
Is decolonial theatre creation possible in Catalonia?

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between decolonial theory and the performing arts, asking whether decolonial creation is possible in Catalonia. To do so, it first analyses both the political–discursive and practical characteristics of decolonial creations in Latin American countries, and then examines the Catalan theatre scene of the last twenty years to study whether some of the creations made in this period could be considered decolonial, both in terms of their practice and discourse. The objective is to reflect, through the study of contemporary Catalan theatre reality and interviews with its creative agents, on how colonial power relations are manifested today in our theatre creation, to what extent they are questioned, and who does so or how.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, decoloniality, performing arts, theatre, contemporary Catalan drama, diaspora, coloniality of power, modernity, coloniality, Catalonia

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Context: postcoloniality and decoloniality

Before answering the question that opens this text, it is important to spend a few lines clarifying the meaning and implications of the terms *decoloniality* and *postcoloniality*. Especially considering that both are often used interchangeably, when, despite sharing common points, their origin and theoretical corpuses are distinct.

It is beyond the objective and scope of this article to delve deeper into this issue, so we will confine ourselves to describing, in broad strokes, the emergence and approaches of the two currents, inviting the lay reader of the subject to widen their reading for a greater understanding of the subsequent development of this text.

Postcolonialism is a theoretical current that emerged in the academic field influenced by and linked to the political movements that, in the second half of the 20th century, appeared in territories colonised mainly by the British Empire. It is a term that came to academia from anticolonial activism. From there, a set of critical theories were developed that focused mainly on the cultures and peoples affected by colonisation with a clear desire to deconstruct and rethink national identities.

In the early 1980s, an interdisciplinary group of South Asian intellectuals created the Subaltern Studies Group in India, where postcolonial studies developed and took root. Later, in the 1990s, they began to expand to other territories, and reached universities in Africa, Oceania and Latin America. It was there that postcolonial theories were revised, rethought and reformulated, and gave rise to what we know today as decolonial theory.

Decolonial theory, therefore, emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in a different context of colonisation. In Latin America, power relations between colonisers and colonised were established in the early 16th century and were interwoven and diluted in a social fabric that was increasingly less dichotomous and more interrelated. Thus, decoloniality was forged in territories whose colonisation was more extensive over time and involved

a process of both biological and cultural mixing that was much greater than what could have occurred in the territories of India or Africa. Decolonial theorists date the beginnings of modernity to the 16th century – with the conquest and sacking of America – and regard this moment as the turning point when an entire system of power and domination relations developed which transformed itself and endures to the present. They consider that modernity and coloniality are two interdependent phenomena, born out of the same matrix of knowledge/power and were geopolitically articulated with the birth of what Immanuel Wallerstein called the world-system (Mignolo, 2018: 113-119).

Decolonial thought began to take shape throughout the 1990s, when postcolonial theories arrived at Latin American universities, and, in the early 21st century, various Latin American intellectuals created the study group Modernidad/Colonialidad, where decolonial theory was definitively developed. This did not focus on recovering the identity that was stolen from colonised peoples but on studying the new identities that have emerged from their intersection. The place that interests decolonial theory is not the dichotomy but the border (Mignolo, 2018).

Postcolonialism, decolonialism and art

Both the decolonial and postcolonial perspectives are clearly political positions, which brings us to the question: what is the relationship between art and politics? If we consult the *Diccionario de la lengua española* of the RAE, we find the following definition of *politics*.

F. 1. Art, doctrine or opinion referring to the government of states. || 2. Activity of those who govern or aspire to govern public affairs. || 3. Activity of the citizen when he participates in public affairs with his opinion, with his vote or in any other way. || 4. Courtesy and good conduct. || 5. Set of guidelines that govern the actions of a person or entity in a specific matter or field (<https://www.rae.es>, accessed 26/03/2022).

Reading the third meaning, we will conclude that *any activity of a citizen who participates in public affairs*, including *opinion*, is political. And, if every construction of a discourse that conveys certain values is political, then art, as a generator of discourse, is political.

In *Art and Power*, Roy Strong analysed how artistic creation in the European Renaissance was a form of expression of the power of those who held and promoted it. Just as Foucault also explored the relationship between discourse and power, arguing that the former is an instrument and effect of the latter, and pointed out how, in this way, the discourse generates and constructs realities. Starting from this idea, Edward Said developed the notion of Orientalism as a system through which the West constructed a discourse about the East thanks to which it could dominate it politically, sociologically, militarily and ideologically (Said, 2021; trans. 1990).

If we understand art as discourse and accept its power as a generator of debate, we will conclude that artistic practice can support power and/or the prevailing logics of power, or try to confront, question, deconstruct and transform them. Decoloniality in art falls into this second option. Authors who work on this basis include Zulma Palermo, according to whom the production of discourse — whether cultural or academic — is imbued with evaluative criteria that were established during the era in which modernity (with its other side, coloniality) emerged and that still today are the matrix of colonial power relations that, from decolonial theory, have been called *coloniality of power* (Palermo, 2014: 9-16).

