

The Broken Mirror of Indigenous Representation

Pablo Mora Calderón

The Rhetoric of Decolonization

If we are to talk about decolonization in its truest sense, we must mention the historical struggles in the Americas that shared a counter-colonial agenda, aimed at liberating themselves from the Spanish, Portuguese, and English empires since the arrival of the Europeans in the 15th century. The examples are countless since resistance to the conquistadors remained a constant throughout the so-called colonial period. Depending on the region of the continent from which these processes of resistance are described, the value assigned to them by conventional or critical national historiographies varies. Perhaps the most well-known anti-colonial processes originated in the Viceroyalty of Peru, in particular the insurrections led by Manco Inca in 1536, continued by the first Túpac Amaru until 1572, and those of the second Túpac in 1780. It is also worth mentioning the uprisings led by Túpac Katari in the Audiencia of Charcas, which served as inspiration for the Catharist and Indianist movements in Bolivia in the middle of the last century.

The vast bibliography that has shed light on them contrasts with the profound obscurity surrounding many other movements seeking liberation from the Spanish crown. It would be time consuming, although not tedious, to list countless anti-colonial episodes, characterized as uprisings, rebellions, insurrections, or wars of resistance: These include Enrique's rebellion, the Mapuche resistance in Wallmapu territory, the Calchaquí rebellion in northwestern Argentina, the indigenous rebellion in the Amazon led by Juan Santos Atau Huallpa in 1742, and the Apache uprising in Texas



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



in 1761. In Colombian territory, historians specializing in indigenous issues have documented the uprisings of the Tairona in the Caribbean between 1571 and 1575, the Quimbaya in Cauca Valley in 1577, and the Pijaos in Tolima, who waged the longest war of resistance in the Americas against the Spanish Empire.

It is interesting to note that the disappearance of this empire in the Americas, a result of the wars of Independence in which our republican Creoles fought - the majority of which were resolved during the first decades of the 19th century - is absent from this inventory, since the colonial matrix never disappeared. This is why, as proponents of so-called *decolonial inflection* have argued, the issue is not confined to the past, when the last viceroys left and our republics were founded, but persists in the present. Beyond the scope of Native Americans, Walter Mignolo has pointed out examples of processes of a decolonial nature, such as the Haitian revolution of 1791 (prior to the French Revolution), the independence of Morocco and Tunisia in 1954, that of Algeria eight years later, and even the Bolivian indigenous movement from 2005 onwards. This does not take into account the emancipation of gender, race, and sex which further increases the scope of decolonial practice.

Long before the rise of decolonial inflection in Latin American critical thought (with scholars such as Mignolo, Grosfoguel, Quijano, and Dussel), the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda had supported the idea of building a "liberation sociology". He advocated for the severing of ties with both North American and European academic traditions, while contributing to the transition to a new form of social, political, and economic organization. His book *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual* [*Intellectual Colonialism and Own Science*] is a direct precursor to the critique of Eurocentrism. The same can be said of the intellectual contributions of Aimé Césaire and Franz Fanon, both from Martinique. They dismantled the Western notion of civilization, exposed the barbaric system imposed by colonialism, and demonstrated how it gives rise to



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



racism while “deculturizing” and marginalizing the colonized, forcing upon them new modes of perception and existence.

Yet it was undoubtedly the autonomous strength of indigenous organizations in Latin America during the 1970s that laid the foundations for defining, in global forums, a path for defending and recognizing the oppressive situation endured by indigenous peoples across the world as a result of colonialism. Accompanied by non-indigenous experts, in 1971 they drew up the Declaration of Barbados: For the Liberation of the Indians,¹ and the Declaration of San José de Costa Rica on Ethnocide and Ethno-development in Latin America,² ten years later.

The first highlighted the colonial relationship of domination in which national societies maintained the indigenous populations, manifesting itself - and I quote the Barbados Declaration - “in repeated acts of aggression directed against the aboriginal groups and cultures. There occur both active interventions to “protect” Indian society as well as massacres and forced migrations from the homelands. These acts and policies are not unknown to the armed forces and other governmental agencies in several countries. Even the official “Indian policies” of the Latin-American states are explicitly directed towards the destruction of aboriginal culture. These policies are employed to manipulate and control Indian populations in order to consolidate the status of existing social groups and classes. This only diminishes the possibility that Indian society may free itself from colonial domination and settle its own future”.

¹ Declaration of Barbados, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43906047>.

² Declaration of San José de Costa Rica, at <https://xdoc.mx/documents/declaracion-de-san-jose-5e615f4ca3619>.



