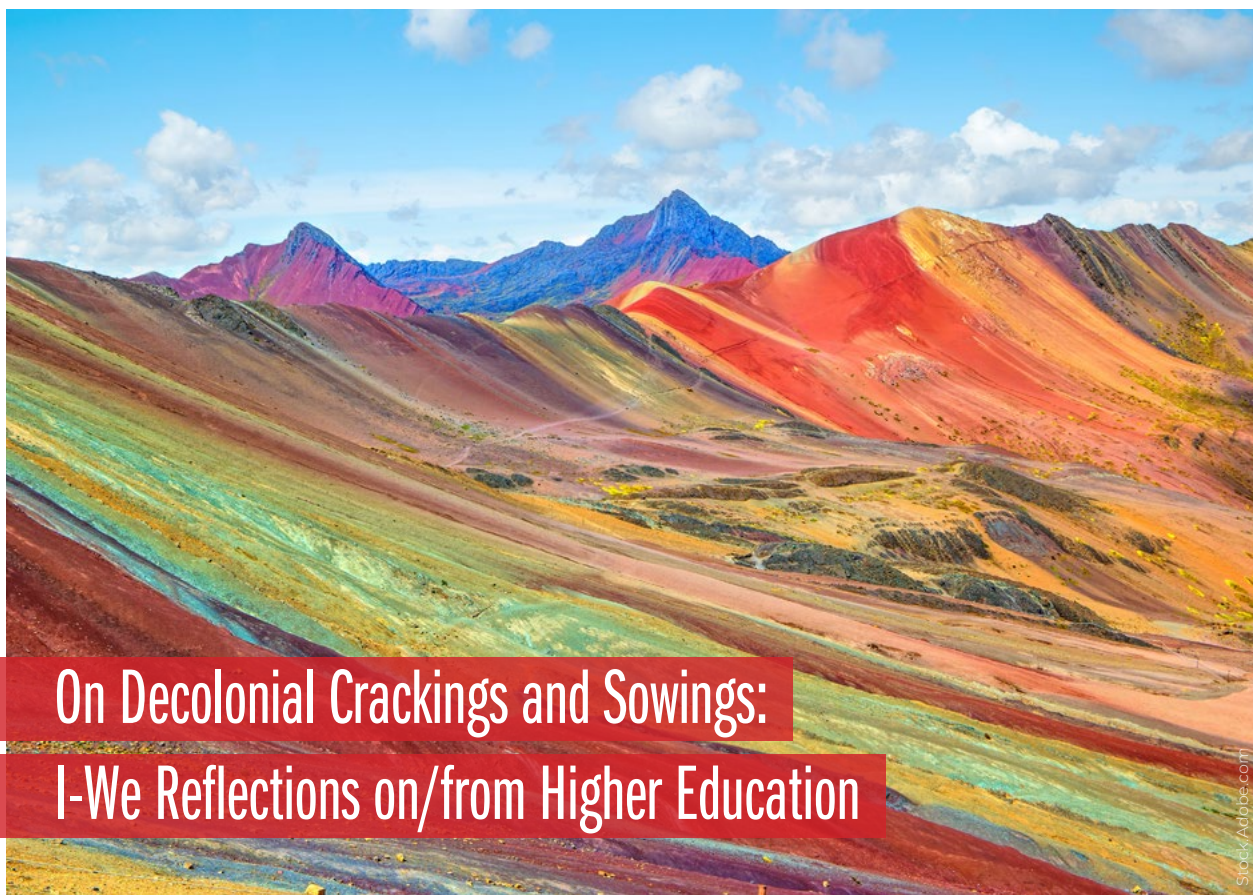




On Decolonial Crackings and Sowings: I-We Reflections on/from Higher Education

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Abstract

The university is one place, among many others, to sow and nurture decolonial thought, analysis, reflection, and action; analytical-actional thought, and thoughtful-reflective actionings, inside, outside, despite—and that both spite and crack—the institution of higher education. This article offers reflections from the author's own lived experience of decolonial sowings and cracking during more than two decades at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador, an international graduate-level public university formed in the decade of the 90s as part of the Andean Community of Nations. Its specific focus is with the planting and cultivation of a doctoral program-project collectively postured from the outset as an otherwise of graduate study grounded in decolonial praxis in which coloniality/decoloniality were central and guiding conceptual and analytical tools. Through a recount of some of the collective processes and practices of decolonial sowings and cracking, the article offers an I-we narrative that works to undo critiques of coloniality/decoloniality as an abstract universal, bringing to the fore decoloniality's actional character and embodied praxis.

Openings

I write as an intellectual militant, a decolonial pedagogue, and a recently deinstitutionalized professor. All three—intellectual militancy, decolonial

pedagogy, and deinstitutionalization—have particularly significant meanings for me. While I have worked in institutions of higher education for

more than forty years, first in the United States and during the last twenty-five at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador, academia has never defined me, nor is it a term that I use to identify myself. The university has been one place, among many others, to sow and nurture decolonial thought, analysis, reflection, and action; analytical-actional thought, and thoughtful-reflective actionings, inside, outside, despite—and that spite—the institution of higher education.¹

Intellectual militancy, decolonial pedagogy, and deinstitutionalization, in this sense, allude to and mark political, ethical, and praxis-based standpoints and refusals; a refusal to identify with and become subsumed by the academy and its structure-institution of power, and an insurgent standpoint rooted in praxis and pedagogies that work, on the one hand, to unveil the systemic operation and lived sense of colonial-capitalist-racialized-gendered-epistemic-territorialized power and, on the other, to plant and cultivate the possibilities of something else.

