




Egyptology: A Decolonial Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This thought experiment introduces decolonial thought to the historiography of Egyptology. At a time when Egyptology increasingly scrutinizes its essence, a decolonial investigation as proposed by Walter Mignolo suggests new insights into the history and function of Egyptology as an academic discipline: formative roots in the imperial competition borne out of the colonization of the Americas, the Westernization of knowledge, and a recently emerging potential for a multipolar Egyptology against the backdrop of wider global trajectories. Decolonial thought enriches the historiography of the field and enables an assessment of the viability of decolonization in Egyptology.

Résumé: Cette expérience de la pensée introduit la réflexion décoloniale dans l'historiographie de l'égyptologie. Au moment où l'égyptologie remet de plus en plus ses fondements en question, une investigation décoloniale, à la manière de celle proposée par Walter Mignolo, suggère de nouvelles pistes de réflexion sur l'historique et la fonction de l'égyptologie en tant que discipline académique: ses racines formatives ancrées dans la concurrence impériale née de la colonisation des Amériques, l'occidentalisation des connaissances et plus récemment, l'émergence d'une éventuelle égyptologie multipolaire dans le contexte de trajectoires mondiales élargies. La réflexion décoloniale enrichit l'historiographie du domaine et permet de procéder à l'examen de la viabilité de la décolonisation en égyptologie.

Resumen: Este experimento mental introduce el pensamiento decolonial en la historiografía de la egiptología. En un momento en que la egiptología escudriña cada vez más su esencia, una investigación decolonial propuesta por Walter Mignolo sugiere nuevos conocimientos sobre la historia y la función de la egiptología como disciplina académica: raíces formativas en la

competencia imperial surgida de la colonización de las Américas, la occidentalización del conocimiento, y un potencial recientemente emergente para una egiptología multipolar en el contexto de trayectorias globales más amplias. El pensamiento decolonial enriquece la historiografía del campo y permite evaluar la viabilidad de la descolonización en egiptología.

KEY WORDS

Colonization of the Americas, Decoloniality, De-Westernization, Historiography of Egyptology

Introduction: Why Conduct a Decolonial Investigation of Egyptology?

This paper is a thought experiment, an attempt at a decolonial investigation of Egyptology. By decoloniality (or decolonial thought), I relate to decoloniality as formulated and advanced by South American thinkers over the past three decades, always aware though that there may be numerous different ideas of what ‘decolonial thinking’ constitutes. It is thus imperative to keep in mind that the ideas and interpretations expressed here are informed by this South American strain. First, what are decolonial investigations? Decolonial investigations, in the words of Walter D. Mignolo (2021, pp. xvi, 3), aim at revealing the underlying logic that has shaped life and knowledge on Earth over the past centuries, a logic that has shaped most people’s lives in a comprehensive, albeit perhaps unaware fashion. The question is why one would conduct such a decolonial investigation with respect to Egyptology. A decolonial investigation can offer an alternative perspective on the history and function of Egyptology, to make visible processes unseen in mainstream histories of the discipline, and thus assist in the scrutiny of this field of knowledge and in pondering its future trajectory. In other words, a decolonial investigation can help ground Egyptology and relate it to historical and ongoing processes.

Intriguingly, the definition of what constitutes an Egyptologist or Egyptology has been discussed more frequently over the past few years, yet only by a negligible number of authors (Baines, 2020; Bednarski, 2020; Gertzen, 2020). This is significant. Perhaps it is no coincidence that such ruminations gain traction at a time that the legacy of Egyptology is being scruti-

nized more widely among specialists and non-academics, although subconsciously most people may think they know how to accurately define Egyptologists. All this indicates that Egyptology is facing an identity crisis *vis-à-vis* bigger global trajectories, which include declining enrolments in Egyptology, a lack of employment for graduates in the field, and difficulties in obtaining permits for archaeological fieldwork, at the same time that archaeology in the global North generally faces increasing difficulties. Apart from the fact that authors (Baines, 2020; Bednarski, 2020; Gertzen, 2020) seemingly agree that Egyptology was hard, if not impossible to define, the general consensus most recently arrived at envisions it as ‘area studies’ based at universities and museums with a more ancient focus employing multiple methodologies (Baines, 2020) or an ‘umbrella term’ for anything related to ancient Egypt (Bednarski, 2020, p. 33). Egyptologists study ancient Egyptian society, broadly speaking. But this is only part of the story—and only the most easily visible one. A decolonial investigation suggests that there is much more to (the practice of) Egyptology and relays how the field functions on a meta-level and how micro-responses relate to global historical trajectories. Before delving into this matter, we have to outline the basic premises of the decolonial conception of history and its agendas to provide the theoretical frame for any further insights into the workings of Egyptology.

