

Insurgent Decolonial Theory and the Role of the Intellectual

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Abstract

This article explores the various ways the intellectual committed to liberation and decolonization has been represented and how combative and insurgent decolonial modes of theorizing contribute to this radical tradition. First, I provide an overview of decolonial thought to challenge the notion that decolonial theory is a coherent whole without contradictions and tensions. I then offer varying ways anticolonial and decolonial intellectuals have contributed to combative scholarship. I propose an insurgent decolonial theory that makes connections between texts and contexts, between theory and praxis, and between the symbolic and material dimensions of coloniality and decoloniality. Insurgent decoloniality resists modernity/coloniality's project of death while planting and cultivating life.

Introduction

Insurgency is an exigency of life and of survival
—Khatibi

What does it mean for decolonial thought to be radically situated in insurrectional movements? To begin to answer this question, I could very well start with the etymological meaning ascribed to the term radical, that is, the root, situatedness,

and material grounding of thought. But what does it really mean to be an engaged intellectual or a guerilla intellectual (Rodney 1990) who not only wages decolonial resistance with pen and paper in hand but also through collective action? How about an insurgent *sentipensante* who uses theory as a weapon (Cabral 1979; Lao-Montes 2007; Fals-Borda 2009; Lozano Lerma 2019)? What is an ethically and (geo)politically and ethically

committed thinker who challenges intellectual colonialism (Fals-Borda 1970; Dussel 1980; Restrepo 2001)? What does it mean to militantly engage the sign (theory) and the stone (praxis) in our everyday knowledge practices (Peña-Pincheira and Allweiss 2022)? Is it not true that alternative modes of reading and theorizing the world emerge from historically specific material contexts, like the flower that springs from the rubble in Gaza despite the incredible odds to do so? What does this all have to do with the science of the word (Césaire 1982), the poetics of relation (Glissant 1997), and the sociopoeisis (Wynter 2001, 2003) of radical decolonial thought? Like the seed that germinates and breaks through the cold, lifeless world designed by modernity/coloniality, radical thought too spreads its roots (if I were a Deleuzian scholar I would, perhaps, say rhizomes) to crack open systems of domination that previously seemed indestructible. The worldliness and materiality of the text (Said 1983) point to the saliency of reading and theorizing the world anew, which hence becomes a radical, transgressive, decolonial hermeneutic act (Fúnez-Flores 2021) that engraves in stone every spoken and written word by working with and alongside sites of struggle.

In a time of genocide, to speak and write truth to power while so many remain silent and complicit is indeed a radical act. The emerging sites of struggle seeking to delink universities from their material and symbolic investments in colonial projects of death and destruction reveal their decolonial potential. Student encampments, for instance, are one of many movements seeking to dismantle the colonial and capitalist foundations of universities. They have made it more visible that universities not only justify colonial domination through Eurocentric epistemologies, the geopolitics of knowledge, and the coloniality of curriculum, but also produce technologies of violence tested on Palestinians. While decolonial scholars have done brilliant work to examine the former's epistemological concerns, the latter is not always made as explicit as one would like in terms of thinking about universities as active participants of coloniality rather than mere knowledge producing institutions that ideologically justify coloniality. Certainly, knowledge underpins the production of technologies of violence used to maintain coloniality, but it is nonetheless important to

shed light on the material dimensions of these institutions in order to sever the colonial links or at the very least sabotage the production of signs (symbolic/epistemic power) and stones (material power) that, in the last instance, respectively become the canons and cannons used to reproduce coloniality. The cultural and physical bombs, as Thiong'o (1986) would put it, are equally destructive.

In this article, I aim to explore the various ways the intellectual committed to liberation and decolonization has been represented and how combative and insurgent decolonial modes of theorizing contribute to this radical tradition. First, I offer varying ways anticolonial and decolonial intellectuals have contributed to combative scholarship. I then build upon Walsh (2008) work to further conceptualize insurgent decolonial theory, which makes connections between texts and contexts, between sign and stone, between theory and praxis, and between the symbolic and material dimensions of coloniality and decoloniality.

