Pedagogical Notes from the Decolonial Cracks

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1. I did not come to the decolonial by way of theory. Stuart Hall’s admonition that political moments produce theoretical movements has real significance for me. In fact, it was the “political moment” of alliance between U.S. based Puerto Rican organizations, groups, and communities back in the decade of the 1980s that taught me about the colonial problem and about decolonial struggle. This “political moment” produced a major theoretical movement, pushing me beyond Marxist analyses toward analyses grounded in colonial relations of power, analyses that helped me theorize from (rather than study “about”) the colonial and decolonial. Frantz Fanon’s texts became useful tools and important interlocutors to such processes and “movement.”

From that point on, the colonial and decolonial have been organizing concerns of both my thinking and praxis. It has been through this and, in the years since, many other socio-political “moments” of engagement, alliance, and co-labor with communities in the Americas struggling both against the ongoing matrix of colonial power and for conditions of life, knowledge, and being otherwise, that decolonization, decoloniality, and the decolonial have come to have significance for me. Such “signification,” as I will explain further below, has brought with it
political and epistemic responsibility. My participation in the collective project of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality since 1999, has afforded an important space of dialogue and collaboration that has further urged my theorizations, and given a sense of shared project to my own thinking and doing, including that which began many years before.

2. Since I entered the academic world, first as a student and later 30 years ago as a professor, my intents, interests, and ventures have been to unlearn the rational modernity that (de)formed me, to learn to think and act in its fissures and cracks. The fissures or cracks have become part of my localization and place. They are part and parcel of how and where I position myself. They are also constitutive of how I conceive, construct, and assume my praxis.

Although I work in the university, I seldom identify as an academic. I identify rather as a militant intellectual, an intellectual activist or activist intellectual, and always as a pedagogue. The latter I understand not in the formal educational sense of teacher who transmits or imparts knowledge, but as facilitator; as someone who endeavors to provoke, encourage, construct, generate, and advance with others critical questionings, understandings, knowledges, and actionings; ways of thinking and doing. My use of “pedagogy” and the “pedagogical” recalls Freire’s conception of pedagogy as indispensable methodology, resonating with the understandings expressed so clearly by Jacqui Alexander:

Pedagogies […] as in breaking through, transgressing, disrupting, displacing, inverting inherited concepts and practices, those psychic, analytic, and organizational methodologies [that] make different conversations and solidarities possible.¹ (Alexander 2005, 7)

For me, this notion of pedagogy and the pedagogical intertwines with intellectual militancy and activism, forming an inseparable whole constitutive of and constituted in praxis, a praxis that I construct and assume both outside the university and within.

Until the early 90s in the U.S., my engagement with activist organizations and groups, and with Latino, Black, Asian, and Haitian collectives and communities fighting against racism and for social justice and language and cultural rights was focused on intervening in the courts, social institutions, the public policy arena, and with students in the classroom. Critical pedagogy then served as an anchor for my unlearning, relearning, thinking, and doing. The years spent in collaboration with Paulo Freire (while he was in exile in the U.S.) and with a network of youth and adult activists and intellectuals, pushed my commitment, and enabled deeper understandings about the ongoing lived realities of colonial power, domination, and racialization.²

This pedagogical-intellectual militancy-activism has deepened and matured in the last two decades outside the United States. Ecuador is now not only my home—I identify as an immigrant from the North to the South—but also my place of enunciation, thought, and praxis. It is here in the South, and most particularly through collaborative work with Afro-descendant and
indigenous social movements and communities at their request, that I began more profoundly to comprehend the colonial and the decolonial.

While both terms have always, for me, had their ground in lived struggle, the nature of the struggle in the South and the persistence not only of resistance but more importantly of the insurgent and creative construction of the otherwise—at the social, political, epistemic, and existence-based realms—afford a different meaning to the “lived.” The fact that the struggles are not just against the dominant order and colonial matrix of power but more significantly for the building of other ways of being and thinking in and with the world, urged me toward the “insurgence.” That is, to think with and from insurgent constructions, creations, and practices that challenge and defy modernity/coloniality, constructions, creations, and practices which work outside, on the borders and edges, as well as within, opening up and widening the decolonial cracks and fissures.

