

# INTRODUCTION

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Two years ago, as we were preparing the publication of *Lápiz* no. 02, we decided to begin the journal on page 44, as a way of honoring the lives of 43 teachers kidnapped and disappeared in Ayotzinapa, Mexico. We wanted to mark the absence of those missing, who would have had a lot to say about Latin American philosophy of education yet were no longer able to. As I began writing the introduction to *Lápiz* no. 03 last summer, the struggle over education in Mexico was still ongoing. In their relentless fight to prevent the neoliberal dismantling of public education, the Oaxaca teachers faced brutal state violence, which has caused many innocent deaths. Further up north, in the United States, the death of Alton Sterling, a 37 year old black man, at the hands of the Baton Rouge police, provoked a new wave of national #BlackLivesMatter protests. The image of Ieshia Evans, a young woman standing calmly in front of two police officers covered in layers of armor, confronting the heavily militarized police with grace and poise, had gone viral as a metaphor of both unfettered state violence and the power of social movements.<sup>2</sup> Without conflating these two situations, I believe it is possible to say that from Ayotzinapa to Baton Rouge, individuals and groups are increasingly standing up against the violence of neoliberal governments.

Events occurring in Mexico are of course more directly linked to our group's main topic of investigation: Latin American Philosophy of Education. However, I consider education to be central to both situations. Following Jacques Rancière, I believe that the police mobilizes physical violence in order to delimit what can be seen, said, and thought. Its role is to control which bodies can access certain spaces and which encounters, relationships, and modes of being are allowed within a given system.<sup>3</sup> The bodies of the Ayotzinapa teachers had to be disappeared because they claimed that students and teachers

<sup>2</sup> See, Ieshia Evans, "I wasn't afraid. I took a stand in Baton Rouge because enough is enough," *The Guardian*, (22 July 2016). <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/22/i-wasnt-afraid-i-took-a-stand-in-baton-rouge-because-enough-is-enough> (accessed July 31, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See Jacques Rancière and Steve Corcoran, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2007).

should have a say over education, thus stepping outside of permissible thought and action. The photo of Ieshia Evans is powerful precisely because the young woman refused to be told where her body can and cannot stand. The refusal of assigned places, assigned actions, thoughts, and feelings connects these two events. Collectively expanding the scope of what can be seen, thought, felt, and done, is, I would argue, education. Which is why, across the Americas, I find education to be at the center of current struggles.

The death of Alton Sterling (one of the many deaths at the hands of the U.S. police) occurred after our third LAPES symposium, which took place on April 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at the University of Miami. However, when we picked the theme for our 2016 symposium—“Decolonial Education in the Americas: Lessons on Resistance, Pedagogies of Hope”—we did so looking towards the future. We were cognizant of the fact that social antagonisms were bound to intensify in the foreseeable future and that we needed to build bridges between academics, teachers, students, and organizers in order to fight a global repressive system that is no longer even trying to appear democratic. The characteristics of this system, roughly called neoliberalism, have been discussed and described in more detail during our second symposium and our second *Lápiz* issue. For the purposes of this introduction, it suffices to say that this system subdues every sphere of life to the logic of the market, and that it measures the value of human life through the profit it generates. Its power is furthermore strengthened by the pervasive belief that there are no alternatives. Which is why, during the Miami symposium, we wanted to consider alternatives, particularly in the field of education. What role can education serve aside from preparing students for the market and for entering the labor force? How can it expand the scope of what can be seen, thought, and felt? Ultimately, we wanted to position education—specifically decolonial education—as resistance to the police order.

I will not attempt to offer a single definition of decolonization. Doing so would delimit the multiplicity of ways in which decolonization has been practiced and theorized. I will let this plurality emerge out of the

conversations and exchanges that took place during the symposium. I will, however, introduce a few concepts that allow us to better follow the articles in this issue.

Over the past few decades, several decolonial theorists have argued that modernity, posited as the universal direction of history, contains a “darker side”: coloniality. As both Walter Mignolo and Enrique Dussel have argued, European modernity has always required the existence of a non-European other. It needed to both negate and preserve this “other,” so that it could exist in a dialectical relationship to him/her.<sup>4</sup> In an article published in 1989 and reprinted in 1992, entitled “Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad,” Aníbal Quijano describes the mechanisms of coloniality. Colonial power in the political and economic spheres, he contends, is always accompanied by the colonization of knowledge. It furthermore relies on the creation of a racial hierarchy. Racial hierarchies are maintained precisely through the devaluation and destruction of the systems of knowledge, meaning, and cultural production of the colonized. Coloniality thus ensures the predominance of European modes of production, European modes of thinking, and European values. Within this framework, there can be no liberation without the decolonization of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Walter Mignolo has named this process of liberation “epistemic delinking.” Epistemic delinking “brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economies, other politics, other ethics.”<sup>6</sup> Mignolo also foregrounds a difference between liberation and emancipation. Whereas emancipation calls for reforms and transformations within the colonial system of power, liberation requires

4 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Enrique Dussel, “Europe, Modernity and Eurocentrism,” *Nepantla. Views from South* vol. 1, no. 3 (2000) 465-478.