Combative, Insurgent, Guerilla Intellectuals

Decolonisation ... is a historical process ... it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content

—Frantz Fanon

The practice of theory is informed by struggle—
Cedric Robinson

When Fanon (1963) stated that movements provide the historical form and content of decolonization, he was referring to the intimate relationship between material and symbolic modes of resistance and liberation. The political no longer simply referred to seizing power by occupying the modern/colonial nation-state, as orthodox Marxists would have it. More than anything, Fanon's pithy statement underscores liberation movements' epistemological and political dimensions—an insurgent politico-epistemological project (Walsh, 2008). As Fanon (1963, p.255) expressed at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, "we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man". Fanon believed it was urgent to set afoot a new mode of knowing, being, and co-existing. Cedric Robinson (2021,

p.307) echoes Fanon's sentiment by stating that "the practice of theory is informed by struggle". Anticolonial and decolonial modes of theorizing the world are therefore an integral part of a praxis of liberation insofar as thought remains intimately linked to and informed by struggles.

What then is the role of the committed, organic, guerrilla, and decolonial intellectual? From Marx (2012) we have learned that it is insufficient to solely contemplate and interpret reality and that we must do what we can to change it. Gramsci (1971) also advanced the notion of the organic intellectual who could be aligned to dominant political-economic and sociocultural interests or conversely with what he referred to as the subaltern who opposes the symbolic and material hegemony of a particular social structure. His understanding of the intellectual was broad and inclusive of non-academics, but he was aware that not everyone took on the role of the intellectual in any given society. Today, anyone who participates in the production and diffusion of knowledge can be considered an intellectual whose work either upholds or unsettles said interests. Fanon also wrote about the anticolonial intellectual's role in shattering "the whole material and moral universe" of colonialism. However, for intellectuals "permeated by colonialism and all its ways of thinking" (1963: 45), it does not come easy to recognize how they, too, reproduce coloniality after political/administrative decolonization or "independence." For those countries that did not experience what Fanon referred to as hasty decolonization,

the intellectual is grounded in the struggle of their people. In the colonial countries where a real struggle for freedom has taken place, where the blood of the people has flowed and where the length of the period of armed warfare has favored the backward surge of intellectuals toward bases grounded in the people, we can observe a genuine eradication of the superstructure built by these intellectuals from the bourgeois colonialist environment. The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal

in spite of all the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course. (1963: 46)

Fanon also addressed the importance of shedding the individualism of intellectual work in order to radically situate oneself in the collective struggles taking place outside of the ivory tower. In the *Representation of the Intellectual*, Edward Said explicates the primary concern at hand: what is the role of the intellectual? The intellectual, according to Said, "is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going her/his business" (1994: 11). In this sense, the intellectual should not dwell in the ivory tower to solipsistically contemplate, interpret, and theorize the world. This detached knowledge practice reproduces the Cartesian subject whose interiority is all that matters, whereby exteriority (Dussel 1980)—the concrete historical and social contexts, and everyday existence—is rendered philosophically insignificant, especially those who dwell on the underside of modernity. For Said, the intellectual has the responsibility of "representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion" that challenges rather than reproduces the order of things (1994: 11). In another text, Said suggests that "The intellectual's role...is dialectically, oppositionally, to uncover and elucidate ... to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power wherever and whenever possible" (2002: 31). In other words, the intellectual must seek to unsettle normalized silence and complicity within and beyond academia.

Along a similar yet more radical vein, Walter Rodney (1990, 2019) had already proposed the notion of the guerilla intellectual. Adeleke (2000) believes Rodney's guerilla intellectualism is a combative countervailing historiography that sought to disrupt what the latter referred to as "European cultural egocentricity" (Rodney 1969: 56). As Fanon also proposed in relation to individualist knowledge production, this European cultural egocentricity can be challenged insofar as the guerilla intellectual is committed to co-creating knowledge of liberation. This ethical commitment to knowledge production seeks to unsettle, in material and symbolic terms, the Eurocentric

knowledge wielded for centuries as a weapon of domination to subjugate colonized and negatively racialized peoples who, under colonial occupation and ongoing coloniality, receive a distorted history that simultaneously obscures the colonial present. Broadening our historiographic horizon, as Vincent Harding (1981) suggests, requires “breaking beyond past western traditional understandings to some new understanding of our identity, our history, and our destiny as human beings” (Harding in Adeleke 2016: 121). This necessarily requires a different type of education, curriculum, pedagogy, theory, and methodology since it is through the miseducation of colonized peoples that the distortion of history is made possible (Woodson 1933), and thus the distortion of the present and future.

