

‘What We Know Is Built on Erasure’

In ‘What We Know Is Built on Erasure’, TCJ editor Carolina Rito interviews Mexican sociologist Rolando Vázquez. The interview took place in the context of Vázquez’s visit to Nottingham Contemporary as part of the ‘On Translations’ international conference on February 17, 2018. Vázquez’s thoughts opened up the conference to the understanding that translation encompasses processes of erasure – in colonial language and epistemologies, as well as in contemporary transnational and globalised communication. Vázquez is part of the modernity/coloniality movement, named after Aníbal Quijano’s concept (later developed by Walter D. Mignolo), that posits the two concepts modernity and coloniality as inseparable – two sides of the same coin.

Carolina Rito: The modernity/coloniality movement draws attention to the relation between the violence of coloniality (encompassing colonialism and its legacies) and the narrative of modernity. Both terms must be seen as belonging to the same European ‘civilising’ project by enabling one another. In your work, you have been looking at how modernity generated an epistemological framework – a hegemonic way of thinking and producing knowledge. How do you understand translation, and its politics, operating within the Eurocentric paradigm?

Rolando Vázquez: The debates on decoloniality have been taking place for more than thirty years, mainly in the context of Latin America. We see them now expanding into other areas of the world. Institutions that are being contested include the university and the museum in various parts of the world. The core institutions of knowledge production in the West, and of what we call modernity, are being questioned by many voices that are no longer willing to forget. These institutions are pushing us to forget. We will not forget because there is a claim to justice and that claim to justice will only be fulfilled if we don’t forget. Of course, the problem that emerges here is to recognise where this injustice lies and to transform the way we ‘do’ knowledge and experience the world.

We need to question: through which textualities we think of the world; through which ways of seeing we look at the world; and through which affects or desires we sense the world. In doing so, we will start to see that these things are not set by nature or given; rather, that they belong to a genealogy of power that has to do with the modern/colonial order. We are seeing, thinking, and sensing the world in a way that already implicates us in this modern/colonial order.

The question of translation brings us to an understanding of the articulation of colonial difference at the border of modernity’s epistemic territory. Looking at translation across the colonial divide helps us to see how the epistemic border of modernity is constituted. We are concerned with how the movement of translation can become one of appropriation, incorporation, and erasure. When and how is translation functional in the modern/colonial order and how does it become an instrument that reinforces the colonial difference? Can we conceive of a decolonial translation that challenges the constituting erasures of the colonial difference?

The question of the coloniality of translation leads us to ask what is being erased in and through translation. What other worlds of meaning, other epistemologies – in particular other non-Eurocentric and non-anthropocentric ways of worlding the world – are being erased. Translation, when at the service of modernity and its epistemic power, becomes complicit in the erasure of other worlds and, via defuturing, the loss of their trajectories into the future. Translation, when at the service of the anthropocentric monoculture of the West, is implicated in the generalised conditions of worldlessness and earthlessness, in other words, the loss of worlds and the loss of earth.

CR: What are the main propositions underpinning decolonial thought?

RV: The propositions underpinning decolonial thought are closely connected to the terms modernity/coloniality and decoloniality. I would like to highlight here three main propositions. The first is the symbolic year 1492 as the marker of the beginning of modernity. The latter we define as the Western project of civilisation. Whereas from the internal history of the West the temporal frame of modernity starts with the industrial revolution, the reformation, the French revolution and the enlightenment, the non-Western history of the West locates the inception of the project of modernity in 1492.

Before 1492, there was no Western ‘project of civilisation’, but a Europe at the margins of the world. Importantly, the year 1492 set out the conditions in which Europe could hold the power of naming the world – which is very important in relation to translation – and of mapping the world. It is colonization that enables the West and Europe to understand itself as the locus of enunciation, as a place that holds the power of representation. 1492 would enable the West to represent itself as the centre of the world. The Western world map, which is

the most common in these regions, is a Eurocentric world map and is one of the most illustrative expression of this history of power. It is not natural but rather a naturalised representation of the globe. Europe could not position itself as the centre of geography without colonialism.

Before that, Europe was a province in a geopolitically peripheral part of the world that had been looking to the East and South, to other civilisations. 1492 marks the moment that enables Europe to understand itself symbolically as the centre of the world in both a spatial and an epistemic dimension. The West begins to present itself as the owner of history and to erase other histories either by exclusion or by incorporation. Western time becomes the present of history, as it occurred with the enlightenment, the industrial revolution, and in terms of the current idea of development.

Over the course of the last five centuries, the West has constituted itself as a sort of ‘universal’ locus of enunciation by assigning itself as the centre of space, the central reference point, such as in the Western world map, and as the ‘now’ of time. Eurocentrism is constituted precisely by this occupation of the centre of world geography and the now of history, which is only made possible in contradistinction to an alterity that is at its margins or in its pastness. The ‘others’ were in the antipodes, in the margins of geography, outside of the centre of geography, not in the metropolis, etc. The so-called others, because of being considered the alterity of the West, have been assigned all sorts of terminology that locates them in the past of Western history – barbarians, primitive, underdeveloped – or have been classified in racializing ways, outside of whiteness. These terms have in common the idea that others were always in the process of becoming civilised or in the process of developing or becoming a consumer.

CR: If 1492 positions Europe as that epistemic power, what are the other elements that help explain the continuity of the Eurocentric project?

RV: The first proposition – locating the start of modernity in 1492 – connects directly to the second one: modernity is a Eurocentric project of civilisation. This statement goes against other discussions on modernity within academia that speak of multiple modernities, or other positions in the post-colonial era that state, ‘we were also modern’, or, from inside the West, ‘we never achieved modernity’. They are all engaged with the internal logic of modernity.

