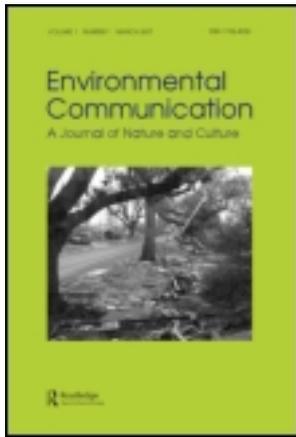


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Race, Coloniality, and Geo-Body Politics: *The Garden* as Latin@ Vernacular Discourse

Darrel Enck-Wanzer

This essay focuses critical attention on one way that The Garden (2008) functions as a Latin@ vernacular discourse that serves to articulate the South Central Farmers to a decolonial politics operating through a kind of “border thinking.” Delinking themselves from the modern-colonial imaginary, I argue, the South Central Farmers enact a geo-body politics of knowledge that is consistently subverted, even by supporters, vis-à-vis modern-colonial rationality. Despite their apparent instrumental failure, the South Central Farmers succeeded in enacting a decolonial challenge, which compels us as scholars to rethink our approach to the Farmers’ specific activism and Latin@ vernacular discourse generally.

Keywords: Racism; Decoloniality; Border Thinking; Latin@ Vernacular Discourse; Critical Rhetoric

It is rare when local acts of resistance get caught on tape, even rarer when the full duration of struggle is meticulously documented.¹ So often, efforts against injustice take place in the shadowy spaces that democracies pretend do not exist—in those spaces where marginalized people have little voice or recourse to democratic procedures supposedly guaranteed to all. In his award-winning and Oscar-nominated documentary *The Garden*, Scott Hamilton Kennedy (2008) has captured a key instance of protest and struggle for liberation in the activities and activism of the South Central Farmers in Los Angeles, CA.² Encapsulating the unique potentiality of the largest urban farm in the United States, Kennedy’s film speaks *with* the South

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Central Farmers to address a host of issues surrounding local politics, citizenship, racism, food production, agrarian myths, neoliberalism, and more.³ Indeed, *The Garden* is such a rich text that it is challenging to choose one single entry point into a critical engagement.

As a scholar of race and public culture, my interests are concerned primarily with how race and racism emerge and function in US American culture; thus, I am drawn to the ways in which the South Central Farmers articulate a distinctive political voice within a highly racialized context that works, at nearly every turn, to exclude their ways of speaking, knowing, and acting. This exclusion is compounded, from the beginning, by California's colonial past: a spoil of the Mexican-American War, justified by the United States' racist "manifest destiny" doctrine (González, 2000).⁴ Such a history of coloniality underwrites Latin@⁵ discourse generally and the South Central Farmers specifically. In this brief essay, I focus attention on one way that this film functions as a Latin@ vernacular discourse (Holling & Calafell, 2011b) that serves to articulate the South Central Farmers to a decolonial politics operating through a kind of "border thinking" (Mignolo, 2000). Delinking (Mignolo, 2007) themselves from the modern-colonial imaginary, I argue, the South Central Farmers enact a geo-body politics of knowledge that is consistently subverted, even by supporters, vis-à-vis modern-colonial rationality. In making this argument, I begin with a brief review of relevant literatures on Latin@ vernacular discourse and the decolonial turn in order to establish the critical-theoretical heuristics guiding my read. Second, I will consider how *The Garden* itself functions as a Latin@ vernacular discourse rather than a colonizing voice that occludes the Farmers. Finally, I will examine the ways in which the South Central Farmers engage in delinking rhetorics that are met with resistance from those who are part of the existing power structure.

Latin@ vernacular discourse is a heuristic with roots in critical rhetoric generally (McKerrow, 1989; Ono & Sloop, 1992) and the critique of vernacular discourse specifically (Ono & Sloop, 1995). In Latin@ communication studies, several scholars (Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Holling, 2006, 2008; Holling & Calafell, 2011b) have made explicit reference to the critique of vernacular discourse. At its core, the critique of vernacular discourse aims "to upend essentialisms, undermine stereotypes, and eliminate narrow representations of culture" (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 25). In their new edited volume *Latina/o Discourse in Vernacular Spaces*, Holling and Calafell (2011b) clarify their view of Latin@ vernacular discourse "as an encompassing, though not subsuming, meta theory for critically examining the everyday sites in which Latin@s struggle over, produce, engage, enact and/or perform culture, identities and community formation" (p. 20). Latin@ vernacular discourse, under this formulation, is both a *thing* and a *perspective*—it is both the subject of study (the rhetorics produced by Latin@s struggling for various forms of liberation) and the critical heuristic through which we orient ourselves to discern Latin@ vernaculars' rhetorical functionality. Holling and Calafell (2011b) argue further that Latin@ vernacular discourse concerns itself with three primary characteristics: "tensions of identity, a decolonial aim, and the critic/al role" (p. 21). It is the decolonial aim which occupies my attention here.

