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Decolonial Reading: Which Voices Disappeared from the History of Knowledge?

World and Consciousness

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Imagine a small exhibition about the history of studying a plant. A traveller's notebooks lie under glass beside a portrait and a list of scientific publications. One page notes in pencil that information came from local residents. Their names are absent. A visitor reads the caption carefully: the traveller described, collected, discovered. People who explained where to find the plant and how to distinguish it appear only as an unnamed source of information.

This is a hypothetical scene created for the article, not an account of a particular museum. We do not yet know what each participant knew, which records survive, or why names disappeared. Yet we can already notice the story's structure: some people own the discovery; others supply material. Adding another portrait may leave that structure intact. The question therefore begins earlier: by which rules is it decided who produces knowledge here?

What this article explores

Decolonial reading helps investigate how relations of domination enter classifications, curricula, citation practices, and understandings of reliable knowledge. It requires distinguishing authors and historical situations. Below, we turn to Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. Their works do not form one doctrine; one author's criticism of another is part of the conversation. Contemporary examples and questions are our development of these problems, rather than statements by the thinkers named.

1. Why changing political status does not settle the question of knowledge

For Quijano, coloniality designates a structure of power that can persist after formal colonial administration ends. At the beginning of "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," he connects the historical formation of racial classifications with the organisation of labour and global domination. Eurocentrism here concerns more than an author's origins: it concerns the order through which a particular experience becomes a universal measure. This is a specific historical and theoretical account requiring discussion, not a ready explanation for every injustice. Quijano, 2000.

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Try understanding the distinction through our own example. An educational institution can change its name, leadership, and official language while required books, assessment rules, and its image of an educated person change much less. Formal decisions and everyday structures of recognition move at different speeds. This does not mean every retained rule is harmful. A more modest conclusion follows: a political event alone does not explain how authority is produced.

Two hasty moves should be avoided. The first declares the past finished because state institutions changed. The second describes the present as though nothing changed at all. Between them remains historical investigation: which dependencies persist, which weakened, and which emerged anew? Who may challenge a classification, and who must accept it first to gain permission to speak?

If every existing order is called colonial in advance, the concept stops distinguishing situations. A good argument should reveal something: an exclusion mechanism, a category's particular history, an unequal distribution of power to establish rules. Moral disapproval alone is insufficient. A reader may ask which observation would change the researcher's conclusion. A critical perspective grows stronger when it allows that question about itself.

2. The source of information and the author of an explanation occupy different places

Return to the hypothetical exhibition. Several histories are possible. The traveller may have recorded a description long familiar to local people. They may have first compared observations from different interlocutors. They may have mistranslated a name. The interlocutors may deliberately have disclosed only some information. Documents must be studied before choosing among these accounts. A decolonial question does not authorise inventing missing evidence, even if the resulting story would look fairer.

The allocation of roles can nevertheless be investigated. Someone who knows where a plant grows may be considered an informant; someone who transfers the information into an acknowledged genre, a researcher. This distinction sometimes describes a real difference in work performed. It becomes a problem when one side is systematically denied the possibility of coauthorship, checking an interpretation, or determining the future of knowledge they provided.

Missing names are therefore not the only issue. Who chose the question? Who could refuse? Who could access the final text? Who received education, payment, and a chance to continue researching? An added acknowledgement at a book's end may correct one omission while leaving other relationships intact. Conversely, shared authorship does not guarantee equal participation if key decisions exclude one author.

Acknowledging contribution must also be distinguished from establishing truth. Fair attribution does not make every reported assertion proven. Correcting an error does not cancel the contribution of someone who helped formulate a question. Both kinds of work can happen together: revising authorship's history and examining content. Merging them creates a false choice between respecting people and attending to evidence.

Including a new name also differs from changing the order of explanation. Suppose a photograph of a local interlocutor is added to our display, but the caption merely says they helped the traveller. Their role is visible, yet the question still belongs to someone else: what matters is what the recognised discovery needed. If the catalogue examines the interlocutor's own questions, methods of checking, and reasons for sharing particular information, a different narrative structure emerges. They become a participant in the history of thought, rather than only in the history of serving someone else's inquiry.

