# [SLIDE 1][[1]](#endnote-1) Decolonizing Networked Intercultural Rhetorical Encounters

## Introduction

Good afternoon, thank you all for being here. My presentation today is fundamentally an attempt to recognize and wrestle with how we might “decolonize” the professional and technical communication networks created by the rapidly proliferating ecology of digital tools defining and transforming global knowledge work. It is also an attempt to think critically about the methods and methodologies that we use to study this ecology, as themselves sites of contestation in the broader decolonizing project in academia.

Today I am going to first summarize research I conducted at a binational, multilingual company on the US-Mexico border. Then I will discuss some salient findings some that study regarding power dynamics in a digitally mediated intercultural encounter—dynamics I think have potential to help us think through how we might decolonize networked work environments. However, I also want to critically reflect on how the “coordinating” process I used for the research is itself potentially “decolonizing.” The word “potentially” here is doing a significant amount of work. “Decolonizing,” like concepts of “wokeness,” “allyship,” and “antiracist,” are not necessarily labels someone can simply take up, apply to one’s self as an identifier, or wield on my own recognizance. To participate in the decolonizing project is really something—as a matter of fairness and justice—that must be recognized in effect and not in intention.[[2]](#endnote-2)

## Summary of research/findings

### Case Study Overview

Participants at my research site inhabited a variety of “liminal” spaces. The national border is the most ideologically, socially, and materially obvious. **[SLIDE 2]** Border Products [BP][[3]](#endnote-3) is the company/administrative office that manages sales and the movement of materials out of the US into Mexico for use in production by their sister company, *Productos de la Frontera, SA* [*PdlF*]. BP also manages the return of manufactured goods into the US and beyond. Midwest Products [MP] and Home Product Corp [HPC] were two of these sister companies’ major customers in the Midwest US—all operating in accordance with the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]. HPC is the larger of the two, but MP has the longer historical relationship with BP/*PdlF*.

**[SLIDE 3]** In this studyI was specifically interested in how digital communication tools (email, WhatsApp, smartphones, etc.) defined and transformed rhetorical work in intercultural encounters.

### Theoretical Frames

**[SLIDE 4]** My theoretical frame for working in these unique, digitally-mediated rhetorical situations was to use Activity Theory (AT) categories in a coordinated way with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) categories as my “lenses” in these situations.

### AT Map of Case

**[SLIDE 5]** One of my foundational assumptions was that in an intercultural encounter one could first use AT categories to help reach a kind of “stasis” in the digitally mediated encounter. This would help begin navigating the complexity of the situation. That complexity is compounded by the double mediation created by digital tools + “cultural difference.” So crucial in this situation is the “object/ive(s)” governing one’s own actions in relation to the object/ive(s) governing the actions of a perceived cultural other.

**[SLIDE 6]** The first step then was to map the research site in accordance with AT categories. This enabled me to stabilize a complex set of relationships in what I hoped would be non-reductive ways. That would then allow me to see how digital tools were shaping the broader activity. But I was aware from the outset that AT categories would be insufficient by themselves to enable an analysis of *all* that was going on in this very complex, networked activity.

### Coordinating AT/ANT

My suggestion that we “coordinate” AT and ANT as theoretical frames is admittedly novel, but I think warranted for a variety of reasons. AT only captures so much, it tends to focus on learning over time and contradictions within activity systems. As Nardi (2005) and Spinuzzi (2008) note, it struggles to track “power” and “persuasion” in activity, as well as what motivates the *creation* of object/ive(s) in a given activity.

