Dismantling the colonial structure of knowledge production

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Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) unequivocally criticizes the colonial structure of knowledge production and the specific ideas and individuals that come to be valorized within such an unequal and disempowering structure. She describes the academic practices that engender the profound depoliticization of "indigenous" ideas. These academic practices include: the proliferation of "neologisms" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 102) and "language (that) entangles and paralyzes their objects of study" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 102), the creation of "a new academic canon, using a world of references and counterreferences that establish hierarchies and adopt new gurus" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 102) and the (re)production of "the arboreal structure of internal-external colonialism" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 101) with its "centers and subcenters, nodes and subnodes, which connect certain universities, disciplinary trends and academic fashions of the North with their counterparts in the South" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 101) through intertwined networks of guest lectureships, visiting professorships, scholarships, conferences, symposia and the like.

These practices enable the circulation, valorization and reproduction of particular ideas, i.e. "a fashionable, depoliticized, and comfortable multiculturalism" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 104), in academic fields that seem intent on reproducing themselves by "changing everything so that everything remains the same" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 101). In this regard, Cusicanqui (2012) seems most critical of those who "strike(s) postmodern and even postcolonial poses" (p. 97) and who, through "cooptation and mimesis (and) the selective incorporation of ideas" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 104) produce decontextualized, depoliticized but academically fashionable work that may further academic ambitions but are ultimately disconnected from, irrelevant to and even exploitative of "the people with whom these academics believe they are in dialogue" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 102). She is unsparing in her depictions of the academics whose specific ideas in relation to multiculturalism "neutralize(s) the practices of decolonization by enthroning within the academy a limited and illusory discussion regarding modernity and decolonization" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 104). She names them – Walter Mignolo (who she is especially

critical of), Catherine Walsh, Enrique Dussel, Javier Sanjinés (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 102) – and refers to them as a "small empire within an empire" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 98).

Cusicanqui's views on the colonial structure of knowledge production were both familiar and troubling. First, I recognized a part of myself in her text. As a sociolinguist who grew up in a middle-class family in the Philippines, who writes in English, who attended universities in the Philippines, the United States (on a Fulbright fellowship) and Singapore (on a National University of Singapore graduate fellowship), and who has mostly researched on and written about language and migration from the Philippines, while working in relatively comfortable teaching positions in universities in Singapore and Switzerland, I have benefitted from the intertwined academic networks and material mechanisms that Cusicanqui describes as enabling flows from the South to the North and vice versa. As such, I wondered, can as Angel Lin (2015) rhetorically points out, "a spider weave its way out of the web that it is being woven into, just as it weaves?". Second, the coloniality of knowledge production and the inequalities that stem from it have been and are everyday realities in language studies. It is palpable in how the notion of "native speaker" was uncritically taught in my applied linguistics program in the United States (see Kumaradievelu, 2016). It is evident in how, at several language conferences in Asia I participated in, "local" and "regional" academics were designated as "country speakers" while "Western" and white male scholars were the plenary or keynote speakers. It is tangible in a friend's observation regarding the peer reviews he sometimes receives: he notices that when the majority of his references come from the so-called "West", reviewers say his literature is "extensive" but when the majority of his references come from the so-called "non-West" (e.g. India), his literature is "too narrow" and "quite limited" and thus he must "expand the reach" of his review. It is visible in how apolitical language studies about, for example, the different varieties of English (e.g. Philippine English, Singapore English, etc.) continue to multiply while anti-imperialist projects that, for instance, propose to decolonize English by de-hegemonizing its standards, i.e. through the legitimation of marginalized varieties (see Parakrama, 1995) seem to fall by the wayside. Cusicanqui may not have specifically levelled her critique at the practices, ideas and individuals in language studies but only a deliberate blindness could make us believe that our field is somehow exempt.

Cusicanqui's criticism of the colonial structure of knowledge production is not new; it forms part of a long line of historical struggles to decolonize knowledge production and to delineate radically different pathways. Such pathways have ranged from attempts to construct and disseminate a vocabulary and world view that reflects a *Pantayong Pananaw* (a from-us, for-us perspective) (see Guillermo, 2003 for a summary) to calls to "multiply the objects of identification and construct alternative frames of reference" (Chen, 2010, p. 2) that echo Cusicanqui's

own proposal to construct "… South-South links that will allow us to break base-less pyramids of the politics and academies of the North and that will enable us to make our own science" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 107). That there is a long history of such proposals and that the colonial structure of knowledge production continues to thrive should signal that what we have been doing to dismantle this structure is not enough. Our appropriation and deployment of postmodern and postcolonial terms in our field, our constant search for what is "new" may have allowed us to think differently and critically but these practices have also led to the rise of sloganization and academic marketization in our field (see Schmenk, Breidback & Küster, 2018). More importantly, as Kandiah (2003, p. 129) eloquently points out, "… they facilitate an escape from addressing exactly the matters that need attention: the determinate material realities of the global order within which the causes of the entire unequal situation are embedded" (see also Kubota, 2016).

Thus, the radical change which Cusicanqui imagines and that we should imagine is impossible without changing the material realities and conditions within which the unequal mechanisms of knowledge production operate, without a politics of (re)distribution alongside and perhaps even above the politics of representation that has characterized many of our current strategies, without "a collective, concerted, and coordinated set of result-oriented actions (that carry) the potential to shake the foundation of the hegemonic structure" (Kumaradievelu, 2016, p. 82). This is an enormous and difficult task, one that may always be unfinished, and one that certainly requires us to continuously recognize our collective unfreedom and to "…resolve not only to think *otherwise* but also to act *otherwise*" (Kumaradievelu, 2016, p. 80). Recognizing our collective unfreedom means understanding how our particular positions in the field of language studies, in the universities, departments and research centers in which we may study and work are unequally privileged by the mechanisms that legitimize and reproduce the colonial structure of knowledge production. This, I believe, raises a particular challenge to those who have the resources that are considered valuable in the academic field. As Kubota (2016, p. 490) states: "It is also important to critically reflect on our own hybrid plurilingual status of privilege within neoliberal academic institutions, in which we further accrue cultural, economic, and symbolic capital from presenting and publishing while moving further away from real-world problems". And then there is the challenge to act otherwise. Can we deliberately and collectively not hoard opportunities (see Tilly, 1998)? Can we step out of the "game of who cites whom" (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 103) so we can begin to imagine what alternative frames of reference (Chen, 2010) might be like, in practice? Can we watch each other's backs and ensure that this intellectual elaboration on the coloniality of knowledge is not just a way for us to salve our consciences while business goes on as usual (Kandiah, 2003)?

Let's get to work.

Acknowledgements

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