This reconsideration does not require artificially equalising contributions. Perhaps the traveller genuinely organised a collection and formulated a new classification. Perhaps the work would have been impossible without the interlocutor's knowledge. Both dependencies can be recognised without allocating honours equally beforehand. A fair description accurately identifies roles and grounds of recognition. It is lost both when one role is concealed and when another is invented in a wish to repair the past.

3. Lugones: adding women to a ready-made scheme is insufficient

In "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System," Lugones examines the mutual constitution of racial and gender classifications. She enters critical dialogue with Quijano: in her view, analysing coloniality requires deeper inquiry into how concepts of sex and gender themselves participate in domination. Her argument also challenges speaking of women as a homogeneous group while missing racial differences. What matters here is framing the problem, not claiming that one scheme has explained every society. Lugones, 2007.

Our contemporary example is a questionnaire about access to education. Its designers first divide participants into men and women, then ask separately about language, income, and residence. This may be useful for a particular task. Yet its structure assumes that groups are already defined and other differences merely add attributes. The right to count as a suitable pupil may instead depend on a combination that cannot be assembled from independent table rows.

Suppose two women formally have the same educational standing. One is invited to speak for a professional community; the other is asked about everyday experience but not to discuss methodology. A study noticing only the number of women speakers may miss their different

roles. The question concerns both presence and which kinds of speech each person is permitted.

This does not make every category useless or comparisons impossible. We should examine what a chosen distinction does and whom it renders invisible. Historical assertions particularly require caution: sex, kinship, and power in a society cannot be reconstructed from a general theory without local evidence. Criticising a universal model becomes unconvincing if another universal history replaces it, equally insensitive to disagreements and change.

4. Linda Tuhiwai Smith: research can change who owns the question

In the introduction to *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes from the position of the colonised and examines research's connection to imperial appropriation. She draws attention to knowledge and cultural forms extracted while their creators lose recognition and opportunities to determine their futures. In the foreword to the second edition, she explains the book's orientation toward new ways of researching with Indigenous peoples and their own research aspirations. This is one author's position, not a commission to speak for every Indigenous community. Smith, 2012, foreword and introduction.

Imagine research on a local body of water. A university team wants to describe traditional names for stretches of shore. Residents consider a construction project's consequences more urgent. Both tasks may matter. But if the first receives funding while the second disappears as insufficiently scientific, power has already been allocated before the first interview. Agreeing to answer questions does not mean participating in choosing the goal.

At least three possibilities can be distinguished. Participants are informed about a finished project. They may revise individual questions. They help define the task, interpret results, and set terms of dissemination. These possibilities differ significantly. A small study cannot always implement the last form, but an honest description of participation is better than a broad promise of collaboration that means only access to interlocutors.

"Community," however, does not identify one person with a ready will. Older and younger members, those who left and those who stayed, and people in different professions may diverge in interests. Meeting a recognised representative does not settle whom they are authorised to represent. Both researcher and local leader may conceal disagreement in the language of the common good. Decolonial work loses meaning if it changes only who may speak for everyone else.

5. What translation does, and what it cannot restore

Knowledge travels between languages together with choices of meaning. Suppose one word in our hypothetical archive designates a tract of land, relationships with it, and participants' obligations. A translator chooses "property" because catalogue readers understand it. We do not assert that this happened in a particular tradition. We examine a possibility: translation may make an expression accessible while imposing another structure of questions.

The first examination is concrete: who proposed the translation, and on which examples was it tested? Can a speaker of the language explain when the equivalent misleads? Are alternatives available? This work takes time and attention to usage. Declaring untranslatability without further explanation can itself appropriate authority: a reader is asked to trust a sole intermediary because independent checking is supposedly impossible.

Keeping the original word sometimes helps but does not settle the problem automatically. It can become an attractive symbol detached from relationships and practices that gave it meaning. Respectful-looking language then accompanies the old superficial understanding. Conversely, translation in ordinary words need not erase a distinction if its author explains choices, shows limitations, and preserves a possibility of objection.

Translation also concerns genre. A story, song, map, and list of propositions allow different connections among their parts. Turning a story into propositions performs useful work for one task while producing a new object. Readers can carefully distinguish original form, translation, and scholarly commentary. This does not guarantee complete understanding; it prevents commentary quietly becoming the source's only voice.