The second declaration went further. It called for the recognition of the autonomous capacity of indigenous peoples to make decisions; the exercise of their self-determination and self-management; the collective and individual ownership of all their threatened civil, political, economic, and cultural rights; the natural and inalienable right to their territories and their reclaiming of lands from which they were dispossessed; the use, dissemination, and transmission of their natural and cultural heritage; the recognition of their own forms of internal organization; and respect for their autonomy.

The incomplete mention of these milestones helps to contextualize the intellectual and political references, not only academic and artistic, which historically underpin contemporary decolonial dynamics and partly explain the decisions that indigenous peoples have made regarding their situation and representation.

The truth is that, at present, the verb *decolonize*³ has become recurrent in academic theory, certain artistic practices, social movements and activism, as well as in indigenous, Afro, feminist, queer, and other agendas. This is related to the ongoing struggle against the capitalist, patriarchal, modern, and colonial system, with its physical, symbolic, sex and gender-related, sociocultural, epistemic, and territorial violence. The verb has been rhetorically associated with another set of actions: rise up, resist, and re-exist, which appear in decolonizing efforts alongside another inseparable triad: do, think, and fight.

From trenches, ghettos, or specific territories, and each according to its own terminology, the decolonization of everything is advocated: nature, the body, the

³I use the terms *descolonizar* and *decolonizar* interchangeably. An explanation for the suppression or not of the s can be found in Catherine Walsh's text, *Interculturalidad, Estado, sociedad. Luchas (de)coloniales de nuestra época* (Quito: UASB-Abya-Yala, 2009), and in the book by Eduardo Restrepo and Axel Rojas, *Inflexión decolonial: hacia una introducción crítica* (Popayán: Pensar Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, Universidad Javeriana, Editorial Universidad del Cauca, 2010).



mind, gender, knowledge, academia, writing, pedagogy, agriculture, aesthetics, memory, disease, literature, mental health, university, methodologies, feminism, rebellions, the future, the divine, and, of course, museums, one of the emblematic institutions of the "evil empire", could not be left out. News headlines such as "Ibero-American museums clamor to decolonize art", which appeared during the 5th Meeting of European and Ibero-American Museums, held at the Madrid International Contemporary Art Fair (ARCO) in 2016, became frequent in the world of art and museology. Last year, during the Bogotá International Book Fair (FilBo), Antonio Pinto and María Wills discussed the topic at the National Museum of Colombia.

I have dealt with the matter in my most recent paper, and after a brief exploration of readings of a decolonial nature, I have compiled, in no particular order, an incomplete inventory of strategies conceived, practiced, or desired by critics, social movements, and *artists*: decolonial performances, sensitive epistemologies, walking archives, unorthodox theories, borderline thoughts, transmodernity, epistemic disobediences, shared fabrics, pedagogies of re-existence, ancestral sowing, emotional approaches, and not simply thoughts, poetic insurgencies, good and pleasant ways of life, epistemic ancestralities, or cannibalism in the style of "tupi or not tupi, that is the question". In short, other ways of being capable, knowing, seeing, narrating, and being.

Likewise, I have come across a solid argument, which can be expressed as follows: since there is no collapse of the modern world-system in sight, or put another way, since there are no other possible worlds or multiverses, processes of decolonization are maintained. This also maintains all kinds of political and theoretical exercises of epistemic resistance, with their discursive elaborations in constant tension, as well as various aesthetic developments and critical commitments arising from activism. All the



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



above-mentioned endeavors are, evidently, if not global, at least localized achievements that, if fulfilled, partially free us from this system. What is interesting is that the decolonial attitude is beginning to permeate the consciousness of broad social sectors. I will try to explain it as follows, based on a text that I recently wrote:⁴

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has exposed the limitations of the capitalist model on a social level. It has illuminated what was in the shadows, questioning what was once considered natural, and has spurred the reevaluation and politicization of society's needs, transforming them into demands. Paradoxically, the uncertainty and fear of a global-scale catastrophe have brought to light, for broad segments of the population, the environmental crisis, colonial injustices, the pitfalls of capitalism, deplorable patriarchalism, and much more. Until this point, these issues had been confined to the critical discourse of environmentalists, feminists, decolonial intellectuals, and various social movements, including the indigenous movement.

Along with the profusion and variety of the threats detailed, there has been an expansion in ways of life and thought that starkly contrast with dominant ones. These stem from socially active and resistant agents who advocate for “living well for all” rather than for a minority. The emergence in Latin America over the last two decades, although intensifying in recent years, of mobilizations of various sectors of the population against those responsible for the global crisis has brought to light the significance and potential of the concepts of “good living” originating from indigenous peoples. These models are related but maintain their distinctions from other schools of thought, including ecologism, neo-Marxist socialism, decoloniality, and post-development.

⁴ Pablo Mora, “Paz en clave indígena”, in *Las pazes diversas*, edited by Ómar Rincón (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, in production).