Premises: The Decolonial Conception of History and Agendas

Decoloniality, in essence, is about relationships of power between humans and between humans and the natural environment, which are guided by a certain, yet not entirely unavoidable logic (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 223). It has gained traction since the 1990s, emanating with South American thinkers like Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo, among others, and gaining seemingly more traction outside its traditional intellectual spaces in recent years. Decolonial thought thus comes from the Global South. Decolonial thinkers, however, posit that decolonial thought itself was not developed by them nor was it indeed anything new, but that it was rather a specific kind of thinking given form, a thinking as old as colonial ventures—here the Iberian colonization of the Americas—and outright opposed to their logic. Instead, decolonial thought argues for alternatives in “the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 16–17), the “liberation ... from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and as domination” (Quijano, 2007, p. 178).

Decoloniality is not congruent with decolonization. A decolonized society of whatever size does not necessarily mean that this society is indeed decolonial. Decolonization is a term that primarily relates to formal decolonization in the sense of a power transfer from colonial elites, historically usually a foreign minority, to indigenous elites, as during the Cold War (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 5, 222). Decolonial thought considers this decolonization as a failure, for “colonial power continued both internally and with relation to global structure” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, p. 5), therefore linking with Frantz Fanon’s (1963, pp. 66–67) contention that formal decolonization was not enough. One can add the postcolonial Egypt as a case in point, also with regard to the study of its ancient past (Langer, 2017; 2021a).

Decoloniality is also not congruent with postcolonialism. Where postcolonialism is rather vague about its meaning or intentions—for example: discussing the situation after the end of formal colonialism or aspiring to the abolition of formal colonialism (Mignolo, 2021, p. 382)—decoloniality envisions a world devoid of any colonial relationships, going beyond formalism. Decolonial thought sets itself apart from postcolonial theories, which it considers to be ‘academic commodities’ (Mignolo, 2012, p. 100), something to be converted into positions and research grants.

For Walter Mignolo, decolonial thought goes to the root of present-day power relations, whereas Edward Said’s *Orientalism* had fallen short in that regard (Mignolo, 2012, p. 57). While Said (2003, p. 42) began his considerations with the European colonization of the ‘Middle East,’ Mignolo (2012, vol. xxvii, p. 55–57) went much farther back, to the eve of the colonization of the Americas, arguing that the postcolonial critique starting with the late eighteenth century leaves out the sixteenth century as the constitutive period which would later effect Orientalism. Drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) modern world systems theory, decolonial thought inquires where and when that modern world system emerged and finds the answer in the colonization of the Americas, specifically in its early Iberian phase in the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries (Mignolo, 2012, pp. 51–60). Then and there was articulated what is referred to as the modern/colonial concept of modernity as it was developed in Europe—modern in the imperial centers, colonial in the colonies; modernity and coloniality are co-dependent in this context and cannot be thought of as separate entities (Mignolo, 2021, p. 22). *Local* European history and thought was expanded beyond Europe and became a *global design* (Mignolo, 2012), a provincialism turned into a universalism (Quijano, 2007, p. 177). In appropriating the world and in constituting itself, Europe destituted the non-European (Mignolo, 2021, p. 24), going back to the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula seen as prelude to the Spanish conquest of Mexico (Thomas, 1993, p. 293).

Thus going beyond the economic focus of Wallerstein's original theory, Quijano (2000) developed the concept of the *colonial matrix of power*, or *coloniality of power* and *coloniality* for short. The *colonial matrix of power* (CMP) is a set of principles ruling most humans, its power wielded by its 'creators and gatekeepers.' The name allows a fitting analogy with the science-fiction movie *The Matrix*. We are all in the CMP and there is presently no outside of it (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 114). The four domains of the CMP revolve around knowledge, governance, economy, and the human. They come in the form of epistemic Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, and capitalism influencing subjectivities (Mignolo, 2021, pp. 36–37). These shape daily life globally (Quijano, 2000, p. 545) and coloniality thus goes beyond colonialism (Quijano, 2007, p. 170).

