



CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Decolonial Computing and Networking Beyond Digital Universalism

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The prominent collective of global scholars who wrote of decolonial thinking and the “decolonial option” in the 2007 essay series in the journal *Cultural Studies* did so urging a broader recognition of the diverse contexts and agents of knowledge production who long represented “a colonial subaltern epistemology.” They wrote to draw attention to the long and diverse histories of decolonial interventions that emerged to confront the “variegated faces of the colonial wound inflicted [over] five hundred years of... modernity as a weapon of imperial/colonial global expansion” (Mignolo, 2007, Mignolo & Escobar, 2010). Writing as researchers bridging conversations and debates across four continents, but facing the new millennium largely as scholars with roots and ties to Latin America, they renewed critiques of how the colonial underpinnings of global knowledge production continued to reassert Western frames of thought as universal scientific truths. And they underscored how this “historically worked to subordinate and negate ‘other’ frames [and] ‘other’

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knowledge,... reproduc[ing] the meta-narratives of the West while discounting or overlooking the critical thinking produced by indigenous, Afro, and mestizos whose thinking... depart not from modernity alone but also from the long horizon of coloniality” (Walsh, 2007, p. 224).

They thus stressed the vitality of “other” forms of knowledge production occurring “beyond the academy” (Mignolo & Escobar 2010, p. 18), and highlighted the de-colonial options enacted by indigenous and other social movement actors as vital to future decolonial projects. Pressing on “the importance of thinking within” and alongside the perspective of these movements (Mignolo & Escobar 2010, p. 19), they urged scholars not only to reimagine their roles as academic documentarians of movements (as actors still dedicated to a reproduction of dominant forms of modern epistemologies), but to decenter their own forms of knowledge practice by beginning to “think with [movements] theoretically and politically.” As such, decolonialists posed the significance of how cultivating a politics of decentralization - and a de-centering of the self as expert and knowledge practitioner - might offer an affront to modernity’s domination and its politics of self-replication through the occupation of other epistemologies.

A decade later, as new forms of what we might call Replicant Politics (Chan, 2018) have begun to globally spread, the decentering project of decolonialism and developing proposals for “Decolonial Computing” could not be more poignant. Today, after all, growing national calls to ensure a *reproduction* of the familiar, to recenter some form of “the authentic” and to replicate some version of “us” free from the strange) or unfamiliar as *the* key matter and central means of securing futures in the context of rapid global change, have now proven to be the defining political force in diverse national contexts all across the West. In the face of such contemporary symptoms, adopting a parallel stance of self-preservation and insisting upon stronger modes of identity conservation may seem like the only choice for progressives. But decolonial computing frameworks highlight another potential, not only in recognizing the diverse vibrancy of existing challenges to “digital

universalist” models (Chan, 2014) that problematically elevate narrow versions of Western and elite digital practice and innovation as the only relevant pathway to the future, but in cultivating knowledge practices that indeed foster a decentering of the self as a generative asset towards the creative co-production of alternative futures.

The extensive transnational and local organizing examples of various collaborative networks – from those extending from Zapatista organizing, to the DDOS stagings and virtual sit-ins emerging from the tactics of interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral alliances engaged within the Electronic Disturbance Theater – demonstrate how a de-centering politic, less concerned with a replication of its own “centers” than with the generativity of collaborative organizing, emerged decades ago in early networked cultures (Dominquez, 1998; Lane, 2003; Smith, 2016). Today, the dynamic socio-technical networks of digital organizers across Latin America that, in the cases I’ve studied around indigenous language software and digital media translations, often bring together open technology coders from across the global south and north, transnational media artists, rural and urban public school teachers, public sector workers, and Quechua, Aymara, and Zapotec community organizers of diverse generational profiles to develop novel collaborative practices in distinct contrast to digital universalist imaginaries. While affirming that neither Silicon Valley, nor MIT, nor Wall Street, nor any other privileged center of innovation and technology can subsume the diverse lived realities and local complexities that span across their positionalities, neither do they come together with the aim, hope, or expectation that some alternative “unity” across their network, or new centralizing force, will emerge. Imagining technological futures *with* and in between the interfaces of the diverse forms of knowledge practice that come alive among them – and that can come together across differences, rather than in spite of it – instead becomes a key resource for imagining new digital futures (Tsing, 2005).

A range of mixed media collectives have emerged across diverse urban and rural contexts in the Andes: from the Escuelab civic hack lab

networks in Lima¹ and Puno² (sustained by organizers like Kiko Mayorga and Neyder Achahuanco Apaza), to Quechua³ and Aymara Twitter and blogging channels (sustained by organizers like Irma Alvarez and Aymar Ccopacatty), and Aymara social media translation projects (sustained by organizers like Jaqi Aru's Ruben Hilari⁴ and the Instituto de Lenguas y Literaturas Andinas-Amazónicas' Amos Batto⁵). These projects each draw together diverse actors (often across long distances between dispersed rural and urban sites) for routine collaborations that necessarily take place in physical (and not merely virtual) meeting space. In such encounters, widely diverse expertise sets and ethical commitments are bridged, spanning the knowledge practices of multiple generations of actors, and technical practices that emerge from global coding collectives, indigenous community leaders, and language activists, public school pedagogists, and transnational media artist networks. Multiple orientations to time, nature, history and ethical and epistemological commitments are consistently channeled throughout. And no aim exists to center or anchor any single logic, assert a single version of right, or give spatial or temporal privilege to a given order.

