Ongoing Efforts of Decolonizing Ourselves: Some Insights[1]

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Several higher education scholars have shown how higher education institutions have engaged in colonial projects throughout history (e.g. Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015; Mbembe, 2016; Stein, 2017, 2018; Tuck & Wang, 2012). For those who know about the manifestations of the colonial violences that settler colonization has caused; the common logic invites us to de-colonize our higher education institutions. But, what does de-colonization really mean? How do we start the exercise of de-colonizing?

Without attempting to be normative nor exhaustive, I drafted some starting points to design a conversation on how we might de-colonize higher education. In what follows, I argue that the exercise of reimagining the limits of higher education requires *ongoing efforts* of decolonizing the many structures that shape our personal and professional lives as academics.

On that note, it is worth noticing that my reflections rely on my experience and the work of some critical higher education scholars that have inspired my research agenda (Andreotti et al, 2013; Stein, 2017, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). I am Chilean-born higher education researcher, classified as mestiza in the Chilean context (racially-mixed between indigenous and European descendent), but I have not experienced the discrimination nor the violence that indigenous groups have received in Chile. I am familiar with the violences of colonial projects in Chile, but I am an outsider of the conversations about de-colonization in other parts of the world, including South Africa.

I. The Meaning(s) of Colonization

Many scholars have written about the meaning of colonization in different parts of the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Thiong'o, 1986) and its multiple manifestations at the local, national and global levels. In this text, I primarily rely on the work of the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, because his work has been pivotal to some other well-known Latin American scholars analyzing the effects of the coloniality in the region (see Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Walsh, 2005). In describing coloniality, Quijano offers the notion of the colonial pattern (patrón de poder colonial) to explain the intertwined systems of hierarchies, knowledge and culture that continue shaping our world. The colonial pattern is rooted in the racial difference between the European and non-European, which organizes the hierarchies of all aspects of the economic, political and social life. That is, coloniality has configured relationships of global and interconnected power that have allowed the exploitation and domination of living beings not only in the economic and labor-relationships realms, but expands to the epistemic, sexual, gender, spiritual, racial, and political domains (Grosfoguell, 2002).

In the field of higher education, the pattern of colonial power manifests in all Latin American higher education institutions, at different degrees. Universities are placed in ancestral unceded indigenous lands. Higher education institutions have adhered to the western-European models of knowing (Grosfoguell, 2002) and the majority of academics working in the Latin American region have neglected or been unaware of the indigenous knowledge systems ('epistemicide', as Buonaventura du Santos describes). Still, indigenous and racially minority groups are underrepresented in higher education institutions, even when reforms of expansion of higher education enrollment are in place.

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The five centuries of colonialism in the Latin American region are deeply rooted and intertwined at the global, national and local levels; hence, as Stein explains, most of us have to start acknowledging that *we* are all here because of colonization. As such, de-colonizing higher education in Latin America (or elsewhere) cannot be described as a single event with a definitive end, but as on-going efforts of unpacking/disrupting the beliefs and mechanisms where the colonial violences operate and get reproduced.

II. Different Views About the Need of De-colonizing Higher Education

Andreotti and colleagues (2015) identify four different articulations around the need of decolonizing higher education, which are insightful to start the conversation. In the first group, Andreotti and her co-authors distinguish the actors -academics and practitioners- who stress the positive side of higher education and the accumulation of scientific knowledge. Andreotti classifies this group as "everything is awesome". Not surprising, these higher education actors do not see the need to change the power relationships existing in current higher education systems. The second group include the soft-reformists, who see the potential of higher education to equalize social and economic inequalities and aim for reforms that allocate additional social and cultural capitals (skills, knowledge, connections) to under-represented groups. Soft-reformists expect that under-represented students can succeed in the higher education maintaining the existing rules of higher education system. The third group include the radical reformists. These actors recognize the epistemological dominance of western knowledge and seek to center and empower marginalized groups by re-distributing and re-appropriating material resources toward them. The final group include the ones who want to go beyond reforms and aim to "dismantling the modernity's systematic violences".

Andreotti and colleagues (2015) explain that the difference between those who want to go beyond reforms and the radical-reformists is that the latter group does not seek to change the ontological conditions of the neoliberal system where universities operates. Instead, the ones "going beyond reforms" call into question the pivotal neoliberal-capitalist and colonial relations that sustain higher education. Some members of "going beyond reforms" support the idea of creating new alternative educational spaces; whereas other members of this group propose to use the already existing higher education institutions in "subversive ways", (p. 31).

III. To De-colonize, First Sit with the Discomfort

Sharon Stein (2017), in a column on how to decolonize higher education, alludes to the work of Tuck and Yang (2012), to explain what de-colonization implies in North America. "Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (p. 1), which will require us to address "the real and symbolic violence of settler colonialism" (Tuck & Yang, 2012 cited by Stein, 2017). So, what is the role of higher education in contributing to such de-colonizing actions?

As a starting point, I build upon the words of Stein (2017), who invites non-indigenous scholars to enter the conversation of de-colonization with deep humility and give space to indigenous scholars to express themselves.

Likewise, Stein asks not to simplify nor rush any attempt of decolonization. Since the degree of interdependence of the colonial violences is such, the exercise of decolonizing requires us to unpack the many ways in which the colonial projects have benefitted/harmed our personal and professional lives.

In that respect, I suggest that the starting point of any effort of decolonizing higher education requires that we, academics and practitioners of higher education, consciously unpack our inner-colonizer, the disadvantages and privileges that we have obtained by being perpetrators, complicit (by silence or unawareness) and victims (receiving and naturalizing) of the colonial project. Of course, colonization will not end with the practice of reflecting, writing,

or talking about the colonial project(s) and its multiple inter-dependent violences. Yet, we will not be able to engage in de-colonizing practices of higher education nor imagine higher education alternatives beyond the colonial violence, if we skip the step of sitting with the discomfort of voicing the historical and current oppressions reproduced, consciously or unconsciously, through our daily actions in the personal and academic realms.

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