Intellectuals and/or creators are not always aware of this network of complex relations deeply rooted in time. For this reason, it is possible that many academic discourses and/or works of art convey certain values that have not been consciously sought by their authors, very particularly if they have never stopped to observe their place in the structure of power relations. That is why it is important and necessary to bring the colonial wound to the fore, to make it visible. And this is precisely what the decolonial perspective aims to do in the field of art.

Performing arts and postcoloniality/decoloniality

It is clear that there is a long tradition that explores the relationship between theatre and politics, and is concerned with researching how theatre can be transformative. Piscator, Brecht or Sartre would perhaps be the clearest examples of this tradition in Europe. But we must leave Europe and approach Latin America to find the first voices that, in this understanding of theatre as a tool of social and political transformation, are not only concerned with the values that the piece conveys and the way in which it expresses them, but also the process by which it is constructed, something that is much closer to what is proposed by decolonial theory today. Augusto Boal was probably the first who, in the second half of the 20th century, after analysing in depth the history of Western theatre and its relationship with politics (his analysis of how what he calls *Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy* works is very interesting) to suggest that the transformative power of a piece lies not only in the story it tells and how it does so, but also, and above all, in how power relations are established during the creation process itself (Boal, 2005).

But, does this mean that what Boal put forward, practised and taught is decolonial? Does decolonial creation exist as such? Is it a conscious and sought-after practice, or a way of analysing theatre from the outside? Are there differences between what we could call postcolonial theatre creation and decolonial theatre creation?

In *Postcolonial Drama. Theory, Practice, Politics*, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Thompkins identify four characteristics that enable them to define a theatre piece as postcolonial, not without first recognising and warning that, beyond identifying categories, “decolonization is process, not arrival”.

We define post-colonial performance as including the following features:

- Acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, whether directly or indirectly.
- Acts performed for the continuation and/or regeneration of the colonised (and sometimes pre-contact) communities.
- Acts performed with the awareness of, and sometimes the incorporation of, post-contact forms.
- Acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation .

(Gilbert & Thompkins, 1996: 11).

These characteristics focus on recovering, recognising and asserting the artistic/performing practices of colonised territories. Decolonial theory, however, as we have already analysed, seeks to go further and is concerned with showcasing colonial power relations. However, this can also be reflected in theatre practice. If we look at what specialists in decolonial theory and theatre creation Lila Bisiaux and Elisa Belém argue, we can draw up a short list of characteristics that would allow us to identify the decolonial character of a theatre creation (Belém, 2016 and 2017; Bisiaux, 2018). It would be as follows:

- **Having been created in a cultural sphere that is not at the centre of modernity/coloniality.** This does not only include the countries that were colonised but also the peripheries of the colonial centres, or the groups, peoples or communities who migrated and are in diaspora.
- **Having a narrative that is not Aristotelian and does not move within the parameters of Western logic.** This may indicate either a fragmentation, a creation based on collage or scenes, or a cyclical structure. In any case, it is not what Lehmann defines as postdramatic theatre but rather a formal structure that obeys non-linear Western thinking logics.
- **Showing a will, a discourse and the praxis of valuing local cultures, practices and knowledge.** In other words, rethinking, reconstructing and revaluing one's own history to the detriment of the history constructed by colonial power.
- **Breaking with the monolingualism imposed by the former colonies.** Working with various languages, often mixing pre-colonial, unofficial or non-dominant languages with those imposed by the colonial power, placing them on the same level. Preventing, therefore, the colonial language from prevailing over the rest.
- **Featuring the cultural and religious syncretism of the region** by reasserting the non-colonial local spiritual and religious practices.
- **Placing knowledge and body discourse on the same level as Western knowledge and logical discourse.** Abandoning logocentrism. Removing from the text its value as a guide for creation, and turning it into another language that dialogues with the other theatre languages.

- **Questioning classical forms of dramatic production, especially hierarchies in the creative process.** Reasserting collective creation, collage, and horizontal group work as a work methodology. Allowing the text and authorship to lose strength to the group, the community. Reasserting orality over written language.
- **Rethinking relations between those who create and those who receive the creation.** Blurring, reducing, diluting or redefining the boundaries between performers and audience, between creators and spectators.
- **Mixing colonial styles, forms, approaches and texts with autochthonous or local ones.** It is therefore not about completely rejecting colonial knowledge to revive and recreate precolonial knowledge, but rather about showing how these two sources of knowledge exist under logics of unequal power, and about inverting, modifying or transforming the way in which they relate. It is a question of eliminating the superiority of colonial knowledge and practice in relation to local/autochthonous knowledge.

Some of these characteristics refer to the content of the piece; others to the form, and others to the power relations that are established during the creation and performance process. It is important to look at these categories to be able to identify how the creation process works and not just the discourse or the way the piece is staged, since this is where the greatest number of unequal power relations of which we are not usually aware resides. It is also, therefore, in the creation and performance process where we will find the greatest potential of the performing arts to transform.

Figure 1. Table of the characteristics that define the decoloniality of a piece. Compiled by the author.

