniality, decoloniality understood as the resistance (and re-existence) against colonial logics. It is an attempt to revitalize the epistemologies of the colonized and racialized groups, and to reimagine knowledges that continue to be suppressed by coloniality and its dimensions (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It has a mix of personal, political and theoretical insights from both authors. We chose this text after having read part of Mignolo's (2011) earlier book, *The Darker Side of Modernity*, in the course. The book begins with two parts, by Walsh and Mignolo respectively, and concludes with a fascinating transcript of a conversation between the two.

Adam Dahl, in his 2018 publication, *The Empire of the People*, focuses on settler colonialism in the United States, and the book is clearly addressing a mainstream audience in political science. Dahl takes the reader through a great amount of detail about the intricate systems, policies, thinking and decision making that went into the creation of the United States of America. Dahl attempts to dissect the ways in which American colonizers deliberately orchestrated "democracy" and "freedom" through settler colonial logics. Dahl uses this book to argue that the logics of Indigenous displacement laid the groundwork of American democracy, but he approaches this through concepts firmly located in Western political science.

In their 2015 book, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*, Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker, both White Canadian settlers, tease out the complexities of contemporary Settler Canadian society and some of the equally complex possibilities for decolonization. Lowman and Barker take up the concern that "any time an answer to a complex problem seems too easy, or too obvious, it probably is" (2015, p. 107). *Settler* is a very readable book for both high school and

college students, yet it also provides critical, historical and contemporary perspectives that all non-Indigenous people, beyond educators and researchers in higher education, could find useful.

Several of us gravitated towards *On Decoloniality*. We begin by describing how this text altered our thinking as graduate students and educators. The review then describes a few ideas from *Empire of the People* that are useful, although several of us found this book to be the least engaging, if not quite problematic. Finally, we incorporate local and practical insights about the Canadian context from our reading of the third book, *Settler*.

Individual Analyses

Adam Davies, Re: *On Decoloniality*

On Decoloniality, by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), delves into discussions regarding the colonial matrix of power, the current condition of modernity/coloniality, and how to de-link from such Enlightenment-based logics. In the introduction, they elucidate how “Coloniality is constitutive, not derivative, of modernity. That is to say, there is no modernity without coloniality, thus the compound expression: *modernity/coloniality*” (p. 4). By bringing the current state of modernity/coloniality in conversation with Anibal Quijano’s framework of the colonial matrix of power, Walsh and Mignolo aim to “push considerations of how decoloniality undoes, disobeys, and delinks from this matrix; constructing paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living” (p. 4). They argue that this entails moving from “studying about” to “thinking with,” and is an act of making visible one’s own positionality within theorizing and thinking. This focus on praxis throughout Walsh and Mignolo’s text can lead to what Walsh terms “decolonial cracks” (2018, p. 24). Following Walsh (2014), such decolonial cracks involve acting “to unlearn the rational modernity that (de)formed me, to learn to think and act in its fissures and cracks” (Section 2). For Walsh, this involves a decolonial thinking, a thinking otherwise through praxis. Such decolonial pedagogies of praxis involve “methodologies and processes of struggle, practice, and praxis—that are embodied and situated” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, pp. 48-49). Walsh’s discussions of praxis illuminate her thoughts, in conversation with Paulo Freire, regarding a new critical humanism. She describes the “(co)relationality that grounds (ancestral) non-Western knowledges, worldviews, and life practices” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 50). Such forms of (co)relationality—meaning the interconnectedness of all matrices of power and efforts to decolonize such dynamics—in Walsh’s critical humanism are in conversation with Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) task of moving *towards* the human and away from “Man”.