In this context, old words have begun to take on renewed meanings and others have emerged, illustrating alternative models. Confederation, direct democracy, autonomic communalism, libertarian anarchism, alternative confluence, and transhumanism are complex terms originating from agendas that have been reformulated this century. They address issues such as gender emancipation, political ecologies, climate justice, the rights of nature, and fulfilling ways of life. The crucial aspect is that these are not merely new discourses promoted by academia, which tends to intellectually dissect the practices and thoughts of the peoples. Instead, they are experiences that go beyond mere resistance and involve re-existence, the construction of alternative collective powers that give rise to different ways of doing, connecting, producing, and creating. These are not utopian promises, but genuine pathways to other possible worlds. Alberto Acosta, Ashish Kotari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, and Federico Demaria, coordinators of the book *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary* (2019), have contributed to creating a comprehensive inventory of more than one hundred essays from peoples around the world who have not only questioned development, but are also living differently. Demaria asserts that there is no single solution, no single dominant world today (of economic growth, technological innovation, and carbon markets), but rather multiple options or *pluriverses*, a term defined by the indigenous Zapatistas of Mexico as a world in which many worlds fit. In his words, these essays are a “hymn to diversity”.⁵ In addition to the Zapatistas of Chiapas, some of these solutions come from the Kurds of Rojava and Xarxa, the solidarity economy enterprises in Catalonia, Crianza Mutua in Mexico, and Vikalp Sangam in India, to mention just a few examples.

⁵ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/natural/20200226/473793970652/federico-demaria-demaria-pluriverso-decrecimiento.html>.



Among all these ways of life, the specific practices associated with the Native American concept of a full and dignified life stand out. These practices have always existed, but are now regaining their power in an effective combination of ancestral wisdom and contemporary political action. These are applicable to various fields, including the solidarity economy, food sovereignty, the rights of nature, biodiversity protection, territorial defense, good governance, spiritual communication, conflict resolution, and civic coexistence within cultural diversity. Of particular interest here is the emergence of counter-visual narratives and critical self-representations in the hands of indigenous communities.

Challenged Representations

At the beginning of this century, in her article "Movimientos sociales y comunicación indígena: el espejo cóncavo y la irrupción indígena" (2000) [Social Movements and Communication: The Concave Mirror and The Indigenous Irruption], Rossana Reguillo pointed out the emergence of a demand from Latin American indigenous movements to consolidate an image of citizenship in times of globalization. Drawing on an analysis of the 1994 Zapatista insurrection in southern Mexico, Reguillo pointed out that indigenous movements — including the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) — had become “powerful analyzers of a peripheral modernity” that, through their presence and media visibility, “have shed light on crises in the forms of social organization, thought and sensibility”.⁶ Indeed, the struggles for recognition and inclusion of difference in the public space led to negotiation processes with the

⁶ Rossana Reguillo, “Movimientos sociales y comunicación indígena: el espejo cóncavo y la irrupción indígena”, in *América Latina Hoy*, n.º 25, 67, and 68 (August 2000).



State and, more importantly, exposed the limitations of the modern project of nationhood.

In this context, the indigenous agenda for "another communication" became imperative and was based on a discomfort with the way in which mainstream media have portrayed indigenous peoples. For centuries, the prevailing images of the indigenous have come from external perspectives, consolidating ideas and stereotypes that have spread ways of seeing and understanding the indigenous as "uncivilized", "savages", "exotic", "primal", "poor", "backward", or "violent". These perspectives have justified conquest, colonialism, evangelization, and violence against ethnic communities. They help to explain why today indigenous peoples are demanding the right to define their culture and identity autonomously, to be able to represent themselves through audiovisual languages, and to be able to publicly communicate their knowledge, perspectives, and positions to the outside world.

In this context, after several years of work, the indigenous peoples of Colombia formulated a public communication policy in 2018. This policy had multiple objectives: ensuring that the State acknowledged their demand for differential rights to communication, strengthening intercultural dialogue, promoting respect for cultural differences, and addressing some of the linguistic and cultural ethnocide that has historically affected them. This policy arose, precisely, from the efforts of indigenous organizations, collectives, and leaders who have been working on the creation of radio and audiovisual production processes since the 1960s.

One of the main principles for which they have advocated is *audiovisual sovereignty*, defined as the autonomous right to create, produce, transmit, broadcast, and preserve their own audiovisual content. This principle also implies the right to make decisions



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



about their preferences regarding communication systems, technologies, narratives, and aesthetics. Far from being an abstract or general statement, it has specifically influenced the critical characterization of how they are externally represented. It offers journalists, writers, filmmakers, artists, public officials, anthropologists, and so on, precise recommendations to avoid poor representation practices:⁷ racism, exoticization, archaization, objectification, sensationalization, stereotyping, stigmatization, discrimination, segregation, exclusion, victimization, criminalization, euphemization, and invisibility.

