

Decolonizing Brazil



Decolonizing Brazil is [a project and website-work](#) by Maria Thereza Alves in collaboration with indigenous students from UFSCar (Universidade Federal de São Carlos) in Sorocaba: Aldine Tukano (Aldine Daiana Barreto), Cagüü?cü Tikuna (Lucas Quirino), Kaly Tariano (Agostinho Brazão Barbosa), Kuhupi Waura, Ñorõ Tuyuka (Reginaldo Ramos), Omawalieni Baniwa (Eliane C. Guilherme), Potira Kambeba (Rosangela B. Braga), Rayana Atikum (Rayana S. Freire), Sileia Tukano (Sileia Massa Alves) and Sunia Yebámahsã (Jonas Prado Barbosa). The work was realized in 2018 as a result of an invitation made by the students and Sesc Sorocaba. Decolonizing Brazil is a result of a series of workshops held from July through August 2018 at the UFSCar Sorocaba Campus, at Flona (National Forest of Ipanema), the Guyra Pepo Reservation and Sesc Sorocaba. These encounters resulted in performative actions, an e-book, seven language magazines, videos and theater pieces, which are available in the website and were exhibited at Sesc Sorocaba.

During the making of “A Full Void,” a work for the Frestas Triennale held at Sesc in Sorocaba in 2017, which attempted to question the denial of the indigenous presence in the history of Sorocaba (built with the forced labor of 400 enslaved indigenous people) a workshop was held with indigenous students at UFSCar (Federal University of São Carlos).

We began with a study aid I compiled of texts by internationally respected indigenous intellectuals from New Zealand, Canada and the USA such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ng?ti Awa e Ng?ti Porou iwi, writer, professor of indigenous education at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand), Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota, writer, theologian and historian), Jimmie Durham (Cherokee, artist, writer and poet), Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish, independent curator and writer), Richard Hill, (Cree, independent curator, art critic, historian and at the time, Research Chair of Indigenous Studies, Emily Carr University, Vancouver, Canada) among others.

The students were frustrated that texts by indigenous intellectuals from Brazil were not included in university curricula. The study aid was designed with this in mind; to exactly bring attention to the lack of publications by indigenous intellectuals in Brazil due to a policy of exclusion based on

colonialism. In Brazil, indigenous intellectuals are not invited to speak, write or participate in any activities that are not concerning indigenous issues.

In New Zealand, USA and Canada, indigenous intellectuals cannot be ignored in many academic fields for example, Post-Colonial Studies—which includes texts by such indigenous thinkers as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Jimmie Durham. In Brazil, seminal texts by indigenous thinkers from abroad continue untranslated and are therefore not actually part of the contemporary discourse. These texts are available only to a few Brazilian intellectuals who are overwhelmingly of European descent and who are privileged to have acquired English. They thus become the only voice resulting in the usurpation of the post-colonial discourse. For example, we see the writing of Linda Tuhiwai Smith being sabotaged by Euro-Brazilians in order to defend their position within neo-colonialism, while Indigenous multi-lingual intellectuals in Brazil have no access to such texts. The nascent decolonial discourse which has begun in Brazil has been appropriated to sustain and continue the power structures of Euro-descendant Brazilians.

In Brazil there existed 1300 languages (not dialects) before the European invasion. Today there are about 300. The ongoing colonial process continues to destroy peoples and cultures and thus languages; some of which have only a handful or only one speaker.

The Marquis de Pombal, who administered the Portuguese Empire in the 18th century, prohibited the speaking of Guarani on pain of death. When my father's wife sees a monument in his honor she screams at it/him. Religious institutions such as those of the Salesians, which established boarding schools for indigenous children, particularly in the Amazon region, punished indigenous children in their care, for speaking their languages or practicing their culture. These boarding schools—institutions of cultural genocide—were closed only in the late 20th century after testimony by Álvaro Sampaio, from the Tukano people at the Russell Tribunal in Rotterdam.