The expansion of Spain and Portugal was the consequence of the Iberian interest to connect with the commercial circuits of China and India, at the time the center of the global economy, while Europe was on the margin (Abu-Lughod, 1989, pp. 33–36). By linking the European with the American commercial circuits from 1492 on, the Iberian powers created a huge new exchange network and shifted the global center of gravity from eastern Eurasia to the North Atlantic (Dussel, 1998, pp. 5–12; Mignolo, 2012, pp. 26–28) and made the capitalist world economy possible (Mignolo, 2021, p. 27). Demarcating their respective spheres of influence, the Iberian powers designated the part west of Europe as *Indias Occidentales* and the part to the east as *Indias Orientales*—East Indies—in the early sixteenth century (Mignolo, 2021, pp. 290–291) and thus divided the world into West and East. Europe's extension into the Americas saw the advent of occidentalism (Mignolo, 2012, p. 51). Said (2003, p. 58), in turn, reproduced the narrative that a continual West had been around since antiquity, drawing on an early modern, retroactively *invented* 'antiquity' (Sand, 2017, chapter 1) himself.

European epistemology hence becoming a global design, the CMP was formed under control of Spain as the "underlying structure of Western civilization and Westernization" (Mignolo, 2021, p. 22). Since *c.* 1500, the management of the CMP has been at its center (Mignolo, 2021, p. 34). Between 1750 and 1800, France and Britain superseded Spain and competed for the leadership of the CMP, resulting in a shift from Christian theology to secular sciences as the hegemonic frame of knowledge with a civilizing mission and the nation-state as the political frame in the nineteenth century; following the Second World War, the United States took control of the CMP (Mignolo, 2021, vol. 36, p. 195). The British and later US-American contention that Spanish colonialism represented a barbaric form of colonialism *vis-à-vis* their own 'enlightened' mode of colonialism—the *Black Legend*—(Silverblatt, 2007, p. 116) reflects the inter-imperial rivalry over the control of the CMP.

The decades since the end of the Cold War have been characterized by de-Westernization aiming to end Western hegemony (Mignolo, 2021, p. 196). De-Westernization “is an interstate-led project that disputes the control of the management” of the CMP within the very logic of the CMP, whose existence is accepted and taken for granted (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 125), although it blocks the neoliberal homogenization of the world (Mignolo, 2021, p. 535) as a self-affirmative movement (Mignolo, 2011, p. 47). Its roots go back to the Bandung Conference in 1955, which aimed at decolonization but still adhered to the concept of the nation-state and the capitalist model (Mignolo, 2021, pp. 17–19). Attempts at re-Westernization by the United States are a reaction to de-Westernization (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 35–37). The conflict between the United States and China is a reflection of the de-Westernization of the CMP and the struggle over its control (Mignolo, 2021, pp. 12–13). Mignolo (2021, pp. 75, 236) posits that de-Westernization, accelerated by the ongoing pandemic, would usher in a reconfiguration of the world system.

A key factor in the management of the CMP have been universities and museums, both enunciators and mediums, the places where knowledge considered legitimate is formed, ordered, and communicated (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 198–200). Seen as innate to coloniality, academic disciplines with their stark boundaries and underlying principles should be dispensed with altogether according to decoloniality rather than simply be adjusted (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 113). Awareness of the CMP is the prerequisite to engage in attempts to undermine its epistemic mechanism. Decolonial thought and praxis thus amounts to *epistemic disobedience* (also Peters in this volume) from within the CMP, a process also called *delinking*, alternatively ‘learning to unlearn and relearn’ (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 114–115; Mignolo, 2021, p. 358). One may broadly compare this with Slavoj Žižek’s (2008, p. 8; 2017: p. 275–276) stance to think or learn about a pertinent problem first before engaging it in practice, especially to avoid blind activism. *Delinking* primarily happens on the intellectual level, for instance by broadening the canon of thought and including (subaltern) Global South thinkers. *Delinking* follows the routes of decoloniality and de-Westernization (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 127). In this context, decolonial thought is critical of postmodernism and poststructuralism as emanating from within the Western canon of thought that reproduces coloniality (Grosfoguel, 2010, p. 66), and together with postcolonialism it is part of the same continuum of the CMP without any clear break as the ‘post’-prefix may imply (Mignolo, 2021, pp. 381–382).

The terms of *imperial* and *colonial difference* describe strategic narratives about the relationships between people and civilizations taken to be objectively true (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 185–186). For example, the *imperial difference* describes projections onto entities that were not colonized

but degraded in the narratives, such as the Ottoman Empire. The *colonial difference* works in a similar way with respect to the relationship between the imperial center and the (internal and external) colonial subjects (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, pp. 185–191).

