

# Critical Perspectives on Decoloniality: an interview with Catherine Walsh

## Perspectivas críticas da decolonialidade: uma entrevista com Catherine Walsh

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### ABSTRACT

Widely known for her pioneering work with decolonial approaches, researcher Catherine Walsh generously accepted our request to do this written interview, which is divided into two parts. First, we aim to delve into the philosophical foundations and motivations that have guided her illustrious career, offering our readers an in-depth look at the forces shaping her research and theoretical positions. Next, we aim to inspire the next generation of researchers from the Global South by sharing his ideas on how to navigate the complexities of interdisciplinary research, the evolution of his theoretical perspectives and his vision for the future.

Keywords: decolonial approaches; critical perspectives; Global South



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# CADERNOS de LINGUAGEM & SOCIEDADE

*Papers on Language and Society*

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ENTREVISTA

## RESUMO

Amplamente conhecida por seu trabalho pioneiro com abordagens decoloniais, a pesquisadora Catherine Walsh generosamente aceitou o nosso pedido em fazer esta entrevista escrita, que está dividida em duas partes. Primeiro, pretendemos aprofundar os fundamentos filosóficos e as motivações que guiaram a sua ilustre carreira, oferecendo aos nossos leitores um olhar aprofundado sobre as forças que moldam a sua investigação e as suas posições teóricas. A seguir, procuramos inspirar a próxima geração de pesquisadores/as do Sul Global, partilhando as suas ideias sobre como navegar nas complexidades da investigação interdisciplinar, a evolução das suas perspectivas teóricas e a sua visão para o futuro.

Palavras-chaves: abordagens decoloniais; perspectivas críticas; Sul Global.

## 1. CAREER AND MOTIVATIONS

**What inspired you to enter the field of decoloniality, and how have your motivations evolved over your career?**

First off, it is important to understand that decoloniality is neither a “field” nor a new academic paradigm. It is a perspective, concept, analytic, process, practice, and praxis that materialized at the very moment in which modernity/coloniality began to take form. As Walter D. Mignolo and I have argued and following Aníbal Quijano, “decoloniality was born in responses to the promises of modernity and the realities of coloniality.” From the sixteenth century until the present, decoloniality has worked to unravel modernity/coloniality’s hold. That is to “engender liberations with respect to thinking, being, knowing, understanding, and living; encourage venues of re-existence, and build connections among regions, territories, struggles, and peoples” (Mignolo, Walsh, 2018, p. 4). Its concept and analytic, in this sense, are grounded in lived resistances to the colonial matrix of power, its racialized and gendered classificatory lens and logic, and the hierarchical structures it constructs and maintains, structures clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity, and the control of thought, knowledge, spirituality, land, and life. Decoloniality’s concept and analytic are, in this sense, grounded in and indicative of the possibility of an otherwise; of the ongoing actions, struggles, constructions, and creations that continue to work within coloniality’s margins, fissures, and cracks to affirm that which coloniality has attempted to negate. As such, decoloniality necessarily denotes and is constitutive of praxis (Walsh, 2025).

The problem then is not with the study of decoloniality in academic institutions, a study increasingly present in a number of areas, including philosophy, history, law, religion, social sciences, cultural studies, and education. The problem, as I understand it, is instead with its conceptualization as just an epistemic and theoretical concern. All too often erased or blurred are the materiality and lived reality of coloniality, of internal and settler colonialisms and their entanglements, and the present-past specificities of colonial violences, structures, and practice, most especially with respect to race, gender, and land. In the academy, knowledge most often takes front seat; the decolonization of knowledge over the struggles of freedom, land, life when certainly

all are necessarily connected. Brought to mind is Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's exclamation that decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck; Yang, 2012). Neither decolonization nor decoloniality can be paradigmized, objectified, categorized, classified, and/or programed as a "field" devoid of political project, praxis, and struggle.

My "coming" to decoloniality began long before I knew the word. It was the Puerto Rican community in the U.S. Northeast that taught me about colonialism and its ongoing lived struggle and sense. As both U.S. citizens and colonial subjects (Puerto Rico remains the longest colony in the Americas), colonialism is a constitutive part of the unique lived and ongoing reality of Puerto Ricans, what Kelvin Santiago-Valles calls a "subject people" (Santiago-Valles, 1994). My learning about colonialism from this community began in the early 1980s, first as a student in a master's program in bilingual education (with an anti-racist and anti-colonial focus) made up almost entirely of Puerto Rican faculty and students and in a region (western Massachusetts) with a large permanent Boricua or Puerto Rican presence. It was in the context of this program (in which I later became faculty), the local Puerto Rican community in which I was actively engaged in spaces of both daily life and popular education, and later in Puerto Rican communities and shared educational projects with educators and activists throughout the Northeast, that the realities of ongoing lived colonialism and the urgencies of decolonial praxis were made real. How colonialism works in schools, how to confront it, undo it, and build decolonizing practice became central concerns.

