

**Decolonial Aesthetics: Unlearning and Relearning the Museum Through Pedro Lasch's "Black Mirror/Espejo Negro."**  
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I

When on a Winter night you—the traveler--enter the exhibition hall in the Nasher Museum to see Pedro Lasch's installation *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro*, you have a strange sensation: all the statues and vessels that are the highlight of the installation are offering their back to you. They do not care about your presence, they are not saying, here I am, look at me.

**Figure 1a, partial overview of the Installation**



**Figure 1b, partial overview of the installation**



When you approach the statues, you see their faces reflected in the black mirror hanged in front of them.

Then after you have a sense of the composition and of the installation, you approach one of the sculptures to get a better grasp of what is going on. For

unknown reasons you end up in front of a composition titled “Mimesis and Transgression”



**Fig 3, Mimesis and Transgression**

While looking at the statue’s face in the mirror— because you are standing in front of its back— and thinking about the meaning of the title, you realize that there are other figures in the mirror, but not reflected and not highlighted. You may or may not have recognized those figures but in either case, you recognize that the images did not come from any Mesoamerican civilization but from Spanish

culture. Someone approaches you, looking at the same image, and says, “Interesting, that is José de Rivera, *La mujer barbuda* (1631). You know, the original is at el Hospital Tavera, in Toledo, and I think, it belongs to the Fundación Lerma.” And there you are too, reflected in the mirror, mixed in between the statue and *la mujer barbuda*.

Fig 4

[http://www.espejonegro.com/images/blackmirrorlarge/36\\_08.05.510.505a.4p.luS.jpg](http://www.espejonegro.com/images/blackmirrorlarge/36_08.05.510.505a.4p.luS.jpg)

Since you are still concentrating on the pre-Colombian statue from the Atlantic Watershed region of Costa Rica, the words “bearded woman” come as if from another space. You look at the person who informed you about Rivera’s painting, and ask how do you know that. “Oh, I am professor of European Art History,” the person says. Then you come back to your own thoughts and realize that you are in front of a very complex installation where art, lights, reflections, archeology, history and...and coloniality are organizing the power relations of intricate compositions. You begin to understand that the expected power relations are somewhat distorted, not exactly reversed. It is as if the person who did the installation were thinking about how imperial Spain told the stories about the colonization of the Americas, and now what you were looking at was the story told from the perspective of those who were not allowed to tell their story.

Since you are yourself a well educated person, although not an art historian or an expert in Ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, you tell yourself, I can follow two paths here. One would be to make sense of it from the history of geometry and most likely from the Greeks on, so I could support my arguments drawing from Edmund Husserl’s second part on the crisis of European sciences or from Edgar Morin’s works on complexity. But you know from general reading on Ancient Mesoamerican civilizations that their measurement and conceptualization of space was highly sophisticated. So you do not need Husserl, but the fact is that you know more about Husserl and the Western concept of space than about the Mayan or Aztec’s. You reach this “eureka” moment and tell yourself: I have to unlearn what I learned in order to relearn.

But even if you were not well versed in Ancient Mesoamerican concepts of space, you knew enough about the Spaniards conquering the valley of Anahuac, and then moving south to the site of Ancient Mayas. You remember the Spanish narratives from an undergraduate seminar in college. In these colonial narratives, whether Mesoamerican civilizations were revered or not, their people, buildings, and institutions were always in the background, even when they, Aztecs and Mayas, were the main characters in the story. What you begin to realize is that you never thought that the people narrated by the Spaniards (and in other cases, by other European imperial narratives) have their own perspective; that they are people, they have agency and are not passive receivers of Western civilization. And now you begin to realize in this complex installation that the problem cannot be dealt with, with Husserl or Morin. You realize that what you had in mind when you entered the room was an image of history framed and maintained by coloniality, that is, the triumphant imperial narratives that highlighted the march of civilization and disguised what it had to destroy, dismiss, devalue in order to justify its forward march. And you begin to think that if the Spaniards, and later on the French and the British, and also the Dutch, were to justify coloniality by building on a

discourse of civilization and salvation, what we need to do now is to think...well...to think de-colonially. Is that learning to unlearn? Probably it is. And all of the sudden something clicks when your eyes encounter your own eyes in the black mirror in between the statue and “la mujer barbuda:” it is de-colonial thinking that is behind these compositions, not just complexity. Or if it is complexity, it is a complexity structured by the colonial power relations that are being unveiled in the installation.