Holling and Calafell (2011b) argue, “Latin@ vernacular discourse implicates the decolonial; that is, the process of decolonization” (p. 22). Holling and Calafell do well to document the ways in which scholars of Latin@ vernacular discourse have identified how Latin@ rhetorics function to decolonize. However, their approach falls short in theorizing robustly an understanding of coloniality in the first place. Other scholars (Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Holling & Calafell, 2007) also fall short in this aim, seeming, instead, to rely on commonplace understandings of the colonial as articulated by postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Hegde & Shome, 2002; Said, 1979; Shome, 1996; Shome & Hegde, 2002; Spivak, 1999). In order to advance discussions of Latin@ vernacular discourse, scholars should ground analyses in a more robust formulation of coloniality that can “meet these texts on their own terms methodologically” (Calafell, 2007) rather than rely on theoretical formulations of the colonial developed for other (e.g. south Asian) contexts.⁶

We can find such a formulation in the scholarly literature on coloniality, which has developed out of critical Latin American and Latin@ studies (Dussel, 2002; Grosfoguel, 2003, 2007; Grosfoguel & Cervantes-Rodríguez, 2002; Mignolo, 2000, 2006, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007; Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992; Wallerstein, 1974). Within this tradition, coloniality is understood as the “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” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). For Quijano (2007), coloniality’s “repression [falls], above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivized expression, intellectual or visual” (p. 169). Such repression is further transferred from ways of knowing to ways of being, enacting an ethnocidal epistemology and ontology (Mignolo, 2000, 2007). In response to modern-coloniality, scholars (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2006, 2007) suggest a decolonial turn—one that requires a “delinking from the rules of the game” (Mignolo, 2006, p. 313).

Operating within this delinking frame, activists and scholars alike “must unveil the totalitarian complicity of the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality in order to open up the space for the possibility . . . of ‘another world’” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 469). Just as Latin@ vernacular discourse seeks both to label a rhetorical phenomenon and to designate a critical perspective, so too does delinking/decoloniality identify both a species of rhetoric and a critical stance. Best captured by the term “border thinking,” this critical perspective and practice grounds our critical/intellectual engagements and interpretations of Latin@ vernacular discourse at the interstices of “the colonial wounds and imperial subordination” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 494)—a space in-between and in simultaneous contact with Western power-knowledge and pluriversal alternatives. With this in mind, I return to *The Garden* and engage the film as unveiling a set of colonizing social relations and enunciating decolonial alternatives through a Latin@ vernacular discourse.

To begin, *The Garden* functions as a Latin@ vernacular discourse vis-à-vis its enactment of cultural syncretism through visual forms marked prominently by

pastiche. Cultural syncretism and pastiche are the two defining characteristics of vernacular discourse identified by Ono and Sloop (1995). Cultural syncretism, accordingly, “affirms various cultural expressions while at the same time protests against the dominant cultural ideology” (p. 21). Pastiche, Ono and Sloop (2005) continue, “fractures culture in the process of appropriating it through imaginative reconstructive surgery” (p. 23)—it borrows and (re)appropriates bits of public culture (myths, ideographs, images, and other significations) in order to become “an embodied practice that is ever changing, active, and constantly motivated by a concern for local conditions and social problems” (p. 23). While *The Garden* is not directed or written by a Latin@ artist, Latin@ vernacular discourse is more figural than foundational; that is, through culturally syncretic pastiche, the film signifies and symbolizes local identity and political commitments in a moment of crisis about this community space, which emerged as a site of racial healing in the wake of the 1992 uprisings following the controversial Rodney King police abuse verdict. Through astute filmmaking, Scott Hamilton Kennedy “speaks with” (Alcoff, 1991) the South Central Farmers in a manner that keeps their words and voices in dialogic engagement with Kennedy’s cinematic and narrative pastiche.

As a Latin@ vernacular discourse, *The Garden* dramatizes the struggle of the South Central Farmers to simultaneously *resist* dominant and dominating racialized constructions of Latin@s and *affirm* a decolonial geo-body politics. In what remains of this essay, I tease out the decolonizing function of *The Garden*’s cultural syncretism in two steps. First, I examine how the film and the Farmers craft the racist/imperial force to which their affirmative constructions are ultimately a response. Second, I examine some elements of the South Central Farmers’ “border thinking” and geo-body politics to explain how they function as a decolonial challenge to oppressive state and private property interests.