My identification as an intellectual militant is grounded in this refusal, insurgency, and praxis. So too is my understanding of pedagogy in practice, an understanding in no way limited to education or schools (see Walsh 2023). Deinstitutionalization is without a doubt connected, yet its specific reference is to my departure (in December 2022) from the University as institution. I do not deny that such departure has to do, in part, with the advantages and privileges of age and retirement. Yet the reference to “retirement” seems inappropriate and inadequate. I left the University not to rest, but to continue. Deinstitutionalizing was a political, ethical, and personal decision, a necessary action and response to an institution of which I no longer felt part; an institution that had radically transformed itself from the most progressive in the region to one of the most conservative, mirroring and reproducing the now global character and project of higher education—the UNI-versity—a central cog in the global (re)configurations of the colonial matrix of power.

Of course, formal education in general, and higher education in particular, have always been central sites of and for coloniality. As we well know, it is there that colonial ways of sensing, seeing, reading, knowing, and being in the world are inculcated,

structural racism, racialization, gendering, and ableism are bred, white-western knowledge frames are naturalized-universalized, and relational and collective forms of learning, thinking, and doing are ruptured and disassembled. This is true throughout the world, including in Abya Yala/Latin America where the global colonial matrix of power works today in multiple and mutating ways. Here—as well as elsewhere and most especially in the global souths—struggles are not necessarily for more “reform/re-form”—which typically strengthen and maintain the same systemic structure-institution—but for decolonial(izing) processes, practices, and praxes, including those that open cracks and fissures in the institution itself. While the cracks will certainly not rid us of coloniality or radically transform higher education’s institutionalized and increasingly globalized systemic structure, they are part of decoloniality’s actional work; of the doing that opens spaces and possibilities of decolonial and decolonizing otherwhises despite—and that spite—coloniality’s presence and power.

