

## Artículo de investigación

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# An Autoethnographic Reflection on the Verb “To Decolonize” in Sociological Knowledge Production

## Uma Reflexão Autoetnográfica sobre o Verbo “Descolonizar” na Produção do Conhecimento Sociológico

## Una Reflexión Autoetnográfica sobre el Verbo “Descolonizar” en la Producción de Conocimiento Sociológico

### Abstract

Decolonization seems to have become a buzzword in multiple disciplines. However, the debate about what it means in relation to individual, collective, institutional and structural changes in academia remains under-discussed. Inspired by Tuck and Yang’s article “Decolonization is not a metaphor” (2012), the author –descendent of enslaved people in a former Portuguese colony– reflects on his own relationship with coloniality and what “to decolonize” means in his own scholarly trajectory. The goal of the essay is to reflect about a researcher’s own epistemological choices and power positions in an unequal and hierarchical academia.

**Keywords:** Coloniality, Decolonization, Reflexivity, Autoethnography, Blackness.

### Resumo

A descolonização parece ter-se tornado uma palavra da moda em múltiplas disciplinas. No entanto, o debate sobre o que isso significa em relação às mudanças individuais, coletivas, institucionais e estruturais na academia continua pouco discutido. Inspirado no artigo de Tuck e Yang “A descolonização não é uma metáfora” (2012), o autor –descendente de pessoas escravizadas numa ex-colônia portuguesa– reflete sobre a sua própria relação com a colonialidade e o que significa “descolonizar” na sua própria trajetória académica. O objetivo do ensaio é refletir sobre as próprias escolhas epistemológicas e posições de poder de um pesquisador na academia desigual e hierárquica.

**Palavras-chave:** Colonialidade, Descolonização, Reflexividade, Autoetnografia, Negritude.



## Resumen

La descolonización parece haberse convertido en una palabra de moda en múltiples disciplinas. Sin embargo, el debate sobre lo que significa en relación con los cambios individuales, colectivos, institucionales y estructurales en el mundo académico sigue siendo poco discutido. Inspirándose en el artículo de Tuck y Yang “La descolonización no es una metáfora” (2012), el autor– descendiente de esclavos en una antigua colonia portuguesa– reflexiona sobre su propia relación con la colonialidad y lo que significa “descolonizar” en su propia trayectoria académica. El objetivo del ensayo es reflexionar sobre las propias elecciones epistemológicas y posiciones de poder de un investigador en una academia desigual y jerárquica.

**Palabras clave:** Colonialidad, Descolonización, Reflexividad, Autoetnografía, Negritud.

## Introduction

This essay is an intimately political reflection about the verb “to decolonize”. In recent years, the literature on communication for development and social change has seen, like other fields, an increase of publications featuring “decolonization” and/or “decoloniality” as a key concept to reflect on practices or as a theoretical framework (Dutta, 2015; Villanueva et al., 2023).

This essay is a contribution to this growing body of literature, but for now I believe it is important to take a step back from empirical analyses of processes of communication for social change, and reflect on the possibilities and impossibilities of decolonial discourses and frameworks in epistemological interactions and productions across disciplines and fields in the social sciences and humanities.

Therefore, the next pages will not feature examples and analyses of initiatives. Instead, I propose a deep (self-) reflection about the challenges to engage with decolonizing conversations; specifically as a Black scholar on communication for social change navigating white, Western academia between the global South –where I come from– and the global North –where I currently work.

Scholars have widely debated the nouns “decolonization” (Mbembe, 2021; Táíwò, 2022) and “decoloniality”<sup>1</sup> (Mignolo and Escobar, 2010; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Bernardino-Costa et al., 2020; Segato, 2022). Elsewhere (Custódio, 2021), I have analysed the practices of communication for social change in Brazilian favelas to problematize the meaning of the prefix “de-” added to the adjective “colonial” and the noun “colonization”. In short, the prefix “de-” in “decolonial” suggests as process of removal of colonial elements that still linger in our lives as individuals and societies.

