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# The World Turned on its Head: Coloniality, Civility and the Decolonial Imperative

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# **The World Turned on its Head: Coloniality, Civility and the Decolonial Imperative**

**Roberto D. Hernández, San Diego State University**

*Cualli Yoali, Kia Ora!*

*Notoka Roberto D. Hernández,*

*Nochanti Kumeeyaay San Diego atlpetl,*

*Notetl Wirraritari Guadalajara atlpetl,*

*Neuani tochtli, neuani mitoatani, Calpulli Cuatlicue Cemilitzli,*

*Neuani macehualli, Teocalli Tlanezi Mexica,*

*Nanatzin Wirrarika, Tatatzin Tzotzil Maya*

*Niltse iuikpa Kumeeyaay-tlalli*

*Tlazokamatl tangata whenua, wairu whenua, hunga tiaki... Ohlone*

*Tlazokamatl, tlazokamatl, noxtin nomecayotzin*

Today I come before you asking first both the permission and *disculpas* of many of my elders, for I feel I am but a relatively young one in these ways we call academia to be speaking to you here on this plenary. There are many of my own elders and mentors whose presence would be an honor to have up here as well, yet I humbly assume this task today. I also come and speak with you not simply as an academic, but also as a *militant* that has long been involved with struggles for the development and expansion of Chicana and Chicano Studies and Ethnic Studies, as well as with various indigenous struggles, questions of Justice in Palestine and the BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions), of which there will be a resolution hopefully passed this year that we have before us that I hope we all support. Also, a quick plug, a roundtable Friday morning at 9am to help keep

furthering that discussion of what does this question of Palestine mean for Chicanas and Chicanos. I also, come as a militant in the advancing of a decolonial praxis in all that we do: the political, intellectual, spiritual, personal work and ways of walking in this world.

*Así es que permítanme me equivoco en lo que les comparto hoy.* I am going to make certain claims today, but allow me to make mistakes in what I share and let's, in that spirit, create and construct together, as part of what I will outline as a decolonial imperative, which implies as a starting point a spirit of generosity and reciprocity even in those most difficult of moments when we may be at odds with one another and there seems to be an impasse, no out to the political and intellectual cul-de-sacs we often find ourselves. But I am with Chela Sandoval when she calls for a theory uprising as a way out of the cul-de-sacs.

I begin in this way, also acknowledging and thanking the *tangata whenua* and *wairua whenua*, the original and customary guardians, spirits and people, of this land, the Ohlone peoples, as well as the original peoples from which my own mother and father have passed a bit of themselves on to me, to ground myself in a sense of self or a return to the center as Ali Shariati would remind us. I do this because one of the central ways in which *not only* colonialism, but also *coloniality* functions — and *coloniality* expressed here as a distinct socio-historical phenomenon intricately tied to colonialism but one that also supersedes it and can and should be distinguished in ways in which I will enumerate below — is that it functions via the erasure and enclosure of entire peoples, land, languages, knowledges, subjectivities and forms of social relations that deviate from the norm.

I am making this initial and, for me, crucial distinction between coloniality and colonialism, because part of the political economy of the university (not just the neoliberal university that we talk about now, but knowledge production writ large over the last

several centuries) has been the constant insistence on new theories, whether for the sake of career advancement or based on an unquestioned faith or infatuation with novelty and science. This mode of producing knowledge and of an obsession with destructive critique and newness for newness sake is after all one of the central tenets and organizing logics of modernity/coloniality since the “discovery” of the “new” world whereby all things new are assigned an a priori positive value in contrast to the presumably outmoded old. And here is where I always remember the words of Elizabeth Betita Martínez who says it is not about, when we talk about indigenous tradition, language, knowledge, it is not about going back to anything. It is about remembering something ancient, and creating something new. As such, we have ironically reached a point where one of the latest trends has been simply to add the word decolonial or decolonizing to any myriad of tried and tested theories without necessarily yielding any new or radically different or path-breaking openings that would allow us to challenge the existing structures of power or their micro-reproductions at the level of face-to-face social relations. Angela Davis’ words, with regard to a similar marker, the word “critical” would be wise in this context as well. She reminds us that “the mere invocation of the word critical, does not in itself ensure criticality.” As such, if we are to talk about decolonizing or the decolonial, then we must take the time, the seriousness, and the rigor to ask, *what exactly is it that we are decolonizing from?* It is not sufficient to simply add on the keyword of the moment if we do not have a clear and specific grasp or diagnosis of the extent and depth of the problem or a social diagnosis that makes clear why it is required of us the need to decolonize. Without such serious reflection we are left with an implicit even if inadvertent dichotomous construction of a “bad” situation, structure, relation of power, etc. from which our own invocation of the decolonial is automatically

and unquestionably positioned as a “good” and thus inevitable, thus linear, and in fact morally superior *solution*.