Stage form of the piece	Content of the piece (values it enchances or champions)	Power relations in the creation / performance process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a narrative that is not Aristotelian and does not move within the parameters of Western logic. • Breaking with the monolinguisim imposed by the former colonies. • Placing knowledge and body discourse on the same level as Western knowledge and logical discourse. • Mixing colonial styles, forms, approaches and texts with autochthonous or local ones. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing a will, a discourse and the praxis of valuing local cultures, practices and knowledge. • Featuring the cultural and religious syncretism of the region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having been created in a cultural sphere that is not at the centre of modernity/ coloniality. • Having a praxis that reasserts the local cultures, practices and knowledge. • Mixing trainings of a colonial matrix with autochthonous and local trainings. • Questioning classical forms of dramatic production, especially hierarchies in the creative process. • Rethinking relations between those who create and those who receive the creation.

A good example of a production that we could define as decolonial, without the conscious desire to be inserted under this label, would be *Prot{AGÓ}Nistas*. A piece whose original idea came from the black Brazilian actor, circus artist and director Ricardo Rodrigues, whose performers are from diverse and related disciplines such as circus, music, dance or theatre, and which arose from the desire to make black artists visible in the São Paulo theatre scene. Its director wanted to show the audience the power and quality of the black artistic community in the field of São Paulo performing arts, and question, at the same time, how it still did not have equal access to the major creation and exhibition centres of the city.

It is fundamental to understand that the vehicles for any cultural event, the points of access, here in Brazil, are white. The press is white, television is white, the newspaper is white, the owners of theatres, circuses, venues, the owners of money are white. So, when we manage to get access to those outlets, we manage to withdraw money that comes out of a white chest and is brought to this other community. When that money arrives, the projects are better distributed, and reach other white venues.¹

After receiving a subsidy from the Government of São Paulo, Ricardo Rodrigues began to organise a work team made up of artists from various disciplines with circus, dance and music acts, and carried out composition work with them based on listening and mutual trust. In 2019, *Prot{AGÓ}Nistas* premiered at the Teatro Municipal de São Paulo, a building that is a symbol of colonial and white power, built for the entertainment of the oligarchy of European origin. One of the objectives of the project had been achieved: to occupy one of the venues that his ancestors, in a relationship of absolute exploitation, built but never enjoyed, and to do so while being owners of the content and the form of the production, but also of the process.

Does the decolonial perspective in the performing arts exist in Catalonia?

The first step to try to answer this question is to trace whether, so far and throughout the history of Catalan drama, there are, at least, some theatre productions that may fit with what until now we have described as decolonial discourse and practice.

For obvious reasons, studying the power relations during the creation and performance processes of past shows is not very rigorous. Therefore, for these cases we will focus on an exclusively thematic and discursive analysis. However, when we analyse current creations, we will take into account all the aspects previously mentioned.

If we consult the bibliography on the history of Catalan drama,² we do not find plays addressing the inequality generated by European colonisation

1. Interview with Ricardo Rodrigues on 29 May 2022 by videoconference between Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona. To view the teaser of the show, you can visit: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2wlz6l79xx09pTQKU2Jy8w>.

2. For this, I have consulted works of reference such as *Història del teatre a Catalunya*, by Josep Maria Sala Valldaura, *Història del teatre català*, by Francesc Curet, *Història del teatre català*, by Francesc Massip Bonet, or *Teatre, guerra i revolució*, by Francesc Foguet i Boreu.

(or Catalan, particularly) with a critical gaze or perspective, before the year 2000. Although it is true that there are pieces in which the existence of slaves is mentioned, before that date we have found no text dealing with this issue with a perspective similar, for example, to that of *El valiente negro en Flandes*, by Andrés de Claramonte.³ The only piece in Catalan literature (although not yet in dramatic literature) that problematises racial discrimination and, in this case, moreover, slavery, is *Llibertat*, a short story by Santiago Rusiñol published in 1898 which in 2013 was adapted to be performed at the Sala Petita of the TNC by Josep Maria Mestres, who also directed the production.

It is still surprising that a society like Catalonia, which often defines itself as politically progressive and artistically vanguardist, and whose commercial development benefitted so much from the slave workforce in the Americas, has not looked at or questioned, until just a few years ago, this past of slavery in any moment of its theatre history.

With the arrival of the new century, we do find some plays and productions that problematise the colonial power relations in many of their forms. There are pieces that question the role of Europe in the migration crisis, which speak of identity as a discriminatory issue that generates inequality, which showcase racism and problematise the colonial past and the neocolonial present of Spain or address the issue of refugees and the desire of the European population to cleanse its consciousness from a dangerously paternalistic stance.

However, how do the productions deal with this theme? From what perspective? Who devises, directs, programmes and puts on these pieces? What has been the process of creation and performance of these shows? To answer these questions, we have studied a total of 34 productions⁴ that we could divide into three main groups.