## II.

Now you smile to yourself with a sense of satisfaction, and you begin to make sense of the complexity as you move to the next unit. You know that for some reason when you visit museums you first look at the title of the piece or installation and then at the painting, sculpture or installation. This one is titled ‘Incest, Narcissism and Melancholia.’ Then you concentrate on the image and tell yourself.

### Fig 5

[http://www.espejonegro.com/images/blackmirrorlarge/22\\_08.05.510.306x.4p.luS.jpg](http://www.espejonegro.com/images/blackmirrorlarge/22_08.05.510.306x.4p.luS.jpg)

Hmmm, you mumble continuing the monologue, let’s see if I can make sense of this one; see if I am learning to unlearn. And there is the art historian again, next to you and “learning” you that the non-reflected figures looking at you from behind the glass but not reflected, are a portrait of Philip IV and Ana, painted around 1607 probably, and now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Ha! you say in a spontaneous reaction, feeling that unlearning is working: “And the seated figure and the vessel?” you ask. “That I do not know” your interlocutor responds. But the person at your right, who you soon learn is an archeologist, intervenes saying, “I think that the seated figure comes from Monte Albán, and belongs to the Nasher Museum collection, regularly stored but not regularly exhibited. And I think the vessel with the effigy of a Jaguar comes from Southwestern Nicaragua. Actually this effigy also belongs to the Nasher Museum collection.” “Oh,” you say spontaneously, since your head is spinning trying to connect Philip and Ana with a seated figure with the mask of a serpent and a Jaguar effigy vessel.

“So...” you think “all of these were simultaneous and parallel histories”... your thoughts, blurred at that moment, returning to what you had learned in college: that once the Spaniards arrived, Mesoamerican history stopped and there was a new beginning, the history made by the Europeans that invented America, establishing a new beginning and relegating Mayan and Aztec civilizations to the past. Now once again this scene is working out using the same logic as the previous one. You remind yourself that you have to unlearn in order to relearn. But now you need to know about the Black Mirror. Hummm...here you have to learn but you would do it unlearning at the same time. The art historian is still next to you. So you ask “ Do you happen to know what the *Black Mirror* means?” “Oh, yes, I do. In Europe from roughly 1700 to 1850, painters and early tourists would take excursions into the countryside carrying black round mirrors strikingly similar to the obsidian disc at the center of this installation. Europeans called these objects “Claude mirrors,” and used them to study images of beautiful landscapes, reflected and temporarily captured in the dark glass. This search for pleasing picturesque landscapes in nature, which were framed in the mirror and resembled the compositions of landscape paintings, impacted landscape design and aesthetic attitudes towards

the environment. The history of the “Claude mirror” and “the picturesque” is suggestive of the treatment of particular peoples as part of the natural landscape, rather than as part of human civilization or culture.”

Now you are expanding your own mental picture, relearning. So, then, you think, instead of “gentle Indians” or innumerable tourist photographs taken today, what we see in the *Black Mirror* are the picturesque “natives” from Spain. The Spaniards, or Europeans in general, are no longer the observers who are not observed but now they are being observed, and they are being observed in the scenario of what they did in the Americas in their dismantling of highly sophisticated civilizations.

### III.

Then it so happens that the three of you end up at the Nasher coffee shop ruminating on the *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro*. “But there is still another element, you say: why *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro*, if neither the Maya’s nor Aztec’s original language was Spanish. There is a Latino, or you could say, Chicano or Hispanic element in the complexity of the installation.” “Sure,” responded the archeologist. “I know Pedro Lasch is Mexicano, and I suspect that the overall vision of the installation is not archeological (“nor is it about the history of Spanish painting,” interrupted the art historian), but is instead an aesthetic political act.” “An aesthetic-political act,” you ask, not because you do not understand what the archeologist is saying but because you have not thought about that yet and want to talk more about it. “Yes,” says the archeologist. “You see, Lasch is not an archeologist digging in sites to find the remains of civilizations that have been buried by conquering civilizations. He is digging in the basement of the museum and “excavating” what museums in general, for reasons known and unknown, do not exhibit regularly. It is not that the public is not interested. Most of the time museums are not interested in creating an interest in the public in certain issues that are considered “less relevant” than others.”