These were the years, until my permanent move to Ecuador in the mid 1990s, that I worked collaboratively with activist lawyers at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, and the Multicultural Education, Training, and Advocacy Project on legal cases against school districts' policies and practices of racial, linguistic, and cultural discrimination, including a land mark case on linguistic, cultural-epistemic colonialism. These were years of shared research and practice-based work with Puerto Rican and Latinx youth, community-based leaders, intellectual activists, and educators, including with Hunter College's Venter for Puerto Rican Studies. And they were years in which my decolonial thought and praxis took form, including with respect to other contexts and communities, and to my own responsibilities, in political, ethical, epistemic, pedagogical and praxistical terms, as someone seen as white (Walsh, 1991, 1996; 1998; 2000).

With my permanent move to Ecuador in the mid 90s, my learnings continued. Even before the actual move took place, CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), began to give me tasks: to accompany processes to critically think Indigenous bilingual education as well as an Indigenous University, both of which endeavored to confront what the Indigenous leader and intellectual Luis Macas referred to as the "colonial tare." The tasks later extended to interculturality, defined by the movement as a political principal and project aimed at the radical transformation of structures, institutions and relations, including in terms of knowledge. My task: to confront epistemic racism by interculturalizing and decolonizing knowledge within the graduate-level, regional Andean University where I began to teach in 1997 (and continued until my retirement —what I prefer to call deinstitutionalization— in December 2022). Such work meant not only shifting the geopolitics of Euro-USA-centric knowledge, but also, moving toward a thinking from and with the lived realities of the region, realities marked by the continued colonial tare and struggles of and for decolonization

(Walsh, 2002; 2006; 2012). In 1999, the country's Black Movement gave me other charges or tasks which continue until today, including with respect to collective memory, territory, and ancestral knowledges.

In the late 1990s, I met Walter Mignolo at an event in Bolivia. In the months that followed, he invited me to a meeting at Duke University of a small group of Latin American intellectuals who were beginning to think with Aníbal Quijano's concept and perspective of the "coloniality of power". Aníbal was one of those present, along with others that became the nucleus of what later began to be referred to as the modernity/coloniality group, a name that Arturo Escobar (2010) gave us. So began my own processes of weaving the threads of that which I had learned, witnessed, and come to understand as the ongoing nature of colonial power in the U.S. and the Andes; a system and matrix of power which I —with others— endeavored to both struggle against —most especially in the context of education—, and work towards the building of an otherwise. "Coloniality" offered a term, concept, and perspective from the Andean region and Abya Yala/Latin America to both understand and analyze the historical and ongoing colonial matrix and its foundation in the ideas of race and gender, and their use as classificatory systems that cross the spheres of intersubjectivity and being, knowledge, territory/land, and nature, including spirituality and life philosophies and cosmologies. Coloniality as inseparable from capitalism and western modernity.

While coloniality initially organized our collective dialogues and thought, decoloniality emerged several years later as a necessary focus of attention, most especially expressed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres and myself. Decoloniality, in our minds, renders present the struggles past and present against coloniality and the myriad of ways that colonized peoples across the globe continue to affirm other possibilities of thinking, knowing, being, existing, living in relation. While decoloniality can be understood as a perspective, concept, standpoint, attitude, and analytic, it is, at the same time, denotative of material struggle and praxis, a struggle and praxis of peoples that live the colonial tare, and a struggle and praxis that necessarily require that others, including those in academia, recognize their responsibility, and assume an engagement, praxis, and stance. As we know all too well, most especially with respect to the Israeli Zionist state's project of genocide in Palestine, silence and indifference are complicit with coloniality's operation.

As I continue to learn to unlearn and relearn with collectives and in territories, lands, spaces, and places in Abya Yala and the Global Souths —including the "Souths" in the Global North(s)—, decolonial praxis cannot be singularly defined, nor can it be simply associated with practice. Rather, it points to, engenders, conjures up the actional thought and thought-felt actionings (to use Fanon's terms) that crack the colonial matrix of power and plant and cultivate paths and possibilities of decolonial and decolonizing otherwises.

I recount this lengthy narrative in order to position myself and my coming to and relation with decolonial praxis. A relation built over decades in the doing; in not only taking on the charges and tasks given to me by racialized communities but also, and at the same time, understanding the

political-ethical-epistemic responsibility such work entails, including the radical difference between “studying about” and “learning to unlearn and relearn, thinking, doing with, alongside and from.” Of course, this does not deny my own lived struggles, or the recognition of how I am implicated, as all of us are and in different ways, in the ongoing colonial matrix of power that is coloniality. While coloniality and decoloniality may not always be the words employed, they are helpful in denoting, conceptualizing and analyzing an ongoing global structure, system, matrix of power in which race, gender, capitalism, patriarchy, and knowledge, among other elements, are intertwined, a matrix that began in the Americas in the sixteenth century and later traveled the globe, continuing until today in its local and global mutations and re/configurations.