This text offers reflections from my own lived experience of decolonial sowings and cracking during more than two decades at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (UASB) in Ecuador, an international graduate-level public university formed in the decade of the 90s as part of the Andean Community of Nations. My specific focus here is with the planting and cultivation of a doctoral program-project collectively postured from the outset as an otherwise of graduate study grounded in decolonial praxis in which coloniality/decoloniality were central and guiding conceptual and analytical tools. Through a recount of some of the collective processes and practices of decolonial sowings and cracking, I offer an I-we narrative that works to undo critiques of coloniality/decoloniality as an abstract universal, bringing to the fore decoloniality’s actional character and embodied praxis. My I-we here recalls María Lugones’ “I→we”, that which, for her, rendered present the movement between the solitary and the collective, a movement that draws from a sense of intentionality, active subjectivity, and “inside/outside/ in-between” interactions and conversations; that which implies and engenders a political moving with others (Lugones 2003, 228).

Charges, Questions, and Qualms

In 2001, I was given a charge by the rector of the UASB: to conceptualize, organize, and put into practice an international and Andean focused and based doctoral program, in essence, the first doctorate in Ecuador.² The focus was to be in the areas of cultural and social politics and studies. Latin American Cultural Studies became the agreed upon name, what I have described elsewhere as part of the politics of naming (Walsh 2012). My experience with graduate education was not new; I had taught in master's and doctoral programs for a number of years in the U.S., and at the masters' level at the UASB and other Latin American universities. Yet what was new was the opportunity to critically and creatively think a graduate program from the start. However, with a very small budget, few PhDs in the country and region, and only two other faculty members with doctoral degrees besides myself at the University (and both in other fields), the challenges were numerous. So too were my questions and qualms regarding the *hows*.

How to conceptualize and organize a Latin American doctoral program that does not justify and contribute to the colonial-capitalist-racist-heteropatriarchal system of power, the hegemony and monologue of Euro-Western-centric rationality and thought, and the multiple violences that both engender, permit, advance and maintain?

How to put into practice a program-as-project grounded in the ongoing social, political, economic, epistemic, and existence-based struggles and lived realities of Abya Yala/Latin America?³ In processes that think *from and with* these struggles and realities rather than just *study about*? And in modes of knowledge, thought, and reflection — intercultural, decolonial and inter-epistemic— that encourage comradeship and collectivity rather than individualisms and competition? A program-as-project in which the analytic of coloniality as well as decolonial/decolonizing praxis are pedagogical imperatives?

How and with whom (faculty and students) to sow and cultivate a doctorate not only with academic rigor, but also rigor in its commitment to an otherwise of thinking, knowing, researching, teaching, and doing?

Sowings

The times then were quite different in Ecuador, in Abya Yala/Latin America, and in this University. The neoliberalization and globalization of higher education had not yet taken over. Critical thought still held an important place in debates both inside and outside the classroom, pushed further by the political and epistemic project-and-as-force of Ecuador's Indigenous movement, a project in which I was also engaged, having been given the task by the movement of sowing epistemic interculturality in the university. While the concept and analytic of coloniality were not widely known in the country or region, the ongoing legacy of colonialism and the never-ending work of decolonization were important themes of reflection and debate in the movement and in some allied intellectual circles. The UASB was a young institution then, with a social, political, and intercultural commitment and project. It was a space and place in which social movements were constantly present, and that invited and supported academic creativity, sociopolitical engagement, and critical thought. As such, it seemed to be a space-place of fertile ground. And so it was, at least for a while.

With the first cohort in 2002, the shared sowing began with twenty four students from throughout South America and a group of international faculty committed to processes of social transformation, critical thought, and this doctoral project; many were part of what later became known as the modernity/coloniality group.⁴ Student selection here was particularly crucial, especially if we understand that the sowing begins with the seeds. In addition to the typical academic criterion, there were others equally central, including commitment to, engagement with, and experience in social and cultural processes, movements, and practices. Unlike doctoral programs in the Western world, the median age of those selected was around 38-40, mid-career women and men, including university professors, critical intellectuals, activists, cultural workers, and community-based leaders from a variety of lived experiences and perspectives, academic fields, and racial/ethnic/gender/class/cultural/territorial identifications. The individual and accumulated knowledges, experiences, and perspectives of the group not only complemented the transdisciplinary program of study, previously

negotiated and approved by the institutions of the University, its Andean coordinating committee, and the state entity of higher education. More importantly, it worked to broaden, adapt, and rethink it, rendering it, with the seeds and sowings, a program-as-project in the constant making.

