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DELINKING RHETORIC, OR REVISITING MCGEE'S FRAGMENTATION THESIS THROUGH DECOLONIALITY

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In an oft-cited 1990 essay, Michael Calvin McGee argues forcefully for the significance of fragmentation as a defining feature of the postmodern condition, suggesting that it requires a reframing of rhetorical criticism to put the emphasis on con/text construction and critical rhetorical praxis¹ Writing during the same period, Fredric Jameson also appears preoccupied with the ways in which postmodernity fragments subjects and culture, delimits texts, and demands new reading and rhetorical practices.² For McGee, “‘texts’ have disappeared altogether, leaving us with nothing but discursive fragments of context.”³ In addition, he argues that “text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse.”⁴ But as important as McGee’s argument has been to the development of critical rhetoric and bringing rhetorical theory into congruence with postmodernism and poststructuralism, his assertion of a major historical break ushering in a new era of fragmentation is problematic. It risks reinforcing a Eurocentric perspective on history and belies a commitment to modern/coloniality, which elides global heterogeneity.⁵

McGee’s perspective centers the modern/colonial assertion of homogeneity (even as he simultaneously asserts its postmodern undoing) in a manner that is blind to the colonial difference. In other words, McGee unreflexively reproduces a dominating narrative of Western/American centrality from within the borders of the modern/colonial world system.⁶

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What happens to McGee's thesis, however, if we approach fragmentation Otherwise? What happens when we approach rhetoric from, in Walter Mignolo's words, "the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system?"⁷ What does it mean for McGee or critical rhetorical studies more broadly if "texts" have not disappeared, but rather never existed cohesively in the first place?

In this essay, I seek to delink McGee's fragmentation thesis from modern/coloniality by rethinking the problematic of text/context circulation from a global perspective attentive to coloniality. I argue that critical rhetorical theory must better address epistemic coloniality (not merely colonialism as an economic-political system) to (1) deal more productively with situated public discourses as they circulate in the world and (2) enact more robustly its antisystemic functions/aims. My desire is not to debunk McGee, but to radicalize him—to enable his well-intentioned impulse to hear and be heard by different audiences. Following Chela Sandoval, my aim is to contribute to a "decolonizing theory and method" in approaching the problems and possibilities of fragmentation Otherwise.⁸ Framed in this way, the question becomes how better to situate us as rhetoricians to engage in our critical *rhetorical* praxis in the face of fragmentation. I contend that the answer has to go beyond McGee to draw from those for whom survival itself has depended on productively and creatively negotiating fragmentation. In what follows, I briefly review McGee's argument and examine its similarities to and differences from Jameson's argument about fragmentation. I also expand on some of the problems with McGee's and rhetorical studies' position vis-à-vis fragmentation, particularly with regard to questions of modern/coloniality. Finally, I turn to a corrective that may start critical rhetorical studies on a path toward delinking from modern/coloniality. In essence, I call for rhetorical studies to practice some degree of what Mignolo calls "epistemic disobedience"⁹ so that we might all become decolonial rhetoricians.

FRAGMENTATION IN A (POST)MODERN WORLD

McGee's argument about fragmentation, which is an acknowledged central assumption of critical rhetoric and an implicit assumption of post-critical rhetorical praxis, rests on the idea that "the fragmentation of our American culture has resulted in a role reversal, making *interpretation* the primary

task of speakers and writers and *text construction* the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics.”¹⁰ Frustrated by (especially literary, but also rhetorical) criticism’s preoccupation with “the text” and concomitant de-centering of “speech,” McGee implores us to “stop whining about the so-called ‘post-modern condition’ and develop realistic strategies to cope with it as a fact of life,” especially insofar as this postmodern condition has brought about the fragmentation of culture, the subject, and the text.¹¹ Jameson similarly sees fragmentation as a central problematic of postmodernity, though he, unlike McGee, laments the fact.¹² While modernity enabled forms of resistance in the formation and textual play (markedly through parody) of collective (Western) subjects, postmodernity’s fragmentation enables only a toothless pastiche. “Modernism’s limit,” Sandoval notes interpreting Jameson, “is a tragic ending” that catches “the first world citizen-subject . . . in a strange, new, tragic antinarrative, escape from which requires fresh forms of perceiving and acting.”¹³

