

Incomunicable:

A Lecture Delivered by Dr. Michael Lechuga at Arizona State University for
the I-4C Collective

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Prof. Sarah Amira de la Garza: Thank you so much for joining us for this [event], and what I think is a very exciting speaker series, and I'm really humbled and excited to introduce you to Dr. Michael Lechuga. Dr. Michael Lechuga is an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico. He researches Latinx communication studies, rhetoric, vibration, and settler-colonial studies, as well as affect studies, Latinx futurism, surveillance, and film studies. Dr. Lechuga is also writing his second book, *Alien Affects*, which illuminates the complex relationships between Hollywood alien invasion film industries and the industries tasked with securing the Mexico-U.S. border. I also think it's important to speak a little bit about the context of Dr. Lechuga's talk today, *Incomunicable: How the University Participates in Settler Colonialism*, and how he came to this topic. So, from my understanding, interested in imagining and creating this decolonial university, as well as inspired by Dr. Erick Torrico, speaking about the colonial encounter and how that is marked with the rendering of the 'other', hence, *Incomunicado*.

The decolonial university in *Incomunicado* brought Dr. Lechuga into this research about this compulsory indigenous erasure in the U.S. at large, which is, of course, a large part perpetuated by the coloniality of U.S. higher education. So, I hope that was a good introduction of your talk, Dr. Lechuga. I'm really excited, and I guess you can go ahead and get started with your talk, *Incomunicable: How the University Participates in Settler Colonialism*.

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Prof. Michael Lechuga: Well, thank you very much for that great introduction. Of course, thanks to the I-4C Collective for organizing this lecture series here at Arizona State and for inviting me to participate. I want to thank all of my friends, of course, at the Hugh Downs School of Communication, but especially Professor Amira de la Garza, for thinking that my ideas would have an audience here. I'm also grateful to the group of graduate students who I'll be getting the chance to meet with at the end of today's talk. I know that your time is valuable, so I really do appreciate that.

I resist making land acknowledgments, like the ones at my university and Arizona State and that other universities have written, which are admittedly just a first step in recognizing Native sovereignty. Some, like Howie Echo-Hawk, a native comic and activist, have criticized the performance of land acknowledgment, insisting that it serves really nothing more than an empty gesture. So, as a Mestizo, I insist on only acknowledging Native lands, Indigenous peoples, Indigenous ways of knowing, and Indigenous practices of world-making, but I also recognize my role in participating in indigenous erasure. For me, part of this recognition will take the form of a donation, of the honorarium, for today's talk, to the Red Nation, a group of activists with a chapter in Albuquerque who are 'dedicated to the liberation of Native peoples from capitalism and colonialism.' They offer ways for Latinx and Mestizx peoples to build coalition in liberating

Native peoples from the entanglements of white settler modernity on this continent, and especially in places like Albuquerque, where those material inequities are most pertinent. Their mission is based in education and media justice, so I think that it aligns a lot with the mission of what many of us in communication studies already do. So maybe, instead, consider this a land *disacknowledgement*. I disacknowledge the centrality of settler colonial land use, settler-colonial citizenship norms, a single settler worldview, the practices of settler worldmaking, which, too often, become practices of settler world breaking. And all of these practices are found in nearly every aspect of our daily lives here in the United States. In reality, this is the focus of my research, in general: How to disavow the centrality of settler knowledge production. For today's talk, I will be speaking specifically on how the university is implicated in this process. I'll start with a few examples.

So, last month, one charter grade school in Ogden, Utah, allowed parents to opt-out of the Black History Month curriculum. They claim that parents were allowed to exercise their civil rights by denying their children a part of U.S. history that would contextualize the violent colonial presence of European descendants on this continent. The Montessori school later backtracked. They said that in the future, they would work with parents on an individual basis, which really only means that they'll continue to allow folks to opt out of this practice but really not make it public. In addition to this, five states in the United States now, Iowa, Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and South Dakota have introduced legislation to defund public schools that teach the 1619 Project. As many of you know, the 1619 Project is a curriculum developed in collaboration with Nikole Hannah-Jones of the New York Times magazine. It centers the arrival of enslaved peoples from the continent of Africa that were sold to settlers, ushering in a 400-year project of exploitation. When the previous President of the United States tried to strip the Department of Education funding from schools who taught the curriculum, he argued that this would "teach students to hate their own country." Now, for many folks in Arizona, this might sound familiar. In 2010, Governor John Brewer signed SB 2281, a law that essentially banned ethnic studies in Arizona Public Schools. The bill was a combination of then State Superintendent of Instruction Tom Horn's attack on the Tucson school districts who developed a Mexican-American curriculum for the large number of Mestizx and Latinx learners in the district. Horn argued, also successfully, that ethnic studies would train non-white learners to "hate America". So, for me, the goal of all of these examples seems to be punishing school districts who teach a history of decentralized white settler paradigm, and to silence the voices of those who were colonized, with the goal of reproducing the same sets of relationships between white settler citizens and those they subjugated in the name of colonization. The idea that somehow these curricula teach students to hate America shows the primary preoccupation with U.S. education, in my opinion - That teaching students to love the myth of what America is & rendering all others silent is what we would consider education. This is a practice of rendering others 'incommunicable', or incommunicable. This is a dark side of communication, and really this dark side of communication is central to colonial power. I and others argue that making sense of this dynamic really should be the responsibility of scholars in our field, communication studies, but in humanities in general. We shouldn't assume that our ways of knowing the world are always productive.