**Can you share any pivotal moments or key influences that significantly shaped your research direction or theoretical stance?**

I believe I began to touch on this question above but let me elaborate a bit more. As I describe in my recent book *Rising Up, Living On*, probably the first pivotal moment was in 1970, the time of the Vietnam War, Students for a Democratic Society, the Weather Underground, and the Black Panthers; of racial and sexual politics; and of revolutionary preparedness, study, organizing, and hope (Walsh, 2023). The University of Massachusetts-Amherst (UMASS), then one of the most radical institutions of higher education in the U.S., provided the context, place, and space for me to begin to probe the why, what, and how of the work to be done, a probing that meant shared militancy, collectivity, and coalition; in essence, a learning-doing with others. It was in this context of multiracial collectivities and coalitions that I first heard the words of Angela Davis and the repeated words of Sojourner Truth, listened to and read the poetry of Audre Lorde, and read the texts of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, and Paulo Freire.

I guess you could say my early theoretical interests and influences began then. While there is much I could say, let me concentrate here on three of the early theoretical influences: Fanon, Gramsci, and Freire, and a bit about how I came to each (Walsh, 1991; 2020). My first encounter with Fanon was in 1971, soon after the English translation of *Wretched of the Earth* became available. Fanon's text became the guiding tool to stimulate discussion and debate between the SDS-Students' for a Democratic Society chapter I was involved with at UMASS and a cell of the Black Panthers. Our collective reading of Fanon brought to the fore the constitutive role of race and dehumanization in colonial-imperial struggles, something that the traditional Left in the United States and elsewhere neglected to see and consider in its thought and actions. The text forced people to define their position and commitment. While many chose to negate Fanon's admonishments, a few, like myself, found meaning in his arguments and consequence in his political-pedagogical challenge. I refer here not only to the unlearning and relearning required in decolonization and social transformation, but also the unlearning and relearning required in addressing white privilege and in working in alliance and co-struggle. Fanon and the *Wretched of the Earth* pushed me to define my

position, to begin to confront at the personal and socio-political levels the defining role of race, and move toward a commitment and stance that, over the years, has come to be crucial in defining and shaping my thought and praxis.

My encounter with Gramsci was around this same time; 1971 was the first printing in English of his *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, a text that brought much serious debate within Marxist circles, including within the SDS. Yet it was in the early 1980s that I delved more deeply into Gramsci's notes and praxistic thought, seriously grappling within the small Gramsci study group of which I was part, with the significance of hegemony in activist and intellectual terms, the lived meaning of organic intellectuals and political praxis, but also the "subaltern" blindness of Marxism within much of the then radical Left (Walsh, 2020). My interest was to think with Gramsci and, following Stuart Hall (1987), to "think" the problems that concerned me in a Gramscian way, most particularly the practical activity of struggle of subalternized groups, including with respect to language, an interest that in later years extended to a philosophy of praxis that engages the relation of nature, society, action and the "earthliness" of thought, a thinking with nature and the relation of human and nonhuman worlds. In Gramsci's words, "an historical, dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present" (Gramsci, 1971).

My first reading of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was also in 1971. As was the case with Fanon and Gramsci, this reading of Freire was in the margins of academia, in a course-seminar organized by representatives of a local commune and entitled "Education as the Practice of Love." Despite the rather strange experience of this course, my connection with Freire began and over the years grew (see my reflections in section 3). It was not education as a discipline or field that interested me, but rather Freire's political-actional-theoretical praxis and stance, an influence that I have carried with me for the last 50-plus years.

While the theoretical interests and influences have certainly widened over time, most especially with my permanent move to Ecuador over 30 years ago and the necessary posture, which I have assumed, to think from and with Abya Yala/Latin America and the Global South, Fanon and Freire, and to a lesser extent Gramsci, remain as ancestral guides.

## 2. RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY

**How would you describe the philosophical foundations of your research? How have these influenced your approach to decoloniality?**

Relational philosophies directly tied to existence-life are what orient and guide my thought, and my perspectives and praxis with respect to decoloniality. The influences here are many. I find resonance, for example, with Caribbean, Chicana, Indigenous, and African-origin feminist thinkers who weave relational thought from cosmologies, spiritualities, memories, land, and life; thought that,



as M. Jacqui Alexander argues, brings together that which coloniality has endeavored to break apart (Alexander, 2005; Walsh, 2015, 2022, 2023, 2025). The existence-based Africana philosophies of Frantz Fanon and Fanonian thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter, Lewis R. Gordon, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres are also key; so too Manuel Zapata Olivella's "muntu", Juan García Salazar's woven thought with Abuelo Zenón in which African/Afro-ancestrality, territory, and collective resistance, history, memory are all interwoven, and, more generally, the lived philosophies/cosmologies of existence-nature-life so central in the Andes (Walsh, 2011, 2012, 2019; Salazar; Walsh, 2017).