I have found Mignolo’s earlier writing about posthumanism useful, and this new book by Mignolo and Walsh (2018) provokes much thinking for graduate students who are working with posthumanism and new materialism. Mignolo critiques posthuman theorizing and its potential for universality, explaining how “this is one of the crucial tasks of decoloniality: to decolonize Man/Human, to liberate *pluriversal humanity*” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 170). This “pluriversal” humanity, which is away from Man, provides a means to see how Mignolo is in conversation with Sylvia Wynter (2003), Franz Fanon (1967) and other such decolonial thinkers. As such, the task of decolonial thinkers is set out as different than that of posthumanists such as Rosi Braidotti (2013). It

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is not a task of moving away from the notion of the human, but of understanding its current terms and how it came to be (Wynter, 2003). For graduate students and theorists working within posthumanism, this holds great implications, as it problematizes the foundations of their work and sees the task as moving towards the human (as Sylvia Wynter would articulate) and away from Man or any reification of liberal humanism which posthumanism might hold (see Jackson, 2013).

Mithila Rajavel, Re: On Decoloniality

Through *On Decoloniality*, Mignolo and Walsh (2018) highlight the significance of moving forward with the ideology of “making decoloniality a lived project of/in praxis” (p. 20) in order to understand the “colonial matri[ces] of power” (p. 17) and gain perspective into the root of modern colonial practices and processes. We need to consider how these colonial frameworks and structures operate. To move forward, we must consider how knowledge has been “formed, molded, and shaped in and by actors, histories, territories, and place that, whether recognized or not, are marked by the colonial horizon of modernity” (p. 26). To work within these parameters, Mignolo and Walsh suggest we consider “decolonial insurgency” (p. 34). By constantly advancing within the varying parameters of decolonial frameworks, we can pursue a path that works within and towards a decolonizing practice.

Thinking of the decolonial process as an active, ongoing movement, we may consider how different diasporic groups in Canada live with the effects of colonial influences in their own histories. I work in a neighbourhood with primarily newcomer students who, during class, share similar stories of leaving home and having to change their lifestyles to fit in with others. Finding a resonance in story and feeling allows them to connect more with their learning on more than just an academic level. Mignolo and Walsh suggest that their own lived experiences are like seeds that must be “resown in contemporary times and with attention to the present-day reality of deterritorialization, disposition, expropriations, cooperation, and false inclusions, and the coloniality of power, being, knowledge, and nature” (p. 101). Working with a multicultural population in the classroom, sharing this similarity provides for a shared understanding of the significance of decoloniality and a strengthened act to do so.

Megan Ewing, Re: On Decoloniality

Mignolo and Walsh (2018) explore themes of decoloniality within the colonial matrix of power framework. One thing in this book that particularly stood out to me was the questioning of how to achieve success in working towards decoloniality. The reader is asked, “How do we, and can we, move within the cracks, open cracks, and extend the fissures? How can we shift our gaze to see from and through the cracks? How can we remain vigilant that the cracks do not close or that the dominant order does not simply path them over?” (p. 83). These questions are both a prompt to wonder and a call to action. They help to explain an issue in the text, that of the difference between working towards decoloniality versus decolonization. If “coloniality is a constant process of rearrangement and production” (p. 66), then striving for decoloniality is “transcending rather than dismantling Western ideas through building our own houses of thought. When enough houses are

built . . . the hegemony of the master's house—in fact, mastery itself—will cease to maintain its imperial status” (p. 44). Our work then, or our call to action, is to constantly ask, question, wonder, challenge and relink. The authors do not leave us there, but rather ask one more important question near the end of the book, “the question is what to relink with?” (p. 247)