This is the localization and place of my thinking and praxis, of my pedagogical-intellectual militancy-activism, of the way I conceive my work, including within the university. The regional Andean doctoral program that I began in Quito in 2001 is one such example. Here the project has been to interrupt—as much as possible, pushing the limits of laws and regulations—the hegemonic Euro-USA-centric frame of doctoral study. This means, on the one hand, to engender a thinking from and with the knowledge production—the production of knowledges in the plural—of the South, and with and from its actors/thinkers, and a thinking from and with the social, political, cultural, epistemic, and life-based processes of struggle, movement, and change in the continent and the Andean region, making evident one’s own place of engagement and enunciation. It also, and on the other hand, means building the possibility of relationality rather than individuality and competition. That is a space and place of dialoguing, thinking, analyzing, theorizing, and doing in community and in concert “with” that encourage alliances, commitments, collaborations, and interculturalizations which cross disciplinary (de)formations, investigative interests, national borders, and racial/ethnic/sexual/genderized identifications, which also extend beyond the classroom and the period of doctoral study. In this sense, pedagogical-intellectual militancy-activism is part of the program/project of the doctorate itself, of a praxis shared by those involved. The students, professors, and interlocutors from social movements and from other places outside the university are all compañeras and compañeros of a process that aims to deepen the fissures in the modern/colonial order. In this sense, and on repeated occasions, the doctorate has served as a base from which to build contacts and conversations with the growing number of collectives from Mexico to Patagonia that define themselves with regard to decolonial thought and struggle.

In my writing, I also endeavor to maintain this political-pedagogical-epistemic praxis and stance. My proposition has never been to study or report “about” social movements, actors,
and thinkers but rather to think “with,” and, at the same time, to theorize “from” the “political moments” in which I am engaged. This has meant, in some instances, constructing texts in conversation. Such is the intent, for instance, of the several dialogical texts constructed together with Juan García Salazar, known as the grandfather of the Afro-Ecuadorian movement and self-identified as “worker of the process.”

This praxis of fissure is not limited to the University or to the writing of texts. For me, the political-epistemic responsibility that I referred to earlier extends to an involvement/engagement with the ongoing and emergent processes of struggle and change. Collaborating, for example, in the debates and conceptualizations with community leaders and Constitutional Assembly members in the development of Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution, engaging in forums on legal pluralism and the interculturalization of law, working with community members, youth, and elders in documenting and positioning ancestral knowledge (particularly for its educational use),

dialoguing with and supporting the community-based endeavors and projects of indigenous universities—sometimes referred to as “pluriversities” or “interversities”—as spaces of political, epistemic, and existence-based insurgence that open decolonial horizons,

are some examples, of a pedagogical praxis of accompaniment and engagement that endeavors to move within and connect the cracks.

3. The cracks, of course, are the consequence, in large part, of the resistance and insurgence of social movements. In Ecuador, the indigenous uprisings of the 1990s challenged the model of society and state, and educated the general populace about the “culture of death” that is the neoliberal project. Their political proposal for the country as a whole was for a plurinational state and a social project grounded in interculturality and the “culture of life.” Such proposal worked to splinter bit by bit the heretofore established order, challenging not only mono-cultural and uni-national hegemony, but also the widely accepted and assumed model of Western—and westernizing—civilization.

