

DECOLONIZING THE RELATION

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Revolution itself is a pedagogical process: a road of learning in the struggle itself on which we build our daily lives.

– Julieta Paredes

Decolonization is an epistemic project: we must begin to reformulate world history.

– Enrique Dussel

What does it mean to *decolonize* our mind, speech, and education—not just schools and other colonized institutions—but also our daily interactions, relationships, and knowledges?

To decolonize is a verb, an action in progress, a movement towards a horizon that seems to constantly shift. It is both a personal and collective process that intersects all facets of our lives, as acts of decolonization challenge and unravel deeply ingrained legacies of patriarchy and capitalism, among other relationships of domination and inequity.

How do we begin and sustain such work when different structural positions obscure understandings of what is held in common or not? How do these differing structural positions—whether inherited or made, whether static or shifting—affect our epistemologies and ontologies? Common sense or common knowledges seem not so common anymore. Maybe they never were, or perhaps these commons are only so amongst specific geographies and epochs. How to decolonize when different bodies are either granted or stripped of authority and power by just entering a space... by just being that specific incarnation?

Decolonization stands in marked contrast to the more static adjective of the *decolonial*, a theorization often critiqued for its elite origins in Academia by mostly white or mestizo academics. Reviewing the contributions to the 2016 LAPES symposium, one notes diverse definitions of and challenges to the *decolonial*. Both academic theory and

embodied practice were exemplified in the presentations and interactions present at the 2016 Miami LAPES symposium where participants gathered to philosophize on the topic of *Decolonial Education*. There were different ways of examining, or even conceiving of, the *decolonial*: Tracy Devine Guzmán traced pedagogical images of racist state education in Peru; Juliana Merçon's workshop proposed Fals-Borda's Participatory Action Research as an example of decolonial methodology; and from the perspective of *feminismo comunitario*, Julieta Paredes presented an embodied protest against the notion of *the decolonial* as a noun still held hostage by a primarily white, mestizo, and male academy.

These various approaches highlight the potentials and failures of *decolonial* education. They demonstrate the pervasiveness of dominant racist educational ideas and practices in modern constructions of identity and citizenship, still prevalent in Latin America and beyond. They also draw into sharp relief the continued contradictions of trying to challenge them from the academy itself. In her contribution, Tracy Devine offered some key images and markers of *decolonial* thought that are helpful to trace a problematic history of the centuries-old nation-state project of *mestizaje* carried out through institutionalized programs of schooling and health in many Latin American countries. Walter Omar Kohan forefronted the LAPES encounter itself as an example of attempted decolonial practices that self-consciously seek to question and undo the coloniality of power through education and its discourses. Enrique Dussel's broad historical sweep traced the actual non-western roots of Eurocentric knowledges back to Asia, demonstrating what traces have been lost in the travel to other geographies. It suggests that the task of decolonizing lies in liberating pedagogies from their myths—a liberation that involves rethinking the past, for as he attests, in order to understand Latin America, we need to rewrite the history of the world and develop ourselves as philosopher educators.

Part of that rewriting of history implies a continuous struggle to reconnect to the materiality of thought through our bodies, lands, and territories. Julieta Paredes' riveting presentation provided an example of body, mind and spirit working together to decolonize the way in which knowledge is usually shared at academic gatherings. Her

opening words acknowledged the struggles—past and present—of those territories on which we stood. She gave thanks to the ocean and those who guide us from below, from the underworld, our ancestors. In such way, she immediately established a decolonizing action and framework for the rest of her talk—a theorization from a body in close communion with the elements, rooted ancestral histories, and live spirits of struggle. Hers is an embodiment of body-mind-spirit in reflective action with anti-colonial past and present struggles. The form and content of Julieta Paredes' presentation came together as but one example of what a decolonizing pedagogy could look like in its delivery in an academic symposium.

In much of indigenous Latin America, the concept of territory connotes much more than just a section of physical land. It is used separately from the word for land to describe all the aspects of life that are intimately connected to it. *Tierra y Territorio* includes historical, cultural and spiritual legacies that are part of quotidian living and learning. The process of decolonization involves both a personal and collective process of self-liberation from colonial legacies including the privatization of land and all aspects of life. Territory also includes the bodies and daily lives of those who live on and with the land. Throughout her talk, Paredes used movement, song and speech to emphasize the centrality of our bodies in ongoing revolutionary struggle. At one point, in order to describe the inclusive aim of *feminismo comunitario*, she performed the metaphor of body as community: demonstrating with her own body what a lobotomized community might look like trying to walk. She thus illustrated lopsided community participation between men and women in the larger society. Thus, she made clear how *feminismo comunitario* is not about rights, it's about rebuilding a community as a body of humans, of which one or several disenfranchised parts, have been negated full participation. It is also not a theory, but an organization of men and women with political tasks building greater equity and participation for indigenous women in Bolivia and other parts of Latin America.