A focused discussion in the book that links to my area of interest is the conversation about the word “nature”. In his section, Mignolo states that coloniality/modernity “invented also the idea of nature to separate their bodies from all living (and the very life-energy of the biosphere) organisms on the planet” (Mignolo and Walsh, pp. 153-154). Mignolo notes that the problem with naming nature is that it *others* nature from ourselves, and he notes that the word “nature” itself is too simplistic to describe the complexities of the world and our relationship with it. Mignolo argues that “nature doesn't exist, or it exists as an ontological fiction” (pp. 158). He then links the confusion of the word “nature” back to decoloniality, suggesting that “how to get out of [the nature/culture conundrum] is a decolonial question” (p. 160). He then furthers his argument by noting the linking the word “nature” to “natural resources”—a strong colonial logic used to defend many acts of colonialism around the world. The conversation around nature continues as Mignolo points out that “after the Industrial Revolution, extractivism concentrated on those natural resources needed to feed the machines.” (p. 159). This word, “nature”, has played an important role, in the so-called New World, and to the wealth that has been accumulated from natural resources, and it continues to be a driving force of ongoing colonization around the world. Nature, then, is a Westernized concept and Mignolo brings this fact to light by pointing out that no other culture has these words in them. As a White settler educator, I am left wondering how my interest in “nature” will be impacted by this unlinking and relearning.

Heather Sykes, Re: On Decoloniality

Throughout the first part of *On Decoloniality*, Catherine Walsh (2018) emphasizes how decoloniality emerges in the doing, that is, within praxis, in what she calls the decolonial cracks in “the fissures of the dominant order” (p. 24). Walsh specifically points out the ways that coloniality persists across *different* politics such as right-wing nationalism, neoliberal globalism and reputedly progressive movements. For me, this has implications for research and teaching in my areas of inquiry, which focus on sexualities and gender in curriculum studies, physical education and sport studies. Coloniality, as Walsh explains in her section of the text, has been put into question through the work of decolonial and Indigenous feminisms that ‘disrupt and transgress the white feminist universal’ (p. 39). Walsh provides guidance for my own striving to interrogate whiteness, settler colonialisms and coloniality, especially within critical work about sexuality in curriculum studies, in studies of whitestream masculinity, and in queer studies. Walsh really sets a task for educators and researchers to name, and then delink from, the logics of coloniality that continues within even seemingly progressive research into sexualities and gender.

In the second part of the book, Mignolo provides another specific, but very teachable, explanation of decolonial thinking. Extending his earlier work, one of Mignolo's chapters discusses the coloniality/modernity/decoloniality triad. Decolonial thinking, he explains, stems from outside

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modern thought and shifts what he calls the very “terms of Western enunciation” (p. 143). Mignolo illustrates this with an analogy that can’t help but cause a sharp intake of breath for many graduate students and scholars in curriculum studies working with psychoanalytic, Marxist and Foucaultian perspectives. He writes: “Coloniality is to decoloniality what the unconscious is to psychoanalysis, what surplus value is to Marxist political economy, and what biopolitics is to Foucaultian archaeology” (p. 140). Mignolo emphasizes how the coloniality/decoloniality dyad is rooted in thinking and politics from Central and South Americas; whereas concepts such as biopolitics or surplus value, even though they enable critique, originated in European thinking.

Queer and poststructural theories that I have used in my own work have sought to shift the discourse, or change the content of conversations, about sexuality, queering pedagogy and embodiment in schooling and sport. Walsh and Mignolo both stress that decolonial thinking seeks not merely to change the content, but to change the very terms of these conversations. This wisdom may well derail a well-honed critical theoretical framework or methodology at any moment—a thesis proposal, a grant proposal or a long-term stream of research. Being derailed, realizing a fissure in your research, or delinking how you are doing research teaching, means something will change—most probably in profound ways (so be prepared for what happens if you change the terms of the conversations you are attached to). Another key theme in the book is how decolonial praxis seeks to delink from global designs, which in my current sport-based work are typified by the roving empires of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). Decoloniality means attending to what Walsh calls “the *hows* of political-epistemic-existence-based resistance and struggle” (p. 34). This has led me to listen and learn from Indigenous and anti-colonial activist campaigns that reject the homo-national, celebratory impositions of the Olympic games and soccer World Cup events (Sykes, 2016). I wish I’d had access to Walsh and Mignolo’s book, and these specific points, when I was a graduate student. It would have not only changed the content of my theoretical frameworks, but it would have given me a way to articulate a critique, and to delink from, the Western whitestream thinking that kept reasserting itself within feminist poststructuralism, queer educational theories and psychoanalytic approaches to embodiment and sexualities.