I once read a study that brought a shocking clarity on genocide. In the colonial process of the Americas a minimum genocide rate of 50% was not uncommon. Those are the countries that still have a “visible” indigenous population such as Mexico, Bolivia and Peru. The rate in Brazil is much higher—I would imagine over 90%. (Due to colonial research structures, population figures for pre-invasion Brazil are unreliable, favoring very low figures which act to diminish the extent of genocide and therefore of responsibility of the Portuguese and Brazilians. It is even difficult to access through FUNAI the current number of indigenous peoples killed for the year 2017. Thus post-colonial discourse is thwarted.) The study reported that rates of genocide for a population does not adequately represent the level of destruction of a people. For example, community leaders, doctors, educators, scientists, philosophers, artists, poets and elders who share a greater responsibility for the community's well being would be murdered at a higher rate than the general population. Thus the knowledge of a nation destroyed through genocide is at a much higher rate than the official figure. It is therefore a cruel mockery, especially with the continued colonial practice of assassinations of indigenous leaders and activists today, (data from CIMI - Indigenist

Missionary Council “show that between 2003 and 2016 at least 1009 indigenous people were killed as a result of land disputes or in defense of their rights.”) that indigenous people are held responsible for “having lost” their language or culture.

FOOTNOTE: It would take me several years of investigation to understand the disparity between colonial genocide rates of Mexico and Brazil. The lands now known as Brazil was, before colonization, in many circumstances a supreme model of democracy in daily action where positions of leadership were in continuous negotiation through consensus building; unlike Mexico which had some highly hierarchical societal structures. The latter is favored by the colonial process since the removal of the principal leader and her/his replacement with a favored puppet or European allows the hierarchy to continue. However in the democratic societies of some indigenous peoples of pre-invasion Brazil, the killing of a perceived leader identified by the colonizer as a “cacique” would result in the spokesperson’s immediate replacement through consensual practices by the community. And thus over 1800 indigenous nations in Brazil were massacred because they would not accept a non-consensual decision making model which would have facilitated the colonization process.

Maximino Rodrigues, a Guarani activist of the Jaguarpirú Reservation in Dourados in Mato Grosso do Sul (the most violent state against indigenous peoples in Brazil) was contacted about the possibility of making ceramic objects which were an important element of “A Full Void” and would be placed throughout various public places in Sorocaba to make visible the indigenous presence of the city. The Guarani communities in São Paulo State had first been contacted but they no longer produce ceramics. Although Mr. Rodrigues does not make ceramics, he agreed to participate and would learn how to. He began research by interviewing the elders of the reservation. He explained that many wept as they remembered the traditional ceramic making process that made up part of their cultural patrimony but which is no longer practiced.

During the first two hundred years of colonization, the principal economic activity of São Paulo was the sale of enslaved indigenous people who were captured from the Atlantic coast to the frontier with Argentina and Paraguay and even further north. Entire indigenous communities, when confronted with these assaults would flee, and anything that was heavy was left behind. After hundreds of years of fleeing, little effort would be spent on the making of objects which cannot be easily carried and thus ceramics ceased to be manufactured. Mr. Rodrigues saw the bringing back of the art of ceramic making as an act of resistance. He taught himself with the help of the elders to find the appropriate clay, dig it up, clean it, make the ceramics and finally fire them. The ceramic elements that the public encountered throughout Sorocaba were the result of this revitalization of Guarani culture. A strand of simple seeds made into a necklace, sold at Guarani reservations throughout São Paulo, for example, is therefore an act of cultural resistance in the face of active cultural and physical genocide.

During the workshop at UFSCar in 2017, students interviewed their non-indigenous colleagues at the campus and asked questions: “What did they learn about indigenous peoples in school? What contributions are made by indigenous peoples? Have they ever met an indigenous person or visited a reservation? Were they aware that there were indigenous students at UFSCar?” One Black student answered that there had been no contributions made by indigenous peoples. Colonization is a process that makes us, those who have been colonized wounded internally and we must therefore also struggle to decolonize ourselves. For a project with AMAAIC (Association of the Indigenous Agro-Forest Agents’ Movement of Acre), the Brazilian translator of Japanese descent translated a quote which referred to an indigenous Huni Kuin historian as a Huni Kuin “character” instead of an historian. I do think this was done unconsciously. Colonization had convinced the translator that an indigenous people could not possibly have a historian.

At the end of the workshop in 2017, the indigenous students at UFSCar requested that I return as they wanted to make a book on indigenous intellectuals in Brazil. *Decolonizing Brazil* is a project and a website-work that is the result of this request and which is generously supported by Sesc Sorocoba. The students who collaborated with the different elements of the project are: Aldine Tukano (Aldine Daiana Barreto), Cagüü?cü Tikuna (Lucas Quirino), Kaly Tariano (Agostinho Brazão Barbosa), Kuhupi Waura, Ñorõ Tuyuka (Reginaldo Ramos), Omawalieni Baniwa (Eliane C. Guilherme), Potira Kambeba (Rosangela B. Braga), Rayana Atikum (Rayana S. Freire), Sileia Tukano (Sileia Massa Alves), and Sunia Yebámahsã (Jonas Prado Barbosa).