**Your research often integrates interdisciplinary perspectives. How do you navigate these choices, and what advice would you give to researchers looking to adopt a similarly interdisciplinary approach?**

While it is true that the majority of my work past and present evidences and integrates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives (the international doctoral program in Latin American Cultural Studies that I founded in Ecuador in 2002 and directed until 2023 is a concrete case in point), my interest has long been to go beyond the disciplines per se; that is, to rupture disciplinary divides and weave relational perspectives of thinking and knowing.

I recall the title of a collective book in Spanish that I co-edited a number of years ago: *Indisciplinar las Ciencias Sociales* (Indiscipline the Social Sciences). As we described in the Introduction: "Our use of indiscipline refers to the need to make evident the disciplining, the discipline, and the disciplinary formations that have been constructed in the social sciences since the nineteenth century, but especially their institutionalization in the twentieth century in Latin America, in order to elucidate their colonial legacy" (Walsh; Schiwy; Castro-Gómez, 2002, p. 13). My "advice" then to researchers and, more broadly, to those who teach and study in universities, is to consider how the coloniality of knowledge operates in their courses and investigations, including in approaches considered interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary. Such consideration requires us to ask what and whose knowledge(s) form the base of our work; with whom we are thinking, from where, why and what for; and how these knowledges and thought reproduce or, alternatively, fissure and challenge the unicity and universality of Euro-USA-centric canons. Such questions help move toward processes of epistemic decolonization —of course understanding that decolonization is never about knowledge alone— as well as pluriversal possibilities and modes of knowing and thinking.

### 3. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPACT

**Your work has been deeply rooted on what you call as a decolonial pedagogy or decolonial praxis. Also, your intellectual and activist journey has been intensely influenced by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Could you please tell us more about how your decolonial**

**approach is connected to education and to what extent Paulo Freire has impacted your career?**

Interestingly enough, I never wanted to be a teacher. I never wanted to be part of the discipline or institution called “education”. However, I somehow came to education without planning and through a sociopolitical politics of transformation and liberation. It all began when I left my undergraduate study after two years (a “study” that had oscillated from archeology, anthropology, dance, sociology, human development, and organic farming with no clear decision or direction). In my search for a job to pay the rent in the collective house where I was living, I found one —the only one that came through— as an assistant in a very traditional-conservative kindergarten-nursery school. The experience opened my eyes to the horrors of disciplined schooling and to Illich’s call for “deschooling”. A number of months spent after in a progressive early childhood center, sparked an interest toward alternative possibilities of thinking and doing education beyond the “banking model” that Freire had described. I returned to the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, as well as another of his texts: Education as the Practice of Freedom. And I began to imagine a process, practice, and pedagogy grounded in the social-cultural-political realities of kids’ lives (this in the mid 70s). An opportunity arose in a donated church space in a multiracial neighborhood in Boston. There I created an alternative anti-racist anti-sexist school for young children from 2-and-a-half to seven years old, run as a parent cooperative. So began my journey with “education otherwise” and, although I did not use those words then, with decolonial pedagogy and praxis.

Some years later —after finally finishing my undergraduate degree in sociology and human development, and spending a semester teaching dance in an international school in Ecuador as a way to obtain a teaching certificate— I decided to return to UMASS-Amherst, enter a masters’ program in bilingual education made up principally of Puerto Rican faculty and students, and later pursue a doctorate in education in this same program with a focus on cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics. This was the context, as I mentioned above, in which shared study and shared life experiences within the Puerto Rican community taught me about ongoing colonialism and decolonial/decolonizing struggle. After graduating, I was asked to stay on as faculty and coordinate a state-wide center focused on bilingual multicultural education. It was in this time, place, and context that I met Paulo Freire.

Paulo was then beginning his return to Brazil after many years in exile. In this process of transition, Harvard University had offered him a three-year invited professorship. With several colleagues, we were able to negotiate with Harvard for Paulo to spend a semester a year at UMASS: 1984-1986. While Paulo’s texts had long accompanied me in my educational and activist journey, knowing Paulo was a gift. Over these three years, Paulo and I co-taught university seminars, did workshops in the Puerto Rican community’s adult popular education program, and spent many hours over the long winter months —along with Elsa, his first wife— in intense conversation. In 1986 and