I still vividly recall some of the vital and pivotal moments of the early sowings. One such moment was at the end of the first week of my opening seminar. With four to five hours each day of intensive discussion in class and more hours dedicated to reading, we were all a bit worn out. One of the students posed a question to the group as a way to evaluate the first week's experience. While the seminar, up until then, had been deeply participatory, at that moment the character and sense of participation radically changed. In response to the question, Adolfo, one of the students, began to uncontrollably weep and soon after others joined the wail until all in the room—including myself—were sobbing. While the sense of the cries was individual—leaving a young child behind in a home country, for instance, as was Adolfo's case—the movement of the cries from one to another fissured individualities and planted the beginnings—the seeds—of a “we”: a collective something else. With emotions let out, personal stories and embraces shared, and bodies as well as minds made present in the classroom, a community started to take form, a community that was later named “decul” by one of the group members and assumed by all;⁵ a “we” that continues to exist and persist now crossing five generations.

I continue to wonder if this was not the first moment of sowing but also of decolonial cracking. That is of opening a crack in the academic and academicized domain of doctoral study and in the university institution itself; a crack in which seeds of decolonizing otherwise—including of embodied/incarnated senses, feelings, and emotions—could be and were planted. The seeds and cracks are central here; central to the tenet that decoloniality is sown, grown, and cultivated in and through praxis. While professors, penums, and courses were certainly fundamental in building comprehensions of the concept, analytic, and what Aníbal Quijano referred to as the perspective (rather than theory) of coloniality/decoloniality (see Walsh, Mignolo, and Segato 2024,p. 3), it was through the doing that an otherwise of doctoral study took form; an otherwise made in the sowings but also in the crackings.

Crackings

While the doctoral program-as-project was part of the University—a part that, over the years, greatly expanded the University's international recognition—it was viewed by many in the institution as a problematic and dissident space. That is as a space that did not conform to the norms, dissenting from, in its focus, perspective, process, practice and praxis, the very notion of “higher” education and doctoral work. The “problem” was with respect to the transversal of coloniality/decoloniality and, with it, the evidencing of a structural-systemic matrix of power in which race, gender, sexuality, knowledge, nature, and existence are intertwined. Such a “problem,” of course, was tied to the de-centering of social class as the hegemonic determinant of critical thought in its Latin American, European, and Eurocentric versions. But it was also with the (re) centering of racialized and gendered subjectivities, knowledges, cosmologies, and existences, a (re) centering that brought to the fore the presence of racisms and sexism in the University itself, most especially in terms of knowledge. However, the “problem” of dissent did not stop there. It was also with the processes and practices of the doctorate itself; that is, with its decolonial/decolonizing praxis of cracking.

There are many vignettes and stories to be told but, given the limitations of space, I recount just a couple here. One has to do with Diana Sofia, the daughter of Adolfo (decul 1) and Camilia (decul 3), the child who provoked Adolfo's heartfelt cries and later accompanied her father and, years after, her mother in classes. One day in Edgardo Lander's class on the coloniality of knowledge, Diana Sofia (then about 10 years old) raised her hand. After a number of minutes of trying to get professor Lander's attention, she spoke out. “Professor,” she said, “I have listened to your lengthy explanation of the coloniality of knowledge and tried to take notes, but I think my colleagues here in the classroom are in agreement that we have understood little.” As the adults around her nodded their heads in a shared “yes”, she asked: “Could you please explain it again and this time more clearly?” He did.

The crack here is not simply about Diana Sofía's active presence; in fact, from the first cohort on, there was always the presence of at least one child.