5 Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad,” in *Los conquistados 1492 y la población indígena de las Américas*, Heraclio Bonilla (ed) Ecuador: Libri Mundi, Tercer Mundo Editores, (1992): 437-448. An English version of the essay, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” was published in Göran Therborn and Lise-Lotte Wallenius, *Globalizations and Modernities: Experiences and Perspectives of Europe and Latin America* (Stockholm, Sweden: Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1999).

6 Walter Mignolo, “Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality,” *Globalization and De-Colonial Thinking*, special issue of *Cultural Studies* vol.2-3, no. 21, (2007) 453.

us to adopt different conceptual markers: “De-coloniality, then, means working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ, which is what modernity/ coloniality does and, hence, where decolonization of the mind should begin. The struggle is for changing the terms in addition to the content of the conversation.”<sup>7</sup>

Without epistemic delinking, both Dussel and Quijano argue, there can be no real multiculturalism or “intercultural communication.” Intercultural dialogue begins with the voices from the exteriority: “In order to create something new, one must have a new word that bursts in from the exteriority. This exteriority is the people itself which, despite being oppressed by the system, is totally foreign to it.”<sup>8</sup> The end goal of this process is pluriversality, the creation of “a world in which many worlds will co-exist.” As Mignolo explains: “Thus, the pluriversality 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: border thinking. That is, the fact of having to imagine a future that is not the future that those in Washington, or London, or Paris, or Berlin would like the people of the world to have can bring together all those who have been contacted in various ways by them.”<sup>9</sup>

Dussel, Mignolo, and Quijano are probably the most widely read decolonial thinkers in the United States. They are, however, not the only ones to have written about decolonization. Their work has, it should be mentioned, also been criticized in some quarters for removing decolonization from Indigenous and Afro-Latin American communities and the realm of action, and enclosing it into U.S. academia and the realm of thought. For instance, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has been very critical of ways in which decolonial thinking has been practiced in the United States; mainly because it is reduced to a process of thinking. She insists on the fact that decolonial discourses are useless without

7 Ibid., 459.

8 Enrique Dussel, “Transmodernity and interculturality: an interpretation from the perspective of philosophy of liberation,” *Polígrafi* vol. 1, no. 41-42 (2006): 5-40. <http://enriquedussel.com/txt/Transmodernity%20and%20Interculturality.pdf> (accessed September 5, 2017).

9 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 497-498.

practices of decolonization. Any serious academic engagement with decolonization must also question (and not only question but also strive to change) academic hierarchies, inequalities, and privileges. It must dismantle what she calls the “political economy” of knowledge. She further rejects the adjective “decolonial” as a more passive, academic version of the verb “to decolonize.”<sup>10</sup>

Many of these questions, tensions, and debates were raised at the Miami symposium. In her presentation, Julieta Paredes equally insisted on the difference between “decolonial” and “descolonizar” (I use both terms in this introduction as an attempt to work with both). Our aim as LAPES was to gather people from different countries, different institutions, with different connections to social movements and community organizations, in order to dialogue about these questions. How can academics engage more meaningfully in practices of decolonization? How can we connect our work in the classroom to our work with our communities? As teachers, how can we support our students as they strive to decolonize their bodies and their minds? Many of the participants, including Juliana Merçon, Walter Kohan, and Charlotte Saenz discussed their attempts to bridge their work within and outside of the university. These questions are not easy to answer. But they are worth pursuing. Decolonization, I believe, can and should be pursued in all realms of our lives and work. Part of the work of decolonization is precisely to learn to collaborate and build—in ways that are mindful of our different positions in relation to power—across differences that have been put in place by colonial systems.

We chose decolonial education as our topic, because, beyond critique of the world-as-is, decolonial thought opens up possibilities for worlds-which-might-be. It calls for an imagination of futures where non-Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies would predominate, and it invites the voices from the exteriority to lead the conversation. “Education, as the process by which we collectively introduce ourselves

10 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, C h'ixinakax Utxiwa: *Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (Buenos Aires: Retazos, 2010).