Further crucial aspects of decolonial thought are *dwelling in the border* and *border thinking*, based on the idea that borders demarcate not only physical spaces but also humans and knowledges, producing a borderland where different epistemologies (*local histories*) meet and converge to form a kind of hybrid from which the *colonial difference* emerges (Mignolo, 2012, p. xxv); *dwelling in the border* is thus an existential condition (Mignolo, 2012, p. xv), a prerequisite for “sensing the colonial epistemic and ontological difference” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 207). *Border thinking*, an outcome of this existential condition, can unravel the imaginary of the modern/colonial world system and aims at “building a world without modernity/coloniality” (Mignolo, 2012, pp. xvii–xviii), leading to decoloniality in the long term or de-Westernization in the short term (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 207).

Decolonial thought can be seen in the context of discontents growing ever-louder over the *status quo* and the search for alternatives; for instance, related to the linear, Eurocentric model of history (Graeber and Wengrow 2021) or the fact that the global economy is on course to wreck life on the planet (Monbiot 2017; 2018). This *status quo* fits neatly into the concept of the CMP. At the same time, decoloniality is understood as an *option* to promote “pluriversality as a universal option”, not as a civilizing mission (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, pp. 147, 224–225). Generally, Arjun Appadurai’s (2021) assessments that decoloniality wanted to return to ‘a pristine past’ before the advent of the CMP or that decoloniality ignored matters of political economy are inaccurate. In a way, the CMP is very much about the political economy of knowledge, of culture, of language, of monetary exchanges, etc. (Grosfoguel 2010, pp. 69–73). Decolonial thinkers know full well that the damage has been done and that it can hardly be reversed. The point is to show that alternatives to the CMP are possible if one was willing to look beyond coloniality/modernity. Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) work *The Dawn of Everything* shows indirect moments of decolonial thought, inasmuch as it is about showing that alternatives to the current, ‘stuck’ state of things and the biased historiography that is set to reproduce the story of (linear) Western grandeur (Quijano 2007: 176) are possible by way of reflections on the deep past and indigenous heritage; but these authors ultimately do not complete the theoretical linkage with decoloniality, perhaps unaware of its arguments given the absence of decolonial literature from the references.

Past and Present: The Formation and Progression of Egyptology through the Lens of Decolonial Thought

The idea that there was some kind of linearity that began with the advent of the earliest tangible states in Egypt and Mesopotamia and led to European expansion culminating in today's global system is a recurring theme in several works, be it explicit or implicit. For instance, Wengrow (2010) accepted the notion of a Western lineage between the ancient Near East and the modern West (implicitly also in the shape of an ancient 'Western tradition' in Graeber and Wengrow, 2021), lamenting that the former's contribution was not appreciated enough; Assmann (2014) traces a line from Egyptian polytheism to Christianity and regards Egypt as part of the past of Western civilization and its 'European cultural canon' (Assmann, 1996: pp. 425–427); Langer (2015) explicitly argued for the inclusion of ancient Egyptian political thought in a history of Western political thought; and for Warburton (2016) the origins of Western civilization lie in the Bronze Age Near East. A *hidden theory* (Sommer and Gramsch, 2011, p. 25) may become visible here.

In this sense, the recent *History of World Egyptology's* (Bednarski et al. 2020, p. 3–4) attempt to frame the topic based on territoriality reproduces the impression that Egyptology has been a Western affair, since the individual contributions revolve around European players and Japan; given its history of Westernization, Japan can be considered Western in this context as well since in the early twentieth century it was accepted into "the family of nations fulfilling the standards of civilization" (Mignolo 2012, p. 286). Conspicuously absent from this 'world history' are surging territories like Brazil (Rocha da Silva 2017; 2019), China (Tian 2017; 2021), or the Balkans (Tomorad 2015). Yet even if these countries had been included in a global overview of Egyptologies, such a globalized history would have changed little, for these Egyptological traditions still pertain to the same logic as the imperial Egyptologies of Britain, France, or Germany per decolonial thought.

