

Book Reviews

Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy, edited by Iris D. Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 195 pp.

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Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy represents a movement among some twenty-first century Latinx scholars to claim and reclaim rhetoric and writing from colonialism. As a whole, *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies* distinguishes itself because of its conceptualization and application of the decolonial, which until now, with some exceptions, has been limited to indigenous studies in rhetoric and composition. The concepts of decolonization, decoloniality, and epistemic delinking serve as the lens through which Latinx scholars analyze rhetoric and writing from theoretical, pedagogical, and research perspectives and attempt to epistemically delink language “from the falsely universalized notions of rhetoric that have accompanied Western Modernity’s spread across this hemisphere” (xiv).

The Latinx culture itself inspires and influences the conceptual framework and application of the decolonial in this collection. Editors Iris D. Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez intended to bring the field “closer to issues that are relevant to Latinx’s experiences” (xiv). Latinx scholars in *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies*, argue Ruiz and Sánchez, follow “the process of recreating, redefining, and reviving” (xvi) that characterizes the work of rhetoric and writing scholars Victor Villanueva and Damián Baca, particularly in their edited collection *Rhetorics of the Americas* (xiv). To my mind, this process harkens back further to Villanueva’s scholarship on memory and racism, Ellen Cushman’s scholarship on the rhetorician as an agent of social change, and Scott Richard Lyons’s scholarship on the formation of publics for publicly oriented writing classrooms.

In what follows, I evaluate *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies* through the authors’ conceptualization and application of the decolonial, description of the significance of racism to epistemic delinking and decoloniality, questions about the role of Latinx in the decolonial, and articulation of the problem the decolonial may pose to the field—a problem about which bell hooks wrote more than twenty years ago.

Decolonization, decoloniality, and epistemic delinking are interrelated concepts attributed to Walter D. Mignolo, the Argentine semiotician influenced by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, both pillars in the field of decolonial

studies. To understand and implement epistemic delinking, the distinction between decolonization and decoloniality must be understood. In Mignolo's *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, he describes decolonization as "a complex scenario of struggles" (82, qtd. in Sánchez) during which the elites—namely, European colonizers and their descendants—sought to govern themselves and expel "the imperial administration from the territory" (82, qtd. in Sánchez). Decoloniality, in contrast, addresses the aftermath of the elites' self-governance, an "imperialism without colonies" (82) that bred epistemic colonialism: *coloniality* (Ruiz and Sánchez xvi). Decoloniality, for Sánchez, represents the response to two rhetorical spheres: "the crooked rhetoric that naturalizes 'modernity' as a universal global process and point of arrival" (82), and coloniality that creates and continues the epistemic subordination of certain people and areas (82). Despite political independence, the elites rely on the colonial matrix of power (82), "the ongoing (and thoroughgoing) system of epistemological, ideological, economic, and cultural hegemony that was established, developed, and maintained through European expansion across the globe" (82).

Epistemic delinking entails thinking of language, writing, and discourse beyond the influences of colonialism and coloniality. Latinx scholars focus on different facets of epistemic delinking in their work. In "Poch@," for example, Cruz Medina defines Mignolo's decolonial act of delinking in terms of its ability "to change the terms and not just the content of the conversation," thereby changing the content more profoundly" (95). Steve Alvarez, in "Literacy," draws on Mignolo's definition of delinking, offered in "Delinking," as "a 'decolonial epistemic shift leading to . . . pluriversality as a universal project'" (20, qtd. in Alvarez) that examines the political-economic dynamic and informs strategies to disrupt the power imbalance resulting from the colonial matrix of power (20). In advocating for delinking through translanguaging, Alvarez identifies the liberating potential for language-based social justice in rhetoric and composition studies because "(d)elinking entails the ability to re-read the world and the opportunity to re-write it" (27).

Epistemic delinking through re-appropriation concentrates on overarching objectives to address hegemonies. These objectives may contemplate smaller populations within the Latinx community, such as Cruz Medina's argument for the epistemic delinking of the pejorative term "pocho"—roughly, "cultural traitor" or "white-washed"—by reimagining pocho as "Poch@," a decolonial trope that would function "as a positive term, even a term of resistance" (94) for Latinx blogger groups in academia, and perhaps beyond. These objectives may apply to larger populations with national and international implications, as demonstrated in "Citizenship" by Ana Milena Ribero and "Illegal" by Amanda Espinosa-Aguilar. Ribero argues for the decolonization of U.S. citizenship in order to delink undocumented immigrants and others from exclusion

and segregation created by the illusion of homogeneity among citizens (42). Espinosa-Aguilar argues that the concepts “immigrant” and “citizen” reflect the problem of linguisticism—language that creates, promotes, and reproduces inequalities in power structures (159), planting fear into voters, which is often “tied to the distribution of limited resources” (155), to garner support for anti-immigration legislation. But, as productive as the re-appropriation of concepts like “immigrant” and “citizen” can be, the re-appropriation of pejorative terms, I fear, presents a different dynamic and, thus, a different problem of linguisticism where, despite re-appropriation, pejorative terms like *pocho* continue to reinforce hegemonies.

