

# Interculturality



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Human lives are entangled. Societies are made up of networks. International relations must be viewed as dense [entanglements](#) between varieties of actors. Until recently, histories were mainly written within national or subnational boundaries, but are now framed as entangled histories, as *histoires croisées* where transfers of all kinds constitute and transform entities and identities [Werner & Zimmermann 2006; Pernau 2012; Ifversen 2015]. Often, first encounters led to permanent transfers and to systematic entanglements. The circulation of goods, peoples, thoughts, words and death between different parts of the world uphold these [entanglements](#). They were formative in creating new ideas, new cultures and new societies as well as destroying existing ideas, cultures and societies. In 1492, Europeans 'discovered' a new world, which

changed their old world forever. The indigenous peoples of this European New world experienced the destruction of their own world.

The figure of [entanglement](#) is used to conceptualize networks of interaction within different systems, such as the international system, the economic system, the media system, the knowledge system and so on. In a globalized present, we constantly speak of global connectivities and interconnectedness to describe human interactions. Globalization is, however, yet another form of [entanglement](#) layered on top of other, older forms of [entanglement](#). The colonial system formed in the 16th century by European powers, is such an older [entanglement](#), which still constitutes a matrix for relations between what is now termed the Global North and the Global South.

This colonial matrix is the basis for a logic of coloniality supported by a global ideology of modernity [Mignolo 2011]. European modernity in its different forms constitutes the present backbone of this structural logic. De Sousa Santos speaks of “an abyssal line”, which excludes and make invisible what is simply an object of European modernity. Those objects or territories are simply being violently appropriated [De Sousa Santos 2016].

[Entanglements](#) are often set within systems constituted of asymmetrical relations. The colonial matrix formed by European colonialism and imperialism is one such system. Its centrality is uphold by the constant

creation of inferiority, invisibility and marginality. If we – and for the moment I leave this inclusive ‘we’ unquestioned – are to engage in encounters within this system we have two options, either to endorse a European modernity and thus keep drawing the abyssal line or to cross it. In the latter case, encounters demand a prior, [decolonial](#) move, which first means to deconstruct coloniality within the existing hegemony of European modernity. Mignolo speaks of a necessary delinking, which places ‘you’ – and here I insert a position that I am not immediately part of – outside European modernity where alternative visions of life and society become visible for decolonial subjects. Delinking corresponds to what de Sousa Santos calls a sociology of absence that makes present that which the system [represses](#) and make invisible. He is thus adding a temporal perspective to Mignolo’s spatial thinking. By bringing in temporality, de Sousa Santos also opens up to the non-yet. [Decolonial](#) thinking is also a way of generating hope for the future. This [affective](#) undergirding of the delinking mode is what he calls a sociology of emergences.

[Decolonial](#) strategies are seen as alternatives to existing strategies within a world formed by the colonial matrix such as re-westernization and de-westernization. The former would simply mean to accept a (rejuvenated) modernity either under a US banner or in a softer EU-European version. De-westernization, on the other hand, entails a radical dismissal of past [entanglements](#) and a “thinking without the

other” [Mignolo 2011, p.49]. This dismissal can either take the form of a traditionalisation (an imaginary return to a pre-colonial past) - what Fanon criticized as “the old tribal attitudes” adopted by the assimilated ruling classes [Fanon 1968, p.157] – or of a relegation of colonialism to a past long overtaken by a prominent global present. Both of these strategies make [decolonial](#) [entanglements](#) difficult. Re-westernization operates a logic of assimilation, and de-westernization a logic of alterity.

The [decolonial](#) strategy not only proposes a delinking and a sociology of emergences, it opens up a framework for rethinking practices of [entanglements](#). The hope linked to the sociology of emergences is produced by intercultural encounters or what de Sousa Santos calls “intercultural translations”. These are “the alternative(s) both to the abstract universalism that grounds Western-centric theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures” [de Sousa Santos 2016, p.334]. They are thus the medium to attain that pluri- or transversality, which is the alternative to the dominant Eurocentric universalism. Pluriversality both involves unlearning modernity and engaging in “epistemic diversality” [Mignolo 2011] or in different “ecologies of knowledge” [de Sousa Santos 2016]. Some scholars prefer transversality because this term more explicitly points to the crossing and intersecting [Miike 2010], but all agree that the strategy avoids cancelling out universal knowledge and encounters. On the contrary, it is “a horizontal

strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions” [Mbembe 2015 p.19].