“Did you notice,” the art historian interrupts addressing you, “that in this same museum at this very moment, there is a well promoted and spectacular exhibit titled *From El Greco to Velázquez*?” “Oh, yes” you respond. “I have not seen it yet. I go often to Madrid and visit the Museo del Prado every time I go. I go mainly to look at *The Triumph of Death* by Brueghel but then I always end up looking at Spanish painting.” “Why *The Triumph of Death*, the art historian asks. “Because it seems to me a realistic vision of Western capitalist society today.” “Hmmm,” mumbles the art historian. He was the author of a book on Pieter Brueghel published not long ago.” “And so you were saying,” you ask turning to the archeologist.

“I was just remembering Fred Wilson’s opening installation in the Museum of World Culture in Göteborg. Are you familiar with Fred Wilson?” the archeologist asks you. “No,” you say and the art historian says yes. “By the way, Jennifer González who will speak here later in the week wrote a wonderful chapter about Wilson in her book *Subject to Display. Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art*. I think it was published by MIT.” “Anyway,” the archeologist continues, “Jette Sandahl, the manager of the Museum of World Culture who invited Fred Wilson recognized that allowing him into a museum is a rather risky business. He digs methodically through the collection and turns up items that serve his purpose: to create a puzzle of odd bits and pieces; and in this way forges an unexpected and entirely new perspective--often with a subtle yet powerful image of power and exclusion. It is in fact rumored that Sandahl resigned shortly after the “scandal” Wilson’s

installations provoked in the well-behaved community of Gotteborgh. I think she is now in New Zealand. But anyhow, I am derailing here. More to the point, Sandahl said she had asked Fred Wilson to help bring their own specific demons out into the open, since he is very skilled at demonstrating in an interesting and subtle way the pillars of colonial power, evolutionary assumptions, racism and sexism— built-in foundations themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

The archaeologist continues: “What I find fascinating in Fred Wilson’s work and in particular the exhibit at the Museum of World Culture, and which I connect with *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro*, is a constant reminder that his experience, existence, vision, share Western categories of thought, but he is also thinking from the experiences and knowledges built and transmitted by hundreds of thousands of Africans in the Americas, enslaved Africans, run-away slaves, religions like Candomblé and Voodoo, Santería and Rastafarianism. In Pedro Lasch’s work we are constantly being reminded of another aspect of the same historical processes, but where Ancient Civilizations in this land were transformed into *Indians*.” “Hummm, I am thinking of *Las meninas* you said to yourself but outloud?” “*Las meninas?!?*” surprisedly exclaimed the art historian.” “What does *Las meninas* have to do with all of this?” “I will tell you in a minute (and your had again that feeling of unlearning), but please, finish your story,” you said to the archeologist.