Thus, the aforementioned manual calls on those who wish to work with indigenous peoples to approach and understand their worldviews, beliefs, symbolic life, laws of origin, inherent rights, diversity of languages, and political projects. Among these projects are demands to secure their rights to life, territory, self-government, memory, and a sovereign image.

The analysis they conducted demonstrates not only unease, but also a deep crisis that exacerbates intercultural tensions. Last century, Jay Ruby⁸ had already pinpointed a critical question for filmmakers and ethnographers: who has the right to represent whom, with what intention, using what language, and within what context? These are ongoing and unavoidable questions that partly explain the broken mirrors of indigenous representation. In the indigenous construction of self-image, there is a

⁷On this matter, please refer to the *Manual de buenas prácticas para la difusión mediática de contenidos relacionados con pueblos indígenas* [Manual of good practices for the media dissemination of content related to indigenous peoples] (Bogotá: Concip, 2020), commissioned by the National Commission on Indigenous Communication to Professor Germán Rey Beltrán, a prolific writer of texts on freedom of expression and culture, and former television critic and reader's advocate for the newspaper *El Tiempo*.

⁸ Jay Ruby, "Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma", in *Visual Anthropology Review* Fall, 2 (1991).



retaliation against the burden imposed by the colonizers. Yet, at the same time and as Soler and Giordano⁹ have pointed out, on other occasions indigenous self-images are produced through refraction, where “each other is a mirror that reflects different images”.

Quechua educator and activist Armando Muyolema has denounced the symbolic, intellectual, and political violence exerted by those who speak for or represent indigenous peoples. This perpetuates the silence, invisibility, and objectified status of indigenous people concealed by the cultural regime of colonialism. Understanding this regime is not a matter for experts or metaphysics; it is, as he says word for word, “a matter of the relations of power and knowledge that govern everyday social relations in the streets but, above all, in institutions”. He then advocates for understanding and dismantling these relationships by breaking the silence that has suppressed the indigenous voice: “Will experts or apprentice indigenous experts be capable of abandoning their intellectual pedantry and listening to the indigenous voice? Is it possible to be a postcolonial expert?”.¹⁰

These questions place us in the contentious territory of aesthetic and political practices that involve attitudes, perceptions, and representations. They bring into play tense yet productive relationships between them to observe, classify, define, represent, and exhibit. The matter can be seen as a meeting of gazes. How do we see and how are

⁹ Carolina Soler and Mariana Giordano, “Reinventar el pasado, transformar el presente: danzas, imagen y espejos entre los qom del Chaco argentino”, in *Cuadernos de Música, Artes Visuales y Artes Escénicas*, vol. 16, n.º 2, edited by Pablo Mora (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2020).

¹⁰ Armando Muyolema, *El/la experto/a indigenista o la impunidad de la violencia epistémica*. s.d.



we seen? In a distant or close manner, lateral or oblique, concerned, implicated or complicit, clinical or ethnographic, derogatory or supportive, incomplete or opulent?.¹¹

Throw the museum into crisis or destroy it?

In 1957, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, an artist of Puerto Rican origin born in Brooklyn, cut into pieces Anthony Mann's Hollywood western Winchester '73 (1950). He did so using a tomahawk, an axe native to the indigenous peoples of North America, ideal for hand-to-hand combat and for scalping white invaders. Afterward, he placed the severed fragments into a medicine bag and then pulled them out again, reassembling them at random while chanting a Native American war cry. The performance culminated in a 16mm black and white Cowboy and "Indian Film", which placed him in the world of avant-garde experimental art creation and as an early precursor of destructive art.

In 2022, El Museo del Barrio (founded by him in 1969) held a contextual retrospective of his works, showcasing video installations, documents, and assemblages that share a critique of colonialism, destruction, and performative ritual. According to Julieta González, curator of the exhibition alongside Rodrigo Moura, the artist reclaimed his indigenous heritage and reacted radically against those who have stripped Latinos of their authentic artistic roots and deprived them of their rights due to racial and class intolerance.¹²

¹¹ Mora, *Paz en clave indígena*, 8.

¹² <https://artishockrevista.com/2022/05/16/raphael-montanez-ortiz-arte-destructivo/>.