The first group would encompass the pieces created by Catalan playwrights or directors. In general, they are productions with a European and Caucasian dramaturgy and direction, and with performers who are also white and European (although there may be a racialised person or belonging to the African and Latin American diaspora who, in general, never plays a lead role). These shows are usually produced by the main theatres in Catalonia (such as the TNC, the Teatre Lliure or even the Sala Beckett or La Villarroel). We generally find here productions whose gaze on the other is usually paternalistic, with a discourse that tends to place the European as the saviour or protagonist of the story and where the other is not given a voice or,

3. This play, which is framed within the Spanish Golden Age — very little known and performed, moreover —, was published for the first time in 1638 and tells the story of a black man, Juan de Mérida, who wishes to disappear and represent the Spanish Empire in the war against Flanders but, because of the colour of his skin, experiences the rejection and marginalisation in the Spain of King Felipe II.

4. *Tractat de blanques*, 2002 / *La pata negra*, 2003 / *Forasters*, 2004 / *Après moi, le déluge*, 2010 / The interdisciplinary work of Azkona Toloza, 2010-2022 / *Llibertat*, 2013 / *Kalimat*, 2016 / *Migrante*, 2018 / *Mexicatas*, 2018 / *Temps salvatge*, 2018 / *Maremar*, 2018 / *No es país para negras*, 2016-2019 / *Negrata de merda*, 2019 / *Palabra de negra*, 2019 / *Dolç*, 2019 / *Blackface*, 2019 / *El combat del segle*, 2020 / *Alhayat o la suma dels dies*, 2020 / *Els Brugarol*, 2021 / *#nosomunhasthag*, 2021 / *Carrer Robadors*, 2021 / *Moi dispositiv Vénus*, 2021 / *Sarau Lispector*, 2021 / *Nosaltres (A nosotros nos daba igual)*, 2022 / *Síndrome de gel*, 2022 / *India*, 2022 / *Bonobo*, 2022 / *Títuba. Bruixa, negra i ramera*, 2022 / *Amèrica*, 2022 / *Te casarás en Barcelona*, 2023 / *Meta*, 2023 / *Black man solo*, 2023.

if so, plays a supporting character or reproduces stereotypes of marginality and crime. The text is usually the creation of a single playwright (or an adaptation of a novel; therefore, also a single discourse) and is the main pillar of the creation process, a process in which there is a marked hierarchical and traditional direction.

A good example of the pieces that would fit in this group is *Temps salvatge*, a production of the TNC premiered in 2018 at the Sala Gran of this theatre, written by Josep Maria Miró and directed by the then artistic director of the institution, Xavier Albertí. The piece is based on real events: the arrests of migrants in Germany after repeated sexual aggressions and thefts during New Year's Eve 2016. Although the text chooses a real event, it also focuses on the criminal behaviour of a group who is again presented as marginal, without questioning the power structures and relations that create this marginality. In the text, there are references to the migrants, the others, the foreigners, but in no moment are they given a voice: the only migrant who appears in the piece does not even have a name, or a line.

This group would also include productions such as *Maremar*, the musical that Dagoll Dagom premiered at the Teatre Poliorama in 2018 under the direction of Joan Lluís Bozzo and which took the tragedy of a girl in a refugee camp and turned it into an adventure story worthy of a Disney movie. Trivialisation, although probably involuntary and unconscious, of a very serious issue of which, moreover, Europe is one of the major responsible parties, a responsibility that was never mentioned or questioned. Because, as Helena Tornero argues, in the end, *Maremar* commercially and irresponsibly appropriated the refugee crises: "It is true that *Maremar* made many people aware but (...) in the end it is also true that this sells."⁵

Taking into account the appropriation of foreign stories or practices, there are some who point out that through the history of Western drama many of the theatre forms from the East had been taken without questioning if by doing so they were falling into cultural appropriation:

A characteristic feature of the development of Western art forms during the twentieth century has been the frequent and highly fruitful expropriation by artistic practitioners of all kinds of materials drawn from non-Western cultures. This is a true of the theatre as it is of music, painting and sculpture. For example, a profound influence on Artaud's formulation of the Theatre of Cruelty was, famously, his discovery of Balinese dance-drama at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931. More recently, two of the most influential figures in contemporary theatre, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, have drawn much of their encounters with the theatre of non-Western cultures — Grotowski mainly from Indian classical dance-drama, Brook from a variety of Oriental and African sources. Creatively stimulating though these non-Western influences on European and American theatre have evidently been, one can ask legitimate questions about the extent to which Western practitioners have considered, understood or even much cared about the nature or significance of their borrowings in relation to their original contexts. In this respect, as Rustom Bharucha and others have

5. Interview with Helena Tornero on 3 June 2022 at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

shown, the stylistic exploitation of, say, Indian forms of theatre has been largely opportunistic and culturally unequal, determined by the perceived needs of Western practitioners and audiences rather than by a genuine effort to confront Indian realities as they are refracted through its rich theatrical culture (Crow & Banfield, 1996: 11).