The problem of Eurocentrism is its ‘arrogant ignorance’ and its functioning as a place, which believes itself to be in the present of history and at the centre of geography. The claim of such centrality can only be based on an ignorance of other worlds. It is a single truth that is only sustained by the erasure of other worlds of meaning.

The third proposition is that there is no modernity without coloniality. This was initially posited by Aníbal Quijano. It simply means that there is no Western project of civilisation without coloniality. Coloniality does not just mean colonialism. Colonialism is part of coloniality but coloniality is a larger historical movement. This proposition is key for decolonial thought, because it marks the epistemic shift from thinking from within the epistemic territory of modernity to the possibility of thinking from outside of it, from the experience and awareness of coloniality. Coloniality is already a term that does not come from Western thought; it comes and names the experience of those that have been subjected to the dominance of the West. That there is no modernity without coloniality tells us: there is no industrial revolution without the plantation; there is no enlightenment without enslavement;

there is no violence without race, etc. Today, when you go to the supermarket here in the Global North and get a chocolate, you are practicing this relation: you cannot have that chocolate, these electronics, or these clothes without the suffering of others across the planet – this is the modernity/coloniality proposition. Modernity informs what is visible and coloniality speaks to what has been made invisible. The task of decolonial thinking is to undo that inequality.

CR: How do you see the current critique of this project in relation to decolonial thinking?

RV: Decoloniality is not fighting to be included in modernity. This draws a distinction from a common postcolonial strategy that seeks a non-Eurocentric modernity and thus to be included in modernity. Decoloniality, in our opinion, is challenging Eurocentrism, but not fighting to be included in modernity. We do not want to be modern. We do not want modernity to be our horizon of liberation. We do not want to diversify modernity so that we can be included in those projects. For us, modernity is coextensive with coloniality and we do not want to become part of a system that has been built upon the erasure of other worlds, worldlessness, and the wasting away of earth, or earthlessness. For us, modernity and coloniality are inseparable and that is why we do not want to be ‘Human’, if being ‘Human’ means the expression of this anthropocentric and Eurocentric model of civilisation. We do not want to be modern under those terms. Decoloniality is about delinking; it is about being otherwise. It is about recovering the possibilities of deep relations that overcome gender, heteronormativity, the human-nature divide, anthropocentrism, and individualism and move towards the communal.

Our hope and orientation for thinking and doing is not dependent on being included in the project of modernity. We do understand,

however, that the strategy of claiming a space within modernity is a valid and important one within certain imperial histories. That is to say, there were no textile industries in the UK without Indian technologies: that is very important, right? The decolonial is not about invalidating those strategies of struggle, it simply advocates for a different orientation, for delinking. Importantly, decoloniality is inspired by the struggles for autonomy of first nations; that is, the struggles for dignity, the struggles to become world-historical realities of those worlds that have been suppressed under coloniality. These are not struggles to become modern or being recognised as such, but rather to claim the right to constitute one's own world and horizon with dignity and autonomy.

Decoloniality presents itself as an option; it is not aiming to become the new macro-narrative that will explain the world. It is presenting an option to think of the world, our historical reality, from a different terrain. This is not simply a struggle within discourse nor a relativist position, rather, it is a way of thinking that is grounded in the historical experience of coloniality, in what has happened. This is the source of what we are thinking. This is why processes such as mass enslavement and the death of two-thirds of the population of the Americas and Africa at the onset of the modern/colonial world, for us, is the ground of our thinking. We must see our history through this: we cannot write it off as a mistake. For us, these genocides are not the mark of an insufficient modernity. They are the sign of a historical reality that we need to understand. We do not want to avoid looking at suffering, just to move on into a utopia somewhere else or into subject-centred preoccupations with identity and performativity. No, we want to address the suffering – the experience of coloniality as the terrain of our thinking – while confronting a global design and that is why we claim that this is an option because it is positioned in specific local, lived histories.

By considering itself an option, decoloniality is also not in a position to accept other frames of thought as universal. If we are an option, other frames of thinking are also options. This brings up another conversation that surrounds the issue of translation as interculturality and not as reproducing the monopoly of enunciation.

CR: In your text 'Translation as Erasure' you frame the process of naming as taking part in coloniality. What does modernity name, what research questions does it bring about, and what awareness of historical reality is it speaking of?

RV: It's very important for us to understand the decolonial methods of thinking or doing. When we think about modernity, we are thinking about what it is, about the order of things. Somebody like Michel Foucault is excellent in understanding how modernity functions as power, but he does not address the question of coloniality. The question of coloniality is not asking for the order of things as established by modernity but it is asking about what is being lost. Modernity has been co-constituted through processes of negation.

The question of coloniality asks about the worlds of meaning, the historical realities that have been erased. So, how is our understanding of the world built through the erasure of things we do not know? Our knowledge is built on not knowing and the question of coloniality is addressing this – something for which we do not really have good methods because all our methods are about studying what has been consolidated as historical reality. However, the question remains: how can we understand what has been erased, how can we relate to these ancestral memories that are not in the texts or in the archives?

If the question of modernity looks at what is, the question of coloniality is concerned with what is erased. Hence, decoloniality comes from that consciousness of what is in modernity

and what has been erased through coloniality. Decoloniality is engaged with the question of delinking: the question of re-existence, of producing a movement in time that has to do with a return but not a conservative return. Rather, the return of what has been erased. It claims a hope that is not individual but rather a historical hope that we carry in and against the oblivion that confronts us. That is why I started with the statement: we will not forget.

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