<sup>1</sup> An example of the contentious character of debates around the notion of decoloniality can be found in the 2020 section “Critical Dialogues” in the volume 23, issue 4 of the *Journal Postcolonial Studies*. In that section, authors from different parts of the world engage with Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh around their book *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018).

The problem, I would argue, is that the historical, holistic and violent nature of colonization has left multiple open and infected wounds –like racism and xenophobia, for example– that have actively shaped our psyche, social relations, political systems and the economic exploitation of people and nature, for the unsustainable maintenance of capitalism. In that sense, “decolonization” –often related to the dismantlement of colonial political control over colonies– and “decoloniality” –concerning the material and symbolic legacies of colonization in contemporaneity– are permanent struggles happening simultaneously across the globe.

However, the verb “to decolonize” –in reference to both nouns– requires further problematizing. To be sure, there are plenty of critical analysis of decolonizing academia in general (Grosfoguel et al., 2016; Bhabra et al., 2018), as well as disciplines and practices in particular (Glück, 2018; Harrison, 2010, Meghji, 2021). Nevertheless, fewer authors (Khanna, 2020; Clarke and Yellow Bird, 2021) have tackled the impacts of these calls to decolonize on scholars whose histories, lives, bodies, minds and souls have directly suffered from consequences of colonial legacies. I speak holistically because calls to decolonize –especially in and by predominantly white institutions– tend to cause strong visceral reactions in me.

Visceral in the sense Neetu Khanna (2020) defines the term in “The Visceral Logics of Decolonization”, where Khanna analyses decolonial processes by exploring the “dense and knotted set of relations between embodied experience and political feeling” (Khanna, 2020, p. 1). For instance, I –descendant of enslaved Africans in a former European colony pursuing an academic career in Northern Europe– often hear beneficiaries of whiteness talk about “decoloniality” and “decolonization” without seriously assessing how they contribute to or benefit from colonial legacies.

Whenever that happens, I feel a sense of discomfort that rapidly grows into nausea, as anger builds up to erupt like vomit. In contrast, I also experience visceral reactions when I read or listen to Black, Brown and Indigenous scholars, activists and artists, whose texts, performances, music and art skilfully express their struggles between assimilation, confrontation and resistance to the violence of colonial legacies. In those occasions, I occasionally cry of joy, have outbursts of laughter and a great sense of relief: what I had always thought of as “my fault” is, in fact, a set of shared symptoms of a lifetime exposed to colonial prejudices, norms and values. What do these visceral reactions mean politically?

In this essay, I elaborate on this question to reflect about the possibilities and, most importantly, the limitations and impossibilities of putting the verb “to decolonize” into action. I start by arguing that autoethnography is a valuable method for us –scholars who have suffered the consequences of colonial legacies– to explore of the intersections between decolonial epistemologies and their own biographies.

This argument is in line with C. Wright Mills’ acknowledgement, in “The Sociological Imagination” (Mills, 2000), that history and biography are intertwined in knowledge production. It is also an important step for us –the descendants of the indigenous and

the enslaved– to overcome the harmful effects of what W.E.B. Du Bois coined as “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 2007) in our relationship with the hegemonic whiteness to which we simultaneously comply and resist in academia. Then, I provide a brief analytical justification to the essay by reflecting on my early, conflicting encounters with decolonial discourses and publications as a “postcolonial subject”.

After that, I proceed to problematize two imperatives that often arise in decolonial debates: “decolonize the mind” –concerning individuals’ psyche– and “decolonize thought” –concerning epistemological production. In conclusion, I reflect about decolonial horizons and how embracing the impossibility of reaching a fully decolonized status may allow us to focus on the various challenges imposed by colonial legacies in academia.

## Methodology

Autoethnography is a suitable method to turn these visceral reactions into entry points to analyses of their root causes. Autoethnography:

[...] Uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences. Acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others. Uses deep and careful self-reflection –typically referred to as ‘reflexivity’– to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political. Shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.” Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion and creativity. Strives for social justice to make life better. (Adams et al., 2015, pp. 1-2).