The body as *comunidad* is perhaps a stance reflected in Julieta Merçon's interpretation of Fals-Borda's Participatory Action Research as a "process open to life and work:" a methodology to counter separation and fragmentation, as well as a "philosophy of life." In this,

Fals-Borda's PAR would seem to mirror the process of reconnection between humans and environment to counter "the coloniality of mother earth," described by Arturo Escobar as "based on the binary division nature/society, body/mind, emotions/thoughts. The planet gives us resources whose value can be reduced to the economic. It overlooks the sensitive and spiritual, it ignores the millennial relation between the geo-bio-physical, the human, and the intangible."¹²⁸ Merçon further points us to exteriorize and embrace the contradictions and tensions of research so that they can become "objects of collective analysis in collaborative research processes." In this, Merçon is arguing for the new construction of a new research *comunidad*, one of collective knowledge building effective collective power. *Comunidad* is not the same thing as "community" in English. Rather, it is a concept rooted in quotidian mutual support and survival based on common struggle and ancestral memory. It proposes recuperation of the long memory held by indigenous women (*de los pueblos originarios*) who have from necessity maintained *comunidad* and continuously construct it anew. It involves the construction of new relations, as Merçon states, "with oneself, with other people, and with the world—where we experiment ways of being other than capitalism and colonialism."

Feminismo comunitario proposes thinking and using the body to do politics. This is what Lia Pinheiro Barbosa calls a liberatory pedagogy of "*senti-pensar*," of seeking an integrated knowledge rooted in our body's thoughts and feelings. It is a knowledge that carries the imprints of inter-generational history, marking both inherited oppressions, as well as carrying potential for liberation. Several of the LAPES presentations integrated heart, mind, and spirit to transmit complex histories: Dussel's long historical-memory tracing his own patrilineal (Argentinian/Peruvian) Gaucho roots back through the conquest to Extremadura, the Magreb, and even the Arabian Desert—while tracing his mother's indigenous roots to Asia; Paredes' recounts stories of her grandmother scripting trembling alphabet letters in second grade—the same grandmother who encouraged her to go to school,

¹²⁸ Arturo Escobar, *Sentipensar con la tierra. Nuevas lecturas sobre desarrollo, territorio y diferencia* (Medellín: Ediciones Unala, 2014), as quoted by Juliana Merçon in her contribution to this volume.

to gain knowledge previously forbidden to them as *negritas*, as indigenuous. Many questioned the historical purpose of schooling: for what larger (colonial, decolonial) purpose, are we embarking on these educational paths? The role and purpose of knowledge, several argued, is for collective struggle, *la lucha de los pueblos*. Dussel introduces the concept of *Pedagogics*, which he is careful to point out, is not the same as *pedagogy*. "It's a part of the philosophy of liberation; it's a moment of comprehension." It is our mutual co-liberating task to develop and then use knowledge to unmask our corrupt systems and reveal their/our complicities. Latin American activist scholars, such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui¹²⁹, have called out the decolonial academy not only as a primarily theoretical activity, but as also obfuscating while perpetuating embedded (and embodied) racialized colonial dynamics within the *decolonial* discourse and practice itself. The difference between academic experts' theories of decoloniality and a practice of actual de-colonizing is in the latter being a revolutionary daily action of, and for, the people. The participants of the 2016 LAPES symposium in Miami, many of them scholar-activists, are part of this effort in venturing both personal, as well as collective, shifts of agency—both in and out of the academy.

In her book *Kuxlejal Politics*, Mariana Mora narrates how in the Zapatistas' political pedagogy, knowledge production emerges "not by extracting the student from daily life into a classroom setting but rather as the body moves through and acts within daily life. [...] It is this same low-volume experience that then holds the possibility for initiating substantial social change."¹³⁰ It is in the day-to-day actions and interactions that we either unlearn or reinforce dominant paradigms. Zapatista pedagogy is showing the world how a common doing can lead to a common sense. Mora refers to Mexican sociologist Pablo González Casanova's writings on what she calls a "decolonial multicultural action" explained as "a type of common sense through which there emerge different forms of thinking, expressing, acting,

¹²⁹ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Winter 2012, 95-109.