In the same vein of reproducing stereotypes with questioning power structures, we could mention *Dolç*, written and directed by Roger Peña and premiered at La Gleba in 2019 — a play that apparently condemns how in Europe we receive migrants but always with a paternalistic tone and reproducing the usual stereotypes —, and *Carrer Robadors*, an adaptation of the novel by Mathias Enard made by Marc Artigau, Sergi Pompermayer and Julio Manrique (who also directed the production), which was premiered within the framework of the Festival Grec 2021 at the Teatre Romea. With reference to the latter, Adeline Flaun, an actress and activist of the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra,⁶ states:

The play caused controversy because the Arab lead character was (again) given to a Caucasian actor while all the other Maghreb characters were performed by Maghreb actors, and any Caucasian character was performed by non-Caucasian actors. We think it is important to point out that the synopsis published for the festival already announced the vision with which this fiction would be narrated, reviewing the emancipatory journey of the protagonist as an escape from the barbaric environment from which he came: consequently, again, Muslim actors would play terrorists, while Caucasian actors would play characters with genuine ambitions. We consider that both the script and the cast have reproduced the postcolonial dynamics reported by the aforementioned analysts of subalternity. (...) It is important to ask oneself what justifies that a creator, his collaborators (including those from Maghreb), the direction of a festival devoted to Africa, and the journalist who publicises agree to advocate such an ideological incongruency (Flaun, 2021: 17).

It is pertinent to stress, as Flaun indicates, that not only those who create, but also those who programme, as well as the press and theatre critics, play a major role in this issue.

And, yet, there are some exceptions within this first group. Three examples would be *Après moi, le déluge*, a play by Lluïsa Cunillé⁷ premiered in 2010 as a coproduction between the Teatre Lliure and the CDN, under the direction of Carlota Subirós, and later as an opera at the Sala Tallers of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya under the direction of Miquel Ortega; *Els Bruçgarol*, by Ramon Madaula, directed by Mònica Bofill and premiered at the

6. To find more about the emergence, activities and impact of this collective in Catalan theatre creation, you can visit its profile on Facebook or Instagram (@tintanegrabcn) or consult the master's degree final project of Adeline Flaun mentioned above.

7. In relation with the play by Lluïsa Cunillé, for instance, Denise Duncan — a Costa Rican playwright and director who has lived in Barcelona for more than 18 years, an anti-racist activist and member of the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra — in the framework of the course "Escriure des del privilegi" (Writing from Privilege), which she taught in March 2022 at the Sala Beckett and which I attended as a student, argued that, although the piece is dramatically well constructed and the author does not write from paternalism but from the desire to revise the past of colonial Europe, it is also true that it speaks of the reality of an African country from the voice of two European characters. The fact that the African old man is an invisible character only contributes to the invisibility of the performers of African origin in Catalan theatre.

Teatre Poliorama in 2021; and *Amèrica*, written by Sergi Pompermayer and directed by Julio Manrique, premiered at La Villaroel in December 2022. These plays, almost entirely written, directed and performed by European and Caucasian directors, do not address the issue of the colonial wound from condescendence and paternalism but from self-criticism and the will to revise. Although it is true that in none of the three cases can we speak of decolonial practices — because, beyond the theme, there is nothing that links these productions to the decolonial way of working and creating — and which still have issues to be improved, it is also true that the fact of approaching the colonial wound from the revision of one's own responsibility rather from the appropriation of the history of the other is already a step forward. As is the fact that this issue is dealt with in productions in big venues and commercial theatres and not only in fringe and alternative circuits.

In the second group we would find the creations by people who either belong to the diaspora — usually African or Latin American — or are Catalan with African or Latin American origins, mainly. In these cases, the place from which the issue of inequality is addressed is not paternalistic but rather critical and problematising. Their creations can be generally seen in fringe theatres that are also managed by people belonging to the diaspora or linked to activism, such as the Sala Fènix, La Badabadoc or the recently created Periferia Cimarronas. Many of the shows in this second group are created by artists who are also activists, such as Adeline Flaun, Silvia Albert Sopale, The Sey Sisters, Vicenta Ndongo, Denise Duncan or Malcolm McCarthy, all of them members of the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra (“a collective of actresses, actors and creators of the black diaspora in Catalonia”). Here there are pieces that directly deal with the issue of racism, such as *No es país para negras*, written by Silvia Albert Sopale and co-directed by her along with Carolina Torres Topaga; *Negrata de merda*, written and directed by Denise Duncan; *Palabra de negra*, with dramaturgy and direction by Maisa Sally Anna Perk; or *Blackface*, also by Silvia Albert Sopale, with dramaturgical coaching by Denise Duncan. All of them were performed during 2019 in much more alternative venues such as the Sala Fènix, the Tantarantana or Cincomonos. This group would also include pieces where, along with racism, other types of power relations linked to it are questioned. This would be the case of *El combat del segle*, also by Denise Duncan; *Moi dispositif Vénus*, a Catalan-Martinican coproduction with dramaturgy, direction and performance by Adeline Flaun, co-produced by Catalonia and Martinique, which was premiered at the Antic Teatre in 2022; *Títuba. Bruixa, negra i ramera*, also by Denise Duncan, premiered at Periferia Cimarronas in 2023; or *Black man solo*, by Malcolm McCarthy, premiered in 2023 also at Periferia Cimarronas.