One inspiration to explore autoethnography in these terms has been the 2018 special issue entitled “Decolonizing autoethnography”, in the journal *Cultural Studies* <-> *Critical Methodologies* (volume 18, issue 1). As I read the essays, I felt relief and excitement to see peers critically and collectively ask what it means “to write the self in and out of colonial historical frameworks” (Chawla and Atay, 2018, p 3).

Identifying as postcolonial subjects who “write from, about, and through the liminal, hybrid, and diasporic locations they inhabit” (Chawla and Atay, 2018, p. 7), the special issue embraces the impossibility of any decolonial effort to undo colonization (Chawla and Atay, 2018. p, 5).

Instead, they argue, “decolonial frameworks focus on hybrid experiences, practices and identities, as well as on the ideologies, performances, and practices that actively question, critique, and challenge colonization” (Chawla and Atay, 2018, p. 5).

Autoethnography is, then, a powerful method for us, postcolonial subjects, to deal with the legacies of colonization in our lives while challenging Western epistemologies, calling for self-reflexivity and accountability among beneficiaries of colonial legacies, and to subversively resisting Eurocentric ontologies and epistemologies (Chawla and Atay, 2018). In other words, my objective with this autoethnographic essay is to embrace visceral reactions and turn them into source material to knowledge production (Evaristo, 2017).

For that purpose, I explore the intersections between biography and history (Mills, 2000) to reflect about my assimilation, discomfort, learning and resistance to the colonial legacies. I start by explaining how my discomfort with the verb “to decolonize” started. After that, I reflect about two decolonial imperatives: “decolonize the mind” and “decolonize thought”. Throughout, I hope to contribute to conversations about epistemological processes in hierarchical and unequal higher education.

## Colonial Discomforts and Decolonizing Encounters

I started drafting this essay on the verb “to decolonize” in 2019, but the nausea started before I first heard about the term. For instance, I remember feeling very upset as a Black teenager in the 1990s when Black folks, including relatives, in my hometown kept asking why I mostly dated white girls. At the time, I shrugged off their criticism with clichés like “we do not control love”, but the sting would linger.

Only two decades later –already married to a white European woman– I came to learn about how my interracial relationships embodied aspects of the harm of whiteness toward Black masculinity and our affective relationships (Hooks, 2004). Anguish especially took over when I read Franz Fanon’s essay “The Man of Color and the White Woman” (Fanon, 2017, 48-65). Fanon’s unapologetic and brutal elucidation of the complex enactment of colonial desires by male, Black colonial subjects felt disturbingly accurate.

To make sense of my feelings, I wrote an autoethnographic blog post problematizing Black desire and attraction for white women. In that text, re-published by Geledés (Custódio, 2018), one of the most prestigious Black feminist websites in Brazil (my country of birth) I wondered: “Was it all love or was I grasping ‘white civilization and dignity and making them mine’ (Fanon, 2017, 48) through my relationships? If the latter was the case, how to recover – whatever “recover” means?”

The displays of public support and criticism to the publication made me realize that those experiences and feelings were not mine, but shared. Autoethnographic writing proved to be a useful tool to deal with visceral reactions to colonial legacies. From that moment on, rather than silencing and blaming myself, I started speaking up about both the colonial contradictions in me and against the generalized aloofness of white peers regarding their own embodiment of colonial legacies (Eddo-Lodge, 2017).

I heard about the concepts of “decolonization” and “decoloniality” for the first time at the time of the blog post. I remember it was intriguing to see the verb “to decolonize” being heavily conjugated in its imperative form among colleagues and activists. Academic events and publications on decolonial imperatives started mushrooming in Northern Europe. Announcements of conferences, summer schools, workshops, articles and books on the topic circulated on social media and mailing lists.

I felt confused and wondered what “decolonization” and “decoloniality” meant. Gradually, sentences like “decolonize the mind” and “decolonize the (epistemological) thought” seemed to impose a sense of urgency for changes that seemed very unclear to me. How can a term that seems to denote so deep and broad holistic transformations be trending so casually and comfortably?