The crack has to do, in a more profound sense, with the relational and profoundly human praxis built in the classroom and its beyond, a decolonial/ decolonizing pedagogy and praxis that cultivated knowledge(s) in collective and in relation. For me, mapping has always been part of this pedagogy-praxis in practice. The collectively created maps of concepts, with their relational ties to lived struggles, realities, territories, and knowledges—to thinking and doing, to actional thought and thoughtful-reflective actionings—always covered the white boards, walls, and sometimes even ceilings of my courses.

Over a recent cup of coffee, Kattya (decul 4) recalled a related and key moment for her in the decolonial cracking. It was the first week of classes and we had covered a huge space on the floor with newsprint in order to begin a shared reflection on struggles of and around knowledge(s). As Kattya recounted, each person in the group began to note phrases or words. However, at one moment the individual character of the mapping shifted and without a spoken cue, everyone (including me) was on the floor with colored markers making relations and connections. For her, this was a crucial moment that opened a crack in what she and others in the group initially presumed and assumed as the individual and individualized nature and theory-based focus of doctoral study. This is not to say that theory was absent, but rather to underscore the collective processes of theorizing and theorization that move beyond the abstract and make ground in concrete territories, bodies, intersubjectivities, knowledges, experiences, and struggles.

The decolonial cracks and cracking certainly do not stop there. They extend to the processes of research as well. Our proposition has been to move away from—to fissure or crack—the traditional research tenets and practices that *study about* with their creeds of objectivity, neutrality, and distancing from the “objects” of study. The prospect instead has been to *think from and with*, a posture and practice that entail, among other aspects, making oneself an ongoing part of the research, reflection, and writing of the dissertation, including with relation to the contexts, subjects, and the research problem, but also with respect to a questioning of the privileges, assumptions, interpretations, and analyses of the researcher her- him-, their-self. Considerations of the methodological-pedagogical

hows are also central here, including *how* to build processes of shared analyses and praxes, of actional thought and thoughtful-reflective actionings. In an institutional setting where dissertations are often evaluated according to the traditionally established criteria of academic disciplines and disciplining, students know that they have to be doubly rigorous, evidencing in their investigations, arguments, and writing an ability to respond to traditional academia while, at the same time, fissuring and cracking the colonial matrix of power, most especially in terms of knowledge, thought, and investigative practice.

The intergenerational character of the program-as-project is, without a doubt, another crack, a crack in the degree-based focus of doctoral work; the degree as aspiration, destination, termination. Although the levels of graduation have been high (generally above 90%), with graduates now populating the Americas, holding positions as professors, program directors, deans, and, in one case, as rector, graduation has not meant an end to the decul connection. Past decules continue in their collaborations within and across cohorts, including in projects, programs, courses, publications, and events. Moreover, the majority of graduates have become elders to the newer generations, welcoming them into an established community, supporting their research interests, advising and accompanying their paths, strengthening and continuing the we-decul relation.

Over the years, we—myself and all those who are the decul community—have come to understand this program as a crack, a crack that indisciplined, disturbed, and fractured the institutional wall—the seeming totality—of this University and, more broadly, of the increasingly globalized institution of higher education in which coloniality evermore reigns. With its decolonial pedagogies and praxis of sowing and cracking, decul has worked to fissure the dominion of epistemic Eurocentrism and the normalcy of verticality and competition, while at the same time planting possibilities of something radically distinct, including of correlation, co-relation, and co-thinking. Moreover, it has pushed a learning to unlearn in order to relearn, a thinking *from and with* beings, knowledges, struggles, territories and places, and *from and with* possibilities of and for dignity, existence and life in these times of violence-dispossession-death.

As we well know, the crack itself does not make the wall fall down. Its projection is not for a reform of the wall-institution; it does not seek its own institutionalization. The crack is an aperture, fracture, fissure, that which breaks, challenges, and debilitates the solidity, the unicity, and the totality of that—in this case the system-institution—which presents itself as consensual, established, secure. Through the cracks we can see openings that can be widened, crevasses and arroyos to plant, to sow and cultivate an otherwise of thought, knowledge, being, feeling, studying, learning, doing, living. The crack, as we came to realize, is something that we can make and do despite the institution. It is a strategy, possibility, hope; a horizon of light, alliance, sowing, creation, relation. The crack, as such, is part of the pedagogy of sowing and the praxis that cultivates while it indisciplines and incommodes.