Recall the formation of the CMP and its reconfiguration in the second half of the eighteenth century, which entailed the (trans)formation of knowledges. Central to this knowledge transformation—and the subsequent appropriation of the world by Europeans—was the emergence of the transatlantic system and the self-conception by Europe and its colonies as *the West*. Politically, this thought was formalized by the partition of the globe by the Iberian powers into a west and an east in the early sixteenth century. Occidentalism precedes Orientalism. What followed was the narrative of a *Western civilization* that represented the pinnacle in human historical development, ensuring technological progress and prosperity—not for

everyone, but for everyone that mattered, i.e., Europeans (or rather, their elites). This narrative persists to this day. By conceiving of Rome, Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia as earlier iterations of this Western civilization, European powers were able to generate ideological legitimacy from the deep past (Langer, 2017; 2021a). And thus they were able to imagine a civilization that is 5000 years old—on par with the Chinese and Indian civilizations said to be equally old, a surging (and perhaps reactive) narrative in recent years especially in connection with China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Egypt is a crucial anchor in this legitimizing grand narrative. It connects the purportedly earliest forms of Western civilization with the Bible and Greece and Rome. As claimed ‘successor’ to Greece and Rome—one just has to think of the Frankish Empire or the Holy Roman Empire (Stolberg-Rilinger, 2018, pp. 12–13)—, Europe claims the Egyptian territory and its ancient, pre-Islamic history as its own (Reid, 2002, pp. 139–171; Colla, 2007, pp. 101–103) or at least as its annex, its extension. Egypt links with both Occidentalism and Orientalism.

The French invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the resulting *Déscription de l'Égypte* are traditionally regarded as the point of origin of the developments that would manifest in the academic discipline of Egyptology, experiencing its explosive moment with the decipherment of Egyptian writing (Drews, 2020). Whether expressly or unspoken—the ‘Napoleonic Expedition’ is always *there*. Somewhat ironically, this colonial-era narrative is supported by Said (2003: pp. 42–43) despite his critical agenda since he sees the French invasion of Egypt as the beginning of Orientalism. Often seen in isolation and serving as the effective foundation myth of Egyptology, one should see it in its proper historical context. It was the imperial struggle over the domination of North America that saw France lose its colonies there to Britain in the French and Indian War/Seven Years War (1755/1756–1763) (Anderson, 2000), which prompted it to look for alternatives elsewhere. At least since the mid-1770s, France intended to conquer Egypt to use it as a gateway to colonize Africa and to undermine the British position in India (Said, 2003, p. 76; Burleigh, 2007, p. vii). Following the turmoil surrounding the French Revolution, that invasion finally came in 1798 led by Napoleon Bonaparte.

The invasion itself had been legitimized prior to the fact by evoking Egypt’s great pharaonic past now being trampled on by the Ottoman Empire and their Mamluk clients. It was France’s (or Europe’s) duty to liberate Egypt from barbarism and bring Egypt home into the Western fold (Said, 2003, pp. 84–87; Cole, 2007, p. 16). The Islamic past and present thus degraded, Europe could ‘reconnect’ Egypt with its proto-Western past. Here the *imperial difference* comes to the fore, the unequal relationship between secular France in the east and the Islamic Ottoman Empire in the

east. While the *imperial difference* helped legitimize the French invasion of Egypt as part of the informal Ottoman Empire, the invasion also reinforced it by turning Egypt into a site of the Westernization of the country's distant past and cultural heritage.

In the Americas, the Europeans destroyed substantial parts of Amerindian (elite) cultural heritage and epistemes with arms (Thomas, 1993) and language (Mignolo, 1995). In Egypt, the Europeans instead began to explore the local heritage, something I argue was made possible by the earlier Roman appropriation of Egypt, which was then appropriated by early modern Europe (see below). Egypt thus could be woven into a European identity. In the Americas this was not possible since there was no prior spatial overlap with Europe; and little did Europeans at the time know of the short-lived Norse activities 800 years earlier along the Atlantic coast of what would later become Canada (Kuitems et al., 2021).

One may be tempted to argue, that France or Britain had no choice other than to incorporate Egypt into their colonial empires, and that their policies were simply consistent with both the times and their ambitions—at least this is what is implied by the wording that 'France was *forced* to reappraise its ambitions to remain a world power' (Bednarski, 2020: p. 37, emphasis added). The point is that one always has a choice. It is only from within the logic of the CMP that France was 'forced' to select 'unexplored or unexploited' lands (by Europeans!) for colonization, to continue to challenge Britain for the leadership of the CMP. In a situation, where state A would argue that it absolutely had to, for instance, attack and occupy state B and use its population for cheap labour and exploit its natural resources to ensure the greatness of state A, decolonial thought would respond: 'No, you simply stop doing it, stop doing and thinking what you have always done and thought.' France, for one, could have simply abandoned its world power status; in turn, that may have delayed the British involvement in Egypt—and the formation of Egyptology as well. Yet it was the logic of the CMP that did not allow for that scenario to occur.