Fortunately, meeting and talking with other Black people active both in research and activism helped me clarify the contestations around decolonial terminology. One example of such encounters happened in the autumn of 2019, when I attended a media and communication conference once again in Malmö, Sweden. There, I met Professor Temi Odumusu, one of the local organizers of the event. Over coffee, we had an emotional and heartfelt conversation typical of Black encounters in predominantly white environments.

As we talked, I opened up about my discomfort with the apparently acritical popularity of the verb “to decolonize”. As I stuttered in my struggle to verbalize my visceral feelings, she patiently listened and smiled. Then, in a kind and wise tone of voice, she shared experiences that corroborated my suspicions. She also suggested readings, like the highly cited article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor” (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

In the article, Dr. Eve Tuck – an indigenous scholar – and K. Wayne Yang denounce the domestication of decolonization by settler colonizers (a term in reference to white people who now inhabit territories colonized by their ancestors) acting out on what they call moves to innocence in academia. That is, “strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 10). The authors also argue that it is difficult to use a single set of criteria to measure aspects of the dynamics between settlers, natives and the enslaved in multiple contexts.

The article triggered many questions. How to decolonize when so many people still suffer from the consequences of colonial legacies? How to decolonize when indigenous cultures, lands, communities, bodies and minds were torn, transplanted, displaced, enslaved, exploited and killed for so many centuries? How to pursue an objective understanding of the verb “to decolonize” in articles and guidelines for institutional changes, when people and postcolonial subjects cannot stop resisting and surviving colonial ubiquity in post-colonial everyday life (Maldonado-Torres, 2007)? These questions do not only concern indigenous survivors and the descendants of the enslaved. People racialized as white must also reflect and act about the practical challenges of any decolonial process.

They must acknowledge their benefits from the racial category their ancestors in power deliberately created, scientifically legitimized, religiously blessed and violently imposed –with sharp blades, gunpowder and hot bullets– to justify and execute their colonial expansion and domination. For that, autoethnographic writing can be a suitable starting point to grapple with the challenges of a genuinely transformative decolonial process. In what follows, I will illustrate what I mean by reflecting on two imperatives: decolonize the mind and decolonize thought.

## Decolonize the Mind

For Black and Indigenous folks, whom white Europeans historically categorized as inferior (Saini, 2019), “decolonize the mind” represents an inner search for healing from the permanent experience of embodying and dealing with the past, present and future of colonial legacies. This is what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o does in “Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature” (1986). In the book, Ngũgĩ produced a native language resistance manifesto against colonial imperialism. He explains that:

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. [...] Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But the most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. (Ngũgĩ, 1986, pp. 13-16).

With this background, Ngũgĩ combines narratives of memory with sharp socio-political analysis to call for uses of African languages in literature, theatre and fiction as a “search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relation to ourselves and the other selves in the universe” (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 87). Ngũgĩ’s search for ways to deal with the impacts of colonial imperialism through language remains relevant, especially as a method with which to develop strategies to decolonize one’s own mind. However, Ngũgĩ does not talk about whiteness, a fundamental problem in former colonies where colonizers settled and held control of most (if not all) dimensions of socio-political, economic, cultural and symbolic power.

Whiteness is a constitutive element of the colonial. It is not a simple matter of “being white” –whatever white means in different contexts– but a social construct historically entangled with colonial imperialism. Whiteness results from the enforced naturalization of everything imposed by colonizing Western Europe as quality standards for all humanity. Examples abound in my growing up as Black in my former colony of birth. From early childhood, social symbols and socialization inform us that the purest and most innocent beauty is white. From childhood, we also learned that only Christianity could save our souls.

As teenagers, we learned that developing skills in European languages and acquiring Western tastes in culture made us appear more intellectual and civilized. Therefore, in a Bourdieusian sense, whiteness was and remains a type of cumulative and multidimensional capital (Reiter, 2009). In consequence, many of us grow into adulthood believing that the more a person assimilates ideal types determined by whiteness, the less they are ugly, barbarian, ignorant, underdeveloped, lazy and subhuman (Fanon, 2017).