Interculturality is a concept closely linked to the field of intercultural communication. While encounter and dialogue are abstract terms, intercultural communication deals with the specific practice of communication. It is defined as involving “interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbolic systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event” [Samovar, L.A., Porter R., and McDaniel, E.R. 2010, p.12]. Culture thus becomes the distinctive feature, which produces an unusual interface between groups or individuals communicating (whereas inference is the usual asymmetry within communication). Scholars in intercultural communication are certainly aware of the structural asymmetries embedded in constituting the ‘inter’ in communication. Coercion, appropriation, imposition, assimilation, resistance and so on works to create asymmetries. These scholars are, however, primarily focused on how to make intercultural communication possible through the possession or the formation of intercultural competences (including respect, tolerance, and ethno-relativism). To conceptualize possible meeting points, they use such terms as intercultural space or third space. Obviously, these spaces cannot be seen as neutral arenas of negotiations. They are zones of contact and friction.

Spatial metaphors make it easier to imagine the production and effect of interculturality. De Sousa Santos prefers to speak of contact zones that are “zones in which rival normative ideas, knowledges, power forms, symbolic universes, and agencies meet in usually unequal conditions and resist, reject, assimilate, imitate, translate, and subvert each other, thus giving rise to hybrid cultural constellations in which the inequality of exchanges may be either reinforced or reduced” [de Sousa Santos 2016, p.342]. The plethora of possibilities listed here demonstrates the complexity of interculturality. It is, however, important to note two central aspects at play in this process. The first is that contact zones only exist if there is a willingness to produce them. The geopolitical vocabulary is rich on terms for zones or territories designed to limit contacts (buffer zones), to control them (limes), to assimilate them (the frontier) [Walters 2004]. Assimilation or imitation are certainly ways of managing relations, but they hardly produce interculturality. With his list of modalities within the contact zone, de Sousa Santos probably wants to emphasize the difficulties and the tensions involved in entering them. Secondly, contact zones are only effective if they leave reciprocal traces. As shown in much research on intercultural communication, there is an apparent risk of becoming self-affirmative, of essentializing identities and of caging others in stereotypes. When moving into a contact zone groups or individuals come armed with identity politics that replace the

incertitude and the indeterminism with control and certitude. They turn the contact zone into a comfort zone.

On the other hand, it is often claimed that contact zones are hotbeds of hybridity; they challenge existing catalogues of identities and leave their mark on them. Homi Bhabha, who has placed hybridity at the center of his cultural theory, sees it as a “third space” where new positions can emerge and old identities are being displaced. In his elegant rhetoric, the third space becomes a strategy to “elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” [Bhabha 1994, p.56]. Hybridity or third space must be seen both as structural conditions of contacts and transfers (they leave traces), a certain process (they involve practices) and a normative goal (they allow for changes). The practice is often captured through the figure of translation. Contact zones make translation possible, but the latter is the practice through which actors engage in potentially transformative processes leading to hybridity. Translation works both at the semantic and the communicative level. By communicating, actors negotiate meanings. They furthermore articulate positionalities in a communicative sense (the subject of enunciation) and in a discursive sense (the subject position). Translation thus at the same time reveals different positionalities (who are *you* translating?) and the potentials for accessing other meanings. Souleymane Bachir Diagne sees this learning of other languages – his term for cultural differences – as a first departure from a colonial matrix and a possibility for constituting a

third space where universality and interculturality meets. In his rendering, translation is “a language of languages” – with a term borrowed from the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o – which opens of a new horizon of universality [Diagne and Amselle 2018].

To produce interculturality through translation and communication presupposes a set of conditions. First there must be a moral willingness, "converging motivations" or even a "cosmopolitan emotion of sharing the world with those who do not share our knowledge or experience" [de Sousa Santos, 2014, p.345, 360] to enter the contact zone and engage in translation. Secondly, there needs to be a critical effort to deconstruct existing hegemonies (coloniality, the abyssal line, the colonial difference) and the positionalities through which they operates. This is particularly important when speaking from a position of the Global North where memories of coloniality have been repressed. Thirdly, there must be a political will to change the power geometries that influence or even hinder translations. Even then, contact zones are difficult and temporary places to be in, and translations are demanding practices. Entering a contact zone means engaging with uncertainties and being exposed to misunderstanding. Translations demand a certain reciprocity, but they are not premised on equality. We know that it entails a reduction. Something gets lost in translation, as we say. Still there is a moral pressure to translate. Sometimes they are turned into ideals of communicative action where the inference of systemic inferences can be