Translation's problem becomes particularly noticeable when a reader demands a short answer. Suppose a catalogue compiler wants one word for comparing several descriptions of a tract of land. A detailed account seems inconvenient. Yet inconvenience can reveal different things: poor editing, excessive explanation, or a real mismatch between subjects. The last cannot be repaired by shortening alone. Honest comparison may need a distinction the initial table did not anticipate.

On the other hand, endlessly demanding context can leave readers unable to understand anything. If every short explanation is declared violence, discussion of difference becomes impossible. The task is therefore not simply choosing between an exhaustive account and simplification. We can identify the translation's purpose, offer a limited equivalent, and name cases where it stops working. This preserves accessibility without presenting it as complete identity.

6. An empty place in an archive does not authorise inventing an answer

An absent record admits many explanations. Someone may have lacked access to writing. A record may have been lost, rejected by an editor, or deliberately never made. A participant may have refused to tell an outsider. Treating every silence as the consequence of one mechanism prevents a researcher from hearing these differences. Good historical reconstruction includes its own limits.

A hypothetical catalogue can say: the interlocutor’s name is unestablished, their contribution is mentioned by the diarist, and no other evidence has yet been found. This is less striking than confidently naming a concealed coauthor. Yet it separates documentation from supposition and leaves room for inquiry. Uncertainty is part of respect: a person is not assigned a role they might themselves have rejected.

A harder case arises when information survives but its availability does not mean consent to every dissemination. Someone may have told a story for a particular circle without envisaging publication in a search engine. We may technically be able to copy a record while lacking sufficient grounds to consider that appropriate. This is a practical question of agreements and context, not a ready legal judgement about a particular archive.

Acknowledging access limits must not automatically place all knowledge under the most influential representative’s control. An individual storyteller’s rights, collective agreements, and dissenters’ interests may conflict. “Tradition” cannot resolve this without specifying who interprets its requirements. Sometimes the answer is not publishing; sometimes narrower access; sometimes recognising that no agreed answer yet exists. One universal rule cannot replace discussion of a particular situation.

7. Rivera Cusicanqui: critical language can also serve domination

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui criticises academic relationships in which research centres claim the right to produce prestigious theory while other participants supply material. Her polemic also concerns authoritative decolonial language: using such concepts does not itself change practice. This internal conflict matters to reading because it prevents taking decoloniality as a unanimous movement with a ready list of correct authors. Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012.

Consider our own example. A publisher issues a series on forgotten voices. Outwardly it is convincing: new cover names, a critical foreword, and several languages. Yet contracts, selection, and authors’ ability to challenge editing remain opaque. The series may contain good books while reproducing relationships it promises to investigate. Checking content and checking production conditions are again different tasks.

The opposite problem arises when only a narrow circle of recognised representatives may address a subject. A new canon gains its own periphery: an inconvenient local author, researcher from another school, or person without an academic post is again insufficiently suitable. Redrawing authority's geographical map does not make the order open. We should ask whether it permits objections from people it declares included.

This is no reason to reduce critical work to accusations of hypocrisy. Principles and practice often enter tensions that can be revealed and addressed. Addressing them requires specific changes: manuscript access, a right to reply, clear distribution of work, recognition of a translator or coauthor. Expressive theory does not do that work itself. Sometimes a small procedural revision has more consequences than another foreword about radical rupture.

8. An assertion's origins do not settle its reliability

The demand for authenticity also deserves criticism. In our contemporary thought experiment, an editor invites someone from a community whose history was rarely published. The author wants to write about contemporary city life, but the editor expects traditional ceremonies. The first text seems insufficiently representative. An invitation to speak thus comes with instructions about what a suitable representative should say. A person receives a place on condition that they confirm a chosen image.

Rejecting the demand does not devalue tradition. It recognises varied relationships to it: continuation, change, criticism, partial participation, or distance. If only one form is authentic, other people become inconvenient witnesses to their own society. Decolonial reading therefore needs both new representatives and an author's right not to meet the expectation behind their inclusion.