Critiquing dominant regimes of truth is key but critique alone will not dismantle coloniality. In other words, theorizing for theorizing’s sake or producing knowledge for knowledge’s sake is insufficient and indeed may fall into the academicist trap designed to exclude praxis. As Adeleke notes, “Knowledge is useful only to the degree that it is used to advance the cause of liberation. It is the ability and willingness to use knowledge to advance the cause of freedom that distinguishes a GI [guerrilla intellectual] from an armchair philosopher” (2000, p. 44). This demands going beyond intellectual posturing by taking collective action. Similar to Freire (1970), thought, action, and reflection are necessary to realize a liberatory praxis that transcends the ivory tower’s mode of theorizing, debating, and critiquing texts that are too often disassociated or uprooted from their geopolitical, sociocultural, and economic contexts. As Walsh (2025) puts it, a decolonial praxis is more than resistance; it is about re-existing against the incredible odds to so. It is about fighting for other worlds and not simply fighting against the modern/colonial world. A decolonial praxis resists coloniality’s project of death and plants and cultivates life. It is open, relational, and radically situated since it would otherwise contradict the historical, political, and dialectical/analectical dimensions of praxis (Dussel 1980). A decolonial praxis is open precisely because defining what decolonial praxis is or is not would fix it in time and space as an abstract universal.

Contributing to decolonial praxis, Mireille Fanon Mendès-France and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2021) advance what they call combative

decoloniality. By building upon Fanon’s work, they argue that “the struggle against coloniality demands first and foremost a combative attitude” (Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). Paralleling Rodney’s contributions, they distinguish combative decolonial thought from academicist decolonial critique. As they observe, “critique and criticism are often praised as the counter-liberal attitudes or actions par excellence, [but] they are often mobilized to take attention away from coloniality” (Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). Critique for critique’s sake, once again, is insufficient when critique is predicated on textualist analyses that downplay the importance of reading and interrogating the material contexts of coloniality or, worse yet, conceive of social reality or social totality as overdetermined symbolically or discursively. It is not surprising, therefore, that so many academics are more concerned with “decolonizing” a specific field of research, while paying little attention to the concrete violence of the present.

Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres assert that “Critique is as necessary as insufficient, and it can easily align itself with conservative attitudes if it is not deployed in a combative decolonial direction” (2021). It is imperative, therefore, to engage in praxis (thought-action-reflection) within material contexts or sites of struggle as much as we like to critique texts, theories, and knowledge systems (Fúnez-Flores 2022, 2023, 2024a). It is apropos to cite Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres (2021) at length to fully understand what they are proposing:

Different from critique, combativity emerges when racialized subjects start to address other racialized subjects in the effort to generate the sense of a collective struggle. While critique draws its power from crisis, decolonial combativity addresses the catastrophe of modernity/coloniality. Combativity goes beyond cries of protests, laments, and appeals, even as these may be necessary moments of the struggle. Combativity is about the path from individual to collective responsibility, and it requires the will and ability to connect with others and to engage in collective movement against coloniality. The combative attitude is, like combative literature, “resolve situated in

historical time" (Fanon, *The Wretched*) and it is dedicated to the effort of building "the world of you" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*).