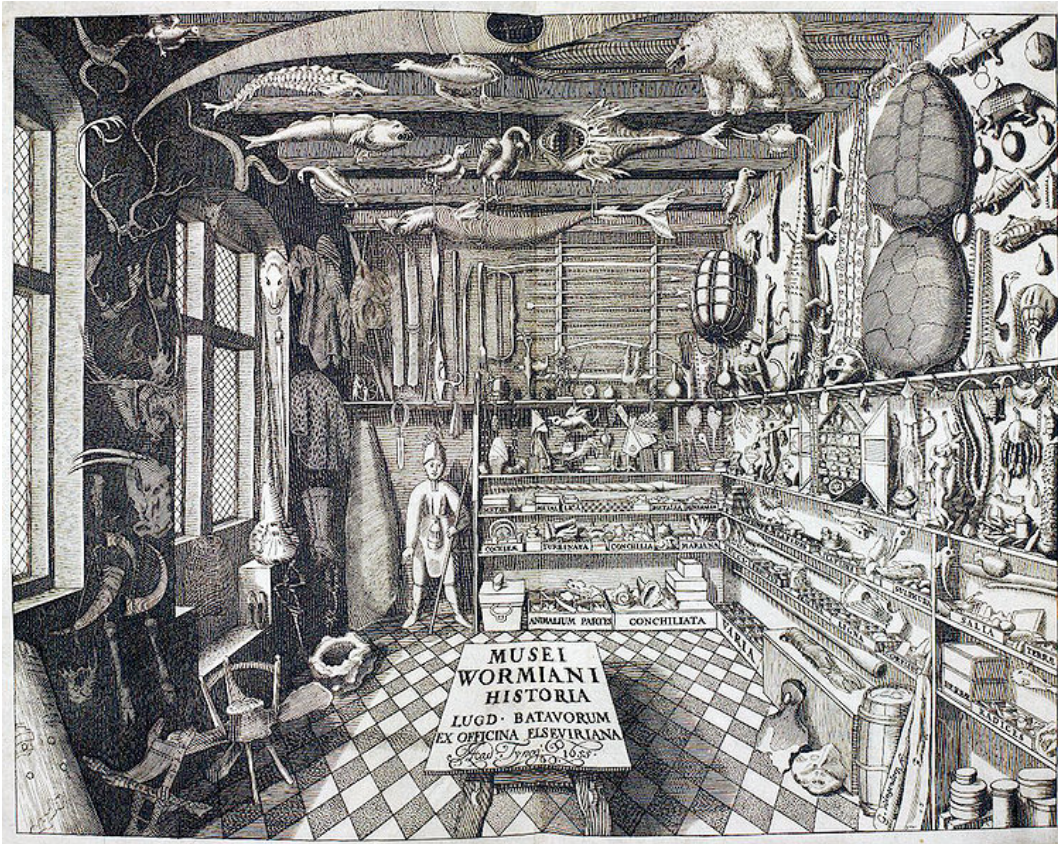
“Interesting, *Las meninas*, I think I know the connection you are trying to make. But in any case, what I was saying is that one of the potent impacts of Fred Wilson’s work lies in the fact that his exhibits and installations go to the heart of the matter: the “demons” are indeed “classifying categories” that are taken for granted. Wilson uncovers those categories, lays them bare, naked, exposed, and we enjoy or react negatively according to whether we feel comfortable with the world classified according to those categories or we feel oppressed, cornered, suspect in the way “we” fall within the natural world that the ‘demon-categories’ turn into ‘labels.’ Fred Wilson is an American citizen, but he is not of European descent. Which means that his subjectivity and vision has been formed by palenques and kilombos (e.g. the social formation of African run away slaves) instead of being formed by Athens and Rome (e.g., the equivalent of palenques and kilombos for Europeans and people of European descent in the Americas and the Caribbean, Australia or South Africa). What I am trying to point to is the radical shift and detachment from Western conceptions of art, and museum installations that artists like Pedro Lasch and Fred Wilson are enacting. There are different worlds and subjectivities being created here. It is also interesting that if this kind of installation is transformed into a commodity, since you are concerned with capitalist civilization”—the anthropologist addressed your previous comment on Brueghel—“it may very well be that it would be the appropriation of a commodity that will begin to erode the system from inside, a poisoned commodity so to speak.”

“Oh, I see,” you say. “Then if I am following your reasoning, what we have here in *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro* is a deep (and you hesitate about the use of this word but do not have another at this time) and laborious digging into the imaginary of modernity, of the myth of art, of the role of the museum in forming subjectivities and in other words, their performing like magicians: now you see it, now you don’t.” “Something like that,” the archeologist consents. The art historian also concurs, and contributes with some information about the history of museums, a Western institution

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thevitalspark2007.org.uk/speakers/jette-sandahl>

that emerged as part of the process of formation of national identities in Europe, and mentioning also the foundation of the Louvre and the British Museum and adding that there was also the creation of the “Cabinet des curiosités” during the European Renaissance, a precursor of the museum. The point here being that the “Cabinet” became the site for collecting objects from European colonies. “Let me give you an example,” the art historian says grabbing a laptop, setting it on the table, and looking for an image in the hard drive. “Here, look at this” (Fig 4).



