

Nelly Y. Pinkrah

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NELLY Y. PINKRAH

A CASE FOR MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURES – A COMMENT ON ACTIVISM IN LANDSCAPES

Decoloniality and what is now referred to as decolonial theory emerged with Gloria Anzaldúas and Norma Alarcóns semi-biographical works as Chicana feminist writers¹ and many other Latin American theorists. From the perspective of decoloniality – founded in the decolonial struggles of African, Asian and Latin American countries from the late 1950s on.² – in today’s world there is no conceivable position that could locate itself outside of a colonial situation. It is seen as an „option“³ of thinking and acting that allows to recognise colonial continuities of knowledge, of structures of politics, of power and control, and of global economy, in order to understand their determined narratives. Within this realm of thinking the importance of orality and oral cultures, of language and communication, in Latin America has been stressed and theorised. Thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo contributed greatly to this theorising, assuming that “theoretical models dealing with languages have been built in complicity with colonial expansion.”⁴ Oral cultures and languages (and entire peoples) were erased from the continent when at

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- 1 See amongst others: Norma Alarcón, “Chicana Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision through Malintzín/or Malintzín: Putting Flesh Back on the Object”, in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called my Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, New York, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983, pp. 182-190; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
 - 2 Walter D. Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing. On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience”, *Europäisches Institut für progressive Kulturpolitik*, 2011. Available at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en> [accessed June 27, 2016].
 - 3 “First, when you state that the decolonial is an option, every thing is an option – Christianity is an option, Liberalism and Neo-Liberalism are options, Marxism is an option, Islamism is an option. We live in a world of options and, therefore, in a world of ‘truths’ in parenthesis.” Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandéz, “Decolonial options and artistic/aestheSic entanglements. An interview with Walter Mignolo”, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2014, Vol. 3/1, pp. 196-212, p. 198.
 - 4 Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 219.

the same time in early modernity conceptual classifications of language and communication were introduced replacing similar structures and frameworks in respective cultures.⁵ Scholars like Miguel León-Portilla aim to reconstruct certain classifications to show “that sophisticated discourse classification and generic categories do not depend on writing to be organised, nor is writing a necessary condition for lasting discursive patterns.”⁶ To jump into the here presented article, this last quote already pinpoints a major aspect of how the perception of the means and capacities of a medium such as the radio can be related to the history of particular localities.

The authors of the article ‘Activism in Landscapes. Culture, Spectrum and Latin America’ essentially suggest three things: first they conceptualise the electromagnetic spectrum “as landscapes in the form of geo-cultural knowledge” and highly contest the colonial/modern division between nature and culture. They write that “natural infrastructure” makes “all culture possible”, hence a clear division between those two is a fragile assumption. But the governing of spatial energy by states and private companies continues to limit and violate fundamental structures of the expression of people(s) on the basis of such assumptions. Second, the authors combine this conceptualisation with an exemplary decolonial argument by making a case for the specificity and importance of oral cultures on the Latin American continent as briefly mentioned before. In this respect the authors reference the ideas of Felix Guattari and Michel De Certeau on ‘becoming minoritarian’⁷ and ‘political expression and participation’⁸, which connects their argument with what in decolonial theory is called ‘epistemic disobedience’. This epistemic disobedience, they suggest, can be exercised through ‘wild speech’ or ‘savage orality’ and in their article it culminates in the “critical exploration” of radio as an “act of decoloniality”. Therefore, they provide the example of the free radio movement, particularly of Radio Muda and Fonias Jurua in the Amazon.

Thus, starting with the conceptualisation of landscapes and the electromagnetic spectrum, it can be noted that if infrastructure is understood as nature and vice versa the epistemological conditions of

5 Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance. Literacy, Territoriality & Colonization*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1995, p. 118.

6 Ibid.

7 “Becoming-minoritarian is a political affair and necessitates a labor of power (puissance), an active micropolitics. This is the opposite of macropolitics, and even of History, in which it is a question of knowing how to win or obtain a majority.” Cp. Gilles Deleuze und Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press, p. 292.

8 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984. See Michel de Certeau, *The capture of speech and other political writings*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

possibility of how to think, understand, and conceptualise natural environments as infrastructure or infrastructure as natural environments have to be considered.⁹ If, as is the case in the presented article, there is a focus on localities and local stories rather than those globally imposed, epistemic disobedience and critical engagement in the deconstruction of categories and great narratives help to uncover power structures. An element of invisibility is inherent in the very idea of infrastructures¹⁰ making it even more important to reevaluate notions such as ‘nature’ or ‘natural’. They structure and inform the ways how we understand being-in-the-world is possible, therefore the privatisation and governance of infrastructures (natural environments) limit various forms of being-in-the-world, sabotage possibilities of expression, effective communication and participation for those at the margins of technological, socio-economical and political access.