The combative decolonial intellectual is someone who is committed ethically and politically to unsettling both modern/colonial symbolic and material structures of domination and exploitation, while making evident the equiprimordiality of discourse and structure, as Wynter (1992) put it. As a new science of the word (Césaire 1982), Wynter offers a combative decolonial approach by contributing to the transgressive and insurgent politico-epistemological project initiated by Césaire (2000), Fanon (1963), and Glissant (1997). Her work serves as a counter-cartography or as decolonial sociography (Fúnez-Flores and Wheat 2024) that conceives human and nonhuman life, material and symbolic, structures and discourses, as relationally entangled on a planetary scale. It makes evident the equiprimordiality of power and knowledge (Wynter 1992). As a craft, Wynter's decolonial approach gestures toward other modes of being human, which departs from "Man" and moves toward a mode of human existence that is "made to the measure of the world" (Césaire 2000, p.73) rather than Western Europe. This task demands relational and heterogeneous modes of reading the world. A new science of the word complements Fanon's and Wynter's sociogenesis with Glissant's (1997) poeisis and relationality, which enables us to think about relations and assemblages beyond colonial modes of being and modern ontologies of separation dividing the social from the natural (El-Malik 2023). Glissant's work is not only focused on social interactions between people but also on the heterogeneous ways in which the relations of memory, place, and sensory affections assist in constituting new worlds.

Building new worlds thus requires a decolonial praxis and poeisis. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon teaches us that racism's sociogenesis and governing fiction is social, structural, and historical. In this text, he expresses with clarity that negatively racialized people who are "exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonial, capitalist society" must take action to set afoot a new mode of existence (Fanon 1967: 157). The historical-structural-racial-colonial-capitalist order Fanon unveils is meant to be understood and unsettled materially and discursively. More importantly, our interrogations

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must create the conditions to become self-determined, actional and sociopoetic beings that work toward building other worlds.

By thinking from a position of exteriority and alterity, "Wynter uncovers ... the conditions of possibility—the context of emergence of the refiguring of the 'discourse of race' (Silva 2015: 99). By privileging exteriority, Wynter makes more visible the material conditions of possibility that generate alternative onto-epistemological positions to be constituted, ones that counteract the dominant mode of being human-Man. She thus seeks to amplify subjugated knowledges to critique coloniality from the darker side of modernity (Mignolo 2011)—that is, from the exteriority modernity hides to naturalize its emergence, misrepresented as an endogenous process attributed to the genius of Europeans (Dussel 1994). This ethical and geopolitical standpoint to think with and from systematically excluded places challenges the onto-epistemological primacy of the Cartesian subject whose epistemological hubris denies other vantage points to interpret and act upon reality. Wynter's work, in this case, serves as "a critique of ideology that targets the symbolic itself and returning to a serious consideration of the juridical-economic dimensions of the political existence" (Silva 2015: 99). She makes these material and symbolic connections with her conceptualization of the sociogenesis of race, coloniality, and decoloniality as an entangled discursive and material process. As Wynter cogently expressed, "To be effective, systems of power must be discursively legitimated. This is not to say that power is originally a set of institutional structures that are subsequently legitimated. On the contrary, it is to suggest the equiprimordiality of structure and cultural conceptions in the genesis of power" (Wynter 1992: 65). The equiprimordiality of the symbolic and

material is key in situating decolonial thought in sites of struggle, avoiding the tendency to empty radical concepts from their political and ethical content. Wynter's contributions to combative decolonial thought are, therefore, neither post-structural in the discursive Foucauldian sense nor structural in the Marxian-Althusserian sense.

If combative decolonial thought is to contribute to these transgressive efforts, it must situate its interpretive methodological craft within sites of struggle that create the possibility of reconstituting new worlds. Stuart Hall draws on Fanon to suggest that it is imperative to "consider the conditions for the production of a new kind of subject and the decolonisation of the mind as the necessary subjective conditions for the decolonisation of the world" (1967: 19). The politics of decolonization necessarily demands unsettling modern/colonial representation and subjectivity.

The principal counter-strategy here has been to bring to the surface – into representation – that which has sustained the regimes of representation unacknowledged: to subvert the structures of 'othering' in language and representation, image, sound and discourse, and thus to turn the mechanisms of fixed racial signification against themselves, in order to begin to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification, without which the most 'revolutionary' moments of national liberation quickly slide into their post-colonial reverse gear (Hall, 1996: 19)

By unveiling the equiprimordiality of knowledge and power, as well as dominant modes of representation, the combative decolonial intellectual thus critiques dominant discursive practices and refuses to "remain isolated and disconnected from collective movements and struggles" (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). A combative decolonial intellectual committed to material and symbolic acts of transgression do not conform to academia's complicit knowledge practices and meritocratic standards, nor do they aspire for recognition and multicultural representation. Rather, their aim is to find points of convergence "between the condemned of the earth and between their various struggles" (Fanon Mendès-France and

Maldonado-Torres 2021) without flattening their geopolitical and colonial differences.

