

# Decolonial Listening

## An Interview with Rolando Vázquez

**abstract** How do practices of decolonial listening help us move towards a more ethical relation to the world and to others? In his work and teaching, Rolando Vázquez has been developing practices of decolonial thinking and listening that seek to form relational worlds beyond the hegemonic framework of Western modernity. In this interview — what better way of talking about practices of listening — we talk about

the required humbling of modernity, about the (im)possibilities of listening to those who have been silenced and about the necessity of thinking in dialogue with others.

**Soapbox (Zoë Dankert):** In “Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: *Buen Vivir*, Relationality and the Task of Listening” (2012), you outline the importance of listening for decolonial critique. What is decolonial listening to you and how can we practice it?

**Rolando Vázquez:** For us, listening refers to a mode of relation that belongs to the decolonial or that gets activated through the decolonial. To answer your question, we first need to understand what the decolonial is about and understand what we mean by listening. We say that there is no modernity without coloniality and that there is no coloniality without modernity. There is no history of Western civilization without the history of suppression of other worlds, and this suppression continues to this day. The colonial difference is the border that gets established by this modern/colonial order and which separates what is seen, what is heard, and what is dignified from what is racialized, negated, erased, exploited, and extracted.

Coloniality is about that erasure and modernity is the forceful affirmation of the dominant world. When we look at historical reality through the tools of the modern we become deaf and incapable of listening to other worlds.

The task of listening is the task of bridging the colonial difference and it requires several things. It requires, first, what I call the humbling of modernity. If you assume that your view is the only view, or the universal value, or the contemporary view, or the view that is in fashion, or the latest view, then you cannot be in the disposition of listening or be capable of listening to what goes beyond your framework of understanding. So, in this sense, listening becomes an enormous challenge: how to humble your position, how to uncover your position when you have only learned to think and experience the real from inside the West? How can you receive and relate to realities and ways of thinking that do not belong to your framework of intelligibility? This is what I call decolonial listening. For me, it is a principle of decolonial critique, whereas critique in the West celebrates reflexivity and metatheoretical reflections, the decolonial critique is about relating to the outside of your epistemic and aesthetic framework so that all your categories, your systems of thought, your senses become located, become humbled and open to real interactions and a growing with other worlds.

**SB:** Thinking of examples of practices of listening reminds me of your article “Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing Design” (2017). Now that we stand face to face with the Anthropocene, how can listening help us move towards a different relation to the earth?

**RV:** I think we still need to be clear that the Anthropocene is a product of anthropocentrism, and anthropocentrism is one of the central axes of modernity, of the Western model of civilization. This is to say that, for us, the Anthropocene is inseparable from modernity. In a sense, the work of decolonial aesthetics and decolonial thought is the work of listening to what has been silenced. Extreme — often genocidal — colonial violences produce a sort of absolute silence. When species are extinct or when languages are extinct, you are confronted with the loss of paths into the future, that is, the loss of those trajectories that have been cut down. This is a silencing that is sometimes impossible to undo. That violence, especially in this extreme of extermination, produces a silence that makes it for us impossible to relate back to what precedes us and to bring it into the present so as to produce alternative futures. This is one of the ethical challenges of the decolonial and also where the limit of what we can do is located. When confronted with all those regions that have been silenced, the task of listening becomes the task of giving back a place in the present, of hosting

and emplacing what has been eradicated. The silencing of coloniality is ongoing and happens now through, for example, racial discrimination and enslavement.

Decolonial aesthetics is about the recovery of memories that have been silenced and that are not part of our awareness of the world. It is about enabling them to take place again through embodiment and experience. It is the possibility of undoing that displacement from history, to redefine what can become history and what can become world.

The task of listening in that sense connects to the task of justice and healing but it does not ignore the limits of what remains unbridgeable. The history of slavery is still very much alive in embodied memories, arts, poetics, communities, and food. The same goes for the genocide of the first nations of the Americas for example, but others are irretrievably lost together with languages, landscapes, species. These losses reduce the possibility of alternatives and of futurity. For us, futurity is not about innovation, but about activating the trajectories that have been erased; the heritages of humanity that have been deprived of their world and of historical existence.