Almost all these productions have emerged in Barcelona fringe theatres — with the exception of *El combat del segle*, premiered at the Sala Beckett (an achievement for its author and director, who before reaching this centre of creation had approached many fringe venues in the city) and in all of them the way power relations generated by the colonial wound are addressed is from a critical perspective lacking paternalism or, at least, this is what is consciously sought. As for the significance of the group in the creation, it is

important to highlight that, although on many occasions the authorship, direction and performance are by a single person due to economic constraints, there is, however, a network of collective work and mutual support during the creation process. In fact, all the aforementioned creators belong to the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra, which is in itself a space of support and debate, a generator of discourse in the field of the performing arts.

Within this second group we would also find shows such as *Sarau Lispector*, a group creation piece by the members of Brasil Auê⁸ in which the texts by Clarice Lispector are used to deal with issues such as migration or gender from an artistic multidisciplinary approach that merges music, dance, theatre and poetry, or *#nosomunhasthag*, a show collectively created by several members of the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra, which could be seen at the CCCB in 2021.

However, the piece with greater discourse, practice and decolonial purpose within this second category is *Índia*, by Mara Ortiz. Premiered at the Sala Fènix in 2022, and coproduced by this theatre along with the Fondo Nacional de las Artes in Argentina, *Índia* questions the coloniality that still exists today and, through the life story of a woman who recognises herself as brown,⁹ looks at the relations between gender, racism and job precariousness. A piece framed within a theatre language but whose idea and creation are by a female dancer, advised by a female activist, with a team of contributors who have worked to make the audiovisual material, which is also on the stage. A piece which, according to its creator, urgently needed to be made here, in Europe:

I felt that *Índia* had to be done here first. (...) I felt that it had to be done here because I think that since I arrived came to blows with the understanding that here there was no revision of what had happened during colonialism, something that has been done in Argentina for years. (...) And when I arrived here and, suddenly, I began to ask how they saw colonisation, how they saw Latin America... I felt like I was in primary school and I heard again that Columbus had come to bring civilisation to our lands. That was one of the serious impacts on me when I arrived here. (...) Not to mention the scandal that the military parade created in my head every 12 October ... (...) I feel that this issue is very overdue here.¹⁰

And, finally, we would have the third group. It would embrace the companies, productions or work proposals in which the artistic team is formed by Caucasian Catalan people and by people belonging to the diaspora of colonised territories — living or not in Catalonia — or Catalan with African, Latin American origins or from territories that have suffered the coloniality of power in one way or another. Here there would be creations such as *La pata Negra*, written by the Catalan actress of Equatorial Guinean origin Vicenta

8. Brasil Auê is an association of Brazilian artists living in Barcelona. For further information, you can consult its Instagram profile @brasilaue.

9. To know more about the movement Identidad Marrón you can consult the Instagram profile of this collective (@identidadmarron) or visit the website <http://marron.ar/>.

10. Interview with Mara Ortiz on 30 May 2022 at the Parc Joan Miró in Barcelona.

Ndongo and directed by Roger Gual, which was premiered with a multidisciplinary format made up of musicians, graphic artists, filmmakers and DJs at the Teatre Zorrilla in Badalona in 2003. *Tractat de blanques* could also fit in this group, because, although almost the whole artistic team was Catalan, the author of the text, Enric Nolla, is a Venezuelan playwright who has lived in Catalonia since 1991. It could perfectly include pieces such as *Migrante*, by Juan Pablo Mazorra — a creation by a Mexican with a Brazilian and a Venezuelan in the direction team and two Catalans in the dramaturgy —, or *Mexicatas*, a piece with the company of Mexican women Cor de Maguey with dramaturgy by Sergi Belbel and direction by Antonio Calvo. *Alhayat o la suma dels dies*, *Síndrome de gel* or *Meta* would also fit here, given that the three develop their plots around the issue of refugee or migrant people and have in their artistic teams Catalan creators and people from Arab and African origin. Although the creative practices of these pieces are diverse, as are the places where they are produced and performed, all of them share a much more critical approach to the discourse than those in the first group, are less accommodating with the stance of Europe in relation to the colonality of power and, in general, place non-European or non-Caucasian people as lead characters of the story, giving them a voice of their own and a critical discourse that is aware of the power relations that affect them.

Within this third group, we will highlight, on the one hand, the work developed in Catalonia for years by the Basque-Chilean company Azkona Toloza and, on the other, the work driven, along with multi-identity and multidisciplinary work teams, by the Catalan playwright Helena Tornero in productions such as *Kalimat* or *Nosaltres*.