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



Sixty-three years after Montañez Ortiz's axe blows in New York, other bangs shook the streets of Popayán and Bogotá as statues of the Spanish conquistadors Sebastián de Belalcázar and Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, founders of the cities of Popayán and Bogotá in the 16th century, came crashing down. Members of the Misak people, belonging to the Movement of Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest (AISO), claimed the political action of these topplings, which is not at all iconoclastic. In an extensive statement, the Spanish conquistadors were charged with a long list of crimes: genocide, land dispossession and grabbing, theft of indigenous cultural heritage, physical and cultural disappearance of the peoples of the great Pubenense territory, rape of women, torture, and enslavement, among other crimes. The trial and restorative actions were framed within the commitment of the indigenous movement to the collective memory of the blood shed and the need to rewrite history, "freeing ourselves from all traces of the coloniality of knowledge".¹³

What do Montañez's actions and those of the Misak people have in common? Undoubtedly, the revanchist spirit against the powers of white, elitist, and exclusionary societies. While the former criticizes indigenous representations in the media, the latter dismantles representations of colonial power in the public space. The first is the product of an individual voice, addressed to the world of art; the second is the collective expression of an indigenous organization that demands historical reparations from the Colombian State.

¹³*The trial of the Piurek — children of the water — descendants of the Pubenenses, against Sebastián Moyano y Cabrera, alias Sebastián de Belalcázar, whom the history of racist and colonial voice describes as the conquistador of "Popayán".* Unpublished document, issued in KeSRe Pel, the long summer of the Misak cosmic calendar, on June 25th, 2020 in the Gregorian calendar.



Other similar gestures, without physical harm but with moral implications, have been amplified by the media. On March 27, 1973, at the 45th Academy Awards ceremony, an Apache indigenous woman gave a speech on behalf of the actor Marlon Brando, who refused the award for best actor for his role in the film *The Godfather*. This was a protest against the discriminatory treatment of Native Americans by the film industry and in response to the Wounded Knee massacre, one of the darkest chapters in Native American history. Or the image of a French-speaking activist taking a Congolese statue from the Afrika Museum in Berg, Holland, shouting "Long live free Africa!" to condemn the artistic plundering by the Netherlands on the African continent during the 17th century. The act was broadcast on YouTube under the name "Reclaiming our heritage".

The internet has documented other symbolic actions, even more innocuous, such as dressing the statue of the Spanish Queen Isabella the Catholic, located in La Paz (Bolivia), in the traditional clothing of Andean women or *cholas* on October 12, 2020, during yet another anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Americas. Or the performance by Colombian artist Iván Argote in France when he parodied the toppling of the statue of Joseph Gallieni, a military officer accused of multiple massacres in African, Asian, and Caribbean colonies at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Gallieni was also the author of *The Politics of Race*, a despicable manual for the destruction and domination of the colonized. Eduardo Abaroa's 2012 installation, titled *Total Destruction of the Museum of Anthropology*, is another example of the artistic desire to envision a potential future, simulating the disappearance of colonialist institutions with their racist and oppressive legacies.¹⁴

¹⁴ Blanca María Cárdenas, "Y el reloj se detuvo. La (re)definición de los museos ante la covid-19", in *Cuicuilco. Revista de Ciencias Antropológicas*, 28-81 (México: 2021).



These and countless other episodes, which have occurred in various parts of the world, have prompted the expert scrutiny of museums and have deepened theoretical inquiries. Therefore, in contemporary debates within critical museology about what a museum is and should be, the starting point is the assumption that it is necessary to shed its colonial and Eurocentric heritage. But what does this mean? It means, precisely, that all traces of its imperial origin, linked to the interests and values of modernity, must disappear. However, this proposal does not resolve the following dilemma: decolonize the museum or reformulate museology?.¹⁵ When Antonio Pinto Ribeiro attempted to answer whether it was possible to decolonize museums, he responded bluntly: "Museums are either postcolonial or they are nothing".¹⁶ And although the question may seem naive to many, it has become a trend in academic discourse and, above all, an increasingly recurring political slogan.

The visit of a delegation from the Kogui people to Berlin (Germany) in 2015, with the purpose of requesting the return of two ritual masks that had been part of the collection of the Ethnological Museum of Dalhem for almost a century, had an impact among curators and artists. The image of Pedro Juan, the Mamo (spiritual leader), in front of his masks in the museum's storage room unleashed fears and admiration: "The indigenous are coming, the indigenous are reclaiming!" headlined the platform

¹⁵The dilemma refers to the contemporary debates that took place last year at the 44th ICOFOM Symposium (International Committee for Museology) of the International Council of Museums. The meeting focused on four major themes relating to decolonization: the internal transformations of museums, the "delicate question" of the blending of cultures, the role of communities in the collections, and the questioning of the museum's origin myths. The restitution of indigenous collections dominated much of the discussions. Yves Bergeron and Michèle Rivet, "Introduction. Decolonising museology or 're-formulating museology'", in *Icofom Study Series*, 49-2 (2021), 44-57.

¹⁶ Antonio Pinto, "¿Podemos descolonizar los museos?". Lecture delivered at the 8th Ibero-American Meeting of Museums (Lisbon: October 3-15, 2014).