The "Columbian moment" thus also affects (or effects) Egyptology, and the genesis and existence of Egyptology cannot be seen in isolation of the colonization of the Americas. While it did not cause the formation of Egyptology as such, it accelerated the process and facilitated the formation at precisely that moment in time by precisely the actors involved. And it is here, in 1798 and the aftermath, that two historical processes converge: the colonization of the Americas and the appropriation of Egypt by the Roman empire (Figure 1). The former set in motion developments dating to 1492 that led to imperial competition in North America, with the outcome that France sought to colonize Egypt; it also generated a sense of superiority and entitlement to the control of non-Europeans. The latter, beginning with the removal of the first obelisks under Augustus after 30 BCE, saw

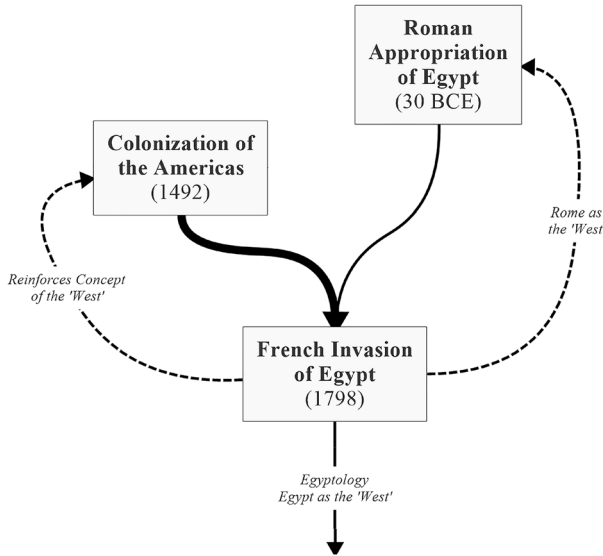


Figure 1. Visualization of the historical processes converging in the formation of Egyptology in 1798 and their effects. © author

the incorporation of Egyptian culture to facilitate Roman control over Egypt and was adopted by European powers in the Renaissance when Rome itself was appropriated together with an interest in ancient Egyptian culture (Roulet 1972; Curl, 2005; Sorek, 2010); a claim to Egypt and its distant history came with it. These two developments converged in 1798: the invasion and scholarly survey of Egypt by none other than France as the CMP was reconfiguring toward British and French leadership and the subsequent formation of Egyptology as an academic discipline; earlier, Egyptology could not have formed as the Iberian powers were clearly invested in the Americas and saw no need for involvement in Northeast Africa (Dussel 1998, pp. 5–12). The earlier indigenous engagements with Egypt’s ancient past (El Daly 2005) have to be ignored in this context since these did not factor into the disciplinary formation, itself an illustration of the marginalizing effect of coloniality. 1798, in turn, reinforced the idea of the West by providing the context of an Egyptian origin via the Roman past, thus enhancing the self-conception as it emerged from the colonization of the Americas. The main thrust came from the Americas, though, as the idea of the West itself enabled the appropriation of Rome in the first place. In principle, this positive feedback loop has not been broken since.

Egyptology was thus not only borne out of European colonialism but it has also fulfilled a knowledge control function in the Western-led management of the CMP, regardless of whether Egyptological knowledge was used to promote

colonialism or to challenge colonial interference (Colla, 2007, p. 18). The conditions under which it was formed meant that it could hardly have been any different. It became part of the CMP, part of the regulatory system (Mignolo, 2021, p. 43) generated by Westernization. The entry of further colonial powers into Egyptology during the nineteenth century (Reid, 1985; 2015, pp. 20–29) underpins the relevance of Egyptology (just as the field of archaeology generally) in this context and its existence as a site of international competition.

The peculiarities of Egyptology with its complex interplay of state-actors and non-state-actors seemingly do not line up well with the CMP as a state-led structure. Entities like the *Egypt Exploration Society* (EES), very much common in Britain (Dodson, 2020; Loktionov (forthcoming)), are different from state-led archaeology as in Germany, Austria, or China. Yet despite their private, non-governmental character of actors like the EES they would be considered as imperial agents by decolonial thought for they ultimately act in the interest of Britain as an outsourced branch of foreign relations.