A necessary step to unlearn and relearn is to engage the thought and action that is systematically excluded from academia. This includes the epistemologies and radical traditions that do not make their way inside the white halls of the ivory tower. While it is an ethical responsibility to *think with* others rather than to do *research on* them, one must still be aware of power imbalances. Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres posit several questions to consider when thinking alongside sites of struggle:

How do we support, work with, and learn from those who do not count with institutional resources? How can we effectively counter the extraction of ideas from social movements, community organizers, and social movements' leaders? How do we transform medical, artistic, and scholarly training and direct them to oppose extractivism in all its forms? How do we transition to more relational forms of engagement, communication, and collaboration in support of movements that combat systemic racism, coloniality, and antiblackness? What can everyone learn from existing combative movements, and what combative movements do we consider particularly critical from our own situated position and point of view? (2021)

Within the context of the state-sanctioned colonial violence and genocide (Fúnez-Flores 2024b), we must not only challenge the "cooptation, mistranslation, and ensuing domestication" (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres, 2021) of decolonial thought but also modestly ask what we can do to contribute to emerging social, territorial, and liberation movements. What must be done within a violent reactionary context that aims "to contain the impact of these movements" (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres, 2021) by silencing dissenting voices. Why should we speak out and organize in a time of genocide? If decolonization and decoloniality have been reduced to what privileged individuals in academia write and textually analyze, it is correct to assume that they both risk becoming commodifiable ideas, as opposed to what was initially intended—that is, a radically situated praxis makes this point clear in terms of challenging the commodification

of decolonial thought that has solely focuses on engaging texts to produce more theory on coloniality at the expense of engaging the material contexts from which thought emerges. As he asserts, decolonial theory is also a double-edged sword insofar as it can underscore systematically excluded histories, knowledges, and experiences, while reproducing “the hegemonic liberal ethos” within academia that tends to result in the “elite capture” (Táíwò) of radically situated concepts by emptying them of their combative or insurgent content. The neoliberal academy not only commodifies knowledge, but it also leads to forming the professional class of intellectuals “who lack organic connections with those who inhabit the underside of history and who are working to build an-other world”.

Even those who have said ‘organic connections’, however, are not immune to critique, since they, too, can fall into the aforementioned traps of producing knowledge that is more aligned with dominant interests. Important to consider within the multicultural neoliberal academy is to question those “racialized intellectuals who are sometimes conveniently positioned as brokers in discussions about racism and colonialism by state leaders of the north while sidelining combative social movements in the north and south” (Fanon Mendès-France and Maldonado-Torres 2021). This double critique, as Khatibi (2019) invites us to engage in, disrupts the essentialism of knowledge production while unsettling Eurocentrism, no matter who is doing the enunciation. As it is colloquially articulated by Black scholars and activists, ‘skin folk aren’t always kin folk’, which implies, as Ruha Benjamin¹ expressed during a commencement speech, “Black [and Brown] faces in high places are not gonna save us,” (Al Jazeera English, 2024) revealing that one’s mode of identifying culturally and racially is not in and of itself trustworthy nor somehow radically situated epistemically, ethically, and politically.

Insurgent Decolonial Thought, Praxis, and Situated Concepts

Now that I have discussed combative decolonial thought, I want to end this article with a discussion on insurgent decolonial thought. What is an insurgent decolonial thought and how is this similar and/or different from the combative decolonial thought? To begin, my preference for insurgent decolonial thought over combative decolonial thought boils

