

TikTok Live as Decolonial Praxis

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This paper explores the possibility of unplugging from the colonial matrix of power by plugging into TikTok Live. Despite the pervasive reach of colonial mentalities and systems, TikTok Live offers a unique opportunity to engage with members of the Global Majority and transform harmful ideologies. This paper will argue that by using TikTok Live, users can challenge colonial power structures and contribute to a broader movement toward decolonization.

TikTok is a social media platform used by over one billion people worldwide across 154 countries (Jackson, 2023). Initially known for its short-form videos and dance challenges, TikTok emerged in 2020 as an educational platform for professors, doctors, clergy, and other professionals (Chen, 2021). The increasing popularity of educational content signals that users appear to be actively seeking out informative and intellectually stimulating material (Fanbytes, 2023) and may be primed to receive decolonial content.

Part of TikTok's popularity is due to its algorithm, which curates a continuous stream of videos based on users' past engagement with similar content. It is important to note that the algorithm only applies to the For You Page (FYP). The FYP is the default landing page on TikTok, where users can discover new content based on the algorithm's assessment of their interests. While the FYP has the *potential* to be a good source for everything from black history to decolonial theory to indigenous epistemology, the feed is user-curated and users can scroll through videos without seeing much outside their existing interests.

Live videos, in contrast, are *not* curated by the algorithm in the same way. The Live option allows any user 18+ with at least 1000 followers to broadcast "live," allowing viewers to engage

with them in real time. Since the stream of Live videos are not pre-recorded and cannot be pre-screened by the algorithm, TikTok is unable to accurately send users to livestreams matching their interests. Instead, TikTok Live sends viewers livestreams from around the globe and lets users decide where to stop and engage. Logging into TikTok Live is not unlike flipping through the channels on a television, if every channel were a live video feed from somewhere around the world. This key difference in the way Live videos are delivered has important implications for the dissemination of decolonial content on the platform.

To briefly illustrate the contrast between the FYP and the Live option, I created a new account, AmericanManTX. I then calibrated the algorithm by only engaging with videos on the FYP that expressed colonial viewpoints, that is, videos that supported the modern colonial matrix of power or applauded the colonial logic of “oppression, control and domination” as described by Tlostanova and Mignolo (20). For a guide, I used their spheres of the colonial matrix of power (44), engaging through comments with videos that emphasized colonial control of the economy, knowledge, authority, and gender and sexuality, along with what binds them: racism (55). Some of these videos I saw violated TikTok’s terms of service, which forbids racism, homophobia, transphobia, hate speech and misogyny, but I chose not to report them until after the experiment. Following just 30 minutes of time engaging with colonially-minded videos on the FYP, the algorithm consistently fed AmericanManTX videos that supported colonial ideologies.¹

After I was confident TikTok had assessed AmericanManTX’s interests, I pushed the “Live” button. While the majority of AmericanManTX’s FYP videos featured light-skinned, able-bodied Euro-American creators, out of 27 livestreams I scrolled through using the same account,

¹ You can view screen recording of AmericanManTX’s FYP after calibration here: <https://youtu.be/D5TGJwGqUzY>

only 5 featured Euro-American men.² One featured someone with a visible physical disability. Half featured women. Six featured streams from other countries, including creators speaking languages other than English. While AmericanManTX's FYP included several videos supporting anti-trans legislation, in the 27 livestreams, two creators voiced their support for the trans community within 10 seconds, including a drag queen who was streaming while preparing for a performance.

As a result of the way TikTok curates content, users choosing the Live option *will* be exposed to a wide variety of narratives and epistemologies. Beyond hearing creators' stories, on TikTok Live, users have the opportunity to *interact*, an important tool for decolonization. Intergroup contact theory describes how positive interactions between members of different social groups can help reduce prejudice, discrimination, and conflict and increase empathy and positive behaviors toward members of the other group (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Intergroup contact theory asserts that exposure to different groups is not enough, however. In order for the positive effects to take place, certain conditions must be met, including interaction and equal status between group members. (Tropp and Pettigrew, 2012). TikTok Live provides both.

