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Decolonizing Decolonization

Rafael Cardoso, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro and Freie Universität Berlin

I do not think, for example, that it is too much to suggest that the American vision of the world—which allows so little reality, generally speaking, for any of the darker forces in human life, which tends until today to paint moral issues in glaring black and white—owes a great deal to the battle waged by Americans to maintain between themselves and black men a human separation which could not be bridged.

—James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” 1953

I was recently asked to sign an appeal for anti-racist action which, among other things, called upon people to watch Raoul Peck’s 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. I signed it, gladly. To me, James Baldwin is one of the towering figures of twentieth-century literature, and I think everyone should see Peck’s outstanding film. However, there was one line in the text of the appeal that rankled. It went something like: “since the first enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown in 1619,” and the clause was intended to date the beginning of slavery in the Americas. As anyone familiar with the history of the Atlantic slave trade knows, that is entirely inaccurate. By 1619, enslaved Africans had been trafficked for over a century, in their hundreds of thousands, to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas, as well as to the Caribbean. The twenty or so captives who arrived in Jamestown are a number so small, statistically speaking, that the Slave Voyages database does not even list any disembarkments in North America before 1650.¹

I should mention that I was called upon to sign the appeal mainly because I am from Brazil. It was a worldwide appeal, and the organizers presumably wanted to include as diverse a range of nationalities as they could. As a historian, though, I felt it behooved me to point out that the Atlantic slave trade began a century earlier—particularly as one coming from a country so profoundly shaped by that crime against humanity. The territory that is now Brazil was the single-largest destination for enslaved Africans, receiving approximately 35% of the ten million or so individuals transported across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Non-specialists are not usually aware that the number of people trafficked to Brazil is almost ten times greater than that to North America and second only to the Caribbean, taken in its entirety. Of course, it is not a competition, but the enormity of the atrocity and the complexity of ensuing debates make it necessary to set the record straight.

Dutifully, I set about explaining the facts and figures to the organizers of the appeal. Haitian-born Raoul Peck was, I argued, entitled to respect for the memory of his Afro-Latin

heritage. I even proposed alternative wording for the offending clause, phrasing it more broadly to speak of the five centuries since the Atlantic slave trade began and the century and a half since it ended—dates that apply to the Americas in general. They were receptive, apologized for their lack of sensitivity, and promised to correct the text. A few weeks later, when the appeal was finally published, the mention of Jamestown in 1619 had crept back into my reworded clause. That is more a testament to the power of the *New York Times* than to the weight of historical truth.

I reference this trivial episode because it is symptomatic of a blind spot readily visible from a Latin American perspective: the tendency of the present reckoning with racism and colonialism to view the past through the experiences of the English-speaking world, often to the exclusion of all else. Let me detail that charge with a less vague and more apposite example. Earlier this year, the journal *Art History* published a piece on “Decolonizing Art History,” which posed a set of four questions to twenty scholars in the field.² The result is a thoughtful and engaging survey of opinions that provides genuine insights into the topic. The editors made an evident effort to balance the composition of their sampling in terms of gender and ethnicity, age and experience, social and cultural origin. The group is diverse in every respect except one. Of the twenty scholars polled, seventeen are based in UK or US institutions. The remaining three live in Canada, India, and Nigeria—all Commonwealth countries.

There are probably a number of good, common-sense reasons why the editors failed to include anyone operating outside the Anglosphere. There always are. Reaching out beyond one’s professional network and direct experience can be a difficult task, sometimes even daunting. Yet it needs to be done. *Art History* is presently engaged in an effort to broaden the cultural and linguistic purview of its readership via a series of reviews on art-historical production in languages other than English, of which I had the honor of authoring the first.³ So, in this case, it is safe to say that the obstacle was not of an ideological nature, imposed by strictures of institutional power. Rather, the self-referentiality with which discussions of decolonization are conducted within the Anglosphere reveals a structural inability to think beyond the world view bequeathed to the present by centuries of English-speaking dominion.

Discussions of decolonization in the English language sometimes seem to redraw the map of British imperialism. I am not arguing against the use of English as a scholarly *lingua franca*. We need a common language for academic and scientific discourse, and the reality is that it is currently English. *Art History* is published in the UK. It is to be expected that a majority of its authors are based in institutions in Britain and its former colonies. However, to a reader from a non-English-speaking background, it is alarming that, of twenty authors consulted on the hot-button topic of decolonization, 100% hail from the Anglosphere. English speakers make up approximately 20% of the world population. If ever the phrase “majority world” made any sense, it is to refer to the linguistic diversity left out of that debate. The unspoken message is that the network of cultural relationships arising out of the former bonds of empire retain their valency and suffice unto themselves.

To those coming from an older generation of anti-racist activism and postcolonial studies, like myself, one of the paradoxes of the present wave of militancy is its seeming insularity. Recent discussions of decolonization in the art world have focused sharply on the representation of “people of color” in institutions and exhibitions, mostly located in the metropolitan centers of Europe and North America, but seem less unflinching in their

willingness to confront ongoing imperialism abroad. That the United States, United Kingdom, and France, among others, continue to exert colonial power through their foreign policies is rarely high on the agenda. As demands for Black rights and gender equality gain traction at home, overarching concerns with international solidarity fade into the background. Somehow, decolonization appears to have strayed from its roots in postcolonialism and become inward-looking.

Perhaps this is just a false impression on my part, filtered through the distorting lens of someone looking at the Anglosphere from the outside, but what I am arguing for is precisely the importance of taking external views into account. After all, it is impossible to see yourself from the vantage point of your own position. From where I stand, it is breathtaking to witness a new readiness in the United States to reckon with issues once held taboo. The toppling of Confederate monuments is something I never expected to see in my lifetime. Having grown up in Virginia in the 1970s, I was thrilled by the destruction of “the boys who wore gray” in Durham, North Carolina, and heartened by the removal of the monument to Robert E. Lee in New Orleans, both in 2017. Yet, the present reworking of historical narratives strikes me as entrenching even further the tendency to view the American experience in splendid isolation.

Perversely, the doctrine of “America first” seems to have wormed its way into the hearts and minds even of those who oppose it. When will more American institutions be prepared to engage with voices from Latin America and the Caribbean and confront the enduring structures of imperialism that keep the playing field of international relations—including artistic and academic ones—so starkly uneven? It is not enough to embrace Latino culture, an integral part of the historical experience of the United States. The alterity within is never truly *Other*. Rather, like James Baldwin in the quote cited in the epigraph for this essay, Anglo-American scholars need to step outside their own cultural bias and see the world as it sees them. Decolonization involves making the effort to hear those who do not speak your language and taking their claims seriously. If there is one thing the Anglosphere stands to learn from the rest of the world, it is that the gargantuan panorama of colonialism contains a full palette of colors and grays.

Notes

¹ *Slave Voyages*, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>.

² Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” *Art History* 43, no.1 (2020): 8–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12490>.

³ Rafael Cardoso, “Why have there been no great Portuguese-language art historians?,” *Art History* 42, no. 1 (2019): 178–84.