Azkona Toloza is a Basque-Chilean company that does multidisciplinary theatre work that which, according to Txalo and Laida, its founders, falls in the field of live art. Their first creations were premiered at the Antic Teatre, a fringe theatre in Barcelona, and have gradually reached the big centres of creation (in 2022 they were programmed at the Teatre Lliure). Despite their interest in not placing themselves under any label but simply speaking of something they believe it is necessary to tell, both their discourse and stage practice would be categorised as decolonial. With a conscious will to question the colonial power relations based on their own experience and history, Azkona Toloza seeks horizontality during the whole creative process, endeavouring to avoid any hierarchy of an authoritarian nature.

TXALO: We have always done one thing: when we start a project with Laida, we both decide that we are going to do a project about... Puelmapu, we automatically notify the lighting designer, the musician, the set designer and the assistant director from the beginning.

LAIDA: Yes, we have a team and everyone has free reign.

TXALO: So that they have the same amount of time that we all have. (...) We know that the text is important and...

LAIDA: But we produce a highly hybrid language.¹¹

11. | Interview with Laida Zakona and Txalo Toloza on 25 May 2022 at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

On the other hand, we have Helena Tornero, a Catalan playwright who has always been interested in the relation with “the other”. This interest has led to two creation processes that are remarkable for being close to the decolonial practice in theatre creation. The first of them, *Kalimat*, emerged out of the will to provide a space of creation and performance in Catalonia for several refugees from the camp of Nea Kavala. Helena Tornero, almost without intervening in the text, acted as a link so that their words could be performed by professional actresses and actors at the TNC, in 2016.

We went there from another place [to Nea Kavala], we went from... we were going to do workshops for the people on what they need... (...) And we were going to see what was needed, because we went because we wanted to help, but also with the awareness that sometimes it may not be the place to do theatre, sometimes there is another priority. But we saw, with an independent NGO on the field... and they told us: “No, we need this, because there is a very bad situation in the camp”... and then we started working on things, and what we wanted was to offer the volunteers who were there and the refugee community itself a training course, so that they could then continue doing their activities in their own way. (...) And the people who were part of this course told us: “We want to explain”, “we want to create a piece.” And we said: “Okay, let’s do it, but you are the ones who choose and do it, we will support you, but you do it because you see that, when we leave, you can continue making plays yourself.” And we spent four days putting together a story that we showed to the whole community and from there they decided to set up a company. (...) And it was as a result of this that we, when we returned there we said: “We have to try to do something to see how we can continue to help”, and then I contacted the TNC and told them that instead of commissioning a text from me, they should commission it from a group of people who are in a refugee camp and could pay them for this, it would be money that they would have there, at least for a few families, and the rest, to reinvest in the community. (...) And in the end they called us: “Listen, we found a budget and we’re giving you this money,” and then we came back, but to tell them: “Guys, there is this project to do a text to be made in the TNC so that people can hear what we want to say.” And that is *Kalimat*.¹²

Kalimat is a fine example of a production in which not only the discourse but also the practice in the creation process has questioned colonial power relations. A piece that not only reasserts local knowledge and practices and places their protagonists in the centre of the process but does so without appropriating their stories. We also find here the ability to revise the situation of privilege of the European creator.

And this is something that we also find in another piece promoted by Helena Tornero: *Nosaltres (A nosotras nos daba igual)*. This coproduction between the Teatro Español and the TNC, which premiered at the Sala Petita of the TNC under the direction of Ricard Soler Mallol in 2022, no longer speaks of the “other” but of “us”. Of how we relate to the other, of our

12. Interview with Helena Tornero on 3 June 2022 at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

responsibility in the place we give him, of how we find it hard to change our perception about what “we” are, as well as assuming and confronting our racist behaviours or our privileges.

Carme Portacelli called me and said: “I’m thinking of a text, to be directed by Ricard Soler Mallol and we want to work with racialised actors” and I was contacted because I had done *Kalimat*. And it was taken for granted that it would be about migration. And I was very aware at the time that the characters that the racialised actors had played were always that... the migrant... But, what if we talk about the people who are from here, who have seen the same cartoons that we have seen, who have grown up here, but we don’t see them that way? (...) And the Teatro Español wanted me to write the text and I said: “No, no, I want to have the actors first and then I will have the text, because I want to work from them.” I was crystal clear that I didn’t want to work based on them talking about their private lives, because that seemed to me to be appropriation, but it was about creating a fiction that was as rigorous as possible. (...) And I wanted to be able to talk to them as well to get rid of some a priori ideas that I might have. And the idea was to do a workshop with them, but not to take out material, because I’ve also experienced this: doing a workshop to get material to do a show, but then those people... No, I wanted the workshop to take place as part of the process, with the people who would later make the show.¹³

In short, we could state that the real capacity of questioning the coloniality of power in the productions of the first group is very low, while it is key and real in the productions of the second group, and the third group has a greater diversity of practices and is, perhaps, the one with the potential for greater dialogue between the classical ways of working in Catalonia and other ways of working that are more horizontal (among them, some that we could consider decolonial), which enable greater questioning of the privilege and power of the European creator.