with several colleagues, we organized the First National Working Conference on Critical Pedagogy. Paulo, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Maxine Greene, Peter Park, Ira Shor, Meyer Weinberg, Stanley Aronowitz, Patti Lather, Madeleine Grumet and many others, including collectives of activists, educators, feminists, cultural workers, and others from throughout the United States and Canada came together to debate, discuss, and share perspectives, postures, and experiences of transformative pedagogy and social struggle and/as praxis. Paulo's thought, writing, and dialogical presence served as a guiding force in what then began to be positioned as "critical pedagogy," a network and movement of sorts that I identified with until my permanent move to Ecuador in the mid-1990s. While "critical" pedagogy was the defining thread of my work then, the context of this work had taught and instilled in me the urgencies of decolonizing pedagogical processes and practices (Walsh, 2023). As I explained at the outset of this interview, it was the U.S. Boricua or Puerto Rican community that made me see coloniality and gave me the responsibility and task to contest it, including in and through pedagogy and praxis. So, I guess I can say that my approach to critical pedagogy back then was decolonial in perspective and practice. And yes, Paulo was an important force and guide, although, as I have argued in my more recent (posthumous) letters and notes to him, I began to sense — most especially as I began my move South but even before— a distance between his "critical" writings, thought, and pedagogies, and decolonial(izing) perspectives and work (Walsh, 2019; 2021; 2023). The lived colonial realities of structural racism, linguisticism, and gendering, for instance, only began to appear in his later texts, and even then in a kind of lukewarm fashion. For many years, I left Paulo's books on the shelf, convinced that there was little there to guide me towards the decolonial hows of pedagogy and praxis, particularly in this context of Ecuador, the Andes, and Abya Yala/Latin America. Yet, it was Jacqui Alexander who brought me back to Paulo. In her powerful book *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander locates her perspective of pedagogies as akin to Freire's; that is of pedagogies as indispensable methodologies of and for transformation. However, and at the same time, she reveals the limits of the psychology of liberation that was constitutive of Paulo's work. While Alexander traverses other realms, she does not reject Paulo; she thinks with and beyond him. Such stance served as an impetus for me to return to Paulo's texts and reread him, to not reject but engage him on different terms.

Ecuador has had a very interesting initiative on the creation of an African Andean Documentary Fund which values and register the oral history of African descendant people in the country. I would like you to comment a bit about this initiative and how the university by its own is incapable/insufficient to deal with oral history.

The Fondo Documental Afro-Andino, or Afro-Andean Document and Archive Fund/Project was formed in 2002 as an agreement "in-trust" between the collective "Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Process of Black Communities) and the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar-Ecuador. Its formation was not an initiative of the University but rather part of the charges and tasks that the AfroEcuadorian Movement began to give me in the late 1990s, and the ongoing relationship of co-

labor which had become part. It was the Black historian Juan García Salazar, known as the grandfather of the Black Movement in Ecuador and the guardian of collective memory —and self-identified as the “worker of the process— who, along with two leaders of Palenques —ancestral maroon (cimarron or quilombolo) communities in the Pacific Colombo-Ecuadorian region— approached me with charges or tasks. After several years of assuming such work and co-labor, el maestro Juan (as many refer to him) proposed that we together organize an archival space within the University, open to communities, researchers, and the general public, in order to house the more than 3000 hours of taped oral narratives, testimonies, and histories and more than 10,000 photographs that he and a group of AfroEcuadorian activists had compiled in Black Ecuadorian ancestral territories in the 1970s and 80s. So began the Fondo and the co-labor of not only classifying and digitizing the oral and visual materials but also supporting the processes of Afro-centered education with workshops and the development of educational resources from the archive for use in communities and schools. With the years, maestro Juan and others added to this living archive, the largest that I am aware of in Latin America.

Before maestro Juan’s passing in 2017, he formed a Community Council to accompany me in overseeing the Fondo. After my deinstitutionalization in December 2022, I was asked by this Council to also form part. Today the Fondo continues to operate “in-trust” within the University and with virtual connections in ancestral territories and AfroEcuadorian educational and research settings.

However, and despite the importance of this living archive, the University as institution has, as your question suggests, shown little interest in the voices, oral and visual materials, and the collective knowledges and memory that reside within the Fondo (housed in the University’s library). While both community members and national and international researchers have continued, over the years, to make use of this incredible resource, seldom if ever do faculty members make reference to the Fondo, use its materials, or encourage students to delve into its wealth of knowledge, knowledges typically absent and obscured within the “academic” curriculum, including in courses of the so-called humanities, social sciences, and education. I was the only faculty member who continually made the Fondo part of my teaching, writing, and thought, including in processes of shared writing with maestro Juan García (Walsh; Salazar, 2002, 2015, 2023; Salazar; Walsh, 2010; 2017a; 2017b). The problem, of course, is not only with the lack of value placed on oral history in general but on Black oral histories, memories, and knowledges, in specific. This in a country that did not officially recognize the existence of AfroEcuadorians until 1998; a population estimated to be at least 10 percent (if not much more), although national census figures fluctuate according to political interests (with the last census figures more than 40% less than the previous ones). As AfroEcuadorian organizations argue, such decrease is an act of intentional, racialized ethnocide.