Until the formal decolonization of Egypt in the 1950s, the institutions in Egypt supervising access to objects and fieldwork were largely under Western control (Ikram and Omar, 2020). The UNESCO salvage campaign of the early 1960s saw new players emerge in Egyptian archaeology, prominently from the Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia. Especially in the context of the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, the nationalization of Egyptian heritage can be seen as an attempt to de-Westernize. Per decolonial thought, this may have resulted in decolonization, but it did not result in decoloniality for two reasons: firstly, the Egyptian elites adjusted the existing epistemic and institutional structures to serve the Egyptian nation-state and to suit their own needs (Mitchell 2002, pp. 179–205; Langer, 2017; Jurman, 2022, pp. 20–22); and, secondly, Western control of academic knowledge remained generally unaffected (Langer, 2017).

Overall, the function of Egyptology in the CMP has remained the same despite formal decolonization. The research agendas echo the CMP: the role of Egyptology in scientific (which can be extended to epistemic) racism, both as data provider for Eugenics and on a theoretical level (Challis, 2013; Matić, 2018); patriarchal views on history and material culture, widespread in archaeology more generally (Coltofean-Arizancu et al., 2021); or the continued ideological support for an ancient Western civilization as discussed above, to name but a few aspects.

Discussion: What are the Implications for the Future?

Decolonial thought suggests that the academic field of Egyptology has been an innately Western project. Egyptians themselves are *dwelling in the border*, inhabiting the epistemic borderland of ancient Egypt's past and her-

itage. Walking a tightrope between the nationalist narratives at home (Sombol, 2018) and the Eurocentric narratives they are exposed to in imperial centers (which includes Western universities in Egypt), they possess a double consciousness which bears the potential for *border thinking*. Yet it remains to be seen how that *border thinking* may occur and what it may foster, in the middle as Egyptians are between the competing projects of re-Westernization and de-Westernization.

Mignolo (2021, pp. 19–21) discerned that re-Westernization was a response to de-Westernization. Although he largely had the structural level of Western governments and international bodies in mind, we may see similar attempts already playing out on at least an individual level in Egyptology, for instance, in the form of established Western Egyptologists advising the emerging Chinese ‘Egyptology market’. The Chinese entry in Egyptian field archaeology has come on the back of the BRI to revive and transform historical connectivities along the Silk Roads. A comprehensive road map for Trans-Afro-Eurasian infrastructure projects and cultural exchanges, China has entered in archaeological and heritage collaborations with host countries and sent out archaeological teams across BRI countries (Langer, 2023). While the BRI might not be the cause for Chinese world archaeology to go abroad, it has certainly provided the institutional framework and legitimacy to the undertaking (see Winter, 2019).

Egyptology’s center of gravity is still very much in the North Atlantic, its knowledge production controlled by institutions and actors on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the global centre of gravity is changing toward the east (Khanna, 2019), this may not have any tangible effect on Egyptology for the foreseeable future. While global de-Westernization is progressing, the disciplinary de-Westernization is trailing the global process. One reason has to do with the dominance of the knowledge production emanating from the Anglosphere, reflected by global university rankings and publishers, which privilege select actors. Another reason has to do with the fact that any serious challenger from without the established Egyptological paradigm is yet to emerge. China is investing in (humanities) research (Moreno García, 2020) and is challenging the leadership of the CMP (Mignolo, 2021: pp. 12–13), yet its Egyptology is marginal and the quest of Chinese scholars to be or become ‘good Egyptologists’ and recognized and respected by their Western peers means that any potential challenge will likely take decades to emerge; even more so if Western Egyptologists (continue to) export their model(s) of Egyptology to Chinese universities—itsself probably best seen as (unconscious) attempts to navigate the reconfiguration of the CMP. If anything, a Chinese-led de-Westernization in Egyptology seems more viable in the long run rather than the short term under such circumstances (Langer, 2023). Yet one cannot agree

with Juan Carlos Moreno García's (2020, pp. 34–35) assessment that Eurocentrism was over. Europe will remain Eurocentric. What is or will be over is rather that Europe can impose easily its local design as a global design.