For people racialized as white, whiteness is not a problem. On the contrary, it can be a permanent source of benefits, security and opportunities. If nothing else, being white in a white supremacist environment allows a person to live a lifetime without dealing with racism. In contrast, there are serious problems associated with assimilating whiteness among Black and Indigenous people in former colonies. One problem is that only to a very limited extent can the reproduction of whiteness in one’s behaviour represent admission to participate in white supremacist, colonized societies.

From experience, I know that speaking the language of the colonizer appropriately, dressing according to the Western fashion trends, learning English, and expressing passion for white artists, among other things, enabled me to avoid more violent forms of racism. Yet, my dark skin remained as a marker of my impossibility of being white. People reminded of that in racist jokes. Institutions reminded me of my Blackness in racist treatment. Once, for example, as my friends and I drove to a nightclub, the police stopped the car and checked everyone, except my white friend who drove. To the white driver, they explained: the officers suspected that we, the Black friends, had kidnapped him.

Another problem is that the thin sense of power derived from performing whiteness only exists in relation to other Black and Indigenous people. In embracing whiteness for some safety in a white supremacist society, a colonial subject ends up reinforcing the harmful effects of whiteness in peers who are unable or unwilling to live by white values and norms. As a child, I suffered all sorts of verbal and physical bullying by lower-income Black boys in my working class neighbourhood.

They stole the expensive snacks I ate and mocked me for the clothes I wore, the way I spoke, the way I cried easily and for my lack of street smartness. One of the kids who bullied me grew to become one of my best friends. As adults, when I confronted him, he explained how they felt I humiliated them, as if I was superior like *the other* white kids. How much damage and trauma (Kilomba, 2019; Fanon, 2017) can these types of recurrent experiences cause to the mind of a postcolonial subject? What does it mean to “decolonize the mind” for the Black and Indigenous forced to assimilate and resist whiteness in colonized societies?

For all of us, including white people, decolonizing the mind fundamentally means learning to problematize whiteness and other colonial legacies to become more respectful in our interactions and active in dismantling our embodiment of colonial legacies. However, for us, descendants of the enslaved and the surviving indigenous, decolonizing



the mind is also a process of identifying and healing the many open wounds caused by colonial legacies. Can there ever be a complete cure, though? In the cases of people like me, that seems unlikely. There are no elements in my existence as Black outside of colonial histories and legacies: my name, my language, my favourite food, the religions around me, the occupied territories which I now call my country... most of what I have experienced in social life has been forged in white colonial imperialism.

To make matters worse, every time I gain awareness of yet another trace of colonial legacies in me, a box of infinite self-reflection opens up. It might be healthier, then, to accept the impossibility of reaching a fully decolonized mind and embrace the anguishing, conflicting and confusing process of *decolonize the mind* as an endless pursuit.

## Decolonize Thought

The imperative sentence “decolonize thought” raises the discussion about colonial legacies to the epistemological level. The first time I heard it was during a symposium by the Finnish Association of Researchers in the summer of 2019. With “decolonize thought” as a theme, the organizers proposed the question: *Is the tradition of Western thought, in its universalising tendency, irreparably on the side of colonial oppression, including its very structures, concepts and categories? If that is the case, how to “decolonize” it?*

In addition to white students, researchers and professors, the symposium featured Black scholars and participants of Asian and Middle Eastern heritage, including Afghan women who had arrived in Finland as refugees in the early 2000s. The theoretical nature of white participants’ understanding of the verb “to decolonize” clashed with the embodied and visceral experiences of those of us who had suffered from the colonial legacies on and under the skin. Debates, as expected, were heated.

What especially interested me was the fact that the work of the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro had inspired the symposium. The association had just translated the book “Cannibal Metaphysics” (Viveiros de Castro and Skafish, 2014) into Finnish. I learned in the symposium that in the book and for most of his career, Viveiros de Castro has challenged the political and discursive foundations of anthropology by arguing for the decolonization of thought as a permanent process. In a conversation with cultural anthropologist Peter Skafish, Viveiros de Castro explains:

[The decolonization] of thought can be carried out by anthropology as an intellectual project. If the thought of other peoples and of the Other in general are necessary conditions of thinking, then you can no longer say “we” without specifying who the hell we are. We is a much more dangerous pronoun than I, because —who cares who I am? After all, I is just me or you, but when you say “we”, a claim is made with some global collective identity in support of it, and philosophers are really, really fond of saying “we” without further

specification. Does the “we” of the philosophers include the Bororo? The Arapesh? Jane Roberts? The wretched of the earth? Or does that “we” amount only to scholars in the liberal tradition, or even just to American citizens? What and who the hell are “we”? I think anthropology could be defined as the science of specifying the necessary conditions of saying “we.” (Skafish, 2016, p. 414).