The uprisings, rebellions, and movements, in this sense, were not just political. They were also conceptual, epistemic, and existence-based. They introduced the possibilities of an “otherwise” into the social conscience of at least some sectors of society, and most especially sectors of the Left. This “Otherwise” is of perspectives and frameworks not based in market capitalism, consumerism, western rationality, or the exploitation of nature, but rather in relatedness, in a living “with.” It is this conceptual/epistemic insurgence that laid the ground for many of the discussions, reflections, and debates within the 2007–2008 Constitutional Assembly (a grouping of social representatives not political parties). It is this insurgence that made the Constitution itself possible, which, among other milestones, redefines Ecuador as a Plurinational and Intercultural State, makes Nature the subject of rights, and positions buen vivir (literally translated as living well or life in plentitude) as the organizing principal of the Political Charter. These radical changes, along with others, define a new order outlined in the Constitution’s Preamble:
We, women and men [...] recognizing the millennial roots forged by women and men of distinct peoples (pueblos,) celebrating nature, Pachamama, of which we are a part and that is vital for our existence, [...] calling forth the wisdom of all the cultures that enrich us a society, and as inheritors of the social struggles of liberation against all forms of domination and colonialism, decide to construct a new form of coexistence, en diversity and harmony with nature, to reach el buen vivir, el sumak kaway [...].

Without a doubt, this Constitution and the processes that led up to it’s crafting, opens up cracks in constitutionalism itself. Ramiro Ávila has referred to this as “Andean or transformational neo-constitutionalism”. (Ramiro Ávila 2011) And, more broadly, they open up decolonial cracks and crevices in what has historically been Ecuador’s white/mestizo modern/colonial order.

4. In and of themselves, the cracks that I am thinking about denote little more than apertures or beginnings. While they may weaken and fracture the hegemonic whole, their effect is dependent upon what occurs within the fissures and crevices, on how the seeds planted, sprout, flourish, and grow, on how they extend ruptures and openings. Of course cracks can also be covered over, patched, and re-filled; in this way the rupture—including the horizons and sentiments it affords—is made to appear less evident, as if it has simply faded away.

This is something we are learning today in Ecuador’s current political moment. Government policy in a number of areas, including environmental extractivism and higher education, suggests a reconfiguration of modern/colonial power under somewhat new terms: the elimination of poverty, national rather than imperial control of resources, and scientific and technological advancement and modernization. With China and South Korea replacing the U.S. and Europe as political, economic, and intellectual/scientific allies, and Russia just recently becoming part of the mix, the order of capital and power is shifting, but is in no way declining. Thousands of students are being given government scholarships to study outside the country in universities “of excellence” (following the Shanghai list of World Universities). The “real” sciences and technological innovation are the aim, not humanities, the arts, or the human and social sciences. The vast majority of scholarships go to U.S. and European institutions. In an action that takes this belief that knowledge and innovation are located elsewhere, the government circulated in July 2013 an announcement in Spain’s El País offering 500 positions to professors willing to relocate to Ecuador to teach in the country’s newly established Public University of Education. Highlighted were excellent salaries and benefits, but also the historical and linguistic relation and affinity these two nations share. In all of this, one can ask what happened to the Constitution and its (supposed) cracks.

The most recent national plan of Buen Vivir, 2013–2017, presents the current post-constitutional moment as one of “transition.” The process of transition, according to this plan, is defined by neoliberal ruptures and an interrelating of four organizing principles drawn from (1) Andean cosmology, including indigenous knowledge and the relation of humans to nature, (2) a socialism of buen vivir, (3) liberalism, and (4) Western traditions of
modernity, including, among others, alternative ethics, feminisms, and deep ecology. This interrelation finds its base in what the Plan describes as the current context and reality of Ecuador where westernization co-exists with other logics, cosmovisions, and ways of living, knowing, and being. In such formulation, “buen vivir” takes on a meaning different from, but not exclusionary of, its indigenous-based conceptualization. As such, we might contend that the strategy of the Plan is one of interculturalization, interscalarization, and of the “crevice-ing” of Western modernity as a universal civilizational. In this sense and although the Plan may not push and extend the crevices and cracks as deeply as some of us would like, it does open and enable an envisioning and engendering of different paths and/as cracks, that may—or may not—lead toward decolonial horizons. Such are the risks but also the prospects of the cracking.