neutralized [Habermas 1981] or conflicts regulated by "conflicting consensus" [Mouffe 2012]. These ideals might provide some theoretical certainty, but they also tend to efface the processual instability at play in interculturality. Mary Louise Pratt, who introduced "contact zone" to grasp the difficulties, the tensions and strategies involved in colonial encounters, points to the perils of writing in the contact zone: "Miscomprehensions, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning" [Pratt 1991, p.37]. As Mary Louise Pratt so rightly states, the practices performed here are also the arts of the contact zone. An analytic of interculturality must include the arts with which communicative action, positionalities, semantics and not least rhetoric are performed.

Interculturality is the ethical, social and communicative practices, which are performed in the contact zones. But how do we locate them? In a poignant text, Achille Mbembe takes up the issue of decolonizing knowledge in African higher education as a response to demands made by the South African students around the movement of Rhodes Must Fall. He certainly agrees with the students '[removal](#)' of colonial heritage, including part of existing curricula within the universities. The [removal](#) will, however, have to be followed by a new engagement with the Western archive without which the risk of traditionalizing knowledge is immanent. This engagement has to be critical. As he succinctly writes: "Yet the Western archive is singularly complex. It contains within itself

the resources of its own refutation. It is neither monolithic, nor the exclusive property of the West” [Mbembe 2015, p.24]. Here interculturality is not only produced through a translation of parts, but also by including the internal deconstruction of Eurocentrism. This, however, demands that the positionality of ownership is questioned. Interculturality is so to speak built into the Western archive, even though this tends to be sublimated in European higher education and elsewhere. Mbembe’s view of interculturality at work in African knowledge nicely corresponds to Eduard Glissant’s hailing of the Africans as eternal cultural brokers even in the most terrible moments of the African diaspora [Glissant 2011].

Let me end my reflections on interculturality by turning to a quite different context. In geopolitical and historical conceptualizations, Europe is viewed as a political and cultural space, with flexible borders. Internally, Europe is fragmented by nations, regions, and minorities; externally, Europe is surrounded by actual and historical contact zones. Etienne Balibar introduces the concepts of overlapping folds and borderlands to describe the fluctuating, European political and historical space [Balibar 2009]. Borders are used to control spaces and identities: on the other side of the border is a different order and different people. Borderlands, on the other hand, point to zones where controls are lost, and where hybridity or ‘overlapping folds emerge. In Balibar’s own words, they are zones "... where the opposites flow into one another,

where 'strangers' can be at the same time stigmatized and indiscernible from 'ourselves', where the notion of citizenship, involving at the same time community and universality once again confronts its intrinsic antinomies" [Balibar 2009, p.210]. This borderland is a zone of blurring and of tension where discourses are stretched and stress produced. It might lean to more control and regulation of entry points, or it confronts existing discourses and ecologies of knowledge. We can call practices produced in and by borderlands border thinking, using a term coined by Mignolo. Border thinking is first a strategy of resistance where hegemonic positions can be challenged from marginal positions with the purpose of crossing the abyssal line and opening up for transversality and thus transformation. It is, however, important to acknowledge that border thinking and borderlands work together. Without a reflection of borderlands, Europe either retracts to a civilizational fortress or evaporates into a semi-dominant force for good.

Borderlands and contact zones have played an important role in European historiography. Consequently, histories of Europe must be viewed as nets of [entanglements](#) and manifold borderlands. Historians have pointed to contact zones in different fields (knowledge, trade, migration) and in different places (the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the European metropolises of the 19th century, the Jewish diaspora). We see increased efforts to decolonize European historiography, although it is less accepted what Enrique Dussel argued long ago, namely that the rise

of *modern* Europe was the result of colonialism [Dussel 1995]. To take a further step towards decolonizing European historiography would be to write a history of a Europe as constantly formed by contact zones and processes of interculturality. This would have to be a history of Europe on the move; a history of series of contact zones through which Europe has always been challenged and transformed. Within a European self-affirmation, there is often a tendency to turn interculturalities into essential or even existential European questions. The Jewish question is constitutive of Europe as such, the colonial question, which is now being reformulated as the migrant question, is constitutive of universal Europe. What we – and here I include myself – need to do is to provide intercultural answers to these questions.



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