We have been learning about listening as a different way of worlding the world from the philosophy of the Tojolabales, Maya peoples from Chiapas in Mexico. Carlos Lenkersdorf made a dictionary of Tojolabal with them, and also wrote about the centrality of listening in Tojolabal philosophy. For the Tojolabal,

it is nonsensical to think of a spoken word without a listened word. There is always a relationship between speaking and listening, between enunciation and reception, this principle of relationality and complementarity goes for all basic relations in life, like eating and dressing, as well as gender. This is an approach that new materialism for example lacks. They are trying to give agency to objects and materiality, but that agency is still very derivative of an anthropocentric view.

**SB:** Could you elaborate on how new materialism reproduces anthropocentrism?

**RV:** Not to all authors but, for me, generally speaking, what new materialism does is that it grounds itself in a horizon of thought that is constrained or defined by immanence, radical immanence — a limited interpretation of Deleuze as well, in my view, because it obviates the Bergsonian Deleuze and his notion of virtuality. The focus on immanence reaffirms materiality and spatiality as sites of the real. This is, in my view, yet another expression of metaphysics of modernity what Heidegger would call the metaphysics of presence. It is a thinking where materiality becomes the total horizon of intelligibility, the ground of certainty. New materialism is very interesting in many of its expressions but the problem for me is that it eliminates time which is in excess of materiality, from

the thought of the real. The questions that we address in decolonial practice belongs not only to space and the question of land and earth but also to time; we are engaged with the suffering of the past. You won't find the memories of enslavement in the immanence of the archive. The issue of justice in relation to the colonial wound is an issue that requires the understanding of time beyond what is made present. For us, the question of justice cannot be addressed from an immanent perspective. Furthermore, the question of coloniality brings us to the question of that which has been rendered out of place in historical reality. This displacement, this erasure of other worlds is precisely a matter of what has been, to put it this way, out of the field of immanence. Thus, we are concerned with what is often outside of immanence.

The vogue of new materialism tends, in my view—and I understand that this is not their intention—to erase the question of justice from academia, from the arts, and from thinking. In this way, it has become functional for the neoliberal system that wants to vacate the question of justice from critical thinking and from research and creativity. Obviously, new materialism has a right to exist and their research is very interesting but the way in which they have been taking a dominant position has functioned to reduce the question of justice in the humanities, social sciences, and the arts. For the questions the decolonial asks, immanence is not sufficient. You need to

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understand time, and in particular precedence, because we are dealing with what has happened.

**SB:** Thinking about the relation between listening and the information overload we deal with on a daily basis, and simultaneously about those histories that we do not have access to because they are silenced or exterminated, I wonder how do we ethically select the voices, subjects, or materials that we want to listen to?

**RV:** What I see happening, and what you can see clearly with the elections in the USA and Brazil, is that Google, Facebook, etcetera and their information overload produce enclosures — epistemic, aesthetic, experiential — governed by algorithms. You can only search, look and receive what you have been profiled to. This is one of the greatest dangers for the sustainment of any form of open political life. Furthermore, the colonial divide is extremely reinforced by these enclosures.

For *Going Glocal*, a program I coordinate at University College Roosevelt, I bring students to Oaxaca in Mexico, to first nation's areas that are very rich in communal life. You can see that going out of those enclosures is a shocking experience for most students. They learn so much about the reality of the world which they could not learn in billions of pages accessible through Google.

Another important element I would like to stress is the importance of sustaining conditions for

thinking. The algorithmic organization of information is making those conditions impossible. Thinking implies a different temporality that is in relation to others. Particularly thinking as listening implies a reception of worlds of meaning. Thinking in relation to questions of justice is becoming more and more rare because of these enclosures. This relates to Ivan Illich's (1973) analysis of the second watershed of technology which is when technology becomes counterproductive. The car could be a very fast technology, but when you live in a city full of cars, it becomes the slowest place on earth. We experience the same dynamic with information: we have access to all possible information, but actually, we are growing completely disinformed and isolated.

When you have the possibility of thinking with others, that is, in co-presence or in dialogue, you can use the tools of technology. This is why I would defend the power of relational thinking, of talking with others, of visiting other people in other places and engage in meaningful conversations. I think that conversations are one of the things that are being suppressed today.

biography Rolando Vázquez is associate professor of Sociology at University College Roosevelt and Utrecht University. Together with Walter D. Mignolo, he has coordinated the Decolonial Summer School at UCR since 2010. Vázquez belongs to the movement of Decolonial Thought and Aesthetics and, in 2016, wrote with Gloria Wekker et. al. the report of the Diversity Commission of the University of Amsterdam.

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