11 In his article, Walter Kohan rightly points to the fact that the discussions at the symposium were also highly influenced by Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, though the explicit reference doesn't appear often.

and others to critiques of the as-is, in order to give form to what-might-be, is inseparable from decolonization.<sup>12</sup> At the symposium, we wanted to gather a diverse group of people to participate in this process and attempt to answer the following questions: To what degree has decolonial thought penetrated philosophies of education in the United States and elsewhere, and how much has it helped (or not) form teachers and students capable of critiquing and resisting systems of oppression and acts of injustice? How can decolonial writings and actions from Latin America help us radically imagine education beyond the current borders and constraints the education field finds itself in? Questions of gender, vertical and horizontal transmission of knowledge, participatory action research, and global history animated the many conversations we had.

At the symposium, we thus engaged in a collective imagination of pluriversality. As Julieta Paredes said at one moment, we cannot offer models but we can offer examples of decolonial thought and practice. This difference between model and example, as stated by Julieta, requires an explanation. In fact, many decolonial thinkers insist on the importance of location. Linda Alcoff explains this very well in her contribution to *Lápiz* Vol. 1. She argues that Latin American philosophy, and by extension an education influenced by Latin American philosophy, must begin from “the everyday lived experience of the context within which we find ourselves.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the understanding of the world-which-is as well as the imagination of worlds-which-might-be has to be grounded in a specific geographic and historical context. A Latin American decolonial model (and there are many of these models within Latin America), one which could simply be applied in the United States, is thus impossible. However, this does not mean that we cannot learn across cultures. We can share examples and think collectively about the (im)possibility of their geographic and historical translation. At a moment where the belief in neoliberalism as the sole possible reality persists, we are certainly in need of more examples that point to other ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world.

<sup>12</sup> This definition of education was formulated by Jason Wozniak during one of our many collective thinking sessions.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Alcoff, “Educating with a [de]colonial consciousness,” *Lápiz* no. 01 (2014).

Given the fact that our immediate, collective context involved the University of Miami, we discussed what it would entail to decolonize the very format of an academic conference. In fact, what constitutes knowledge, who constitutes it and for whom, are all questions central to decolonial practices. Those questions are particularly pertinent to us, as we speak about decolonial theory within an academic setting. The academy has, for a long time, been the keeper and the arbiter of knowledge. From its very inception, LAPES has tried to experiment with different ways of organizing these encounters, in order to move away from what Paulo Freire calls the “banking” model of education, where the university professor “with knowledge” transmits this knowledge to a passive, “unknowing” audience. For decolonial thinkers, as already mentioned, changing the terms of the conversation is as important as changing the content of the conversation. To the terms and the content, one could also add the format of the conversation. In our practice as LAPES, we have tried to encourage audience participation and position the speaker presentation as the basis for collective thinking, rather than an end in itself.

With this in mind, we began the Miami symposium with a graduate student roundtable where five graduate students from across the country presented their current work on decolonial education. That same day, Juliana Merçon led a workshop on participatory action research in Mexico and its relation to decolonial thought. Juliana pointed to ways in which academic research can be closely connected to and contribute to grassroots organizing. Julieta Paredes gave the opening keynote focusing on the concept and practices of *feminismo comunitario* in Bolivia. She discussed the role of knowledge in popular struggles and the need to think about decolonization through a gendered lens. She insisted on the need to think of *descolonizar* as a verb, as an action, directed at preserving, protecting, and building our communities.

The following day, Tracy Devine-Guzmán talked about the failures of “indigenizing” education in twentieth century Peru. This failure, Devine-Guzmán argues, is not an ultimate defeat. But as we think about future decolonial practices, we must also learn from past mistakes. Walter Kohan discussed the subjectivity of a decolonial teacher. According to

Kohan, the role of the teacher is not to transmit a specific knowledge to a student who is not yet in possession of said knowledge. Rather, it is to cultivate a dynamic relationship to learning as a collective process. During the closing keynote, Enrique Dussel presented global history from a decolonial perspective. Re-thinking history from a non-European perspective is central to both the philosophy and the pedagogics of liberation, Dussel argued. Each presentation was followed by an hour-long collective discussion. The audience was composed of academics, teachers, and education activists, which led to very productive dialogues and tensions. The need to continue these conversations outside of the university setting was reiterated.

The articles in this issue have developed out of the symposium presentations and debates. The collective discussions have not been transcribed, but they are included in the audio accompaniment to *Lápiz* no. 03. We would like to thank all of the symposium participants for contributing to this ongoing effort to expand the ways of theorizing and practicing education. We invite all of our readers to join us during our next encounter. ■