Viveiros de Castro’s urgent and important questionings have deservedly made waves beyond anthropology. Undoubtedly, his thought has contributed to challenging eurocentrism, technocentrism and the increasing contamination of academic culture by neoliberalism. Nevertheless, it also seems important to reflect about the paths towards a level of epistemological conditions to call for the decolonization of thought.

In other words, paraphrasing Viveiros de Castro, the conditions to enter academia and challenge its foundations reflect multiple inequalities consequent of colonial legacies. Those of us who suffered the harmful effects of colonial history face different obstacles to reach those conditions (Almeida, 2019; Souza, 2021; Sodr e, 2023). One of these barriers is the backlash to progressive and inclusive movements we observe globally with the rise of a coalition between the moderate, market-oriented Right and the nationalist and xenophobic extreme Right (cf. Yancy, 2018).

In diminishing historical struggles for rights and justice into offensive and misleading terms (e.g. “identity politics” and “woke culture”), reactionary forces end up reinforcing the pact to maintain the privileges of hegemonic whiteness (Bento, 2022). Paradoxically, this pact also benefits well-meaning beneficiaries of colonial structures to the detriment of those who have historically suffered from colonial legacies.

As an illustration, a reflexive exercise about how history and one’s biography affect the construction of epistemological thought (Mills, 2000) is in order. For this exercise, I will contrast what is known about Viveiros de Castro’s upbringing and academic trajectory to my own. This exercise is not meant to diminish or deny the unquestionable value of Viveiros de Castro’s work. Instead, it is just an effort to somehow materialize coloniality in biography of existing people who inhabit this world and make a professional living in academia.

We are both intellectuals from Brazil, one of the settler-colonized and white supremacist societies historically built on slavery and land exploitation. He was born into a wealthy white family of aristocratic lineage that includes senators (great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather) whose names are now streets in upper-class areas in Rio de Janeiro. Being born in a family of lawmakers and intellectuals created conditions and presented him with role models for critical thinking. He also had financial possibilities to travel and autonomously explore multiple forms of leisure and learning from an early age. On the other side of a typical postcolonial social divide, I was born into a working class Black family.

Previous generations in my extended family include local schoolteachers (like my mom), construction workers (like my dad), factory workers and maids. With few exceptions who made it into higher education, myself included, current and future generations will follow the professional footsteps of our parents and grandparents. In my kind of family, education is very utilitarian. One studies to increase the chances of well-paying, hopefully permanent jobs and, as a bonus, to avoid troubles with a racist and punitive justice system.

Growing up, the idea of working as an intellectual did not exist. For most young men my age in my hometown, higher education was a waste of time, except for the polytechnics. Most of our readings were comic books, football magazines and tabloids with sarcastic coverage of violent crime. We occasionally read books for school. Ironically, it was the utilitarian decision of my mother to sacrifice a big chunk of her income into my studies of the English language that triggered a domino effect of lucky turning points that led me to being a scholar today.

What do these two distinct biographical snapshots mean in relation to the act of “decolonizing thought”? From an early age, Viveiros de Castro had the conditions (e.g. time, silence, support) to develop skills (e.g. reading, critical thinking) to understand, construct and contest epistemologies. In contrast, descendants of the enslaved and surviving indigenous folks –and especially those who had less opportunities and luck strikes than I did– learned from childhood that assimilating, silencing and working, even unwillingly, were the only ways to avoid the consequences of challenging colonial legacies (e.g. unemployment, police repression, verbal and physical racism, etc.). Academia is no different.