What one notes instead are multiple orientations that together work to disrupt the dominant framework that defines technology's so-called globally "peripheral" actors as ones who were meant to be "left-behind" and forgotten, or as irrelevant to work to creatively re-envision alternative economic or technological futures.⁶ Working to sustain diverse collaborations around media, technology, and culture, such networks develop relations around decolonial computing that enact a shared ethics of de-centering to work across wide relations of difference and rework instrumentalist orientations of standard innovation ventures around time, history, and nature. While such elements are typically treated under dominant innovation practice as objects to control, optimize, or dominate within decolonial computing networks, they instead offer fertile grounds on which participants' diverse orientations to such spatio-temporal-material elements can indeed be brought together to open new forms of relating across creative differences.

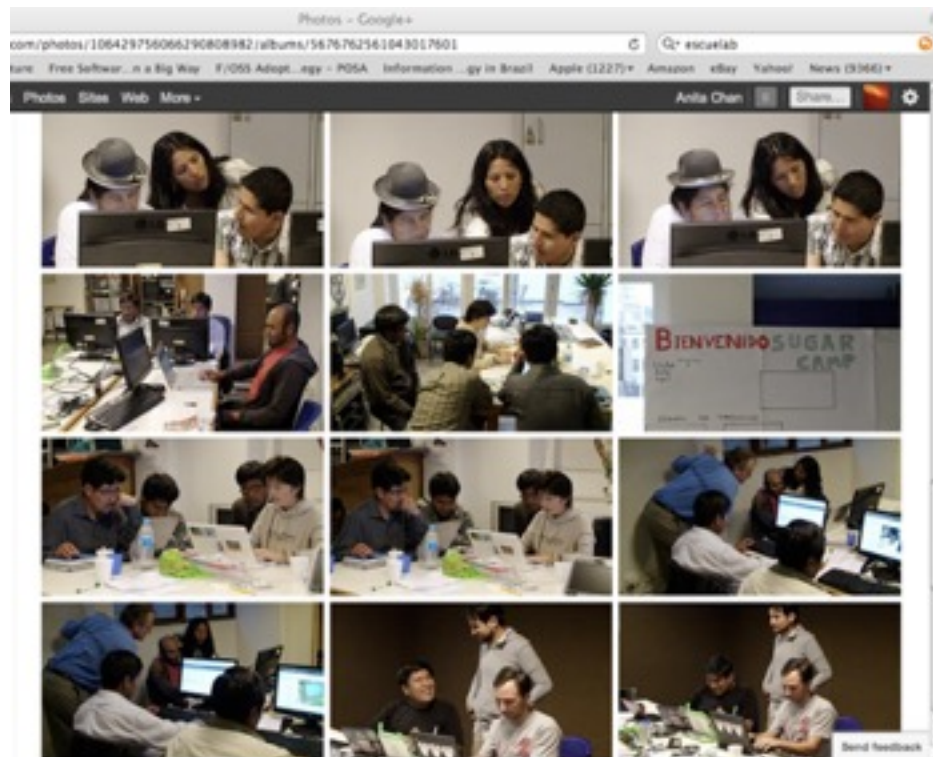


Figure 1: Photo archive of a software translation hackathon held in Lima, Peru's Escuelab civic hack lab space on November 11, 2011.

Like approaches for a post-colonial computing that Lily Irani, Kavita Phillip and Paul Dourish have called for that aim for expanded “tactics, ways of proceeding, and need-to-know approaches to reality that expand the transdisciplinary scope of what one needs to know,” (2010, p. 21) ,such developments around a decolonial computing perspective take seriously the new orientations required to “think within,” between, and among in the diverse perspective of wide-ranging and widely-situated movements both inside and outside traditional research spaces. Writing now in 2018 as renewed calls for alternative and urgently needed forms of global political imaginaries that no longer take for granted a presumed stability and centrality of Western liberalism and modernity are being called upon, such forms of open-ended relating and experimentation indeed yield valuable lessons.

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Notes

¹ <http://escuelab.org/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/EscuelabPuno/>

³ <https://twitter.com/hablemosquechua>

⁴ <http://www.jaqi-arua.org/> and http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/05/140515_tecnologia_facebook_aymara_ar

⁵ <http://www.illa-a.org/wp/>

⁶ In Peru, the South American nation I've worked in longest as an ethnographer, various initiatives over the past decade have defied such limited digital universalist presumptions. Before similar national proposals would emerge in countries in the West like France, for instance, Peru had become one of the first nations – alongside China and Brazil – where national legislation for the use of free and open source software in public offices was proposed in 2001 (this was also a year before city-scaled measures had been taken up in Germany and Italy, but not yet national ones). By the mid-2000s, hacker spaces and maker labs of basically every stripe – some based at universities, others at museums, and in cities and in rural sites alike, were growing dynamically across the country. And prominent digital initiatives, like the One Laptop Per Child Program, launched in partnership with MIT, that helped ignite global

educational technology markets in the mid-2000s, gained its *largest international deployment* site in Peru.

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Bio

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