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



Devuelve pe at the time. This is just one of many examples of the tensions that arise around the ethnographic and art collections housed in European museums.¹⁷

Indigenous demands for restitution have increased in areas with a colonial past, accompanied by primarily performative actions by artists in solidarity. In July 2019, artist Natalia Rodríguez staged a week-long *performance* in front of the Humboldt Forum, still under construction, in which she cut out photographs of the more than thirty thousand objects belonging to the museum. The action was a symbolic act that questioned the museum institution and its public, and was part of the strategies that the Institute for Art in Context (Institut für Kunst im Kontext) developed that year to amplify the critical voices of Latin Americans against the Humboldt Forum. It also served as a radical response to an invitation by Manuela Fischer, custodian of the Latin American collection of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and one of the curators of the Humboldt Forum, to make artistic interventions in the permanent collection of the museum. With her *performance*, Natalia Rodríguez made it clear that collections must return to their places of origin. The very word *collection* has been the target of critics who argue that this euphemistic terminology should be replaced by "loot", the product of violent or consensual pillaging.

Undoubtedly, performative actions have stimulated the discussion on the need to question all colonial symbols, taking the issue beyond museum walls. When in 2015 a student at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, threw feces on the statue of Cecil Rhodes, considered a monument of British colonialism, the discussion shifted to

¹⁷Ten months after this article was written, the demands of the Kogui people were met and the masks were returned in August 2023 by Germany to the Colombian government and, in turn, to the Kogui authorities of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.



the country's educational content and practices. Students wondered angrily: "Is my curriculum white?".

In the academic sphere, still a far cry from the artistic gestures of cultural protest, the English anthropologist and museographer Sharon MacDonald responded to Ramón Sangüesa's question: "What walls should fall in museums and why?". Considering museums with "difficult legacies" and the dilemmas that experts face in deciding what should be preserved for the future, MacDonald raised the need to rethink what is chosen, who chooses, what is preserved, and for what audiences.¹⁸ Traditional museology has been criticized for the hegemonic nature of explanatory texts which have a scientific, neutral, and exclusionary style. They impose a single interpretation and their narratives exalt colonial power. There have been calls to make room for new actors, to make other counter-hegemonic narratives visible, to review the social function of museums, and to modify their understanding of what should be collected and preserved. It has even been suggested that objects should disappear, with more importance given to activities and teachings.

With more radical and scattered perspectives on the museum institution and their self-examinations of conscience, other stances make it clear that de-westernizing the museum does not necessarily decolonize it,¹⁹ while calling for the need to *challenge* the museum and its ways of legitimizing the memories of power. These stances find it absurd to believe that the museum can redefine its mission, methodologies, audiences, and institutional structure in a decolonial way. It is not possible to identify

¹⁸ "What will our future memories be?". Interview with Sharon MacDonald, at <https://lab.cccb.org/cuales-seran-los-recuerdos-del-fut>.

¹⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, "Desoccidentalizar no es descolonizar". Interview with the *Otramérica* team, September 18, 2013.



a museum or any other institution that no longer operates as an instrument for legitimizing colonial processes, racialized memories, or Eurocentric approaches, and is instead capable of developing a critical and reflective agenda on archive management, forms of representation, and the inclusion of marginalized narratives. Whatever the museum, it is part of a world-system that has not changed. To put it another way, I borrow a slogan from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation: “Our rebellion is our NO to the system. Our resistance is our YES to another possible thing”.²⁰

Bolivian activist Maria Galindo, member of the Mujeres Creando [Women Creating] collective, believes that decolonizing the museum is impossible, since it has not been depatriarchalized in the current context. She claims that the current inseparable relationship between coloniality and patriarchy, in addition to not having been noted by the academic world, has prevented the emergence of political practices aimed at subverting the colonial order. Depatriarchalization is the emergence of a political subject that is not constructed based on its status as a victim, or on its customs, place of origin, or skin color. From these places of enunciation, the museum cannot be subverted or destabilized. So what places is she talking about? The streets — the ultimate political area — a place of survival, encounters, and disagreements. A place where unorthodox theories are born in opposition to a world of academia that monopolizes the right to theorize, amidst the fervor of social struggles that equally connect gay people with the indigenous people of Pachamama. “What we need,” she says, “are not statements of rights but of utopias”. It is therefore a question of creating a method, process, or possibility that allows the emergence of a *decolonized other*,

²⁰In Catherine Walsh, ed., *Pedagogías decoloniales: prácticas insurgentes de resistir, (re)existir y (re)vivir*, tomo II (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2013).



capable of demystifying, disarming, disassembling, dismantling, disorganizing, decoding, or destroying the patriarchal matrix of colonialism.²¹

However, the networks and platforms that identify as decolonial are by no means insignificant, as they provide a space for activists, critics, artists, and curators who combine research, artistic practice, and social mobilization. We must also acknowledge the numerous local museum experiences that starkly contrast multimillion-dollar institutions, such as the Berlin Museum, or mega-projects in the style of the Museum of the Future in Dubai. Examples of these local experiences include the aforementioned Museo del Barrio in New York and, as recommended by Pinto in his cited book, the Maré Museum in Rio de Janeiro and the museographic programs of the Metropolitan Gallery in Santiago, Chile.