I would thus submit to you that decoloniality or the decolonial cannot be just an added signifier. It is, as with all concepts (civility included), that concepts are relational, contextual and thus draw their meaning from the constellation of concepts with which they are involved. So in that sense, we can have on the one hand civility invoked by those in power, as has been the case with Steven Salaita, as a way to silence dissent, but we can also have a different civility, tied to a different constellation of concepts; a civility that speaks more to what even Celia Herrera Rodríguez reminded us this morning: *How can we be well to one another? How can we be well to each other?* This is not necessarily tied to this history or a colonial project. The decolonial for me then is explicit about a decoloniality that has coloniality as its social diagnosis, and that we think not just about colonialism but about coloniality in its complexity, that from which we are attempting to decolonize. As such, concepts are also not static, inherently good or bad concepts that must be embraced (say the decolonial or the critical) or dismissed (such as has been the case with civility that has, and I am glad that it has, sparked so much debate here in Chicana and Chicano Studies). So these concepts should not be either unquestionably embraced or unquestionably dismissed without careful consideration of their own horizon of meaning. Decoloniality, thus, in my estimation, requires that we have an analysis of coloniality not just as a condition of colonialism, but in its own right, as a deeper imbricate set of structures that affect not just land but knowledge, subjectivity, social relations, such that even in the moments when we think we might be critical or are being critical, we might in fact be critical on one end, and

we nevertheless may also be reproducing the logic of power or coloniality all over again on the other.

It is coloniality then, which precedes the nation state and is prolonged beyond the existence of formal colonial or neocolonial administrations, and not colonialism, that is more of the framework in which I want to situate my remarks today. Coloniality is thus at once material, national, global, and also interpersonal, epistemic and psychic.

All this to say that today, by way of opening this plenary and in the coming days, as we consider the notion of civility and incivility, we must also historicize and problematize the concept of civility itself when considered within a constellation of other associated concepts. It is not an abstract absolute concept that has only one available meaning. And given the coloniality of language and communication in which our own discourses operate, we too often reproduce and reify even that which we claim to be challenging. As such, the idea civility also produces as its own mirror particular conceptions of incivility that can challenge, but can also serve to reinforce the very same structure.

So somebody might say: "They are saying civility... *No, chale!* I will be uncivil!"

*Pero ahí ya* we are stuck in that structure. Our own incivility is being defined by that which claims to be civil as seen from the basis of power. And even in that "challenge" (to civility) we are locking ourselves into that the very same logic. So we should not take for granted that this concept of civility is tied only and inextricably to a colonial project. On the contrary, instead I propose a re-reading of these concepts of civility and incivility that explodes the limits of our understanding of both towards a distinct decolonial horizon that attempts to evade the very logic itself; the logic of coloniality, the logic of this structure of civility-incivility, which has restricted our ways of thinking the two concepts outside of yet

again reinforcing that very same structure. So it is here where I take seriously this question, inspired by the Zapatistas, but also asked during the debates after the Call for Papers by one of our own Chicana and Chicano Studies colleagues Salvador Barajas, “Whether or not another civility possible?”

So while there has been much talk of civility this past year (within NACCS and given the Steven Salaita case), and these past ten minutes, I for one begin instead with Aimé Césaire. Aimé Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, gives us a different look at this question of civility. Instead of accepting that civility itself is intricately tied to a colonial project, he says (and I am paraphrasing)... No, no, on the contrary... Colonialism is what de-civilizes. Colonialism by definition and by its use and the ways in which it has been invoked in the service of (colonial) power, it is colonialism that de-civilizes. We have been civil peoples. We have been good people. We have known other ways. We have known how to be good to one another, but it is colonialism that has de-civilized us. And so if it is colonial power that is itself always already a de-civilizing act, then what happens when those of us, within that framework of colonialism, have been deemed uncivilized, uncivil? What happens when all we do is strive to be “civil”? We are striving to be civil but according to the terms of colonialism, civil according to terms that are a rather low standard. Here I draw from Fanon, Frantz Fanon and Lewis R. Gordon’s reading of Fanon, on the question of the human and the question of recognition. If colonialism has been a process of dehumanization, then why would those who have been dehumanized seek the recognition of “the human”?

“Hey, *acá, mira*, me, look I am human too!”