**You say elsewhere that you do not consider yourself as a scholar but as an activist intellectual. This is partly due to your critique on how university as institution is limited and does not dialogue with society and its issues. Could you talk about the role of the university nowadays in the context of a decolonial praxis/pedagogy, especially in the Global South?**

My decision to “deinstitutionalize”, that is, to leave the University Andina Simón Bolívar-UASB in December 2022 after 25 years, has much to do with the ways this institution of higher education, as many in the Global South, had begun to radically distance itself from social concerns, social reality, and social struggles. The UASB-Ecuador was once considered the most “progressive” university in the Andean region and, in large part, in Abya Yala or Latin America. This was the reason why I accepted the invitation to become part of its faculty in the late 1990s, and to subsequently develop the international doctoral program in Latin American Cultural Studies, a program widely known for its social-political-epistemic focus, its close ties to social movements, and its decolonial pedagogy, praxis, and perspective. However, in recent years the institution began to increasingly ally itself with the neoliberal globalized model of higher education, what I have referred to as the UNI-versity (Walsh, 2024). Professionalization —rather than critical thought—, knowledge commodification, and a white-washed Euro-USA-centric authoritative patriarchal focus became the *modus operandi*, all part of the endeavor to not only challenge but eliminate attention to race and racialization, gender, sexuality, dissidence, and decolonial perspectives and thought. The use of inclusive language was banned, a heteropatriarchal authority made clear. The social movements that once had an active presence in the University became disturbances to the project at hand. Such shift was made publicly visible in June 2022. In the massive national mobilization led by the Indigenous movement, University authorities chose to place chain locks on its doors. While in the past this house of higher education, as many other public universities, opened spaces for Indigenous women and children from the countryside to sleep and eat, this time the protestors were kept out. So too were faculty and students, considered potential allies of the protestors, if not protestors themselves/ourselves. Such action was later justified by authorities as a necessary measure to keep the University “clean”. Clean of whom, I ask? The social-political and epistemic significance of the cleanliness and the chain-locked doors were made clear not only in social media, but also in the messages that appeared one night in posters plastered along the long wall between the University and the street:

Your classes talk to us about PRIVILEGES. Your classes talk to us about HUMAN RIGHTS. Your classes talk to us about INTERCULTURALITY. Your classes talk to us about DECOLONIAL THOUGHT. In the University's archives lie THOUSANDS OF RESEARCH STUDIES, THESES, ARTICLES AND STUDIES ABOUT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, CAMPESINOS, SOCIAL STRUGGLES. But what is happening in reality is that YOUR CLASSROOMS, AUDITORIUMS, AND CAMPUS ARE EMPTY. What is happening in reality is that THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ARE SLEEPING IN THE STREETS. What is happening in reality is that THE DOORS ARE LOCKED. CAREFUL! THE PEOPLE WILL NOT FORGET YOUR INDIFFERENCE.

My political-ethical decision to leave the University had much to do with all of this. How to continue to work in this UNI-versity, I asked, most especially in the context and practice of decolonial praxis/pedagogy? My decision to leave was not simply an individual one. I discussed it at length with the community of then present and former students. It was a decision in which the political-ethical premises of my leaving were understood by all. With my departure, the institution announced that the fifth doctoral cohort (then beginning the thesis phase) would be the last; the doctoral program would end with them. So too, announced was the plan to rid the institution of decolonial praxis and thought, a praxis and thought that had filtered from the doctorate to other programs, increasingly evident in students' perspectives and theses.

Of course, the doctoral program and its decolonial praxis/pedagogy never sought institutionalization. It was a crack. A crack in the institution itself. A crack that widened over the years but never presupposed to reform the institution or become an institutionalized component part. Rather, it was a space of knowledge and thought "otherwise" that planted and cultivated interepistemic and intercultural relation, that encouraged thinking from and with (instead of studies about), and that wove processes and practices of learning, unlearning, relearning, and co-learning with and from the lived social reality of Abya Yala/Latin America, and in conversation with the Global South and the "souths" present in the Global North. Making, opening, widening, and connecting the cracks was (and is) a crucial part of my labor, work never done alone but always in company of others, a co-labor.

With the increasing casting of universities in Abya Yala/Latin America and the Global South as UNI-versities —distanced from territory, social contexts and realities, and critical thought, and with increasingly whitened populations and epistemic orientations, production, and perspectives—, the strategic work of cracks and crack-making takes on an urgency evermore crucial, an urgency tied to the lived social realities of thinking, knowing, doing, and living in these times, and, relatedly, to the planting and cultivating of seeds of decolonial otherwises of thought, knowledge, life. This, for me, is the struggle-based work of decolonial praxis/pedagogy that needs to happen today within, against, and in spite of the university/UNI-versity institution and its increasingly Westernized and whitened colonial-capitalist-patriarchal structure.

Following from the previous answer how would be possible to rethink the university as an institution of education in order to reveal that what /who is missing there need not to be exactly "included", but does need to be revealed at the roots of knowledge production? I am thinking on social movements, grassroots movements, collectives, public gatherings, assemblages, etc. How to face university as an exclusive and privileged locus of knowledge?

