

Decolonization

Who needs it?

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In winter of 2015, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui held the Andres Bello Chair in Latin American Cultures and Civilization at New York University's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, where she gave a graduate seminar called "Sociology of the Image: A View from Andean History". Rivera Cusicanqui's course and her pedagogy were unique. Her aim was not to inform students about Andean history and visual imagery. It was to use Andean history, thought, and visual representation, along with other sources, to awaken her students' powers of imagination and creativity, to liberate their imaginations and intellects, to inspire them to transform themselves and their place in the universe. Drawing on years of study of Aymara language, history, and cosmology, in class after class she did the work exemplified by her discussion of the concept of *ch'ixi* in the final section of the essay that appears here. She laid out Andean concepts in depth and detail, in combinations of visual display, verbal explanation, and bodily expression. As she does here with *ch'ixi* (pp.105–106), Rivera explored the suppleness, multifaceted, multivalent character of Andean concepts, the multiple, even contradictory meanings that form enormously complex and labile totalities and defy linear representation (more on this below). Western rationality, in which Rivera Cusicanqui is also trained, values concepts for their consistency of meaning across contexts, favoring stable definitions and unambiguity. Grasping Aymara concepts, Rivera showed, required literally changing your mind.

For her, this is decolonizing work. In her view, as she observes in this essay, the people most in need of decolonization are white people. They need to be saved from themselves, and the world from their mindless deprivations. Pedagogy for her is a decolonizing practice driven by political urgency and a sense of responsibility. It is also a linguistic practice, an aspect of her work that readers of this journal are particularly able to appreciate. Bilingualism and translingual research across languages are key instruments of decolonization. Aymara terms pepper the text here as elements of its conceptual vocabulary. Rivera Cusicanqui aims to introduce *ch'ixi* into a lexical series that includes the terms Spanish *mestizaje*

and English hybridity, but her first move is to trace the semantics of ch'ixi within the Aymara lexicon, where it is anchored in a visual concept of contrasting colors combined in different ways – by adjacency or by kinds of mixing in which neither element loses its distinctiveness. She places ch'ixi in different lexical series within Aymara. One includes the terms allqa and ayni, and that indicates “something that is and is not at the same time”, or that is simultaneously itself and its opposite (p.105). Others refer to temporalities, classes of animals, registers of strength and weakness. Only after this intralinguistic lexical analysis does she place the term into resonance with contemporary cultural theory's concept of hybridity. It is another decolonizing move. The aim is not simply to supplant the term hybridity with ch'iwi, it is to transform hybridity into a concept useful to a decolonizing practice. Ch'iwi introduces a social vision of the “parallel coexistence of cultural differences”, all with their own deep pasts, “that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other” (p.105). Serious translinguistic work is an essential tool of decolonization because it becomes a source of the new social visions decolonization requires, visions that can and must come only out of the conflicting but intersecting histories that produced the colonial encounter. Rivera is not a native speaker of Aymara, though she grew up surrounded by it;¹ her knowledge of it is the result of long, arduous linguistic work whose necessity and value we must learn to appreciate. Do the work, is her message, don't appropriate; take responsibility, intervene, develop a practice – this is not a merely theoretical enterprise. What we do is how the world will be.

Decolonization in Rivera Cusicanqui's vocabulary coexists and contrasts (ch'ixi) with an opposite term: recolonization. In her reading of modern history, far from eliminating colonial hierarchies, social and intellectual elites have engaged in waves of recolonization that reproduce them in continuously reengineered form. The Bourbon reforms of the late 18th century, followed by 19th century republicanism, 20th century modernity, modernization, progress, and late 20th century postmodern multiculturalism and hybridity represent waves of recolonization, the continuous re-engineering of colonialism's racialized relations of domination, exploitation, and exclusion. Other theorists have shared this insight. Gayatri Spivak observes that colonialism's enduring power lies in its ability to constantly renew itself in non-colonial forms; Brazilian theorist Roberto Schwarz sees Latin American intelligentsias as trapped in endless and futile efforts to implement “misplaced ideas” (*idéias fora de lugar*) relentlessly exported from

1. Rivera is often erroneously identified as indigenous or Aymara. Like a great many Bolivians, she is of combined indigenous and criollo descent, and grew up in a Spanish speaking household in La Paz. Her entire scholarly career has been shaped by her identification with Bolivia's indigenous majority and the struggle for the decolonization of Bolivian society.