In “History,” Jose Cortez also builds on Mignolo’s work to identify the ideological forces of colonialism in Latin America as evidenced in the relationship between alphabetic technology, including writing, and cultural identity at the core of political sovereignty (51). Language in rhetoric and writing becomes a central concern politically, epistemologically, and ontologically. For Latinx in the U.S., the analysis of language in rhetoric and writing calls for a confrontation with a core element of colonialism and coloniality: racism.

Iris D. Ruiz, in “Race,” and Gabriela Raquel Rios’s “*Mestizaje*” provide important perspectives on racism critical to decoloniality and epistemic de-linking. Racism, Ruiz argues, as an operation of race, is a social instrument of domination that constructs classifications and hierarchies through discourse. Examining definitions of race from Michel Foucault, James Berlin, and Linda Brodkey, Ruiz argues that racism “serves current power structures, affects material realities unequally across racial groups, and distorts the real-life experiences of humans who belong to races with long histories of oppression” (14). W.E.B. DuBois, Ruiz notes, describes the troubling complexities of race: race is not a concept, but a group of contradictions—contradictory trends, tendencies, forces, and facts—that ultimately “kills people” (14).

Rios questions the re-appropriation of racial tropes and the exclusion of essential cultural perspectives on those tropes and decoloniality. Rios concentrates on *mestizaje*, a category of racial configurations in Mexico and other countries that signifies the mixture of Spaniard and Indigenous blood and cultural worth. Chicanx and others have re-appropriated *mestizaje* as a trope to communicate its intellectual traditions. But this re-appropriation “often unwittingly reifie[s] the racial dynamics through which *mestizaje* functions, both epistemologically and ontologically” (109) and promotes “the logics of cultural and biological purity” (121). The romanticizing and fetishizing of Indigenous cultural practices, including writing; the erasure of indigenous futurity; and the pure/mixed fallacy (121)—these three tendencies associated with *mestizaje* trap Indigenous cultures in time and vitiate Indigenous rhetorical practices, rhetorical agency, and writing (121). Rios argues that a decolonial

approach to *mestizaje* should disavow the trope entirely or “its universalizing, racist, and reductive tendencies” (121). Rios’ decolonial approach exposes disparities in the focus and purpose of decolonization. Rios argues that Latin American Studies approaches decolonization as discursive, epistemological, and future orientated while Indigenous Studies approaches decolonization as an issue of sovereignty primarily, which emphasizes settler colonialism and the dismantling of colonialism (113).

Through these perspectives, Ruiz and Rios underscore a salient point about the decolonial, which, for some readers, also underlies a criticism of the collection: decolonization, decoloniality, and epistemic delinking are not exclusive to Latinx. Moreover, *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies* focuses almost entirely on the Latinx community in the U.S., yet the term “Latinx” is not explicitly defined. The absence of a definition may raise confusion among readers unfamiliar with the complex nationalities, cultures, and communities that cannot be so easily conflated.

The pages of *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies* capture Latinx scholars grappling with hegemonic rhetoric and writing from public, political, and private forums that couple Americana with Latinx, the Ivory Tower with kitchen tables, the classroom with publics, History with silences. As Villanueva puts it in the forward to the volume, “Colonialism remains, despite the post- and the de-. It’s a knotty problem. In the pages that follow attempts are made to lay out the problems so that we might begin to untie the knots” (viii). Indeed, the scholars who contribute to the collection imagine the decolonial as the means to shape theory, pedagogy, and research and to challenge notions of colonialism and coloniality in rhetoric and writing. These scholars imagine liberating potential of the decolonial, captured best by Alvarez who claims that epistemic delinking creates “the ability to re-read the world and the opportunity to re-write it” (27).

Epistemic delinking, decolonization, and decoloniality require grappling with the core of colonialism and coloniality, racism. Grappling with racism may require grappling with ourselves. “In short,” Ruiz writes, “the field has not addressed racism in all of its complexities” (5). Ruiz calls for us “to talk about race, as it is still the ‘absent presence’” in the field (5), a phrase borrowed from Catherine Prendergast. Addressing pedagogical theory in the classroom, bell hooks wrote of the significance of grappling with racism in 1994, alongside her then-Oberlin College colleague Chandra Mohanty: “We had not realized how much faculty would need to unlearn racism to learn about colonization and decolonization . . .” (38). Our knotty problem. Grappling with our problem would reveal the challenges in re-reading and re-writing the world—the risks of entanglement that we would have to accept to free knots, our own and

others, and the choice inherent to the decolonial option that we would have to face: to engage or to ignore.

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