Adam Wrestch, Re: Empire of the People

In *Empire of the People*, Adam Dahl (2018) writes in an objective manner without stating his own positionality or approach to writing. Unfortunately, this writing style weakens the analyses of his research. The book documents the settler colonial violence in how the United States of America was established. Nonetheless, Dahl offers little to denounce the settler violence that would have elevated his writing to the “thinking with” recommended by Mignolo and Walsh, instead of the “writing about” Indigenous and black peoples, as he does throughout his work.

As a teacher, I have recently grappled with this concept of including one’s positionality within one’s writing because high school students, in my experience, are taught to be objective and have their writing devoid of the personal—for example, avoiding the use of the personal pronouns of “I”, “me” and “we” in essay writing or in longer academic papers. I, myself, have only recently learned

how important it is to state my own positionality as a White settler, cisgender male within my own research, as it provides the reader my relationship within the research that I have conducted. When secondary school students begin to learn the academically stifling four- or five-paragraph essay structure, their voices are silenced, I believe, because they are discouraged to use personal pronouns. However, the problem with this objective writing ethos is that it promotes the limited “studying about” that Mignolo and Walsh decry, instead of developing students’ empathies and, ideally, encouraging students to become critical allies for the Indigenous peoples upon *Turtle Island* (as North America was known before it was colonized). In fact, as I examined Dahl’s work, I was left wondering if he truly believes in decolonizing the systems and practices of North America, or if he wants readers to solely “think about” those oppressive systems that established the United States of America.

The last chapter of *Empire of the People*, entitled “Decolonizing the Democratic Tradition”, is the most thought provoking, yet it mainly focuses on how American society’s modern democratic thought is rooted within settler colonialism and Indigenous beliefs. Dahl suggests that “to rethink political foundations through the lens of settler colonization would help foreground the colonial ideologies and practices that underpin foundational democratic ideals” (p. 184). As my colleagues within this course have illustrated, the Ontario Social Studies curriculum already highlights Europeans settling Turtle Island, but I believe there is misinformation regarding the allegedly convivial relations between European settlers and Indigenous peoples. Moreover, I note that the theft of land is omitted from the curriculum. Juxtaposing Dahl’s writing with the Ontario curriculum, there is no call to action to decolonize settler colonial systems and structures.

Within this chapter, I do appreciate how Dahl cites scholars who believe that there needs to be a recognition of how Indigenous cultures contributed to contemporary democratic thought: “By foregrounding the positive contributions of the Iroquois and other indigenous peoples to modern democratic thought, both Kellogg and Young enlist the indigenous other as a constructive participant in the making of the modern world” (p. 194). Dahl calls upon a transmodern approach to democracy in that democratic thought did not only originate within/from Europe, but rather emerged instead as a *mélange* of cultural sources.

Despite the title of this chapter, I posit that Dahl does little to re-imagine relations between Settlers and Indigenous peoples in order to truly decolonize and dismantle the many forms of oppression that Indigenous peoples encounter today. In my view, Dahl’s approach to decolonization in the *Empire of the People* must go further than solely recognizing Indigenous beliefs as influencing democracy within the United States.

Brooke Charlebois, Re: Settler

As a White settler educator and PhD student, I came to Lowman and Barker’s (2015) book *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* with some background knowledge in settler colonial theory. Both authors do an excellent job of drawing on the work of more established settler colonial and Indigenous scholars (e.g., Veracini 2015; Wolfe 1999; Regan 2010; Tuck & Yang, 2012) to

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create an accessible text that examines the complexities of settler colonial identity and settler colonialism as an ongoing system of oppression in Canada and assists the reader to begin to unpack what is meant by the term *settler*.