down to the subversive, transgressive, revolutionary, and countervailing connotations of insurgency, where contestation may take various forms: manifest and latent, macro and micro, militant and subtle, tactical and strategic. Insurgency maintains Rodney’s (1990) guerilla intellectualism and its ability to permanently ground and militantly articulate insurrectional work in multimodal forms. To be an insurgent decolonial intellectual here refers to someone who collectively rises in revolt and insurrection from below, like a spring of water (surge) that can no longer be contained as it bursts out to bring life and new modes of co-existence in a modern/colonial world that only knows how to effectively design projects of death and destruction. The insurgence and resurgence of decolonial movements and struggles affirm life² and create the conditions of possibility to think and to build a world otherwise. Insurgent decolonial thought is “the practice of theory [that] is informed by struggle” (Robinson 1983) and not the other way around, whereby the ivory tower dictates the terms and conditions of decolonization, decoloniality, and liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Ndlovu 2025). An insurgent, though combating against domination and exploitation, is not necessarily a combatant who enters into a battlefield with clear objectives against a known enemy. An insurgent decolonial intellectual also moves subversively and unpredictably within dominant institutions, such as universities, while working with the insurgencies unfolding beyond. An insurgent is not only someone with a clearly defined enemy insofar as the ‘enemy’ may also reside in us and in those with whom we may very well identify socially and culturally. The archive of counterinsurgency teaches that no one is immune to upholding and reproducing coloniality.

Insurgency, as Khatibi addresses, entails “subversion, the power of speech against the speech of power that seizes all society” (2019: 32), including all the spheres of social existence in which we participate. Transgressing exclusive spaces while maintaining and strengthening connections with sites of insurrection is one of the tactics employed as a means to sustain the decolonial strategies that require a protracted struggle that will certainly outlive us. Being an insurgent means being the dissident voice that speaks out when it is most urgent, even when the majority remain silent. It

means not conforming to normalized silence and complicity; it means unsettling the “unseen power wherever and whenever possible” (Said 2002: 31), even if that means risking one’s career in the process. While the concept of combativity points to the militancy required to think and act, insurgent decolonial thought and praxis may add other layers in terms of rethinking agency beyond reaction and resistance between two opposing forces, as alluded by the term of combativity. Although this is not what Maldonado-Torres proposes, I am simply adding clarity to terms to show their politico-epistemic affordances to avoid future misappropriation and co-optation of radical concepts and theories.

There is a positive meaning to insurgency that proposes or affirms other modes of relating, being, and knowing with one another. Insurgency hence transcends defensive resistance. To be an insurgent should not be reduced to a reaction against something or limited to mere opposition. As Betty Lozano proposes, insurgency

is neither opposition nor the capacity to endure an oppressive effort or situation for a long time. Nor does it imply challenging; rather, it involves building. It is more about forms of thought, self-representation, relationships, and knowledge that promote the construction of other worlds that prioritize life and do not assume the State as the main interlocutor. Therefore, it is not limited to political practice in relation to the State. It is a profound questioning of everything that exists, paving the way for a completely different world (2019:23).

Insurgent decoloniality is a world-making praxis that extends far beyond academia. Being an insurgent decolonial intellectual thus entails being able to recognize that collective struggles tend to be ahead of academia in terms of theorizing the world and acting upon it to change it. As Lao-Montes (2007) points out, Black Panthers used terms such as internal colonialism to understand their reality before it obtained currency in academia. The same thing could be said about decolonial thought situated in sites of struggle, such as the Zapatistas and other struggles for liberation.

Catherine Walsh writes in the introduction to Betty Lozano’s (2019) book that insurgency underscores Black women’s “unceasing social, cultural, political,

epistemic, and existential insurgency that continues to fight and to sow life where there is death. Hopes that crack the wall of despair” (Walsh in Lozano 2019: 17, my translation). Insurgent decolonial thought can be considered “*senti-pensación*” (feeling-thinking-action), which means that insurgency is embodied, corporal, and politico-epistemic-existential, which not only resists interconnected systems of domination and exploitation but also affirms the existence of all life positioned in the zone of non-being, as Fanon (1967) would put it. Insurgent decolonial thought and praxis is a politico-epistemic-existential project that simultaneously resists against and reexists within and beyond the heteropatriarchal, racist, Christian-centric, and capitalist modern-colonial world.