Throughout the film, it is eminently clear that we (the viewers) are immersed into a highly racialized context, which does not escape the Farmers at all. Despite working 14 acres of land productively since 1992, the South Central Farmers faced an eviction notice in January 2004 after the city-held land was sold back to the original owner (Ralph Horowitz) for approximately the same price the city had paid in 1986.⁷ The Farmers were under no illusion about why they were given the land in the first place: “to pacify the community,” as activist Rufina notes.⁸ In taking away the land, the city council effectively denied the Farmers’ humanity. One farmer noted, “They wanted to throw us out, as if we were animals,” then another added, “It’s because we’re Latino. Exactly.” In addition to dehumanization, numerous players in this drama also racialized the Farmers as Latin@ Others, as foreign non-citizens apart from America. Working in opposition to the Farmers, for example, Juanita Tate (founder of Concerned Citizens of South Central, which opposed the garden) cited over-inflated numbers of undocumented Latin@s living in South Central in a manner that questioned the legitimacy of any claim to the land and practices of citizenship. Such tactics underscored for Farmers that “they want to do the race thing. They wanted to do the race thing from the get-go, to make this a brown and black thing” in the historically African American South Central LA.

The most telling racialization and rejection of the Farmers came from developer Ralph Horowitz, who is quoted in a radio interview run as a voiceover at the emotional climax of the film (as the garden is being leveled after the Farmers' legal challenges ultimately failed):

Even if they raised a hundred million dollars, this group could not buy this property. It's just not about money. It's about, I don't like their cause, and I don't like their conduct; so there's no price that I would sell it to them for. Where does this kind of "you owe me" mentality end, and how good is that for America? Everybody says "you owe me." Is this good for our country that everybody is owed and nobody is obligated? I don't see it. What they should have said to the taxpayers of Los Angeles and to me is, "This is a gracious country. Thank you very much for letting us have these gardens here. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

In this powerful statement, Horowitz's ethnocentrism and racism is laid bare in the presumption that the Farmers are not American. Rather, they are a foreign succubi, separate from Americans, who are, in Tate's words, "raping [the] community."

Within this context of racialization and Otherization, the South Central Farmers counter modern-colonial, universalist legal rhetoric by enunciating a geographically local, historically contextual, and fully embodied reply, which remains cognizant of (although not fully faithful in) existent legal apparatuses that offer some hope for resolution. On the legal side, Rufina, one of the leading Farmers' advocates, asserted, "The sale of the land which we are working is an illegal sale." Tezozomoc, another leader, expressed a strong faith in the system to fairly resolve the dispute days before filing for an injunction: "Whether we're rich or we're poor, or a developer from a good background, we will all be made equal under the law. And now we will see who will prevail." Such explicit contact to the wounding territory of a legal system historically unjust to Latin@ land claims (González, 2000) continued in the Farmers' direct appeals to the city council.

In those appeals to the council and others in positions of authority, however, the Farmers speak in a language delinked from legality and employ, instead, a geo-body politics of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2007) that draws attention to the embodied, local, and communal significance of their struggle. At their first council meeting appearance, for example, one farmer announced, "I am a farmer, and here is the proof in my hands! [shows hands] To not allow us to stay on that land that has already been cultivated! For what reason?" The South Central Farmers consistently directed attention to the ways in which they learned from and through this land (e.g. "I have learned from this land to be proud")—claims that are connected to slogans from prior land struggles in Mexico (e.g. "Tierra y Libertad!" and "Viva Zapata!"). Josefina, another Farmer, says late in the film, "For me, it's the story of life. Because without the land, we are nothing. What are we without the land? Try to plant on cement and you'll get nothing. It's life, simply life." Their interest in the land, then, is not about acquiring ownership or property rights; instead, they make a claim "about the rights of the community" and the sacred, life-affirming connection they have to the land.

Such epistemic shifts seem unintelligible to those operating within the modern-colonial system. For example, at one point the South Central Farmers storm the

mayor's office demanding face-time to resolve the dispute. Deputy Mayor Larry Frank (someone who, we learn later, is fairly sympathetic to their cause) disarms the Farmers through a colonization of their discursive space, by saying "We'll sit down, we'll sit around a desk, and we'll try to make sense out of it." Once a smaller group of Farmers meets with Frank behind closed doors, however, he has no way to "make sense" of Tezozomoc's eloquent, tear-filled plea: "I think sometimes, in these kinds of struggles, we lose a little bit of focus on what this really means for the community. It is as if I went to your community and I took down your temple, I took down your church. That's what we're talking about. These . . . are sacred things. You're taking away our way of life." The Deputy Mayor sits silent, unable to grasp the kind of knowledge with which he had been presented.