I believe I have touched on this question above. However, there are a couple of more reflections that I might add. First off, I don't believe it concretely possible, in these present times, to

rethink, remake, and/or decolonize the university as institution. While we might imagine other ways, constructs, places, and spaces of doing higher education —recognizing, at the same time, those increasingly fewer spaces and places of higher education otherwise that do exist, including “pluriversities”—reform from the top down seems, to me, not only impossible but a futile effort. Universities are necessarily part of the system of corporate state. The work to be done, in this sense, has to be done from below; inside, outside, and despite the institution. It is, at least in part, in the opening and widening of cracks, and in the planting and cultivating in these cracks of other logics, rationalities, philosophies that fissure the supposed “universality” of Euro-USA-centric knowledge and thought. That is, of situated and embodied knowledges, and of other ways of thinking, doing, and being with —with place-related realities, peoples, movements, struggles.

Secondly, and in a related sense, it is important to consider how the present-day politics of “inclusion” within educational institutions are functional to the interests of the corporate state and the present-day colonial-capitalist-patriarchal system. Inclusion, as we well know, does not alter the structure, institution, or system but rather brings individuals historically excluded into the system. I am referring to those persons historically excluded because of race, ethnicity, language, gender, religion, and so-called “disabilities”, among other social classifiers, including their multiple and complex intersections. The aim is individualized assimilation, a kind of cooptation and “colonial integration” that most often requires leaving behind socially subscribed and shared —ancestral, cultural, linguistic, vitally lived— ways of being, knowing, thinking. Inclusion is part and parcel of the UNI-versity, and the colonial de-existences (of knowledges, life-ways, thought, etc.) that this institution facilitates, promotes, enables, provokes.

Of course, and as is evidenced in the current political scenario of the US, but also in most of Europe and increasingly throughout the Global South, inclusion (as problematic as it may be) is now deemed a danger and menace to white, western —and heteropatriarchal biologically male— civilization and its educational foundations and reproduction. The so-called or somewhat progressive neoliberalism in which inclusionary politics were a constitutive part is, without a doubt, fading. Exclusion, as we well know, is becoming once again the *modus operandi* of higher education, of the UNI-versity as crucial component of colonial reconfigurations. The Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador (where I taught for 25 years) is a case in point. While once the most progressive institution of higher education in the region, today it prides itself on eliminating the use of inclusive language in thesis and publications, and programs and courses focused on so-called gender ideology, sexual dissidences, structural racism, and decolonial thought.

Resisting, questioning, challenging, confronting the colonial project and practice of the UNI-versity are, of course, necessary actions. So too are efforts, such as Mexico’s wide-scale processes of higher education reform that aim to de-westernize, re-territorialize, and reconstruct, from below —with students, professors, and local communities— the content, focus, and practice of universities, an endeavor that, along with the Nueva Escuela Mexicana (the New Mexican School of primary and

secondary education), has critical interculturality and decolonization as its base. Such processes, while not without problems, certainly contest coloniality's present-day intensification, particularly in Abya Yala/Latin America.

However, given these current and increasingly horrific times, the questions for me are with the concrete hows. The hows that spite the UNI-versity, that make and work from the cracks, that plant and cultivate otherwises of knowledges and thought, including inside and outside educational institutions, and with grassroots assemblages, social movements, collectives, and communities. The hows that bring to the fore decolonial pedagogies and praxes.

#### 4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

##### **What emerging trends or areas of research do you believe are crucial for the future of decoloniality?**

As I mentioned above, decoloniality has a collective history/herstory/theirstory of more than 500 years. It began with coloniality. And since coloniality is ongoing in its configurations, reconfigurations, and mutations —with little likelihood that it will ever disappear—, decoloniality will so too endure. The problem is when decoloniality becomes a reference without collective memory, devoid of political project, significance, praxis, and struggle. Such is the case with what I have described as its increasing “adjectival lightness,” its use as a replacement for the alternative and critical, and its cooptation and rhetorical use within spheres of power, including within the contexts of state and state institutions, of which universities are part (Walsh, 2018). Moreover, by blurring the materiality of coloniality, settler colonialisms, internal colonialisms and their entanglement, and, relatedly, the present-past specificities of colonial violences, structures, practice, and difference, “light” decoloniality – most especially in its academic manifestations in the global North, but also sometimes in the global South– all too often positions the decolonization of knowledge over the struggles of freedom, land, life when certainly all are necessarily connected. Brought to mind is Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's exclamation that decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck; Yang, 2012).

In this sense, it is imperative to make clear how we are signifying decoloniality and how such signification is grounded in and engages resistance and struggle, struggle against coloniality and its multiple, situated, and lived manifestations, and struggle for the construction, cultivation, and affirmation of radically distinct ways of knowing, thinking, being, existing, and living. Both the struggles against and the struggles for demand what I have termed decolonial insurgencies (Walsh, 2023; 2025) and what Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls combative decoloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2021; Walsh, 2025). Such attitude and actionality, both of which find sustenance and ground in Fanon, are, for me, central to thinking and doing decoloniality today and in the years to come.