I think that we also come from a country where there has been a dictatorship and the director-dictator also comes from here to some extent. I think that the history we have had in this country contaminates all the institutions. (...) And it is true that you have a certain power [as a director] because in the end if you direct, you have to choose, you have to make some final decisions. But this does not mean that the power relationship is toxic or authoritarian. (...) But I think that all this is also changing. Then it also depends on where everyone has placed their ego... (...) Because sometimes it is difficult to accept a mistake and then people disguise it as authority.¹⁴

Perhaps this is one of the keys. Our difficulty in accepting the mistakes made. Our incapacity to accept that our privilege exists and conditions us, our difficulty of looking at ourselves to revise ourselves. This is why it is so necessary to dialogue with the other, and know how to give him the place that for centuries we have denied him. Yes, also in creation.

13. Interview with Helena Tornero on 3 June 2022, at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

14. Interview with Helena Tornero on 3 June 2022 at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

Conclusions

Back to the initial question, “Is decolonial creation possible in Catalonia?”, it would seem so. In the same way as decoloniality was the mode in which in Latin America postcolonialism was reapproached, Europe can find its way of showcasing the colonial wound. But this is a painfully slow process, at least here, in Catalonia. Because, to do so, it is necessary to have the will to undertake a process of revision, which is apparently still a long way off.

Ya Boal (Boal, 2005) argued that in order to revise the practice of power relations it is important not to speak of the other but to speak of oneself, of one’s own history. Also in this vein, authors such as Crow and Banfield (1996: 11) criticise cultural appropriation and point out that in the encounter with the knowledge and creations of others it is important to integrate not the forms or content of what the other does but their way of relating in the creative process. Because speaking of coloniality of power from the privileged position of focusing on the history of the other without revising from what place, with what purpose and how it is told degenerates into cultural appropriation, which leads us directly to the issue of legitimacy, which Azkona Toloza are very clear about:

LAIDA: In *La caja de Guinea* we were faced with a very big issue and, in the end, we decide that it is not us who has to tell it. They told us: “Well, you have the privilege, you can tell it”... yes, but, we have been able to tell it up to here. (...)

TXALO: There is a very delicate subject and they told us that too... When we went to the Mapuche territory, one of the things we were very interested in – Laida came from dance – was to understand Mapuche dance a little. What did the dance consist of, what did the music consist of, its rhythms, its logic. And they told us several times: “You don’t have to be interested in this.”

LAIDA: In fact, I never dared ask, but you felt it, didn’t you?

TXALO: The idea was very clear: “Here you always came to be interested in our dances and our music, and the only thing you do is to reduce a people to folklore, and we are political agents.”¹⁵

It seems clear that a decolonial practice made from Europe cannot exist if there is not a revision of one’s own privilege, and this implies assuming, observing and revising our place in the unequal power structure and our responsibility faced with the colonial wound. And, although it is true that in recent years this point of view seems to be forging ahead in Catalan contemporary creation, it is also true, very likely, that this would not have happened without the fight and the claims of the creators who belong to the diaspora. In fact, it is clear – as the numbers show – that since the organisation and emergence of the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra, as well as the creation and operation of Periferia Cimarronas (whose objective, let us not forget, is to promote the creation, debate and political organisation of the Afro-descendant community in Barcelona), the number of non-Caucasian people in Catalan

15. Interview with a Laida Azkona and Txalo Toloza on 25 May 2022 at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona.

theatre shows has considerably increased. For a deeper debate in this respect, I recommend consulting the master's degree final project of Adeline Flaun (2021), in which she analyses in detail how the activism of the Col·lectiu Tinta Negra has been a clear driver of very important and necessary changes in the field of the performing arts in Catalonia. In fact, in the last two years, not only in the shows created based on hybrid models but also in those that emerge from the centres of power such as the Sala Beckett or the TNC, we have seen an increase in the number of actresses and actors of Afro origin in the texts written and directed by Catalans, without this being a necessary distinctive trait of the character, and the text dealt with an issue related to themes such as racism or decoloniality. Good examples of these would be *Nessun dorma*, by Eu Manzanares or *La plaça del Diamant*, by Mercè Rodoreda, directed by Carlota Subirós. This is, undoubtedly, a cause for celebration. Although it seems difficult to believe that this would have equally happened without the constant demands, presence and militancy of the group of Afro-descendant performers and creators.

Therefore, I dare to conclude that, at least for the time being, the decolonial creation made in Europe is only really possible based on hybrid work models, where the dialogue with the “other” is present from this will to listen, learn and revise, and where European creators have the maturity, integrity and enough honesty to assume their situation of privilege and be able to deconstruct, reconsider and modify it. To place themselves, in short, in a situation of discomfort. Because as Helena Tornero says:

Discomfort is welcome if it helps to advance as a society. [...] But... this is the issue we have in Europe, isn't it? Because it seems that Europe is very cool and, well, maybe we should consider that the foundations on which Europe is based are not all so magnificent. And that means expressing this self-criticism.¹⁶

And it is only through self-criticism that we can really talk about something close to decoloniality in Europe. The rest will be what we have been doing for centuries: merely discourse, marketing and self-deception.



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