5. The decolonial, of course, is not a new condition to be rendered, implemented, or achieved by government, nor could it ever be a project of structures and institutions that retain the governance mold of vertical authority, control, and power. To think then that governments can achieve or even provoke decolonization without radically transforming first the very notions of authority and power is a fallacy that even Evo Morales is making clear. The decolonial comes not from above but below, from the margins and borders, from the people, communities, movements, collectives who challenge, interrupt, and transgress the matrices of colonial power in their practices of being, action, existence, creation, and thought. The decolonial, in this sense, is not a fixed state, status, or condition; nor does it denote a point of arrival. It is a dynamic process always in the making and re-making given the permanence and capacity of reconfiguration of the coloniality of power. It is a process of struggle not just against, but also more importantly for—for the possibility of an otherwise. A process that begets movement, invites alliance, connectivity, articulation, and interrelation, and strives for invention, creation, and intervention, for radically distinct sentiments, meanings, and horizons.

6. The idea of the fissures or cracks presented here has its ground in this lived significance of the decolonial. The cracks become the place and space from which action, militancy, resistance, insurgency, and transgression are advanced, where alliances are built, and the otherwise is invented, created, and constructed. Although the cracks are virtually everywhere in the spheres, institutions, structures of modern/colonial reason and power, and continue to grow by the day, they often go unperceived, unseen, and unheard. This is due, in large part, to the myopic nature of contemporary life and living. But it is also due to the inability, even among much of the so-called Left, to imagine and comprehend the decolonial in its otherwise, including its unsettling of binaries and of the traditional universal significance of “Left.” Such unsettling could probably not be clearer today than in the continent that indigenous peoples have re-named Abya-Yala, land in full maturity, the continent of the America of the South.

Some, including myself, believe that there is no turning back. That, despite the contradictions, conflicts, and growing repression, despite the violations of Pachamama in the name of poverty eradication, the decolonial cracks and crevices are becoming ravines from
which the sonority and reverberations of movement and collapse, cannot be silenced, negated, or denied. The declaration in December 2012 of the Zapatista Clandestine Committee is illustrative: “¿Escucharon? Es el sonido de su mundo derrumbándose… el del nuestro resurgiendo.” [Did you hear? It is the sound of your world collapsing… and of ours resurging.] The participation of over a thousand activists and activist intellectuals as students in the “Escuelitas Zapatistas” this past August is further demonstrative of the pedagogical significance of the cracks. The cracks as a place of a convocation, an “other” place that invites, calls together, and summons forth a place of unlearning and relearning “with, in, and through a pedagogy-politics-practice grounded in relation.

7. These “notes” are not meant to reify the cracks or simplify their complexity. The proposition instead is to draw attention to their existence and increasing emergence. But it is also, and maybe even more importantly, to ponder the idea of decolonial cracks and fissuring and, at the same time, it is to place in deliberation the political-pedagogical stance of locating oneself and one’s praxis within the cracks and crevices of the modern/colonial order. This is my place of thinking, being, acting, and doing; the fissuring, extending, and connecting of the cracks are my interest and dedication.

Postfacio

In November 2013, I received a special invitation from Subcomandante Marcos and Subcomandante Moises to participate as a first grade student in the Escuelita Zapatista. This experience, intensely lived the last week of December 2013, has left a mark that I am still unable to fully grasp, process, and describe. Its depth and significance are still becoming.

Yes, of course, the experience served to evidence—in real-life form—the profoundness of both the Zapatista-opened fissure and its otherwise—esa forma muy otra—that has its ground in autonomy, freedom, and community as lived praxis, a praxis that effectively undermines and undoes the capitalist order. But the experience also, and maybe more importantly, humbled me. It humbled me by displacing and decentering what I thought I knew, how I thought I knew it, and how it is, or at least I thought it is, that we come to know. In so doing, it also confronted the suppositions that, despite my avowed criticalness and decolonial positioning, have gone unchallenged in my own practice and identification—and privileged authority I should add—as pedagogue and teacher. It humbled me by taking away the clarity of day, replacing it with a brume. And it humbled me to personally assume that which I have long preached and taught: unlearning to re-learn, experiencing—not for the first time but in a particularly “other” way—its difficulty, conflict, and discomfort.