### **What advice would you offer to young researchers who wish to make a meaningful impact in the field of Decoloniality?**

My advice to young researchers, and to students, activists, and others concerned with the thinking-doing of decoloniality in and out of academia is, as I said above, to move away from “light” manifestations, studies, and discussions, and to assume a perspective, stand, and stance that recognizes the lived nature of coloniality in its manifold forms, that works towards actional thought and thought-felt actionings that both struggle against and for. Of course, this requires considerations as well as how most all of us contribute to coloniality in different ways and often without being aware, including and most especially in and through research. Brought to mind is Linda Tuihwa Smith’s reminder of “the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism”, remaining as “a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples” (Smith, 1999, p. 1). This means, in part and as I mentioned before, beginning to unsettle research practices that study about in order to move toward practices that instead endeavor to think from, alongside, and with, a thinking that necessarily entails making present and tense the researcher’s subjectivity, the problem of her/his/their/our “inner eyes” (to use Sylvia Wynter’s expression) (Wynter, 1994; Walsh, 2023) that give shape, substance, and form to the ways we see, perceive, read and interpret reality and the world, including with respect to systemic racism, racialization, dehumanization and the invariant absolutes of hierarchical and oppositional classification.

## **5. REFLECTIONS AND PERSONAL INSIGHTS**

### **Looking back on your career, what do you hope your legacy will be within the field of Decoloniality?**

I don’t think in terms of “legacy”, but rather with regards to seeds and plantings. My hope is that my years of decolonial thinking-doing in and through pedagogy and praxis and with students, colleagues, intellectual militants, activists, collectives, and communities in and from different territories of the globe, have left seeds and activated plantings that sprout, nurture, and grow processes and practices that crack coloniality’s totalizing wall, propagating radically distinct possibilities of knowledge, thought, and existence.

### **How do you balance the demands of your professional life with personal interests or passions outside academia?**

As I alluded to above, “academia” per se was never my life plan or project. If I add up the years of study and the years of teaching, more than five decades of my life have been spent in universities. Yet it was not “professional academia” that enticed me or defined my paths. Rather, it was the constant call for the work to be done, work grounded in the situated realities and ongoing

configurations-mutations of coloniality, capitalism, and Euro-USA-centered modernity, and their intricate and constitutive relation. That is of structural racism, linguisticism, sexism-gendering-heteropatriarchy, and the myriad of related systemic oppressions that attempt to control thought, knowledge, being-becoming, cosmology spirituality, relationality, territory, nature, life. Study and research have, for me, been tools to delve into the hows, to interrogate and understand the ways this system works. To paraphrase Audre Lorde: to understand “the masters’ tools”, their systemic foundation and operation, and the fact that the masters’ tools will never dismantle the master’s house. But study and research have also been means of intervention, part of the actional thought and thought-felt reflective actionings (the praxis referred to above), constructed with others and from and with the shared aims of transformation. Part, as well, of the processes that occur beyond academia’s walls: of learning to unlearn and relearn from the situated knowledges, contexts, and struggles of existence-life.

Writing has also been a crucial part of my praxistic thinking-doing-living. Here I find particular resonance and sense with what the Brazilian writer-teacher Conceição Evaristo calls *escrevivência*: “a writing engaged, committed to life, to living” and to the relation with lived reality; a writing-living that denounces, disturbs, and calls out from one’s own historic processes and subjectivity (Evaristo, 2020). As I explained *Rising Up, Living On*, my writing is never solitary. It is a thinking and conversing with; a pedagogy of sorts of active engagement; that which “intends to stir up, to unsettle, to implore, and to defy inaction and indifference.” (Walsh, 2023, p. 10; 2025). For me, writing in various genres or forms, including books, articles, essays, narratives, narrations, lived accounts, and personal letters, is integral to life-living.

It is in this sense that what you refer to here as my “professional life” (your term, not mine) has little separation from the personal. Moreover, and while I am now outside the academic institution, I continue my paths of learning, unlearning and relearning, of writing and thinking-doing with; with spaces, places, territories, communities, collectives, groups (some associated with universities and others not) concerned with breaking coloniality’s hold and affirming and making the possibilities of a decolonial otherwise. I guess you could say that these paths are part of my passions. Passions-interests of planting and cultivating decolonial(izing) hope, possibility, and life, increasingly difficult tasks in these present time. Passions-interests that necessarily meld with the “personal”, including the planting and cultivating of vegetables, herbs, and flowers (i.e., gardening), cooking, pilates, yoga and other exercise, and living a cosmo-relational spirituality; care and sustenance for the body, soul, and mind all intertwined. Is this not all part of decolonial praxis?

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