The conception of nature is dependent on the ideas and associations that exist (or do not exist) and on the question of what ‘nature’ or ‘the natural’ is. “As environmental feminist theorist Stacy Alaimo puts it, nature is ‘a philosophical concept, a potent ideological mode, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism.’”¹¹ A reciprocal conditioning is taking place: By opposing such concepts as ‘rationality’ and ‘emotions’ or a supposedly more ‘natural way of living’ to ‘civilisation’, hence by denying certain bodies and peoples their agency, it was determined who or what is entitled to be or possess a more civilised and therefore legitimate culture, knowledge economy and production – a mode of being. Furthermore by judging certain bodies on this epistemological basis, their mode of being was classified. “As a result, Alaimo says, the concept of nature ‘has long been waged against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes.’”¹² Dismantling the conception of nature, as opposed to culture, as opposed to technology, can hence be read as a strategy of epistemic disobedience pointing to the relations between users of infrastructures, infrastructures themselves and the (natural) environment. Infrastructures, in this sense, become a relational dynamic concept, that “encompasses both technical bases and

9 “Ashley Carse argues that as natural environments are increasingly shaped by human action, phenomena such as rivers and forests have been transformed into systems of human imagination and intervention, rendering nature itself infrastructural”; Cp. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2015, p. 14.

10 Cp. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, 2015, p. 6.

11 Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature”, in Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (eds.), *Material Feminisms*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008: p. 239, cited from Lori Gallegos de Castillo, “Sketch of a Decolonial Environmentalism: Challenging the Colonial Conception of Nature through the Biocultural Perspective.” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, 2015, Vol. 6/1, p. 36.

12 Ibid.

social arrangements, extends beyond single events and sites, connects with existing practices and standards, and must be learned and naturalized over time by users.”¹³

How content moves, and through which means, has an impact on the content itself. The study of material infrastructures has advanced immensely through Lisa Parks’ and Nicole Starosielski’s publication *Signal Traffic* (2015). “Media and communication researchers have begun to explore the sociocultural and economic relations of mobile telephony, but few have considered the complex materialities of its infrastructure.”¹⁴ The manifold forms of what *media infrastructures* might be and their entanglement in the shaping of conditions of living and thinking, go beyond mobile telecommunications. Employing different lenses of micro-level analyses and conceptualising different sites (such as data centers, underwater cable systems across the Pacific, etc.) allows on the one hand to demystify the paradigm of immateriality. On the other hand questions that concern infrastructures become a site for critical thinking. So the article here presented – which could very well be part of the aforementioned book – sheds light on the specific projects of Radio Muda as well as Fonias Jurua whose functionalities are embedded in the history of orality of the Latin American continent. And the discussion is very much influenced by historical philosophy and phenomenology in regards to the considerations of decolonial theory.

So what forms *can* media infrastructures actually take? When infrastructures are believed to loosely describe “any important, widely shared, human-constructed resource”,¹⁵ it is essential to critically examine what determines the understanding of these human-constructed resources and what is understood to embody which infrastructures for which purpose. Especially if one assumes that media infrastructures “are material forms as well as discursive constructions”¹⁶, the historicisation and contextualisation of these discursive constructions become crucial. These methods make it possible to understand the contemporary intermingling of infrastructures in economic, geo-political and environmental issues, struggles and conditions. Contemporary infrastructures have an enormous environmental impact and require natural resources. And it is precisely at that point in the article when the boundaries between culture and nature become blurry and nature itself becomes infrastructural and dynamic (and a part of an imagination that facilitates communication,

13 Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, 2015, p. 9.

14 Ibid., p. 3.

15 Paul N. Edwards, “Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems.” in Philip Brey et al. (eds.), *Modernity and Technology*, Ambridge/London, MIT Press, pp. 185-225, 2003, p. 186f.

16 Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, 2015, p. 5.

speech and civic disobedience) – that a certain productivity is achieved.

So to sum up these brief observations and contextualisations, from my perspective the article's approach is one that systematically addresses how a decolonial view and theory informs a contemporary situation. Identifying and deconstructing the lineages and linkages of colonialism lets us take seriously this situation of coloniality, further introduce it, understand, reformulate and explore the concepts behind it. To think a decolonial communication through the means and techno-politics of the electromagnetic spectrum as an invisible infrastructure, bearing in mind landscapes as "procedures of symbolic and practical action" where nature and culture are constantly in motion and not separate(d) entities promotes a form of empowering the struggles for autonomy and decolonisation. It does so not only for marginalised people but for a much broader society in which questions like what the commons are and how to protect them are as relevant as ever. The "epistemological challenge" to "formulate a mode of thought that sees in the landscape and its features an element which is social, aesthetic, political, technical and material" is directly influencing a mode of being – a mode of how people see each other, relate to each other and the natural world. It is, in fact, a challenge that enfolds its relevance on the level of every-day life, as well as in social, aesthetic, political, technical and material ways.