Bracketing the question of whether fragmentation is a good or bad thing, both McGee and Jameson frame fragmentation as temporally unique—an essential feature of the emergence of postmodernity/late-capitalism—and a challenge to Western homogeneity and the subject’s stability; both also seek practical strategies for dealing with fragmentation. For McGee, such strategies rest on a restructuring of the relationship between rhetoric and criticism. While rhetoricians had borrowed too much from philosophy and literary criticism, resulting in something like Edwin Black’s idea that “criticism is what critics do,”¹⁴ McGee reverses the equation to emphasize that “rhetoric is what rhetoricians do,” thereby foregrounding “the performance of discourse” to better equip rhetorical scholars to deal with postmodern fragmentation.¹⁵ As rhetoricians, our concern for “empowerment” prompts us to engage in forms of “social surgery” that challenge “taken-for-granted conventions,” address/redress “human grievances,” and establish new cultural norms which are subject to the same “surgery” by others. As McGee notes, “every bit of discourse . . . invites its own critique.”¹⁶ Rhetoricians, surgeons that we are, stitch together the fragments of discourse/culture to affect at least the possibilities/conditions for, if not an actual state of, social change. For Jameson, dislocated postmodern Western subjects must similarly engage in a “process of taking and using whatever is necessary and available in order to negotiate, confront, or speak to power”; such *bricolage*, Sandoval indicates, “is a method for survival.”¹⁷ Indeed, McGee would likely concur;

such a method would be central to the survival of rhetoric if we are to be invested in our critical stances and attentive to the dispersal of texts into “discursive fragments of context.”¹⁸

FRAGMENTATION AND THE CONSTITUTION OF MODERN/COLONIALITY

What if McGee and Jameson are misguided or mistaken in some of their assumptions? While the impulse and advocacy of both authors vis-à-vis how we ought to *better deal with* fragmentation is laudable, their epistemic starting point occludes the longstanding functionality of fragmentation in the colonial matrix of power and limits the possibilities for more ethical and efficacious modes of critical rhetorical praxis in a global world. For the purposes of this essay, I want to highlight two main deficiencies that can help us radicalize and better realize McGee’s aims. First, cultural homogeneity is a rhetorical fiction and technology of power, not an objective state threatened by fragmentation. Second, fragmentation is not new; rather, it is the longstanding condition under which most outside of the First World have struggled to survive since the emergence of the modern world system in the sixteenth century. Only by addressing McGee’s modern/colonial bias in his formulation of fragmentation (as historical diagnostic and critical praxis) can we begin to rethink rhetoric’s modus operandi and engage in some epistemic disobedience.

To begin, McGee takes a myopic view of homogeneity that mistakes it for a somewhat objective thing rather than a thoroughly rhetorical construction. McGee asserts, “In the not-too-distant past, all discourses were . . . ‘totalizations’ . . . That is, all structures of a text were homogenous.”¹⁹ Over the course of the twentieth century, perhaps especially in the post-World War II years, “presumed homogeneity has been replaced by the presumption of cultural heterogeneity.”²⁰ While anyone would be hard-pressed to deny the significant economic, cultural, political, and rhetorical transformations that have occurred, McGee’s own presumption of an a priori homogeneity is problematic because it takes as given a rhetorical construction that normalizes an exclusionary “zero point epistemology” under which geo-spatial and bio-graphic understandings of knowledge and culture are “hidden in the transparency and universality of the zero point” of Western power-knowledge. This is a fundamentally colonial project, Mignolo notes, whose “imperiality consists precisely in hiding its locality,

its geo-historical body location, and in assuming to be universal and thus managing the universality to which everyone has to submit."²¹ In other words, modern-Western homogeneity is a real, material thing, but it is also a thoroughly rhetorical invention that occludes its geographic and embodied location through a universalizing gesture, eliding the heterogeneity against which it functions as a response (the ways in which U.S. Americans "had to colonize what would become their own national space and thus face constantly the presence of undesirable others within").²² "We" (U.S. Americans, Westerners, Europeans) have never been homogenous.