¹³⁰ Mariana Mora, *Kuxlejal Politics: Indigenous Autonomies, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities*, University of Texas Press, 2017, 236-7.

with the understanding that a necessary dialogue clarifies affinities and differences, allowing for more expansive common languages and consensus capable of multicultural actions for an alternative world.”¹³¹ Pedagogically speaking for those of us outside Zapatista communities, this seems to suggest that production of a liberatory “common sense” cannot occur without an interpersonal and intercultural building of listening skills that build the kind of humility that allows for the other’s dignity—including consideration and inclusion of different epistemologies and ontologies. For any decolonizing “common sense” to emerge between people inhabiting different embodiments of what Anibal Quijano calls “the coloniality of power,” a shift needs to occur. Both inherited or inhabited structural power relations need to be acknowledged in order for any actual decolonizing actions and/or communications to be possible. Otherwise, there is no learning taking place, but rather imposition of colonial (usually racialized and gendered) class power in the microcosm of interpersonal or group relations.

A common capitalist enemy does not erase the differences amongst ourselves. Simply declaring a prefigurative politics of equality does not erase the structural inequalities that govern our societies. Colonialism penetrated territories and bodies—men’s as well as women’s, with a patriarchal and racist capitalist modernity—a process that continues until today. It has not just been our bodies but also our *thought* that has been penetrated. As made evident by the images of Tracy Devine Guzmán’s presentation, pervasive dominant visual culture presented and mass media continues to prescribe devaluing imagery that imposes sexist and colonial hierarchies upon our notions of ourselves. It was with such iconographic violence that indigenous people were historically denied a soul, and still today, together with women and other genders, denied full personhood. It is from this denied personhood, that an indigenous woman will be viewed differently (and view herself differently) than a white or mestizo man—a point Paredes insisted upon during the Miami symposium.

What do we mean pedagogically when we speak of, and try to enact, a decolonial education in our relationality as teachers and learners?

¹³¹ Pablo González Casanova as quoted by Mariana Mora in *Kuxlejal Politics: Indigenous Autonomies, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista Communities*, 237.

How can we decolonize interactions between differently abled, racialized, and gendered bodies which continuously enter and exit positions of power in relation to teach other depending on often shifting contexts? Summoning Rancière’s famous book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, there is the suggestion that perhaps what we are after in more equitable teaching and learning is a posture of “ignorance amongst equals”, of facilitating a process of learning, of learning how to research, think, and learn together. In his review of Rancière’s book¹³², Yves Citton suggests that it is the act of explaining itself that is problematic, as it confers expertise that perpetuates the dominant hierarchical norms of education to reproduce social categories. However, both Rancière and Citton neglect to address the possible different power-relations embodied amongst inheritors of patriarchal, colonial relations: the gendered, racialized incarnations that would render one body’s “ignorance” or “expertise” superior/inferior to that of the other based on structural social relations that automatically confer authority to one over the other, if not intentionally disrupted by the teacher/facilitator, however ignorant or expert the teacher may present or appear. This point may be obvious for some, and equally absurd to others—depending on the relative location to dominant power of their embodied differences as racialized, gendered bodies with colonial experience, one usually only mitigated by class. Such are the disjunctive cognitive dissonances that occur every day in colonial, patriarchal relations—interactions where some bodies are somebody and others are automatically, consciously or unconsciously, delegated to less than, or even nobodies.

Settings of differential structural power amongst those present, considering Dussel’s pedagogics as “that part of philosophy which considers the face-to-face,” requires extra willingness to listen from all participants. They can also require explicit self-awareness and explicit articulations of humility from us when we speak from places of greater structural (i.e. societally conferred in that particular context, which may vary) voice and power than another. Rancière’s “ignorant schoolmaster” calls for the realization—actualization of a personal potential or power whose source is located within the learner, and which the “teacher” is

¹³² Yves Citton, “The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Knowledge and Authority,” in Jacques Rancière: *Key Concepts*, 25-37.

but a facilitator, or to use the Zapatista version, “promoter of education” (or learning). Ranciére holds that we all have the intelligence, capacity, and power to learn; all we need is the will to use it for our own (common) good. However, his argument does not account for how that equality holds in a room where different people feel/enact different levels of agency and/or entitlement based on their different experiences as racialized and gendered bodies. The difference can prevent the “ignorant schoolmaster’s” prefigurative equality from actually manifesting within the personal interactions.

Dussel asks us to consider what a pedagogics of liberation might look like? It goes beyond granting the Other—which could be the community, the people’s culture, but might also be the child, young person—a chance to speak within the systems they interpolate (inclusion): they must philosophize! Starting with the first nations of the global south, developing our philosophers, our various feminisms, collaborating with others...the many philosophies of “the south” can (re) create “new” critical thought, says Dussel. Such pedagogics can help us complicate the notion of Eurocentric colonial “universality” and shift our notion of “university” to decolonized “pluriversities.”