TikTok Live provides some anonymity to viewers, which ironically facilitates interaction. Although creators can see the user profiles of viewers, few individuals can be readily identified in "real life" by their TikTok profiles. As a result, users can view livestreams with relative safety without fear that they might "say the wrong thing" by accident and have to face real-life consequences. Commenting on a stranger's livestream is also much easier logistically than going out into the community and finding a group one might consider "other" and engaging with them

² You can view a screen recording of me scrolling through 27 livestreams for AmericanManTX here: <https://youtu.be/GS8TllvUW4Y>

face-to-face. Users can ask questions they might feel embarrassed to ask or feel unsafe asking, and creators can choose whether or not to engage with those comments from the safety of their own space. I recently had someone in my live stream, for example, who identified as a white Christian nationalist. I would not feel safe engaging with them in person, but in the digital setting, I was able to set the tone and also keep a safe physical distance.

Interaction with people from different groups has the potential to impact creators as well. In my last live stream, for example, over 500 people dropped by over the course of an hour, including progressive Protestant clergy, atheists, Pagans from Europe, fundamentalist Christians from the USA who reject women's ordination, Indigenous people from the USA and Canada, Pentecostal Christians from Latin America, Orthodox Christians from Ukraine, Orthodox Jews from Israel, Muslims from the Midwest USA, and people ranging in age from 13 to 93.³ The interaction in the comments no doubt had an impact on the viewers; however, my mind was also opened and stretched by our conversation. Creators can also invite others to go Live with them on screen and hold a conversation, which provides yet another way to interact in real time with people from different groups.

Interaction with people thriving in non-Western environments through TikTok Live also undermines the myth of “underdevelopment,” and the use of “underdevelopment” to “justify economic and political interventions” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 37). Beyond that, it deconstructs colonial notions of who gets the right to be named and treated as “human” (Tlostanova and Mignolo 155). When a user watches someone enjoying a community dance in Honduras, or a

³ Two examples of livestreams from my channel @disorganized.religion. #1: <https://youtu.be/pmcRjLNdV1E> #2: https://youtu.be/9aCc_A4NXU0. They will not show the user comments; however, I regularly read questions and comments out loud before answering them, so you should be able to get a sense of what is said in the comments.

fisherman joyfully singing and praising God as he fishes on Lake Victoria, it begins to undermine colonial narratives of Western “superiority.” TikTok researcher Marcus Bösch noted in an interview, “There’s this whole notion of the global village, where we get content from everywhere in the world because there are people with smartphones—that is the real TikTok experience. That is the case more or less right now, for instance, with Turkish laborers live-streaming their experience working under really hard conditions.⁴ Alternately, I’ve enjoyed stuff from Sketch Joy Winnie, a model and creator who is making fun on Western expectations of Africa” (Vanderhoof, 2023).

In addition to facilitating interaction between groups unlikely to encounter each other outside the platform, TikTok Live also includes tools to support the equal status element of intergroup contact theory, actively working against the repression of ways of knowing supported by colonialism (Quijano 23). For example, historically, Indigenous people in the United States and Canada have been silenced not only by colonial powers but by epistemologies that “silence and distort the voices of Indigenous peoples” (Allard-Tremblay, 2019), and a common critique of subaltern studies has been that groups like Latin American Studies Group, for example, produced studies “about the subaltern rather than studies with and from a subaltern perspective” (Grosfoguel 65). On TikTok Live, on the other hand, an Indigenous creator can be in control. They can block or mute users not respecting the space they create, and they can share their story in the manner they choose - through conversation, art, story telling, prayer, dance, or even through silence.⁵

⁴ You can watch the Guardian’s coverage of Turkish workers on TikTok here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvLAaxpYRfs>

⁵ See <https://youtu.be/D8zO1hH9J8> for a screen recording of 3 sample livestreams from Arapahoe TikTok creator @nooookeet.

A fair critique would be that all users on TikTok Live, regardless of social location, still embody some level of coloniality within themselves (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 17). However, because Live feeds are not dictated by user interests', users have the opportunity to encounter people from different groups serendipitously, giving them an opportunity to engage in the work of decolonization within the "existing world order" (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 17). Even people entrenched in colonial systems may still expose viewers to different perspectives and help challenge colonial narratives and help viewers unlearn colonial attitudes and behaviors.