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During [Decolonizing Brazil](http://www.descolonizandobrasil.com.br) a series of workshops were held from July through August 2018 at the UFSCar campus, at Flona (National Forest of Ipanema), the Guyra Pepo Reservation and Sesc Sorocoba. These encounters resulted in performative actions, seven magazines as well as audio recordings of indigenous languages, videos and theater pieces, a meetings at the Guyra Pepo Reservation, and an e-book which are available in the website and were exhibited at Sesc Sorocoba.

During the process of the work’s making the students of UFSCar elaborated their histories, voices and ideas about who they are and how they want to be heard on their own terms. They developed their own expressions to resist quotidian colonial forces adversely affecting indigenous realities.

At the time of my research in 2017, I went to FLONA, (National Forest of Ipanema) which with the use of the labor of enslaved Tupiniquin people, had been an ironworks since the late 16th century until the late 19th century. After the decimation of the Tupiniquins through genocide and slavery

practices by the Portuguese and then Brazilian people, enslaved Africans provided forced labor until the late 19th century when slavery was “abolished”—although the practice continues today. Enslaved Africans had a lifespan of 30 years while working at the ovens of the forge. “The father of modern Brazilian historical scholarship,” Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen, was born there. It was his father who built the high temperature ovens and managed the ironworks. Varnhagen’s extremely racist viewpoint against indigenous peoples and Afro-Brazilians is a result of his upbringing at Fazenda de Ipanema (now FLONA). “The father of modern Brazilian historical scholarship,” supported genocidal colonial wars against indigenous peoples and writes in his *Discurso Preliminar* (Preliminary Discourse) of 1854: “...So far from condemning the use of coercion through force to civilize our Indians, we are persuaded that no other means could have been employed; and that we had to do this ourselves for the benefit of peace, which will increase their useful labor, in favor of human dignity, which is vexed in the presence of so much degradation, and even to the benefit of these same unfortunates, and that when in our cities progress to the condition in which our Africans find themselves in, they would live more tranquilly and freer in the city than they live, always horrified in their fearful freedom in the woods...”

As we were standing outside the main house of the estate, our guide explained that during cold weather, the cavern-like rooms with iron-grated entrances below the foundation level of the building held enslaved African peoples. They were whipped in order to keep them moving and thus their bodies would provide “heat” for the white family living above. This is where Varnhagen was born and thus this is the basis of modernity in Brazil. The ironworks closed and was transferred to the Ministry of War and later the Ministry of Agriculture and a nuclear reactor was installed in 1980 by the Marines. In 1992 the estate was declared the National Forest of Ipanema, an area of ecological conservation albeit with a nuclear reactor. Until the formation of FLONA, all activities resulted in the destruction of the Atlantic Rainforest. During my visit at FLONA I met with Rafael Gonçalves Dorival, fourth generation resident at the ironworks and who is an environmental guide. He explained that there is an attempt by a group committed to an inclusive history of the area that includes the original peoples and the Africans who arrived as enslaved labor. Presently, the official history of the park abounds with monuments to “the father of modern Brazilian historical scholarship” and didactic material takes overwhelming pride of the ironwork’s involvement in the industrialization of Sorocaba and in providing war materials for the Paraguayan War. Those who suffered the brutalities of enslavement are not mentioned and have no monuments. Ceramics made by Sr. Rodrigues were placed on several sites of FLONA to bring back the indigenous history of the place.

For the first day of our workshop in FLONA in 2018, in response to the denial of indigenous history, the students used face paint as an attempt to re-vitalize the indigenous presence in the area. Returning from the climb to the main monument in honor of “The father of modern Brazilian historical scholarship”, two students were in front and paused nervously. I wondered why and then

saw that they would have to pass a large group of non-indigenous schoolchildren who were spread on both sides of the trail. I quickly asked the organizers in our group to form a phalange which would place the students in the middle. Although no comments were made, the racist stares were so debilitating to the students that on the second day at FLONA, the students did not use face paint. However on the second day, as we were waiting on the trail, again by the aforesaid monument, a group of young white scouts who had been shouting racist "war whoops" came down in face paint. It was disheartening to see that it is perfectly acceptable to dress up as an 'Indian' but not to be an indigenous person.

In FLONA, we had squares of cloth of our favorite colors which we sewed together and with which we realized performative actions in order to *Retomar* (re-take) an ancient indigenous path that cuts through the area and which as a result of contemporary colonial practices has been named after a white male. These actions strengthened a local movement that would like to rename the indigenous trail as the "Tupiniquin Trail". We also cut off sections of our cloth and performed *Retomar* actions dedicated to specific indigenous leaders and peoples and left these monuments on site.