*¡Chale!* That is a very low standard!! Why be that “human” if that human is mediocre, if that human is what created dehumanization? I don’t wanna be “human”. I want to be *más*

*que* human. I don't want to be civil... Or uncivil... I want to be a different civility, a different civility that we do not even yet know, that we have no word or name for. So we should not accept this idea of civility as only tied to colonial power. On the contrary, colonialism de-civilizes and to tie ourselves to that logic of civility-incivility is to accept that low standard. It is to accept that mediocrity for ourselves. Instead I want to think of something different.

So even if these conversations in NACCS started to foment before say (the killing of Mike Brown in) Ferguson or the Salaita case, and yes civility has this long history of ties to colonialism, we must nevertheless remember the words of Jack D. Forbes who would warn us. Jack D. Forbes, Powhatan indigenous scholar (we should recall) was amongst the first who always would insist to Chicanas and Chicanos: "You are indigenous to this land, don't you forget that!" And Jack D. Forbes would also warn us: Why do we take at face value the history of the Wétiko<sup>1</sup> as written by the Wétiko? .... Why do we accept that? So while Chicana and Chicano Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women Studies, Queer Studies must, and have challenged Eurocentric constructions of history, nonetheless I think that we run the risk, and in fact at times we not just run the risk but we do this: we have continued—and for all the decolonial *que digamos* that we are—we have continued with a very Eurocentric mode of critique. And it is this mode of critique as well, which is destructive and not constructive, that we need to challenge. And, I would hope we begin to do that here today. And it has already been begun in other spaces but we continue here....

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<sup>1</sup> Amongst the Cree and other Algonquian indigenous peoples of the territories known today as the Northeastern United States and Canada, wétiko is a word associated with cannibalism as a disease. In *Columbus and other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism*, Forbes uses the word wétiko to characterize the history of colonization on this continent, shaped by greed and gluttony as the basis for the insatiable consumption of land and peoples. For Forbes, it is a form psychopathic behavior where the wétiko "consumes other human beings for profit" and obfuscates said cannibalism by projecting it as a practice of indigenous peoples/lands it consumes.



And so in that sense, in the Introduction to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre warned Europe: Fanon is not speaking to you. *We* are no longer speaking to that which deems itself civil but is really a project of de-civilization. Let's speak to each other. Let's speak to each other here. Let's speak to each other because instead if we get stuck in this line between the civil and uncivil already structured by power, that very line entraps us. But nevertheless, Chela Sandoval through Roland Barthes, would tell us "let's look at that line," that line between the civil and uncivil, in this context through the lens of power. The very act of that line reveals a contradiction between the two. That is why let us not get stuck in that box. Steven T. Newcomb would say, you know "it is not just even enough to think outside the box, but to realize that there is no box, there is an idea of a box." And to the extent that we keep thinking *que si* civil or *no* civil, then we are right back in the box, even when we claim to be... outside it. We may even be outside the box, but we are still being defined by the box.

So, that said, it is this punctum, this moment of revealing the dividing line between the civil and the uncivil that reveals the contradiction. And through it we need to find that third meaning to again use Chela Sandoval's reading of Barthes where we could begin to have a conversation that provokes the critical turn towards making visible a third meaning, yet unnamable; that "new", that "new civility" that is *not* civility, is *not* incivility, but a third meaning that we do not yet know, but whose dim light is seen in the distance, felt in the gut, dreamed, imagined, set as a decolonial horizon of possibility, and to end perhaps paraphrasing the words of Eduardo Galeano who recently joined our Star People: Of what good is the horizon, if one can never reach it? Well, it serves to keep us walking. And I would hope that we continue to keep walking here together in a good way, being good to

one another, having these difficult conversations, not from a starting point of a Eurocentric mode of critique that is ultimately destructive and de-civilizes, but from a spirit of generosity and reciprocity.

That horizon that we have no name for must also include the democratization of our own organization. And yes, you know we must be critical. We must critique! But we must also stay here and have those difficult conversations. It is not enough to say, “Oh, NACCS *están en lo de* civility... I’m leaving. I’m walking away.” No! We have to have those difficult conversations and this democratization and face-to-face dialogue. Even if it means to the point of arriving to a collective democratic decision that perhaps NACCS *has* outlived its usefulness; that perhaps we *must* abolish ourselves! But that must be a collective decision, and not through abandonment because here, there is still something *here* that brings us back every year. Even when we are pissed off, *aquí estamos*, right? And Eden E. Torres reminded us of that last year, because it is *home!* So it is not through abandonment, but through a conscious intentional decision that we have to forge those conversations however difficult they may be. So, *ni centro, ni periferia; ni civil, ni uncivil;* because both ultimately lock us into a project that de-civilizes. Instead, every world must first be dreamed and I hope we can begin to dream that here together. Aho!

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