As an elementary public school teacher in Ontario, I see potential for this book to be used as a resource for teachers in a variety of contexts, including as a lens to identify how settler-colonialism is embedded in our current Ontario curriculum, and as a framework to start to delink (as Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, put it) from the many settler colonial narratives that currently exist in that curriculum, in various subject areas. Throughout the text, Lowman and Barker (2015) “explore settler colonialism and its relationship to identity in Canada, including how it manifests in daily life, informing acts of appropriation and racism, and defining many strongly held national myths” (p. 24).

This made me rethink my classroom practice in several ways. First, I started re-examining the current trend of teaching students that “we are all treaty people”. While this might appear as a step in the right direction, Lowman and Barker (2015) argue that “claiming identity as a treaty person cannot be done without a deep critique of one’s own relationship with Settler Canadian society and present-day settler colonialism” (p. 67). This “deep critique” is what is missing from the curriculum. When looking at the revised 2018 Social Studies, History and Geography curriculum for Ontario, there is reference to *colonialism* at various grade levels and the word *settler* is used in a historical context, but the document never mentions the term *settler colonialism*, or the term *settler*, as a component of contemporary Canadian society. The second re-examining that I have started to do is with respect to the arts program that I teach. This text has helped me deepen my understanding of settler belonging and how it is connected to our national myths and to the appropriation of Indigenous culture. Lowman and Barker argue that in the context of ongoing colonial power imbalances, appropriation intended as “honouring” is clearly ridiculous (p. 41). This has led me to question having my students create works in the style of Indigenous artists (e.g., Norval Morriseau), something that I have done in previous years. This text gives me a starting place from which to deconstruct famous Canadian works such as those of the Group of Seven, to see how they contribute to the settler colonial narrative of *Terra Nullius* and, ultimately, to affect the way I approach these works with students. Lowman and Barker provide a useful resource to help teachers identify where settler colonialism exists in their programs and how they might begin to reshape the narrative.

Conclusion

These books are critical to read right now, in this moment of time, because, as Lowman and Barker (2015) state,

We stand at a crossroads where there is at least some willingness to admit that colonization happened, that it had devastating impacts on Indigenous nations and communities, and that a colonial legacy persists into the present in the form of socio-economic inequality, racism and discrimination, and political marginalization of Indigenous communities. However, colonialism continues: Indigenous nations are still losing their land base, facing infringement from resource extraction and mining companies, property developers, and the pressures of urbanization. (p. 12)

As settlers on *Turtle Island* studying Settler Colonial theories, we are disturbed by the logics that we have, in our own ways, taken for granted for most of our lives. We hope that through this academic review of these texts, we are prompting ourselves and readers to take action to disrupt the systemic oppression and erasure of Indigenous peoples within education. We came to these texts from various perspectives, but we have used these texts as a way of re-imagining pedagogies in our own contexts. Walsh and Mignolo's (2018) *On Decoloniality* was a dense read, with many references to settler colonialism within South America, but also to other parts of the world. It may be challenging if the reader does not have a background in the historical and political developments within those regions. Nevertheless, as an exemplary text on how to conduct research with an anti-colonial focus, it is powerfully academic and respectful of Indigenous peoples. We feel that it would be an ideal text for graduate students.

Unfortunately, Dahl (2015) has an impartial approach to his analyses of the theft of Indigenous land and the slavery of Africans, instead of being critical of that part of American Settler colonial history, or even being critical about the ongoing oppression present within contemporary American society. Thus, we feel that the *Empire of the People* should only be a supplementary text in an undergraduate or graduate class, and not a stand-alone text, for it ultimately perpetuates how Western modernity stifles students' unlearning processes of settler colonial logics.

In the first line of *Settler*, Lowman and Barker (2015) write, "the words we use to name ourselves are important" (p. 12). Their approach within *Settler*, like that of Walsh and Mignolo, is also deferential to Indigenous peoples within settler colonial Canada. In fact, we feel that *Settler* would be the perfect text for a university-level, introductory course on settler colonialism within Canada. Moreover, since the writing of the text is accessible overall, it would be a great core text for senior-level secondary school classes and teachers looking to reimagine their pedagogy.

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