“Later came the division between art museums and museums of natural history, where the “art” of European colonies found their place. But now I understand,” the art historian continues, “the Renaissance perspective so obvious in this representation has been disposed of in Lasch’s installation. Not only are we faced with the backs of the sculptures exhibited, and see dark and gray images of Spanish paintings, but we also see ourselves looking at the installation. The detached observer becomes involved in what he or she is observing.”

“Bingo!!” you interrupted, with a smile and a tap on the table. “This is exactly where *Las meninas* comes into the picture. You see, what Velázquez did and the French philosopher explained” you hesitated ---“Michel Foucault...” informed the Art Historian.” “Yes, him” you continued. “What one represented and the other wrote about and explained was a dislocation within the history of European perspective, a dislocation where the eye of the observer is being observed. In *Las meninas*, the observer sees what the subjects being painted (King and Queen) see. So Velazquez reversed the perspective by refracting it in the mirror. This is similar to Cervantes’ novel, where Don Quixote reads in the second part of his adventures, that which was narrated to us in the first part. Both

Velázquez and Cervantes are ascertaining the emergence of the modern subject and emancipating it from their own past; although they are unintentionally obliterating already the existence of the colonial subject in their own present. I am not speaking of the Spaniards and their descent in the Americas, but also and mainly, of the Indian and Afro populations who were not passive and happy receivers of European civilization, but instead engaged in an active process of decolonization. It is in this genealogy that Lasch and Wilson engage their work, their decolonial aesthetic, not in the genealogy of Velazquez and Cervantes.

Now you feel that you are preaching, but want to test you unlearning/relearning process. The reversal of perspective—you continue-- and the mirroring that locates the gaze of the observer in *Las meninas* is a great moment in the formation of the European modern subject. But that modern subject is already implicated in coloniality. It is more obvious in Cervantes. The narrator of Don Quixote is Cidi Hamete Benengeli, an Arab speaker. But, voila, all references are to knowledge in Latin, Greek and Spanish, not one single reference to the splendid thinkers of the Muslim past.”

“I do not follow,” the art historian said. “Me neither,” the archeologist added.

“OK, listen—watch out, you are becoming professorial-- here is how with Lasch and Wilson, but particularly with Lasch, the use of the mirror brings something else into consideration. First of all, both installations are imagined and enacted by modern yet also colonial subjects. Aren’t Afro-American and Chicanos colonial subjects?” “Yes, we could say so,” one said and the other nodded yes. “Well, then what we have here is not just a reversal of perspective in which the observer is looking at the painter, but one where the modern subject (through his art and knowledge) is devalued, placed in the shadow of the mirror which is the incarnation of coloniality. Wilson, as you said” addressing the archeologist “is achieving a similar goal but bringing to the foreground what the museum placed in the underground, in the basement. The reversals and refractions here are indeed a contribution to the formation of de-colonial subjects in the same revolutionary way that Velázquez and Cervantes contributed to the formation of the modern subject and modern subjectivities. So Wilson and Lasch are the “true” Cidi Hamete Benengeli, telling the story from the silence of the modern subject! Picasso’s *Las meninas* from 1957 is only a scratch and a twist of the modern European subject entering in its post-modern phase. You can say that Picasso deconstructs Velázquez, inside the European culture and cosmology. But Wilson and Lasch are de-colonizing aesthetics and its foundation, the modern/postmodern subject.”

“In a somewhat related way”—said the art historian—“what I wanted to say earlier when I brought up the image of renaissance perspective, is that it appears to me now that what Pedro Lasch and Fred Wilson are doing is just detaching themselves from the history of museums and its complicities with “art.” That is the meaning of “digging into the basement of the museum” as you said, addressing this time the archeologist. “That is interesting,” you continue and you add: “Now, if art museums are part of the imperial imaginary that contributed, on the one hand, to the creation and management of the imaginary of us, the museum goes, of what we understand as art and, on the other hand, of natural history museums which create a distinction between “art” and “natural objects,” then what we see in the *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro* are objects that “belong” to natural museums rather than museums of art, and that is why they are in the basement.” “Precisely,” says the archeologist. “Now...” you continue, “if all of this is imperial history and its colonial consequences, can we say that Pedro Lasch’s and Fred Wilson’s installations are de-colonial interventions?” “I would say so,” says the



archeologist. “The main protagonists of this installation are not part of Western history, but at the same time, they are not exhibited here as a curiosity or of the exotic exemplar of bygone civilizations.” “No,” they are prominently exhibited and illuminated in front of the dark and gray figures of European civilizations. You see, that is the difference say, between touristic exoticism or the *National Geographic*, and Lasch’s and Wilson’s installations.”