Concomitant to this narrow understanding of homogeneity, McGee mistakes the newness of fragmentation. "Radical change has occurred," he posits, "and our new condition makes it necessary to insist on the concept of 'fragment' and to suggest that alternatives embrace error."²³ Fragmentation may very well be new, but only for a first-world subject who occupies a privileged position within the modern/colonial world system. But such a subject, Sandoval argues, "enters the kind of psychic terrain formerly inhabited by the historically decentered citizen-subject: the colonized, the outsider, the queer, the subaltern, the marginalized."²⁴ Franz Fanon would concur, arguing that in the "crushing object-hood" and state of "nonbeing" endemic to coloniality, the subject is "burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self."²⁵

In a world where, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues, "ordinary life is infected by the colonial virus,"²⁶ the colonized and Others who are decentered must practice what Sandoval calls "survival skills developed under subordination" to negotiate fragmentation and "juggle, transgress, differ, buy, and sell ideologies in a system of production and exchange bent on ensuring survival."²⁷ Such survival skills are important for at least two reasons. First, they provide a practical set of alternatives for engaging the historical and cultural problematics in which people like McGee and Jameson are most interested. Second, they form the *exteriority* of the modern/colonial world—the constitutive inside/outside that undergirds the theoretical and methodological impulses behind modernism and postmodernism, as well as the decolonial option.²⁸ In this way, fragmentation is less a fundamentally new condition than it is a case of the chickens coming home to roost, a case of first-world people finally having to deal with the conditions they created and that enabled their assertion of superiority.²⁹ McGee's critical intervention, however, simply does not go far enough. Maldonado-Torres would say that

it “leaves intact and sometimes even becomes complicit with configurations of power that extend the reign of the pathological and the inhuman” that authorize modernity and postmodernity alike.³⁰ The key task for critical rhetorical scholars today must be *hearing* these marginal voices and moving toward theoretical changes that avoid complicity with modern/coloniality.

HEARING THE OTHER: TOWARD A DECOLONIAL CORRECTIVE

When Raka Shome first articulated her “postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon,” she observed that despite the advances provided by feminist and postmodern rhetorical theory, “there is still more to be done if rhetorical studies is truly to open itself up to alternative and marginalized voices and dialogues.”³¹ Where Shome argues for a *postcolonial* perspective, I seek a *decolonial* option that is more attentive to delinking from modern/coloniality.³² But where can we begin? Obviously, there are many issues and entry points that I cannot address in a short essay like this; as such, I want to narrow my focus in what remains to a few key normative commitments and practical steps that can nudge us onto a productive path. Radicalizing McGee’s concern with speech and rhetoric as a performance, I argue that rhetoricians would be better off if we could (1) commit to and find ways of practicing epistemic disobedience toward modern/colonial logics, (2) channel such disobedience into an altered ethics of critique, and (3) resist ghettoizing decoloniality into the barrios of communication studies.