Today, several weeks later, the brume remains although its hue is not quite so dense. While my steps are still unsure, Sup and Viejo Antonio’s advisement that the questions serve to walk now guides me. “Para saber y caminar hay que preguntar” (in order to know and walk one must ask).
Much has happened since I wrote the above “pedagogical notes” several months ago. Upon me I feel the political-pedagogical imperative to not only share the experience and learning but, more significantly, to make it walk asking. This is one of the first lessons I learned in the Escuelita. Asking and walking questions while unlearning to re-learn are certainly part and parcel of the pedagogy of the decolonial cracks, of crack-making and extending. Yet today, and after having recently lived the Escuelita in body, mind, spirit, and heart, I see more intensely the complexities of the cracks, the brume, and the dangers circling. And all this has me still enveloped in the mist and muse.

Catherine Walsh is an activist-intellectual long engaged in the struggles for social justice, first in the United States and in the last 20 years in Ecuador and Latin America where she has worked collaboratively with Indigenous and Afrodescendant social movements. She was an unofficial advisor to Ecuador’s 2008 Constitutional Assembly, and has been involved in initiatives and debates throughout the Andes and the Americas on decolonization and transformation, including of the models of knowledge, development, society, and state. Catherine’s present work is focused on the political, epistemic and ethical project of critical interculturality, on concerns of decoloniality, particularly with regard to the interrelated themes of race, gender, knowledge, and nature, and on sociopolitical pedagogies of resistance, insurgency, and existence “otherwise”. Her extensive list of books and articles published in Latin America, North America, and Europe cross the fields of social and human sciences, cultural studies, critical development studies, education, and law. Catherine is presently senior professor and director of the Doctoral Program in Latin American Cultural Studies, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador and Visiting Professor in Romance Studies at Duke University.

Notes:

1 See also my “Introducción. Lo pedagógico y lo decolonial: Entretejiendo caminos” in Walsh (ed., 2013)

2 Such stance was what motivated my first book Pedagogy and the Struggle for Voice. Language, Power, and Schooling for Puerto Ricans, as well as a later edited text written with adult and youth community-based activists. See Walsh (ed., 1996)

3 For a description of this effort, see in English: Walsh (2001), and in Spanish: Walsh (2010).

4 See García Salazar, J. and Catherine Walsh (2002, 2010 and forthcoming)

5 The Fondo Documental Afro-Andino (Afro-Andean Archival Project,) a collaborative effort between Procesos de Comunidades Negras and the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, now with over 3000 hours of digitized oral testimonies compiled by Juan García and a team of AfroEcuadorean activist intellectuals beginning in the 1970s and a huge photographic collection, has been one of the spaces from which to develop, publish, and distribute multimedia
Here it is important to note the ongoing struggles of Amawtay Wasi—the Intercultural University of the Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador (see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iz_6R817C4) as well as the emergent efforts of the Indigenous University of the Aldea of Maracaña in Rio de Janeiro. The latter is a recent effort by indigenous migrants in Rio who have occupied the former “Museo del Indio” condemned to destruction in the Brazilian and Rio governments’ plans of the Maracaña complex for the World Cup. This project has additionally involved the destruction of houses, a school, and an aquatic park in the Favela located beside the stadium to create a parking lot. The women, men, and children that have occupied the dilapidated former Museum have resisted dislocation by police, and named themselves a “university” both for the development of the knowledge and reflection that they are constructing in this process—crossing the multiple languages, histories, and experiences present in the group—and working towards the idea of consolidating a space of learning among native peoples coinciding with similar efforts in Abya-Yala or the Americas. See my invited conversation with this University, prepared for youtube by Milson Betanncourt of the Laboratório de Estudos de Movimentos Sociais e Territorialidades of the Universidade Federal Fluminense at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVtEtCRvodY

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