Dussel’s recollection of the period of Moorish dominance in Spain¹³³ brings to mind Palestinian educator/philosopher Munir Fasheh’s writings on Al-Jame’ah () the Arabic word for university. Fasheh explains how the Arabic word gestures towards creating spaces and opportunities for learning as well as collective nurturance, enrichment, and growth. Similar to Ranciére, Fasheh holds that the idea behind al-jame’ah is that the basic ingredient in learning is a learner; everything else is there.

Any person who is doing something and wants to understand it more and do it better is a learner; automatically that person can be a student/learner in al-jame’ah; there are no other requirements for “admission”. And every person who can be helpful or inspiring to a learner and ready to open his/her heart and mind is part of the “faculty”. Every place

¹³³ From Dussel’s testimonio at the 2016 LAPES symposium: “...the most educated region of Europe, Spain, had regular contact with the Muslim world. And the Muslim world was the most advanced culture in the world at that time. They made their way all the way to Spain in the west and China in the east.”

where people can meet and learn, or that has resources, experiments etc that could be helpful to people in their search for understanding, knowledge, or for walking their own paths in life, is part of the “campus”. Obviously, every person can be a student in one setting and a teacher in another. There is neither full time students nor full time faculty. In other words, the campus literally is the whole world – any person, any thing, any place that the person needs and that s/he can reach and is hospitable and relevant for the learner is part of the campus.¹³⁴

The university described by Fasheh is comprised of both spaces and actions that resist the universalization of colonialism and its notion of world history. Such rooted, quotidian, autonomous spaces of knowledge production decolonize education through an accumulation of stories, experiences, understandings and knowledges that “are important in protecting the social majorities around the world from the destructive impact of the claim of universality and universal tools.”¹³⁵ After tracing the various ways in which the universalizing legacies of systemic colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy (now in their current incarnation of Neoliberalism) have historically inscribed themselves on the bodies of the subjugated, Paredes described how the presence or absence of an embodied autonomy, a self-naming, shapes the larger social body. *La autonomía del cuerpo es la autonomía del pueblo*, she declared, “the body’s autonomy is the people’s autonomy.” Revealing the system and its complicity requires autonomy: *auto-nomía*, a self-naming. Reclaiming indigenous autonomy means reclaiming control of lands, territories (including cultural territory) and bodies. This means the ability to *auto-nombrar*, to self-name who we are, to self-proclaim who we think and feel we are, as persons and as people, what we want and desire. This is a political, educational and pedagogical path of decolonization.

The knowledge we exchange in this political, educational and pedagogical path must be at the service of the people, several of this symposium’s presenters maintain, because changing the world is necessary

¹³⁴ Fasheh, Munir. “الجامعة” Al-Jame’ah ما يحسنه كل امرئ ما يحسنه “قيمة كل امرئ” الجامعة “The University of “*Qeematu Kullimri’en Ma Yuhseenoh*” (A personal statement).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

and urgent. Other than faith in *ourselves*, our people, and in possibility, it requires a rewriting of history and reconnection to our bodies and lands, both conceived as both *tierra y territorio*. Today's Neoliberalism further foments and instills a rampant individualism, pitting people, and individual identity groups, to compete against each other, while extracting our bodies, our labor, and territories. By revealing systemic inequities and the ways we are entangled in them historically and today, we can begin to recognize our common humanity and common existential vulnerability. Decolonizing our minds means recognizing the innate value of each entity, learning to listen to each other with respect for what it can teach us. Rewriting and reconnection happen when we listen to our elders, to history, to the people in our neighborhoods, cities, and fields—listening to how processes of colonization and decolonization unfold for each of us as well as collectively.

Education as an act of decolonization is a verb that describes an ongoing, and perpetually unfinished, process of challenge and becoming. As I wrap up these thoughts amidst the recent slew of natural/social disasters, from the various earthquakes in Mexico, hurricanes in Florida, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, to giant fires ravaging California... it occurs to me that in order to decolonize education at all levels in our thinking, we must shake the foundations of the assumptions we hold, but cannot see, and how we need each other for becoming aware of this. We are undoubtedly, better together. The Miami 2016 symposium, together with LAPES itself as an ongoing project surfacing diverse philosophies of education from Latin America, played an important role in the shaking of such foundations. Our collective emergencies can give way to new emergences, of different epistemic and ontologic orientations that further erode the crumbling dominant lenses that still cling to us, even in our professed decolonial and anti-capitalist claims. Our collective move must be towards a deeper decolonization of relationship: with our bodies, minds, and actions that match our words. ■