While I have addressed some of these issues elsewhere, a brief return to the key terms guiding what I advocate is in order.³² Coloniality is a constitutive feature of Western modernity that structures exclusionary modes of power, knowledge, and being—it is the dark underside of modernity, which influences both first and third world people. As an antidote to coloniality, scholars and others have advanced a “de-colonial turn” that, according to Maldonado-Torres, “highlights the epistemic relevance of the enslaved and colonized search for humanity. It seeks to open up the sources for thinking and to break up the apartheid of theoretical domains through renewed forms of critique and epistemic creolization.”³³ In striving for such epistemic openness, advocates of decoloniality argue that we must delink from modern/coloniality and enact a kind of epistemic disobedience, by which Mignolo understands “a double movement: unveiling the regional founda-

tions of universal claims to truth as well as the categories of thought and the logic that sustains all branches of Western knowledge."³⁴ Such a normative stance requires that we better situate knowledge in its geographic and embodied specificity and resist attempts to universalize any particular episteme. It does not require, however, that we reject "European modernity"—just that we reject the West's claim to epistemic privilege.³⁵

One way to take this call for delinking seriously—in fact, it is almost a requirement of scholars like Maldonado-Torres and Mignolo—is to shift away from the visual/written bias of Western culture and toward a stance stressing embodied speech and listening. Here, we can bring McGee back into the conversation because he was acutely aware of the ways that contemporary discourse theory privileged writing and excluded "speaking from the meaning of the term *text*" itself.³⁶ For McGee, such exclusion is problematic for two reasons. First, it leaves undertheorized the ways in which speaking functions as a "regulative ideal of discourse" that "is open, embodied, enacted, capable where writing is not, in its capacity to bear communication and engender community."³⁷ Second, it secures an emphasis on *criticism* and effaces the role of *rhetoric*, the latter of which he understands to emphasize more the "performance of discourse than . . . the archaeology of discourse."³⁸ The performance of discourse, however, is not monologic. "To speak," writes Fanon, "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization,"³⁹ which means partly that we *mobilize* fragments of discourse to construct our con/texts *from* the places where we speak. McGee, however, fails to be reflexive about the *place* from which *he* speaks, instead reproducing the dominant logics and theoretical rhetorics that exacerbate exclusion.

As an alternative, Maldonado-Torres stresses the importance of a dialogue that "breaks through Eurocentric [and U.S. American-centric] prejudices and seeks to expand the horizon of interlocutors beyond colonial and imperial differences. The de-colonial attitude seeks to be able to *listen to what has been silenced*."⁴⁰ Such a willingness to listen, however, is predicated upon an ethics of critique that goes beyond the skepticism of power advocated by scholars like McKerrow, or even the critical rhetoric with a "commitment to telos" advocated by Kent Ono and John Sloop.⁴¹ Listening, for Maldonado-Torres, requires something akin to an ethic of decolonial love. Here, the critic both struggles "against the structures of dehumanization" and positively expresses "*non-indifference* toward the Other."⁴² The

critic-theorist must give the gift of the self, who “is only able to *see* (*theros*) and *grasp* (comprehend), because it first *hears* and *gives*. Hearing the ‘cry’ of the wounded and the afflicted becomes, in this sense, the enlightening act *par excellence*.”⁴³ On a practical level, this means that rhetoricians (who both theorize and critique) must begin *hearing* those voices excluded from our theorizing and the discourse communities we study, *internalizing* their thought, and *seeking* ways to delink from modern/coloniality.

In short, I would submit that we all (regardless of whether we are interested in discursive con/texts *explicitly* marked by colonialism or imperialism) must seek to become decolonial rhetoricians. Rather than be “at the service” of Continental philosophy as so many in our ranks seem to be, we should adopt a decolonial attitude that aids in “shifting the geography of reason, by unveiling and enacting geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge” by putting our disciplinary tools in rhetoric “at the service of the problem being addressed.”⁴⁴ It is not enough, however, to leave this task to scholars of color. Such a move is dangerous insofar as it continues to relegate these important questions to the margins of the discipline while constructing a fiction of “inclusion” that remains authorized by the hubris of zero point epistemology.⁴⁵

We who are colonized or function in some way Otherwise cannot be the only ones leading the charge to delink rhetoric from modern/coloniality. An ethic of decolonial love requires those who benefit most from the epistemic violence of the West to renounce their privilege, give the gift of hearing, and engage in forms of praxis that can more productively negotiate the borderlands between inside and outside, in thought and in being. We need not, as I have shown with McGee, throw out the baby with the bathwater; however, it is crucial that rhetoricians begin to take the decolonial option seriously if we wish to do more than perpetuate “a permanent state of exception”⁴⁶ that dehumanizes people of color and maintains the hubris of a totalizing and exclusionary episteme.