**[SLIDE 7]** I’ve found ANT, specifically its methodological “symmetry” (Spinuzzi, 2015), especially valuable for studying the mediation of digital tools in mono- or multi-cultural contexts. As a frame it destabilizes how tools are perceived. Rather than simply being something we humans *use*, this stance helps us see how those tools *act* **on** (use?) us. This is important to note especially the more complex the ecology of digital communication tools become. But more broadly the “sociocultural” approach (AT for me) needs the “materialist” or “posthumanist” approach (ANT, in my case) to navigate the complexity of the world—especially when it comes to power’s role in persuasion. Power and persuasion flow discursively and non-discursively through (or are “stopped up by”) the non-human actant as well as through the conscious discursive choices of thinking/speaking human beings. **[SLIDE 7: Animation 1]** So ANT, in my view, is a means for cultivating a “disposition” amidst our more intuitive socio-cultural stance[[4]](#endnote-4) that, as a second move in any moment of AT analysis, adopts a more symmetrical, “flat” stance towards the world.

**[SLIDE 8]** There is substantial precedence for supplementing AT with other analytical frames (some of which I list here). Lest we think this is simply the result of researchers’ failure to allow ANT, the “new materialist,”[[5]](#endnote-5) or “posthumanist” stances to “come in to their own” as the sole frame of analysis in a given situation, Rose and Walton argue in an exceptional sigdoc from 2015 that very real ethical challenges/problems linger amidst the new materialist and posthumanist frameworks. They argue we must continue to attend to the “sociocultural” along with these other frames of reference in order to cope with these ethical challenges inherent to materialist/posthuman approaches. I will argue momentarily that we should just embrace this limitation and intentionally “camp out” in the destabilized uncertainty created by moving back and forth between sociocultural and “materialist” perspectives.

### Digitally mediated intercultural rhetorical encounters

Returning to my study: **[SLIDE 9]** Within the larger activity, I mapped what could be plausibly described as cultural “borders” using national identifiers, linguistic differences, differences produced by individuals’ migration histories, etc. and traced different kinds of rhetorical encounters by the type of digital mediation.

### Example Exchange

**[SLIDE 9: Animation 1]** I zeroed in on several specific exchanges that were at once typical but also uniquely illuminating. **[SLIDE 10 + Animation 1]** One was a particular WhatsApp exchange in which the office manager from BP’s historically significant customer MP was asking about an order whose shipping had been delayed and how Esteban, the main office manager at BP utilized the capacity for “silence” afforded him (intentionally or not) by the smartphone/WhatsApp complex to manage his time and work—exercising power—in that rhetorical situation. He also utilized the capacity to send images as a way to deflect possible “invented selves” (i.e., a “Latin” person with a particular “way of doing business”) that he feared might be working in the exchange.

### AT/ANT as Analytical tools

**[SLIDE 11]** Placing individual exchanges within the map created specifically by AT we’re able to conceptually “slow down” the exchange in a way that allows us to analyze the dynamics at play both socio-cultural and material. Clearly several object/ive(s) are operating at once in the exchange: concern that the product be manufactured properly, that it be delivered on time, and that participants manage their day/work in a reasonable way.

It was clear from my research at this site generally that people are mostly making decisions with reference to the immediate ***object/ive(s)*** of their activity. Most rhetorical work revolves around meeting those material object/ive(s) (i.e., properly constructing the order, delivering it on time, negotiating issues with materials, navigating the border, etc.).

But placing the exchange in the AT framework helps us tease it apart more precisely. **[SLIDE 11: Animation 1]** We can see that the “silences” created for Roger by Esteban’s lack of initial response in WhatsApp are constructed by the material conditions of the tool. So for example, people are expected to have their smartphones “on their person” (especially in a business context) or very nearby (e.g., on the desk). This intimacy created by the physical size of this particular mobile technology can create conscious or unconscious expectations of response times to contact (i.e., rules/norms for). Different people, in different contexts, regarding different issues are going to have differing “tolerance” for the “silences” created in and through our digitally mediated rhetorical work. **[SLIDE 11: Animation 2]** So the raw possibility of the immediacy of presence is the first “affordance” operant in this exchange. **[SLIDE 11: Animation 3]** But in Esteban’s initial lack of response we see a second affordance disclosed. There is a “distance” created by the text—in another sense it lacks the immediacy of face-to-face address. So it is equally possible *not* to respond to a text in the moment. **[SLIDE 13: Animation 4]** And in this second affordance we see the material complex of smartphone/Whatsapp as a site to exercise power. Not necessarily a *punitive* exercise of power, but the ability to simply exercise power over one’s time and focus. Esteban, reflecting on his lack of initial response to Roger, speculated that he was likely on his way to the factory in Mexico at the time of the first text in this particular exchange. This is a trip that requires him to cross the national border and drive for some 30-40mins depending on traffic to reach the factory. He had the power to prioritize his time in that moment in a way far more challenging then if a customer walks in and addresses themselves to him. This possibility of exercising power “flows through” the material conditions of the exchange created by the digital tools and interacts in a complex way with the shared and divergent *object/ive(s)* of all participants.

