

A QUESTIONNAIRE ON DECOLONIZATION

A conversation between Renée Green and Iman Isaa
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Renée Green: I'm trying to think about the term *decolonize* in terms of how I've encountered it empirically within the past several years—for example, in New York in 2016 when there were banners in the former Artists Space at 55 Walker Street that read DECOLONIZE THIS PLACE. Since then more has happened, particularly in art and educational institutions. I want to think about the emergence of this term and what it has meant through time, historically and geographically. Thinking about the term in relation to long histories changes how it may be considered. It isn't a recent notion, yet it's currently being used in ways that suggest a different valence. And perhaps for some this combination of the past and the present is already active in their use of the term, yet I'm wondering how. In relation to what is "decolonize" being defined now? What does it mean? What is its significance in relation to people's lives, many kinds of people in different places and of different ages?

Depending on what one's conditions are, the term *decolonize* may or may not resonate in relation to some of the ways it's currently being invoked. I find it difficult not to think about decolonize in myriad ways, as a notion that was being tested by my ancestors and, more recently, by the generation of my parents, which includes Stuart Hall, Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, Paule Marshall, Eqbal Ahmad, Assia Djebar, and on and on. I think about them frequently now, as they are leaving us, yet their words remain, as well as memories of their actions and the challenges they faced. Their words remain for us to continue pondering and responding to in the present. Each of us has different understandings and relations to what "decolonize" can mean. So reconciling how decolonize is being used in the present is something I am wondering about. It is no simple thing. It's not simply a rhetorical expression. My immediate reaction when I thought about decolonize was "Decolonize yourself" or "Everybody decolonize themselves." What might that mean, if we really go deeply into what forms colonization can take, with long residues, in daily existence? These can create many tensions between what is said and what is enacted, between what

is claimed and what is experienced.

We were both in Berlin when I received the invitation from *October*. You are now living in Berlin, after having lived many years in New York. We both continue to work in both places. The term *decolonize* came up in one of our conversations in Berlin, yet we didn't have time to probe it. From different experiences and in different places I was curious how the word or invocation of decolonize resonates. Does it? When returning to New York I talked with different friends about the term, and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I asked my current students, "Decolonize—what is your relation to or perception of this word and its use now?"; they thought about it, but they didn't have anything to say at that moment. I have yet to ask my relatives, but I'm curious about what they might think. Being in conversation seemed a way to probe the term. What do you think?

Iman Issa: I share the difficulty you have in thinking through the term. Personally, I haven't found it to be a useful term for unpacking concerns, nor as a conceptual basis on which to build action. The reason for this is how abstract it seems to me, and thus easily co-opted. I understand the notion of decolonization when it comes to historical writings such as those of Fanon or more recent uses of the term such as "Decolonizing Architecture," a project initiated by Alessandro Petti, Sandra Hilal, and Eyal Weizman, dealing with the concrete case study of Palestine -there the term seems substantial. This doesn't always strike me to be the case in other uses of the term. For example, I was listening to a lecture by Walter D. Mignolo linking the concept of decoloniality with a process of decentering art from the West, as can be detected in recent biennials where the majority of artists are from places other than Europe and the United States or in the opening of museums in the Persian Gulf, such as the Islamic Museum in Doha, where the objects on view are following a different trajectory than in Western museums. In these cases, taken as examples of welcome change, decolonization may indeed seem like an apt term, but I'm not sure if it is by default positive or emancipatory without the introduction of other elements.

In this case, I'm thinking of the term in relation to the reformation of art institutions in particular. I think a questioning of the models and structures under which artists are operating is urgent and essential. I also find that art institutions, from museums to art schools and beyond, have evolved radically, but without developing at the same time a critical awareness that matches the scale of that evolution. For many of us who haven't done the work of delving deeply into these institutions' operations and histories, and even for some who have, we are still dealing with opaque structures to which we can only ascribe platitudes. This doesn't seem to be a good vantage point from which to change things. I don't have a good term for what is, in my view, a necessary undertaking of unpacking these structures and reforming them through the introduction of precise policies, but decolonization doesn't quite cut it.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

RG: I agree with your points, and find particularly resonant your mention of “the work of delving deeply into these institutions’ operations and histories,” as well as a certain opacity of structures. I’m not referring to what’s been called “institutional critique,” despite what it has revealed, but rather a combination of engaged ways of more deeply understanding, listening, acting wherever we are, with the knowledge that change is a continual process, requiring daily, perpetual, and enduring awareness and attention.

Being capable of understanding complexity and open to perceptions from a variety of distinct subject positions, understanding the complexity of historical relationships of inequality which continue in accepted forms in the present, facing ignorance without defensiveness, are in my view crucial efforts. My friend Howie Chen, with whom I’ve been in conversation for years, and now regarding decolonize as well, said something I’d like to repeat here: “To truly decolonize an institution or self would entail a radical undoing, and I think those that are reform-minded or looking for symbolic wins are not willing to risk institution and self as part of the long chain of undos necessary to get to the true goal of decolonization in the West.” What do you think about this?

II: That’s a good point. If “decolonization” refers to the process of shaking up dominant structures—whether discursive or practical—that give birth to oppressive systems, then yes, that process requires a serious uprooting. What gives me the chills are those instances in which too much is conceded in the premise. For example, one can argue that universalism is a colonial self-serving concept manufactured with the aim of extending influence and exploitation, but if that assumption entails replacing the concept with an idea of regional cultures and essential, specific, “non-universal” identities, then we’re fighting a lost cause—we’ve never left the playing field inasmuch as the supposedly different choice we are making is already specified in the original self-serving premise. It seems to me that what needs to be done is to disentangle these concepts from the systems that employed them, and not to give up on them by default. You hear all the time people declaring themselves to be for or against identity politics, as if that were a real choice. I never understand what that means. I think of identity as something that one needs to claim, a manner of existing socially and politically in the world that is not ascribed but earned. It is also almost always contingent and rarely ever essential. This idea that decolonizing institutions is to fill them with objects, people, and things that bear and act out the markers of their “specific identities” contrasted with that “bland” dominant one feels like securing colonialism with metal bolts rather than decolonizing anything.