NOTES

1. Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 274–89. McGee also echoes McKerrow’s attention to fragmentation, which McKerrow bases on one of

- McGee's earlier conference presentations. See Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 101–02.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Post-contemporary Interventions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).
 3. McGee, "Fragmentation," 287.
 4. McGee, "Fragmentation," 288.
 5. Coloniality, in my usage, is distinct from colonialism. Coloniality "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations." Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 240–70. See also, Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Race, Coloniality, and Geo-Body Politics: *The Garden as Latin@Vernacular Discourse*," *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5 (2011): 363–71; Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Decolonizing Imaginaries: Rethinking 'the People' in the Young Lords' Church Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98 (2012): 1–23.
 6. On modern/coloniality and Occidental reason, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); D. Walter and Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
 7. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 11.
 8. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 5.
 9. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 54, 116.
 10. McGee, "Fragmentation," 274.
 11. McGee, "Fragmentation," 278.
 12. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1–96. For an exegesis of Jameson's lament, see Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 21.
 13. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 19.
 14. Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (1965; rpt. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 4.
 15. McGee, "Fragmentation," 279.
 16. McGee, "Fragmentation," 281.
 17. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 29.
 18. McGee, "Fragmentation," 287.
 19. McGee, "Fragmentation," 284.

20. McGee, "Fragmentation," 285.
21. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 80. On geo- and body-politics, also see Enck-Wanzer, "Race, Coloniality, and Geo-Body Politics," 363–71.
22. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Decolonization and the New Identitarian Logics After September 11," *Radical Philosophy Review* 8 (2005): 35–67.
23. McGee, "Fragmentation," 284.
24. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 27.
25. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.
26. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views From the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 127.
27. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 30.
28. Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002): 57–96; Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 3.
29. Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 33.
30. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 99.
31. Raka Shome, "Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An 'Other' View," *Communication Theory* 6 (1996): 40–59.
32. On the distinction between postcolonialism and decoloniality, see Enck-Wanzer, "Decolonizing Imaginaries," 19; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge," *City* 8 (2004): 29–56; Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21 (2007): 449–514. Also, Shome seems more focused on the *issues* of imperialism and neocolonialism (see page 46), but decolonial theorists would ask us to shift attention to the ways in which theories themselves (including some that underwrite postcolonialism) reinscribe coloniality in our present era.
33. Enck-Wanzer, "Race, Coloniality, and Geo-Body Politics," 363–71; Enck-Wanzer, "Decolonizing Imaginaries," 1–23.
34. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 7.
35. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 116.
36. On this distinction, see Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, xiv. Also see Maldonado-Torres's call for a "moratorium on the West" in Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Postimperial Reflections on Crisis, Knowledge, and Utopia: Transgressive Critical Hermeneutics and the 'Death of European Man,'" *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 25 (2002): 277–315.
37. McGee, "Fragmentation," 277.

38. McGee, "Fragmentation," 278.
39. McGee, "Fragmentation," 279.
40. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17.
41. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 234. Emphasis added.
42. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 91–111; Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "Commitment to 'Telos': A Sustained Critical Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992): 48–60. Ono and Sloop attempt to go a step further with their work on vernacular discourse. While beyond the scope of this essay, their formulation runs into questions similar to those I have posed with regard to McGee. Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 19–46. Condit's suggestion that critics reframe how we practice listening might come closest to what I advocate here. See Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Critic as Empath: Moving Away from Totalizing Theory," *Western Journal of Communication* 57 (1993): 178–190.
43. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 157 and 158.
44. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 240–41.
45. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 137–38.
46. For example, see Maldonado-Torres, "Postimperial Reflections," 310.
47. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 218.