It’s also important to note that in his debrief of this exchange with me Esteban noted how he used images sent via WhatsApp to further assuage Roger, yes, but also head off any kind of stereotyping that Roger might be tempted to engage in while attempting to explain Esteban’s silence to himself. I consider this process of explaining another to myself in a digitally mediated silence “inventing” a cultural other. Esteban told me he sent the pictures **[SLIDE 11: Animation 5]**:

“so that [Roger] can believe me. Because you know there’s always a trust issue. Because—‘Oh no, the order shipped’ and then…you know…a little bit of the Latin…sense of humor. No, not ‘sense of humor’ but way of doing business [laughs].”

## Decolonizing digital intercultural networks

**[SLIDE 12]** It is at this point that I think the material findings of my research have something to say potentially about “decolonizing” the “networked intercultural rhetorical encounter.” Professionals in asymmetric corporate power relationships can still utilize the specific affordances of digital technology to control their engagement with cultural others—even those in historically imbalanced cultural and economic power relations (US to Mexico, for instance). Here Esteban is utilizing both the smartphone’s capacity to delay engagement, establishing control over his time and activity, while at the same time exploiting its capacity to quickly provide “richer” information in the form of pictures—showing examples of products in various stages of manufacture—in order to implicitly counteract unspoken stereotypes about “Latin” persons.

It was and remains my hope that using AT to map activity in this way might help professionals especially from dominant cultures working in digitally networked global contexts reduce their impulse to “other” or essentialize members of non-dominant cultures in these digitally-mediated encounters. AT could potentially help by drawing attention to the object/ive(s) in intercultural or cross-cultural activity and move away from stereotyping tendencies grounded in intellectual essentialisms (e.g., “Latin” persons don’t perceive time/urgency in the same way as “non-Latin” persons). The goal for using AT is to render object/ives visible among other complex elements of activity and to prioritize goals and objectives’ explanatory power—rather than nationally or ethnic/racially essentialized identities shape choices (i.e., “Mexicans speak this way”).

I stand by the value of these insights that emerged from the close observation at my site, but several outlying points challenge the significance of this potential value and challenged how we ought to think of these perspectives in decolonizing networks.

## Challenge(s) of “decolonizing” networks

### Significance of object(ive[s]) and material tools as tools of resistance vs. economic actants

**[SLIDE 13]** In that same WhatsApp exchange referenced earlier, the office manager from MP, Roger, later uses $14,000 as leverage to try to get information from Esteban quickly. This was an amount MP owed BP for previously completed and delivered orders. Roger threatens (implicitly and on behalf of the owners of MP, Bob and Mary) to withhold payment to BP until he gets specific information.

Esteban referred to this exchange in a later discussion. He pointed out that MP had historically been responsible for well over 80% of BP/*PdlF*’s business output. But they were only responsible for 15% or so at the time of my observations. HPC on the other hand had rapidly increased its output demand on BP/*PdlF*. It was taking up substantially more of the output and literally half the physical space of the factory at *PdlF*. MP was used to calling the shots as to how BP/ *PdlF* spent their day/week/month. But their power in that regard was waning. And it showed in Esteban’s willingness to prioritize some object/ive(s) over MP’s needs in favor of the factory, HPC’s more dominant needs. At the same time Esteban seemed to imply that it showed in Bob and Mary’s (via Roger) apparent compulsion to find more concrete means of leverage in their day-to-day rhetorical back and forth.