Surely there has been no shortage of attempts by the University to cover over the crack, to isolate it, to make sure it does not spread. Still, it continued in its multiplication. 'It's enough that not only doctoral theses but now master's theses continue to focus on decoloniality, this is not a decolonial university!', said some. Of course it is not, I responded. The project is not to institutionalize the crack or make decolonial thinking-doing into part of the system. It is to fissure the system itself.

Closings and Sowings

As I announced my deinstitutionalization, authority-opponents rushed to prepare the elements to patch over, to eliminate any trace of the crack. They made it clear that decul, as we have constructed and known it, will cease to exist. But what they do not know is that cracks also grow within, behind, and despite the wall, multiplying and exceeding the wall-institution, extending to other walls, and sometimes even sprouting roots, leaves, and flowers as they make connections and relations. Could it be that with the multiplication of cracks, the higher education structure will eventually begin to crumble and fall? And what about the possibilities of fallen walls? I recall the words of Angela Davis that in recent years have widely circulated in internet (without a clear published source): "Walls turned sideways are bridges."⁶

The cracks are certainly not the solution. They are a decolonial(izing) strategy and tool; an actional

possibility in the struggles for sowing an otherwise of education(s), knowledge(s), existence, life. The practice of sowing is the praxis of cracks. Both are conscious acts and actions of cultivation that open, nurture, tend, and enable germinations, roots, hope.

"We are seeds" was my exclamation in the parting words that I shared on December 8, 2022 before a packed auditorium of decules and other students, colleagues, and many others, but with no authorities in sight. "We are seeds" was the collective cry that bellowed through the audience. "We are seeds", the phrase of resistance and re-existence that travels the territories of Abya Yala/Latin America today appearing as graffiti on university walls, city streets, and the banners of peoples in struggle: "They want to bury us, but they don't know that we are seeds."

As I said then, and as I repeat here, "we are seeds." We are seeds that multiply, that move and mix with the wind, seeds that carry the memory and force of decolonial resistance and re-existence, that sprout breaking through walls of concrete and stone, and that continue in their sowing and re-sowings in spaces, places, and territories, including—but of course not only—in institutions of higher education.

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Endnotes

- ¹ I take the actional here from Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1968). For a deeper discussion see Walsh (2025).
- ² I say the "first" because while there were two other doctoral programs in this same University that began around the same time, both were organized through an institutional agreement with a European university. No other doctoral programs existed in the country at this time.
- ³ Abya Yala, "land in full maturity and vital blood", is the name that the Kuna-Tule people (of the lands now known as Panama and Colombia) gave to the "Americas" before the colonial invasion. In its present-day use (which began to take form in 1992), Abya Yala is a decolonial proposition that challenges and takes back the politics of naming.
- ⁴ Included over the years and from this group, were Walter Mignolo, Edgardo Lander, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Javier Sanjinés, Fernando Coronil, Santiago Castro-Gómez, María Lugones, Augustin Lao-Montes, Ramón Grosfoguel, Aníbal Quijano, and Enrique Dussel, with Mignolo and Lander central figures present in all the five cohorts.
- ⁵ While "decul" literally refers to the name in Spanish of the program: doctorado en estudios culturales latinoamericanos, its use among the first and subsequent cohorts was as a sort of communal or community-based relational "we" identification. With each new cohort came the diminutives of "deculitos and deculitas" (little decules) and the denotation of those who came first as "deculotes" (big decules), in essence the decul elders.
- ⁶ See for example: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/rs/2024/05/turning-walls-into-bridges-the-transformative-power-of-unruly-migration/>