These experiences, which Pinto refers to as “active postcolonialism”, are not limited to the development of the museum but also advocate for human rights, liberation theology, indigenous movements, land occupation movements, and new cartographies of favelas.²² Other types of museums are thus emerging, no longer serving as instruments for validating colonial power, but rather as critical and reflexive tools that propose alternative ways of managing archives, different forms of representation, and new narratives depicting diverse worlds.

Of course, it is still necessary to address crucial questions regarding the feasibility of incorporating other ontologies and epistemic structures into museum spaces, as well as the roles that various social actors should play within the power structures of museum institutions. The emergence of “subjugated knowledge” — using Foucault's terminology — in this space should prompt institutional readjustments that allow for

²¹ María Galindo. Lecture delivered on November 27, 2014 at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona. Beatriz Preciado, curator of the seminar *Descolonizar el museo*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pg8gf9NhcbM>

²² Pinto, *Podemos descolonizar*, 29.



autonomous decision-making, rather than mere prior consultation or the condescending use of “subjugated” opinions. Are there indigenous curators in ethnographic and art museums? Should there be indigenous curators in these kinds of museums? Do all indigenous peoples need museums? Have they been asked? What should be done with colonial monuments? Destroy them or keep them as historical examples of shameful memories? Empty the warehouses and shelves full of collected objects? Return them to their original communities for good? Create participatory methods to oppose counter-visualities and self-representations within museums? And, as Rodríguez²³ (2018) has suggested, engage in creating solidarity versus indifference, empathy versus voyeurism, and subjectivity versus objectivity?

Notes on Museographic Collecting and the Right to Look and Be Looked at

In October 1970, the young Martin von Hildebrand paddled a small canoe down the Guacayá channel to its mouth on the Mirití River. He was headed for the hamlet of La Pedrera, in the middle of the Amazon jungle, where he hoped to find a way to Bogotá. At the urging of his mentor, anthropologist Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, he had begun his journey five months earlier in search of the indigenous Tanimuka people. Hired by the Colombian Institute of Anthropology, in addition to his field notes, photographs, and audio tapes containing testimonies and songs, he carried in separate trunks samples of the material culture of the group he was studying: headdresses, feathered crowns, hand drums, rattles, arrow bags, blowguns, and other ritual objects, which he either purchased or exchanged for fishhooks, beads, western medicine, and cartridges. Although it was part of his institutional commitments as a

²³ Mariel Rodríguez, “Descolonizar el museo. Limitaciones y posibilidades del museo como productor de encuentros”. Online seminar, held from May 28 to July 22, 2018.



field researcher, he assumed that the indigenous owners of these objects must find his eagerness for collecting ridiculous. As well as taking up space and getting in the way during the return trip in cramped canoes, he wondered: "What use can they be in a foreign place and out of cultural context?". Someone explained to him that all those objects, once shamanically curated or arranged for productive or ritual purposes, had the spirit removed from them. What they were giving him was the mere shell, as they rightly assumed that in the place where Martin was taking these objects, they would not be used for hunting or ceremonial purposes. "If he takes them with their spirits, he must learn how to handle them, and in Bogotá they are of no use", they told him.²⁴

In December 2008, a group of Kogui, Wiwa, and Arhuaca authorities from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta curiously entered the National Museum of Colombia and the Gold Museum in Bogotá to investigate the whereabouts of numerous objects of power (*sewás* in the Kogui language), taken by treasure hunters and archaeologists. Shibulata, the *Mamo*, was surprised to see numerous objects stored in warehouses, enclosed in plastic boxes, or exhibited behind glass. As much as he tried to spiritually deduce the origin of the majority of the pots, griddles, ceramics adorned with anthropomorphic figures, beads for necklaces, and gold artifacts, he could not find a satisfactory answer. The explanations given by the museum guides about these objects and the captions translated by his assistant seemed incomprehensible to him and completely unconnected to the cultural meaning he had in mind. After a ritual procedure, which was incomprehensible to most non-indigenous officials and attendees, he asked his assistant to translate what he was about to say: "All of these objects or materials were made by the spiritual fathers Serankua, Shikuiki, and Mukueke. Each object belongs to one of the nine layers into which our territory is divided and serves a specific function in maintaining the balance of nature, such as

²⁴Personal communication, 2021.



controlling diseases or preventing natural disasters".²⁵ He looked gravely at the director of the Institute and asked him what those amassed objects were doing there, what role they were fulfilling. He did not think that they were doing anything there, locked up, without sustenance, lacking the spiritual care of *mamos* like him. He then asked for their release.