Europe; Peruvian sociologist Guillermo Nugent agrees with Rivera that republican modernity made Latin American oligarchies more rather than less archaic, producing what he calls a “contramodernidad” in which “*los indios se hicieron más indios y los señores más señores*” (“the Indians became more Indian and the oligarchs more oligarchic”).²

Contemporary academic practice recolonizes by granting Europe a monopoly on theory, a monopoly conceded over and over again by scholars in the Americas. The extractive paradigm prevails: Latin America provides raw materials which are processed through European theoretical machinery and shipped back in already-interpreted consumable form. For Rivera Cusicanqui, the great flourishing of Latin American cultural theory after 1980 was driven to a significant degree by recolonizing energies that produced new, energized cultural visions but left privileged white intelligentsias in their place, their intellectual authority unquestioned. Reanalyzing Latin American societies as “hybrids” where indigenous (often “pre-modern”) and European (often “modern”) traditions co-exist looks like a decolonizing move because it grants recognition and agency to non-European formations. But, Rivera Cusicanqui argues, no transformative imperative or political urgency follows from these formulations; everyone remains where they are. Indigenous people are represented as archaic and historically inert, denying the dynamic energies and innovative agencies that colonialism itself forced upon them. Multiculturalisms, official and otherwise, are subject to the same critique. Indigenous people and minority groups become “adornments for neoliberalism”. Others might put the case differently and say that critical multiculturalism had a decolonizing potential that was co-opted and defused by the institutions they threatened. The aggressive discrediting of the testimonio by white academics in both North and South exemplifies the violence that decolonizing energies meet when they challenge intellectual authority and professional privilege.³ As the essay here attests, the “decolonial” paradigm advanced over the last fifteen years by a group of scholars led by the U.S. based Argentinian scholar Walter D. Mignolo has been a particular focus of Rivera Cusicanqui’s ire, for a “strategic appropriation” of the work of insurgent anti-colonial thinkers (p. 102) that generates professional capital for first world scholars but assumes no accountability to the movements whose “decoloniality” it lays claim to.

2. I discuss these authors and Latin American debates around modernity in Pratt (2002).

3. I refer readers in particular to the campaigns by white academics across the political spectrum, and in both North and South, to discredit Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú after her dramatic and powerful testimonio became a staple on university syllabi, and Menchú herself an eloquent presence on American campuses. Menchú won the i.e. Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. For discussion of this episode see Arias (2001).