TikTok Live is decolonial in the way it transmits knowledge as well: through relationship. As Burkhardt notes, "knowledge can never be divorced from human action and experience" (Burkhardt 21). When viewers interact on TikTok Live, it is fundamentally different from watching a documentary or reading a book. Viewers are learning through relationship (Burkhardt 22). Users join and get to know the host. You may notice in the example livestreams I included as references for this paper that the hosts do not just lecture the audience. They may speak on a specific topic, but they also engage the audience about hobbies, movies, and other topics one might share in a conversation with a good friend. This creates the opportunity for critical dialogue between groups toward what Grosfougel describes as a "pluriversal as opposed to universal world" (66).

A possible drawback of the Live option is that livestreams are limited in time. However, if users want to continue the conversation another day, they can select an option to be notified the next time that creator goes live (Finn, 2022). In my own livestreams, for example there are people who come back consistently. Over time, we have gotten to know each other and share knowledge from a place of familiarity and care, exchanging knowledge that is lived, contextual, and meaningful to the group gathered.

There is evidence to suggest that TikTok Live has not only exposed people to alternative narratives and epistemologies, but also moved them to action on behalf of historically oppressed groups. For example, the #StopWillow movement on TikTok connected millions viewers to livestreams of Indigenous creators in Alaska and across the United States who spoke about how to lobby Congress to stop the Willow Project (Nilson, 2022). The Willow Project still passed, but some concessions were made as a result of the activism promoted on TikTok by Indigenous and environmental groups (George, 2023).

TikTok's expansive reach means that Live streams by creators from non-dominant groups have the potential to influence the overall narrative presented by legacy media as well.⁶ Tlostanova and Mignolo note that traditional media plays a key role in mediating between the “market” and the “state,” giving the general public little access to the “untouchable” and their narratives (22). TikTok Live streams, on the other hand, play the role of “indymedia,” exposing viewers to subaltern perspectives, often providing a counterpoint to legacy media’s coverage of events as well as possibilities for social engagement and action (22). TikTok Live creates “*spaces* where individuals resist and challenge dominant political or cultural discourse and foment the idea of a ‘right time’ for change” (Rodriguez 1059).

One of the greatest pieces of evidence that TikTok Live may be successfully doing decolonial work is the resistance to the platform from those with power. Hannah Maruyama, a TikTok creator and contributor to USA Today, noted that in addition to a large number of congresspeople owning stock in TikTok’s competitor Meta, legislators have another incentive to ban TikTok: control of the narrative (2023). Quijano notes that the liberation from colonially

⁶ non-digital news from radio, newspapers and television

includes “the freedom to produce, criticize, change, and exchange culture and society” (32).

TikTok Live is participating in this work of liberation. Unfortunately, as Tlostanova and Mignolo note, “the control of knowledge and subjectivity through education and colonizing the existing knowledges is the key and fundamental sphere of control that makes domination possible” (45). Maruyama points out that on TikTok, it is individual users, not corporations or legislators who control the information shared (Maruyama 2023). The bipartisan push for a TikTok ban in 2023 may have a variety of motivations, but one driving factor may be the way TikTok livestreams challenge dominant narratives and epistemologies, undermining the colonial power matrix of power.

This paper has briefly explored TikTok Live as decolonial praxis. Supported by the research done in the field of psychology on intergroup contact theory, it is clear that TikTok Live can be a valuable tool in helping people overcome prejudice and unlearn colonial indoctrination. It successfully undermines colonial narratives and offers users an opportunity to listen to and engage with alternative epistemologies first-hand. Beyond exposing people to subaltern narratives, TikTok Live has shown it can be a catalyst for real action in opposition to colonial domination and abuse. The platform falls short in that it is still user-curated. While TikTok occasionally includes previews of livestreams on the FYP, users can generally choose not to engage with the Live feature at all, remaining in their comfort zones. On the other hand, it is possible user control of their feed could ultimately support decolonial work. Future research could explore how user choice could actually facilitate intergroup engagement in situations where privileged groups resist decolonial work due to a perceived loss of control. By empowering users to either engage or scroll past Live broadcasts, it may help users become more receptive to content that challenges their perspectives.

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