And the students continued *Retomar* actions on the campus of UFSCar.

During the workshop, the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro burnt down on September 2nd. A list follows in the order that either reporters, or the public lamented the loss of the objects in the museum's collection: a fresco from Pompeii, a collection of Egyptian mummies, Roman and Greek statuary, a meteorite, dinosaurs, botanical and zoological specimens, and lastly indigenous artefacts. 130,000 pieces that belonged to indigenous peoples were thought to have been totally destroyed as well as almost all of the indigenous language archive which held documentation and recordings from the last 200 years of 160 languages some of which are now extinct. However, the first mention was of a fresco from Pompeii. José Urutau, an indigenous leader, linguist and researcher of the National Museum said, "It was a linguisticide, an epistemicide, when they exterminate all knowledge, all the culture of a people."

The existence today of 300 languages in Brazil should be seen by intellectuals in Brazil as the standard of a “post colonial” process. Instead of celebrating this gift of an amazing diversity of thinking and speaking, barriers are erected which penalize the original peoples for not speaking or writing a European language. The students who participated in the workshop in 2018 speak a total of nine indigenous languages. Due to the lack of indigenous language courses offered at UFSCar, the students produced publications in their maternal tongues; Tikuna, Baniwa, Tuyuka, Kambeba, Tukano, Wauja and Yebámahsã—which are available in the website along with audio recordings. I ask of the education system of Brazil, “Do universities offer indigenous language classes? If not, is the university actively participating in contemporary cultural destruction and oppression by excluding indigenous languages?”

During the process of the making of this work, we received news of the Guarani Mbya from the Guyra Pepo Reservation, in Tapiraí (a town close to Sorocaba). The students met with the community’s leaders: Mr. Jose Fernandes Soares, William Macena and Nilson da Silva who together with more than 60 Guarani Mbya returned to these ancestrally indigenous lands in June 2018. These lands were handed over as compensation for the loss of the land where they formally resided due the construction of the Rodoanel Beltway in São Paulo City inaugurated in 2002. The government transported the families to Tapiraí in the winter, leaving them there without housing or food. The students decided that this history would be part of the project and the website.

A series of videos and theater pieces, written, directed and acted by the students documented their daily life at the university. All these actions confronted the complexities of negotiating spaces that do not admit their colonial past and are therefore deeply entangled in contemporary colonial practices which are routinely manifested, such as in the daily use of the derogatory colonial misnomer of “Indians,” rather than the term, indigenous peoples.

During discussions on the book which the students were writing, at the workshop in UFSCar - Sorocaba Campus, they asked if an intellectual must have a university degree. As one of the first in my family to attain a university education, I do not see how a university degree and critical thinking are necessarily co-commitment to each other. The students at UFSCar thought it imperative to write about intellectuals who are important to them as young thinkers. Indigenous peoples in Brazil are excluded as protagonists from the official narrative of history.

The primary efforts of indigenous peoples throughout these 518 years of colonization is for the recognition of the communities’ lands which has only recently been guaranteed due to the long struggles by the communities for indigenous rights to be included in the Federal Constitution of

1988. However, these rights are ignored and lands continue to remain un-demarcated. As a result, many of the intellectuals chosen by the students for the *Decolonizing Brazil* e-book are community leaders or activists who are active in defense of the land as well as promoting revitalization of indigenous languages and culture which has been decimated by the violent process of colonization which continues today and can be seen in the increasing number of assassinations of indigenous peoples throughout Brazil. Many of the intellectuals chosen do not have published texts and thus due to the importance of orality in indigenous cultures, the preferred mode of research was interviews. The result, or actually a beginning, is this e-book written by indigenous thinkers of UFSCar on indigenous intellectuals, with the hope of a printed publication.

Rayana Atikum (Rayana S. Freire), in her essay on “Djukurna Krenak: The guardian of the knowledge of her people” writes “So I see, how important it is to share and map indigenous leaders. Although they are those that history does not really consider; they are the great philosophers, educators, teachers and defenders of the Brazilian nation. They carry with them the belief in change, in the process of rebuilding in order to strive for a better future.”

Through the many levels of interactions between artistic practice and decolonial movements a new ground was tested and elaborated on which the students enabled themselves and us to create ideas. We hope this work contributes to the beginning of a truly decolonizing discourse so that we can together imagine a future.