Lozano (2019) states that insurgency corresponds to a notion that etymologically alludes to rejection of authority, uprising and rebellion, and to revolutionary struggle. Those who take up arms as guerrilla fighters are usually referred to as insurgents. Insurgent, however, are not necessarily combatant; they can also be subjects who engage in subversive actions that are not always visibly violent, but which can nonetheless disrupt, unsettle, and sabotage what seems indestructible. Drawing on Catherine Walsh’s (2008), work, Lozano points out that insurgency aims to transgress all spheres of social existence, including the cultural, political, economic, and epistemic domains. Insurgency hence goes further than direct confrontation in terms of proposing and affirming relational modes of co-existing in the present while collectively taking action to dismantle coloniality by any means necessary.

Insurgent decoloniality also addresses the feminist praxes that have always formed part of liberation struggles yet are erased from the histories of decolonization. It reconstitutes life where death seems to only prevail. Insurgency proposes, projects, and affirms what modernity/coloniality systematically denies—the right to dignity, land, and existence. Perhaps insurgency, in comparison to combativity, enables one to think of alternative forms to resist and re-exist beyond conventional masculinist visions of liberation that tend to downplay the crucial role women play, not only as armed combatants but also as revolutionary decolonial thinkers and insurgent agents that transgress social norms and practices.

Along these lines, insurgent resistance and re-existence entail maintaining collective memories, narratives, histories, knowledges, and experiences in order to create the conditions to militantly think and act in the present, without which we would otherwise be unable to think and enact an alternative political-epistemic-existential horizon within and against the totalizing project of modernity/coloniality. Maintaining the conditions of possibility for transgression, subversion, and insurgency to exist within a modern/colonial world that seeks to violently erase difference thus becomes a radical revolutionary act.

Insurgent epistemology and radically situated concepts: Re-signifying discursive spaces

The radical aim of decolonial movements is liberation from multiple, interlocking systems of domination and exploitation, yet this cannot be achieved without reclaiming the ability to articulate concepts that assist in thinking, interrogating, and constituting the world anew. The politico-epistemic act of creating concepts is ethical and geopolitical insofar as these concepts seek to show the complicity of discourses that uphold concrete structures of power—systems we are seeking to dismantle and transition from. After all, concepts are windows through which we can view and interrogate reality.

The value of concepts is based on their ability to seriously interrogate the problems generated in the social world. Concepts enable the search for solutions, although they are not solutions in and of themselves, which tends to be the case in neoliberal academies where concepts are co-opted and commodified. Concepts nonetheless open up alternatives to the present and enable the imagining of possibilities (Pratt 2022). This resonates with Stuart Hall's (2018) situated approach to theorizing political conjunctures whereby political moments create the conditions for theoretical movements to emerge. This means that anticolonial, decolonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-heteropatriarchal struggles create the conditions of possibility to imagine and build a world otherwise, a world where many worlds can fit, as the Zapatista's dictum illustrates with so much clarity.

Struggles have thus radically changed the knowledge, histories, and stories we have access to today. Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, Feminist and Gender Studies, and Decolonial Studies would not exist if it was not for concrete movements. The Zapatistas (Marcos 2023), Landless Workers Movement, Via Campesina (Barbosa 2022), the Palestinian struggle against Zionist settler colonial dispossession (Sabbagh-Khoury 2023; Molavi 2024; Abu Zuluf, Kilani and O'Rourke 2025), student and feminist movements (Fúnez-Flores 2020), and a multiplicity of Indigenous territorial struggles have also created the conditions of possibility to think and do otherwise. Indeed, they have initiated a theoretical insurrection and revolution (Mignolo 2002) the theoretical revolution they enacted it is here to stay. Theoretical revolutions are not supposed to come from popular sectors, without the necessary research and communicating the results by interviews, the internet, or newspapers. The theoretical revolution of the Zapatistas consists, precisely, in changing the perspective. Those who, in the long history of colonialism, or coloniality (the hidden side of modernity. These movements remind us that radical theories are always derivative rather than the result of the genius of an individual intellectual. Ultimately, radical thought derives from the "true genius" that emerges from sites of struggle where, whereby thought is much "more than words or ideas but life itself" (Robinson 1983: 184).