The reverse caution matters too. An author need not represent everyone, but their personal position does not ground a description of the whole collective. We can read it as a particular voice, identify its place, and compare documented objections. Comparison must not become an endless search for someone confirming a researcher's favourite thesis. Otherwise, plurality is merely a stock of convenient quotations.

There is a temptation to reverse the former hierarchy: treat all external knowledge as suspect and all local knowledge as true. This may look like defending dignity while depriving people of the right to err, disagree, and learn from each other. It demands flawless collective wisdom. Someone noticing an error in a familiar explanation becomes a threat to authenticity's image.

Different questions are needed. How did the assertion arise? Why did it acquire authority? Which evidence supports it? Who bears consequences of its use? Answers may diverge. Knowledge acquired unjustly may contain accurate information; that does not justify its acquisition. Respectful collaboration may reach a wrong conclusion; that does not make

collaboration unnecessary. Distinction permits criticism of both levels without destroying one through the other.

The same applies to concepts' origins. A term's European origins prove neither universality nor inapplicability. Local origins do not exempt a concept from questions about limits. In a particular task, several descriptions can be compared to see which distinctions each retains. Perhaps none suffices; perhaps mutual criticism can refine them. This outcome does not require declaring all traditions harmonious beforehand.

Decolonial reading and Latin American philosophy of liberation meet here without coinciding. We can ask who is excluded from social life's structure and how responsibility toward them changes. We can investigate the historical production of categories making exclusion seem natural. The questions may support each other. Yet differences of tasks, authors, and debates remain significant: joining them under one attractive label would conceal part of history again.

9. A reading practice: seeing one page's structure

For independent reflection, choose a small passage: a museum caption, textbook introduction, questionnaire, or popular discovery story. One page is enough. First reconstruct its explicit content: who asserts what, which evidence they offer, and what they acknowledge as unknown. Criticism becomes more precise when accusation does not precede reading.

Then examine role distribution. Who owns "investigated," "explained," and "discovered"? Who only supplies information or appears as an observed object? Is the allocation explained? Sometimes the explanation will convince. Sometimes an unnoticed editorial habit appears. Different roles are not themselves proof of injustice, but yield a question that can be investigated.

Next, find boundaries of translation and interpretation. Where does a document end and commentary begin? Which apparently obvious words may carry a contested distinction? What happens to the conclusion if a word is replaced by a fuller description? You can write two caption versions: original and clarified. The clarified one need not accuse; its main merit may be an honest unknown.

Finally, ask about possible objections. Who could disagree with this representation, and where could a response appear? An absent person cannot check our imagined reconstruction of their view. Documented objections, grounded questions, and suppositions can therefore be recorded separately. This is a voluntary practice of attention, not an obligation to speak publicly, disclose personal history, or independently settle rights disputes over materials.

10. The history of knowledge grows more complex, and therefore clearer

Such reading has its own discipline of negative results. A researcher may suspect exclusion and discover clear acknowledgement in a less familiar part of an archive. They may find that a presumed community agreement never existed. They may establish appropriation's precise mechanism without recovering a name. All three outcomes deserve description. Accepting only a result matching the initial expectation deprives critical work of its capacity to learn from material.

Question, evidence, and conclusion should therefore be separated. A question opens inquiry; evidence limits permissible answers; a conclusion retains conditions for reconsideration. Respect for previously excluded voices needs precision no less than respect for recognised authors. It does not make them convenient characters in a new story or force absent people to confirm our current beliefs.

Return finally to the exhibition. Research may place an interlocutor's name beside the diary. It may reveal diary errors and show that one discovery is the wrong framing. Or its principal result may precisely identify what remains unknown. None must confirm a visitor's favourite theory beforehand.

Decolonial reading gains strength when it questions its own means. Who chooses the new history? How does it treat dissenters? Does it turn participation into a predetermined role? Does respect for an unknown person become a reason to speak instead of them? These questions preserve differences between inquiry, recognition, and appropriation.

Knowledge need not lose testability to gain a fairer history. An expanded history need not finish in a common worldview where all voices finally say the same thing. Sometimes its result is a more precise understanding of disagreement, clearer responsibility for one's own account, and the possibility of keeping a place open for an answer we do not yet have.

Sources used

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