In *The Garden's* final scene, Tezozomoc wisely concludes, "The garden was about many things, a multiplicity of things. And I think that we'll never know all of the answers to that. All I'm, all I can speak to is what we witnessed and what we lived through." Such a sentiment, combined with the aforementioned examples, does more than articulate identity; rather, it both asserts and models ways of knowing and being indicative of border thinking, in which "the pluniversality of each local history and its narrative of decolonization can *connect* through that common experience and use it as the basis for a new common logic of knowing" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 497). With the South Central Farmers, such new ways of thinking and being spurred "new concepts of economy and social organization" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 498) central to border epistemologies and to the process of delinking from modern-coloniality. Their rhetorical maneuver should also remind cultural and social critics of the importance of meeting vernacular discourses on their own terms (Calafell, 2007; Calafell & Delgado, 2004), especially when those terms function through another rationality. In marking out and fighting for their own space, identity, and ways of being other than that which the modern-colonial state demanded, the South Central Farmers and *The Garden* teach us about *their* own innovative struggles and *our* need to innovate as critical communication scholars.

Such continued conceptual innovation is important, especially in the context of Latin@ vernacular discourse. While Holling and Calafell (2011b) have expertly marked out the theoretical terrain of Latin@ vernacular discourse, their enunciation of decolonization leaves room for development. Rather than rely on unproblematic assumptions of colonialism as a historical concept, I suggest in this essay that turning to the Latin@/Latin American studies formulation of coloniality offers a productive alternative because it better equips the critic to take up Latin@ discourse on its own terms (Calafell, 2007; Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Enck-Wanzer, 2006) with heuristics developed from within the Latin@ experience. Furthermore, theory centered on coloniality provides a critical vocabulary (delinking, geo-body politics, border thinking, etc.) encouraging analytical specificity (e.g. Mignolo, 2007). In other words, a focus on decoloniality and its attendant features moves scholars away from more general claims about decolonization, and toward a more precise analysis of "the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 485). *The Garden* and the South Central Farmers with which it

speaks, then, is not only a captivating example of Latin@ vernacular discourse in action; it is also a compelling vehicle for beginning to rethink how scholars can approach Latin@ vernacular discourse in the first place.

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Notes

- [1] The existence of YouTube videos may be an exception, but their effectivity relies on access to a technological infrastructure from which many people are excluded. Regardless, such videos are often fragments, not fully documented, feature-length narratives.
- [2] I capitalize “South Central Farmers” throughout because it is the name by which the farmworkers chose to refer to themselves.
- [3] I allude, here, to a distinction between speaking *for* others and speaking *with* them. Alcoff (1991) argues, “We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialog and the practice of speaking with others rather than speaking for others” (p. 23). In approaching Kennedy’s film, I believe it functions as a dialogic encounter that “challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, an opposition that is key in the reproduction of imperialist modes of discourse” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 23).
- [4] It is worth noting that virtually all Chicana@ and Mexican American activism in the southwest since the 1960s has made claims to a colonial past (González, 2000; Muñoz, 2007).
- [5] I use the word “Latin@” in line with Holling and Calafell (2011a), who argue that the term “names the subjects (and objects) . . . that brings forth the weight of history, governmentality, and grassroots organizing that reflect acts of self- and group assertion, thereby producing ideological struggles over how Latin@s are understood socially” (p. xvi). The “@” further symbolizes “an intertwining of Latina and Latino subjects” that subverts the hierarchical binary logic of “Latino/Latina” and its variations (p. xvi).
- [6] Scholar-critics of coloniality distinguish their intervention from various “posts,” especially from postcolonial theory. For Mignolo (2007), de-coloniality “is a project of de-linking while post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy” (p. 452). The scholarship on decoloniality, in its attentiveness to delinking, offers a level of rhetorical specificity and geo-political germaneness that makes it preferable in theorizing and extending Latin@ vernacular discourse.
- [7] The land, the film tells us, was originally purchased through eminent domain for the purpose of a waste incinerator. The incinerator project, known as LANCER, was stopped through community activism organized by Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, an activist group led by Juanita Tate.
- [8] All quotations, unless otherwise noted, come from the film and were transcribed by the author.

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