Although I recognize that concepts are not solutions to the dominant structures we are trying to dismantle, they are nonetheless indispensable insofar as they correspond to the problematics we are trying to address. Concepts make more visible what has been systematically made invisible through the myths of modernity, such as salvation, progress, development, globalization, and liberal democracy. Radically and insurgently situated concepts are not only epistemically disobedient but are also methodologically subversive as they enable one to think in relational, planetary terms that unsettle the methodological nationalism and individualism of dominant knowledge practices and social movements (or methodological obsession and inhibition as Fals Borda (1970) and Mills (1959) referred to it respectively).

Thinking seriously about concepts does not only make more visible how capitalism restructures

itself according to the logic of coloniality, but it carries the potential to inform our collective praxes across geographical boundaries. By thinking with social and territorial movements, for instance, our concepts regain the geopolitical and ethical content they were meant to have initially. This will assist in refusing the academic tendency to decontextualize radical thought from sites of struggle. Epistemological critique or deconstruction is without a doubt necessary but insufficient when praxis is ignored. It is insufficient when we are incapable of learning from and committing to collective action and actually existing communities resisting colonial domination, dispossession, and, in the case of Palestine, the annihilation of an entire people.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminds us, deconstruction and critique is great and all, but it does not stop people from dying. Or, as Freire (1970) taught us, praxis is indispensable whereby thought informs collective action and collective action dialectically informs thought and reflection. Important to consider is that we must also avoid the vanguard positions of the past where intellectuals prescribed the best paths forward for social movements. Today, social and territorial movements are teaching us that they are not passively waiting for the intelligentsia to show them the path forward. They, too, are producing knowledge, theories, and concepts that unsettle the hierarchical vanguard position of the past. It is perhaps best to take a rearguard theoretical position as we listen to, learn from, and work alongside those who are resisting domination while affirming another possible world.

To conclude, I want to say that a radical critique of the Eurocentered modern/colonial capitalist world must seek to dismantle the symbolic and material structures of power—that is to say, the dominant epistemologies, histories, narratives, subjectivities,

as well as the institutions and structures of domination and exploitation in which we participate. In the end, our struggles are epistemic and world-making projects moving toward a decolonial present and future. In the words of the late Anibal Quijano, “it is time to learn to free ourselves from the Eurocentric mirror” (2000: 574). In other words, we must shatter the theoretical lenses and subjectivities that have reflected a distorted image of ourselves for over five centuries. It is time to stop aspiring to be what we are not and will never become, so that we can reconstitute ourselves and our worlds. Ultimately, the insurgent decolonial intellectual “ought to use the past with the intention of opening up the future”, which consists of “an invitation to an action and a basis of hope” (Fanon (1967) as cited by Hall (1996: 14)). In the end, decolonization is not a project seeking to create a seemingly postcolonial society that maintains and indeed fortifies coloniality. Instead, decolonization and insurgent decoloniality are global projects that aim to dismantle domination in all its forms, while insurrectionally affirming life by any means necessary.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Referring to Black ambassadors at the UN voting against a ceasefire, Benjamin goes on to state that “our Blackness and womanness are not in themselves trustworthy. If we allow ourselves to be conscripted into positions of power that maintain the oppressive status quo.” (Al Jazeera English, 2024). She breaks from the essentialized view that being a racialized, colonized, and subjugated person guarantees a radical epistemological and political position.
- ² When Palestinians cook for one another, play music and sing, or when children take care of other living things, including cats, dogs, birds, and plants, they are affirming life in the face of death. They are teaching the world that, despite the attempts to annihilate them, they will continue to resist and re-exist. Joy becomes a means through which resistance endures despite the overwhelming exhaustion liberation movements face. Palestinians teach us every day that smiling in the face of oppression in the ruins of colonialism is a form of insurgency that cannot be so easily destroyed. This is not in any way an attempt to romanticize resilience (Bonilla 2020) but rather a way to show how collective subjectivities give us a glimpse of what this world could become if it was not for the project of death of modernity/coloniality—*solo queremos vivir bien, vivir dignamente, y vivir sabroso*.