A different kind of translingual operation defines the “decolonial” paradigm which uses the neologism “decolonial” identically in English and Spanish. Rivera Cusicanqui rejects this paradigm for failing to ground itself in any decolonizing practice or any concrete concept of decolonization. To grasp such critiques (which I share), it is important to know that the English and Spanish terms “decolonial” are not at all identical. In English the neologism “decolonial” resonates or aligns with the term “decolonization”, and English speakers understand the term in terms of that link. In Spanish, however, “decolonial” inhabits a semantic constellation distinct from and incompatible with that in English. In Spanish, decolonization is *descolonización* with an “s”. Hence, in Spanish, the neologism “decolonial” can only be understood as eliding or suppressing the “s” that marks *descolonización* as a process. The absent “s” in Spanish creates not an alignment or a link, but a relation of contrast between decolonial and *descolonización*. Whatever “decolonial” means in Spanish it is different from *descolonización*. There is no way for monolingual English speakers to know this, as there is no way for monolingual Spanish speakers to know the English semantics. While Mignolo’s disciples who write in Spanish readily import the term “decolonial” into Spanish, Anibal Quijano, the Peruvian intellectual whose work inspired Mignolo’s paradigm, never elides the decolonizing “s”. In Quijano’s writings, English decolonial is always Spanish *descolonial*. This slippage between English and Spanish may seem trivial, but it is not. In Spring 2018 I joined a symposium on “Alianzas y Activismos Hacia la Descolonización del Presente” organized by a group of Latin American, Spanish, indigenous and indigenist women activists. The proposed event came under fire from Spanish language decolonial thinkers for using the term *descolonización* in its title. *Descolonización*, the organizers were told, was not a concept native to Latin America, while “decolonial” was. There was supposedly something colonized about using the term *descolonización* because the term was born in the liberation struggles of Africa, not Latin America. The women stayed with *descolonización* for the same reasons Rivera Cusicanqui does, because the term refers to a process of historical change, rather than an unspecified “decolonial” condition. It is not possible to overlook the gendered and racial dimensions of this confrontation, nor the potentially colonizing relation of English to Spanish. Let me emphasize that in her own vehement critique of the decolonial paradigm, Rivera does not bring up these interlingual slippages. I am convinced, however, that they are a significant source of her (and my own) *desconfianza* with the decolonial proposal. We cannot find a meaning for this term, in any language

“There can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice”. This is Rivera Cusicanqui’s mantra, directed at both individual and collective action, as a matter of responsibility. In La Paz, she leads a group who has founded an alternative learning space in which reading and

dialogue combine with instruction in construction and food-growing in a minimal, rustic environment the group itself is creating. In New York, horrified by la desperdicie, the city's vast, uncontrolled throwaway culture, she experimented with radical recycling, the dumpster diving movement, minimizing her own consumption of everything, including water, and assembling groups to make art out of trash. Her prescription calls for the body to be in play always along with the imagination and the intellect.

Rivera Cusicanqui's work today places her in the company of a number of indigenous and indigenous-descended thinkers who, from many sites across the globe, backed by generations of antepasados, are working to convey the transformative powers of indigenous thought to non-indigenous people. Examples, among many, would include Maori theorist Linda Tuhiwai Smith in New Zealand (Smith, 1999), Winona LaDuke, Anishinaabe, (Laduke, 1999) and Taiaiake Alfred, Mohawk, (Takaiake, 1999) in North America, and Rivera Cusicanqui's fellow Bolivian, Julieta Paredes (Paredes, 2010). All have engaged in the kind of experimental creative, extroverted, committed work of transmitting their decolonizing knowledge to the ones who know it least and need it most.⁴

4. FROM THE EDITORS: We are grateful to Mary Louise Pratt for invaluable clarifications of the English translation of Rivera Cusicanqui's Spanish text by Duke University Press. We include those clarifications here in the hopes of further illuminating Rivera Cusicanqui's words:

- a. On p. 97, line 4, the statement "that envisions decolonization" should read "that decolonization envisions".
- b. On p. 99, the last full paragraph, lines 3–4 in this paragraph are repeated exactly in lines 11–12 of the paragraph.
- c. On p. 100, line 18 "illustrious" should be translated as "enlightened" as this is the meaning of the Spanish word "ilustrado" referring here to the (so-called) Enlightenment; line 23, the words "that of" should be deleted; and lines 28–29 "material, primarily" is a mistranslation of Spanish "materias primas" which in English is "raw materials." This should read "the exploitation of raw materials under the control of foreign capital".
- d. On p. 105, line 2, "q'ara" is the Aymara term for "white person". Rivera Cusicanqui is saying here that she does not consider herself a white person, but claims a "double origin".
- e. Footnote 11, the term "pollera" does not mean "chicken farmer". It is the name for the distinctive wide skirts and crinolines that Aymara identified women wear in Bolivia. So, the term should be left as *pollera* in italics along with the two Aymara words in the title.

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