The point is: yes, the material affordances of the smartphone/WhatsApp complex along with the diversity of object/ive(s) in Esteban’s activity do indeed enable Esteban to exert power in an historically asymmetrical power relationship. But the larger context, which AT only touches on but what ANT insists we see, limits Esteban’s ability to exert power. **[SLIDE 14: Animation 1]** His power is limited by money. **[SLIDE 14: Animation 2]** To use ANT categories, his power is contingent on having “enrolled” or accepted enrollment on behalf of *HPC*. This larger actant or assemblage of relations[[6]](#endnote-6) is more fundamentally what defines and transforms Esteban’s relationship to MP. The “site” of that change is certainly worked out in the material conditions around the networked smartphone/WhatsApp exchange. But the smartphone/WhatsApp complex is limited in what it can do to help Esteban as he acts rhetorically and materially amidst the shift in the balance of power with MP.

### Decolonizing Methods

Turning quickly now to my methods: Originally as I reflected critically on my methods for this project, my entryway to the concept of “decolonial methodologies” was Agboka’s *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* article “Decolonial methodologies: Social justice perspectives in intercultural technical communication research” (2014). Agboka asserts that there are no inherently “decolonial” methodologies. However there are “ways” to comport one’s self as a researcher—taking “purposeful,” “meaningful,” as well as “flexible, thoughtful, and reflexive” stances that help “decolonize” one’s stance (p. 319).

I like this notion of decolonizing being a “way” of doing things. I think that coordinating AT and ANT cultivates a “disposition” that fits well, potentially, with decolonizing methods. The sociocultural focus on object-directed *activity* (AT) can lead us away from essentialized notions of causation to explain peoples’ action. ANT’s commitment to “following the actors/actants” themselves also has the potential ability to cultivate a “way” that results in careful study of people and things on their own terms.

Problems hover, however, somewhat “ambiently” around my project as a whole. **[SLIDE 14: Animation 3]** Beyond the fact that much of the “new” materialism is technically “late to the party” as scholars like Zoe Todd have pointed out—is the problematic universalizing tendency of scholars who make claims on the world as being universally applicable from within their chosen categories. Todd (2016) makes this point specifically as it pertains to Latour (upon whom I called on almost entirely for my definition and application of ANT in my research). **[SLIDE 14: Animation 4]** If Todd is right that “ontology” is another word for “colonialism,” then we ought to be very careful to make claims about the “to be” verb. In one respect this is unavoidable. I do it with my claims re: the universality of object/ive(s) in intercultural encounters. This universal claim when coupled with the erasure of knowledge outside the (Western and/or western-impacted) academy and wedded to the very real social and monetary capital knowledge-making affords, you have a nexus of forces that re-inscribe and replicate the universities’ colonial practices which have rendered “research,” in Tuhiwai-Smith’s frequently quoted formulation: “one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (2012, p. xi).

This last tendency bothers me most intensely. When I first conceived of my method of “coordinating” AT and ANT I did so first for pragmatic reasons—AT is simpler, easier to manipulate for the purposes of framing/organizing data. ANT served then to “supplement” AT as a perspective, filling in gaps especially as pertained to power and persuasion. But my focus was still on the extent my methods and methodologies helped me see the world “as it is.” But returning to Todd’s point re: ontology, this insistence on speaking of the world “as it is” from a very particular methodological stance is already a problem.