Drawing on Brazilian curator and psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik, the *Mamo's* words reminded us of the essay *Valery Proust Museum*, by Theodor Adorno.²⁶ For the essayist, the expression "museum-like" has unpleasant overtones, since it designates objects condemned to death. Museum and mausoleum share a phonetic association and, furthermore, they function in a similar manner: they are the burial place of works of art and bodies. The Kogui *Mamo's* comment has also resonated with Deleuze and Guattari's statement: "It is always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned, or of tempting it into an uncertain combat."²⁷ Shibulata's uncertain combat is on hold, and the museum authorities have not yet realized that his desire to have the *sewás* returned is not to create an indigenous museum in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta but rather to bury, in a manner akin to an "*anarchaeology*," some recovered objects so that they can regain their power and safeguard the cultural integrity of indigenous peoples. In this regard, the ontological turn remains pure rhetoric among those advocating for alternative possible realities. Additionally, it was not possible to bridge the gap between them, thus maintaining an interpretative abyss.

These *mamos*, who close their eyes to see, also challenge our society's ocularcentric obsession and its display mechanisms. They prioritize their right to conceal more than

²⁵Testimony taken from the audiovisual piece *Resistencia en la Línea Negra*, directed by Amado Villafaña (Santa Marta: Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona, 2011).

²⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Prismas. La crítica de la cultura y la sociedad* (Berlín/Barcelona: Ediciones Ariel, 1962).

²⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2001).



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia



our professed right to look. In *yátukua* consultations, the *tutusoma* or hat, symbolizing the snow-capped peaks of the Sierra, is used to cover the shepherd's gourd overflowing with water. This serves to shield the ritual from the curious eyes of those unfamiliar with divination rituals, where stones or beads are submerged to produce bubble-messages from the invisible realms. Similarly, there is a mandate to conceal the knowledge sought after by cultural researchers, museographers, and their audiences.

This concealment of truth contradicts the ideal held by knowledge societies and challenges Mirzoeff's assertion that the right to look is the right to reality.²⁸ In other words, it raises questions about the concept of visibility when it is used as an aesthetic justification for domination. And let us not forget that cinema, universal exhibitions, and museums were born with this syndrome. Guarín Martínez²⁹ reminds us of the words written in his diary at the beginning of the 20th century by Burton Holmes, one of the first travelers to use film as a means of documenting travel, giving birth to a popular genre of the time, the *travelogues*: "To travel is to possess the world". The phrase serves as a metaphor for the colonialist expansion of the West. "To film is to possess the world," I might add, situating cinema as Gustavo Gallupo sets out in *Refutación de Troya [Refutation of Troy]*: "Before cinema, there was already an inclination for control and appropriation. Without that inclination, cinema would have been inconceivable. The desire to kill and the desire to create images share one and the same foundation".³⁰ But cinema in indigenous hands—what it produces and how

²⁸ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Right to Look", in *Revista Científica de Información y Comunicación*, 13 (2016), 31.

²⁹ Óscar Guarín Martínez, *La Amazonia (des)cinematografiada (1910-1950)* (Campinas: Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2015).

³⁰ Emilio Bernini, *Refutación y reinención de la imagen. A propósito de "Refutación de Troya", de Gustavo Gallupo* (2020), at <http://kilometro111cine.com.ar/refutacion-y-reinencion-de-la-imagen/>.



it produces it—evokes that violent inclination and demonstrates that other worlds and other ways of narrating those worlds are possible.

The so-called uncontacted peoples in the Amazon serve as a perfect analogy for an emerging ideology: delocalizing, evading drones and surveillance devices, protecting privacy, getting off Facebook, avoiding spectacle and various other counter-visual practices and attitudes. It's the right not to be looked at when that gaze (or its representation) hurts, kills, condemns, or robs. To claim the right to hide is to claim the right to exist.

Mirzoeff wants to escape from this manifest destiny, from a visuality at the service of necropolitics or perverse voyeurism, and in a personal sense, he proposes a right to look that “begins with looking into the eyes of the other to express friendship, solidarity, or love”. In his opinion, the gaze must be mutual and goes beyond representation. He also advocates for autonomy and the recognition of otherness on equal terms, that is, he advocates for a subjectivity-other with sufficient autonomy to organize the relations between the visible and the sayable. These statements can serve as a premise for any policy regarding the visibility and exhibition *of and with* indigenous peoples.



mamu
Museo de Arte Miguel Urrutia