“Now I understand,” you add addressing the archeologist, “what you meant a while ago when you said that this installation was an act of aesthetic, epistemic, and political disobedience. That means, that *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro* is questioning the way we feel (sense, aesthesis). It is telling us that our naturalized concept of knowing is only partial, and in doing so stages a political act that invites us to become engaged in breaking the Western code... But, the obsidian mirror at the center of the installation.

Fig 5

[http://www.espejonegro.com/images/blackmirrorlarge/35\\_08.05.510.501b.4p.luS.jpg](http://www.espejonegro.com/images/blackmirrorlarge/35_08.05.510.501b.4p.luS.jpg)

How do you explain that?”

“Oh that has a long and complicated history,” the archeologist and the art historian respond. The art historian wins the competition and mentions that Arnauld Maillet, author of *The Claude Glass. Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, will also deliver a talk at the end of the week. “To make a story short, a story that was well summarized by Pedro Lasch himself, would be to say that there are two stages in the history of the black mirror. The first stage goes back to the European Middle Age and extends to the Renaissance, and was linked to rituals of divination and sorcery. In the second stage, in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the black mirror was reframed by Claude Lorraine, it was linked to geometry rather than to magic.” “But there is a third state that doesn’t fit your chronology,” the archeologist responds to the art historian. “The uses and meaning of something similar to what you call the ‘black mirror’ in Ancient Maya and Aztec civilizations, long before any Spaniards or British set foot in this land. But I think what is relevant for the installation is the moment in which the European and Mesoamerican histories come together, in the sixteenth century, and mix under well structured power relations. Let’s say that the ‘Black Mirror’ at the center of the installation forges the bond between the two sides of European modernity and European coloniality that were imposed upon Mesoamerican civilizations. Here,” he says grabbing a piece of paper from his pocket. “I copied this from the internet, it was written by Pedro Lasch himself. It is a shortened version that I prepared for my students but you can find it on the web.

The Aztecs directly associated obsidian with Tezcatlipoca, the deadly god of war, sorcery and sexual transgression while in Europe threatened by similar associations with sorcery and deviance, Pope John XXII banned the use of mirrors for any religious purpose in 1318. Yet centuries later, obsidian plates of all shapes and sizes would be introduced into Christian Altars across Spain and its colonies...

So you see how parallel histories came together. But, according to Lasch, there was another twist in the second era you mentioned”—says the archeologist to the art historian—“and it is when the Black Mirror was extricated from its past related to magic and entered into a present associated with science and technology.” “It was the age of the observer presented in Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer*,” the art historian completes the information. “That is it, thanks. Well”—the archeologist continues—“the eighteenth century was not only the second era in the history of the black mirror, but also of European colonial expansion. So this is what Pedro Lasch says about that complex moment, when the changing role of the ‘Black Mirror’ goes hand in hand with the changing hands of European imperial management:

This optical device marked a shift to a new period, when ritual and magic gave way to scientific illusionism and Colonialist expansion. We no longer use black mirrors to speak with the dead, or to fix a gaze on objects that may last a little longer than we will. Yet little black eyes still hover all around us in the form of cameras placed in many public buildings and outdoor spaces. These black mirrors still act as go-betweens between the present and the absent, the visible and the invisible, the colonizer and the colonized.

So you, the traveler, who has been silently and attentively listening to the conversation between the archeologist and the art historian, conclude without realizing it, “The obsidian mirror functions like the slash “/” that divides and unites modernity/coloniality, the two faces of European expansion that at the same time has a magical and epistemic power (I am using the oxymoron intentionally, you say), of opening up for Pedro Lasch the de-colonial imaginary that sets the installation in motion.” You do not know if your interlocutors agree or not, but they remain silent, and the situation is saved by someone who approaches the table, making the acquaintance of your interlocutors.