**[Slide 15]** Instead, returning to my proposal regarding “coordinating” AT and ANT: I want to suggest that for those who want to insist on materialist approaches to research, this “back-and-forth,” the “parallax view” created by something like a “guerilla”-style appropriation of one methodological frame in this instance and another in the next depending on circumstance **[Slide 16]** has decolonizing potential. It prevents a settled, comfortable schematization of another’s “ontology.” Focusing on historically framed object oriented *activity* simultaneously with whatever material concerns we have keeps one from comfortably ontologizing in a way that enables conversion of knowledge in to capital.

## Conclusion

Certainly we must seek out opportunities to decolonize the professional globalized communication networks created by the vast and changing ecology of digital tools users manipulate to do their work. Finding ways to help users avoid essentialisms or “othering” people they perceive as culturally distinct from themselves is valuable work. I still believe AT in particular aids that work. But it seems that in even *studying* these globalized networks we must be cautious to further recalibrate our methodological frames and “attunements” to prevent erasure of others all the while baking the essentialization of others *into* our method/ologies. This is so if we wish to think of ourselves as more than just producers of knowledge in the classroom or the research field. Thank you. **[Slide 17, 18]**

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1. Document is keyed to presentation presented at CCCC 2018. See author for accompanying PowerPoint presentation. Email: beau.pihlaja@ttu.edu. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Given that, I should say briefly at the outset how I am understanding “decolonization,” particularly as it applies to academic knowledge work. My summary here, to be clear, is not proposed as definitive or authoritative. I think of it is an exercise in scholarly “active listening,” an occasion to confirm, if possible, whether I’ve “gotten that right” in listening to the voices of the “colonized” in rejecting their subject position as reduced “objects” of scholarly research. My understanding is that academic decolonization operates on a number of levels. From the stance of a (largely) Western academy it is predominantly and in the first instance a refusal:

refusing to take credit for “discovery” of insights previously visible to, known by, and disseminated from preceding communities (esp., but not limited to, indigenous knowledges, practices, etc.). Here the refusal is to participate in an academic system whose research projects, as Tuhiwai-Smith puts it: “told us things already known, suggested things that would not work, and made careers for people who already had jobs" (p. 3).

refusing to distort (as a matter of representation) indigenous, (historically) exploited people’s cultural objects, practices, identities, in the pursuit of extracting value. Here “value” is broadly construed to include not only monetary value but also the kinds of social and institutional capital reflected in T&P portfolios, publications, conference presentations, etc. Again Tuhiwai-Smith’s point about making “careers for people who already had jobs” (2012, p. 3). The point of articulation for this distortion happens, I would argue precisely when, having claimed credit for “discovery” for a particular insight they then render the insight implicitly or explicitly as universal.

There is more to say here. Others include: 3.) refusing to allow or engage in research practices that convert (without equitable reciprocity) indigenous, (historically) exploited people’s lives—their cultural objects, practices, identities in to products from which value is extracted for others; 4.) refusing to study without consent, participation, critical voice of indigenous, (historically) exploited people’s cultural objects, practices, identities; 5.) refusing to research indigenous, (historically) exploited people’s practices, identities, cultural objects for the purposes of improving exploitative practices by “outside” actors (corporations, non-governmental organizations, etc.). This is certainly not all. We might say yet more, especially about the way failure to “refuse” in these ways ground, support, and perpetuate colonization in education spaces, K-12, higher education, etc. My original intention for this presentation was to dwell more substantially on my research findings themselves—arguing that they point toward ways researchers, practitioners, and educators might “decolonize” the world of professional rhetorical/knowledge work. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. All organizations and individual names are pseudonymous in accordance with the strictures of my IRB approval for the project. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For the language of “disposition,” I am indebted to Dr. Lucía Durá. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I’m increasingly dissatisfied with the qualification “new” in “new materialist.” Given that much “new” materialism makes claims to insight known previously by, say, indigenous scholars, the language of “new” seems in violation of refusal #1 above (see endnote i). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. BP/*PdlF* are subcontractors to the manufacturing plant in Juárez HPC has contracted. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)