Those of us who manage to enter higher education in a white supremacist and/or colonized society recurrently deal with the anguish and anger to adjust to Westernized evaluation criteria. Examples include some peer feedback I have received throughout my academic career in Europe. Reprimands like *you cannot write academically in the first person, you must read and cite references that we recognize as part of the canon of Western scholarship, and I cannot evaluate you if you refer to materials in languages I am not able to read.*

In other words, to “decolonize thought” for people who have had a lifetime suffering from colonial legacies means more than only challenging ideas and academic practices. It also means overcoming the permanent insecurity of perhaps not knowing enough to question established scholars. It also means calculating the possible professional backlash of confronting predominantly white institutions with their hierarchies and egos, inflated by the sense of epistemological superiority that ooze from the discourses and behaviours of colleagues more versed in Western academic thinking.

Will they think I am ungrateful of their benevolence? Will I ever get a job? Are my ideas legitimate? Am I able to think critically? Can I really construct knowledge and theorize? The writings of established scholars like us –colonial subjects, the descendants of the enslaved and the surviving indigenous– tend to ease the fear, anguish and anger,

as if they soothed, remedied our wounds and strengthened us to persist. Yet, persisting tends to mean embracing a lifetime of visceral reactions constantly affecting our efforts to decolonize thought. That happens because the colonizing forces of the thought to be decolonized are very skilful in engaging with pretence to avoid any structural changes that might strip them of their power. Or, in the words of the indigenous-Bolivian scholar Silvia Ribera Cusicanqui about the act of decolonizing:

The [Latin American] elites adopt a strategy of crossdressing and articulate new forms of co-optation and neutralization. In this way, they reproduce a “conditional inclusion,” a mitigated and second-class citizenship that molds subaltern imaginaries and identities into the role of ornaments through which the anonymous masses play out the theatricality of their own identity. What then is decolonization? Can it be understood as only a thought or a discourse? [...] There can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice. (Cusicanqui, 2012, 100)

## Decolonial Horizons

In this autoethnographic essay, I reflected on the imperative sentences “decolonize the mind” and “decolonize thought” to indicate how they are endless and holistic processes with psychological, collective, social, epistemological, cultural and structural dimensions. That means, from my perspective as a colonial subject, that being fully decolonized is impossible.

Thus, rather than pursuing a complete decolonized status, it is healthier and more feasible to treat the verb “to decolonize” as a journey towards an unreachable horizon that constantly transforms us as we move forward. A journey that we take by enacting everyday *decolonizing ideas and practices*.

This is admittedly not an original proposal, but a contribution to reinforcing its desirable and urgent character. All of us, workers in higher education –colonial subjects, white beneficiaries of settler colonizers and colonizers, the descendants of the enslaved and the surviving indigenous– have a responsibility to pursue the decolonial horizons. However, the decolonizing ideas and practices that we enact must take into consideration our own roles in the history of colonial legacies. The journey is collective, but also intimate.

The journey is also dependent on the contexts in which we are and the positions we occupy in power hierarchies. It is up to each one of us to look inwards and outwards and reflect about how colonial legacies affect us and how we enforce colonial harm on others. It is up to us to decide what thoughts we can and want to decolonize as we build our academic careers. It is especially up to us to put ourselves in relationships of mutual learning and collective construction of knowledge.

That way we may ensure a desirable level of respect and acknowledgement to individualities and inequalities. In summary, an important starting point before acting or demanding others to decolonize the mind and thought is asking oneself: what does the verb “to decolonize” mean to you? This is definitely not a rhetorical question. Rather, it is an urgent entry point to urgent transformative conversations and debates. It complements Tuck and Yang’s warning published twelve years before this essay.

Let us embrace the complicated situations and uncomfortable reactions that this demand for deep self-reflexivity and structural analyses entail. It is only then that sociological research, including research in our field of communication for social change, will fulfil its transformative potential without turning the powerful concepts of “decolonization” and “decoloniality” into empty buzzwords that give a revolutionary edge to hegemonic scholarship without actually dismantling its history of epistemological and societal privilege.

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