The often-heated debate surrounding a decolonization of Egyptology that has emerged in recent years (e.g., Gertzen, 2020; Abd el Gawad and Stevenson, 2021) can be seen in the context of de-Westernization as well, yet does not necessarily entail exercises in *epistemic disobedience*, i.e., *delinking*. The quest for a greater Egyptian presence in Egyptological knowledge production and a (selective) restitution of Egyptian objects held in non-Egyptian museums is still largely within the logic of the CMP. The Egyptian (and non-Western) role in its management is rarely addressed. In this sense, Gertzen's (2020, pp. 192) lament that the dichotomy of the 'bad' Western destruction and looting of ancient heritage versus the 'good' or 'less bad' (indigenous) Egyptian destruction and looting of ancient heritage in the quest to modernize the country made no sense appears sensible from a decolonial vantage point. In both these modes of destruction, ancient Egyptian heritage fell victim to the logic of modernity and should thus be seen through the same lens. That the role of local Egyptians should be scrutinized in this context is a sensible proposition; yet, as Gertzen (2020, p. 192) also points out, it was Western agents who were the driving force behind the antiquities trade. Rather than exonerating Western culpability in the creation of the antiquities trade nexus, an inclusion of indigenous agency in this context can illuminate how coloniality has effected and affected the antiquities trade.

Connecting more with global tendencies, a globalization of research agendas has been proposed (Moreno García, 2020; Langer, 2021b). Yet this would not automatically usher in decolonization but rather in a shift from north/west to east/south, and thus effect and/or accelerate de-Westernization. One might see this as an attempt to navigate the reconfiguration of the CMP, an attempt to adjust Egyptology with the ever-clearer realities of a multipolar world order.

Gertzen's (2020) existential fears are well-founded. A fully realized *decolonial* Egyptology is an Egyptology that does not exist, cannot exist. This does not mean that *research on ancient Egypt* would no longer be possible, however. Decolonial Egyptology would happen in a different frame and would no longer serve as an instrument in the management of the CMP. For Nubian archaeology, for example, Lemos (2022: p. 11) envisions collaboration with and the development of local communities, and the promotion of local Nubian/Sudanese epistemologies as cornerstones of a decolonial praxis.

Contrary to Gertzen's (2020) fears, this also means that a *decolonized* Egyptology would be perfectly able to exist. It would merely imply an Egyptology under formal Egyptian control, but it would still be colonial according to how decolonial thought understands decolonization, as seen above, its knowledge managed by someone else. Perhaps the fears are

indeed less about decolonization than they are about a loss of control over the knowledge production and associated resources held by a particular cohort centered on the global North. A multipolar world may see the co-existence of different Egyptologies in parallel, the Westernized and the de-Westernized forms. In practice this could mean a de-Westernized Chinese Egyptology whose readings of ancient Egypt are rooted in Chinese ontologies and on level terms with Eurocentric readings; or an international political economy of Egyptology where Beijing carries more weight in Cairo compared to London or New York (Langer, 2023). Variations of Egyptologies would go on to form parallel universes in a common multiverse, or *pluriverse* as decolonial thought puts it.

Conclusion

This decolonial investigation offers alternative perspectives on the origin story of Egyptology and its role in the current world system, the CMP. It has connected the historiography of Egyptology with the global, diachronic effects of the colonization of the Americas and related the function and progression of Egyptology with the CMP as developed in decolonial thought. It has pushed the genesis of the discipline further back and posits that its creation at a time the CMP was reconfigured was the result of two historical processes set in motion much earlier. Beyond such new insights into the history of Egyptology, a decolonial perspective also offers a fresh perspective on the function of Egyptology in the grand scheme of things. The integration with the concept of the CMP allows projections about the future of Egyptology in the context of de-Westernization. This investigation also suggests that research and debates over decolonization largely take place within the logic of the CMP. Further decolonial investigation can certainly relinquish further and more precise insights.

Unlike postcolonial theory, decoloniality cannot simply be applied to explain historical processes in ancient Egypt or Nubia. What it can be used for, though, is to scrutinize historiography, for that very historiography was influenced by the logic of the CMP, and thus influence the interpretation of said historical processes indirectly.

Decoloniality means the cessation of Egyptology as a field of institutionalized knowledge. As a constituting factor in the CMP since the late eighteenth century, it would have no function in a decolonial world that has successfully *delinked* from the CMP. It is unlikely decoloniality will prevail in Egyptology and do away with the discipline, though, since the field is too entrenched in the CMP and too many careers depend on it to gain any serious traction—at least not from within. As decoloniality shows one has to consider macro-scale processes. Based on decolonial thought as dis-

cussed here, I project that Egyptology will continue to exist as long as the CMP exists. That means it will even survive de-Westernization. That said, Egyptology will primarily be a site of de-Westernization in the near future. Processes in Egyptology thus reflect but lag the global trend.

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