To sort of frame this idea of 'incomunicado', or rendering folks and lands incommunicable, I turn to Erick Torrico, whose conception of the five communications that pertain to coloniality are imagined through a sort of taxonomy that I'll share with you. For Torrico, the first form of communication, or colonial communication, would be what he described as 'pre-colonial communication'. This is not very much studied in our field. It would require, really, an investment into the study of native languages. I also think it would require an epistemology of relationship with the natural world. Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez, a Zapotec scholar, discusses that land was not empty when colonizers arrived, rather, it was pristine precisely because of the symbiotic existence enjoyed by Indigenous groups with their environment. The knowledge produced as a result of this relationship is widely ignored in the humanities. I would argue that this is a form of communication networked through ecosystems that can tell us just as much about our human condition as, perhaps, other approaches to communication.

The second area Torrico describes is the communication of colonial encounter. This is where the Indigenous natives as well as the land stewarded by the Indigenous are rendered 'incommunicable'. This action of rendering one incommunicable justifies the dehumanization of Indigenous others by colonizing groups, and the exploitability and extraction of economies that are put into place by these colonizing groups. In the field of rhetoric, José Ángel Maldonado writes that *incomunicación* has long been a tool for political isolation: "Language, among other forms of communication, is at the center of who is, and who is not, sought to be worthy of humanity." And in reality, this is what remains a primary tool dispossession by settlers, and the seller government, in the United States. This is our foreign policy, our immigration policy, our environmental policy, and today I'm going to talk about how this has become the U.S. education policy and university systems around the country.

The third kind of communication, quickly, is communication that pertains to colonialism, or what Torrico calls colonial communication: the modes by which a colonizing group distributes and maintains control over the political, social, and economic hierarchies. Walter Dignolo refers to this as the rhetoric of modernity. In a recent forum in communication and critical cultural studies, I also describe how this form of communication, or what we call rhetoric, the form of communication that celebrates public address, that celebrates presidential rhetoric and the rhetoric of the descendants of white settler colonizers, is, in reality, a celebration of this third kind of communication that Torrico refers to as colonial communication.

The fourth type of communication, and I think one that many of us in these circles are familiar with is decolonial communication. It's communication that speaks to the resistance of coloniality. Still centralizing colonialism in its power to shape new futures, but resisting that power. So Tuck and Yang remind us that colonization is not a metaphor, and, thus, the decolonial communication should strive for a deprogramming. Too often, though, especially for those who claim to do colonial work simply out of the happenstance of their identity or out of the start of orientation of being interested in the kind of work are really just doing it as a metaphor, and I think rather we should think about the coloniality as a practice of strategizing the end of colonial power through the material recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. For me, this means nothing

short of land back. I look to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's work, especially her book, *Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, as an exemplary work of this type of decolonial research.

Finally, there's a communication beyond the constraints of the colonial, or what Torrico calls 'comunicación humanitario', humanitarian communication. This kind of communication is a future-looking orientation, and it can imagine the ends of colonialism into a bifurcated, multiple future for sovereign peoples. It's a world where new modes of subjectivities and relationships with lands and waters and air is one that's symbiotic, one that returns to what Altamirano-Jiménez referred to as this perfect symbiosis. This is not necessarily post-colonial, because I think that carries within a certain set of assumptions and connotations, but it is, again, "comunicación humanitario", or one that exists in a human world beyond colonialism.

For me, then, the importance of this sort of taxonomy is one that, when we render things as 'incommunicable', I think that it's important to think about the metaphor of a hard drive. So, when we delete something from a hard drive, we don't necessarily make it disappear from that. It's etched into the hard drive. When you delete something from your computer's hard drive, you're actually deleting the pathway, the language coding that connects the interface with the information. So, when something is rendered 'incomunicable', it's not necessarily disappeared, or it hasn't been removed from the face of the earth. Rather, the pathway, the knowledge, the ways of knowing that part entailed in that are erased. And reconnecting might be just a matter of finding those pathways again.

And so, despite what appears to be a chronological list of five communications, I think it's also important to consider that these are all layered and interwoven into one another. I mean, to see an example of this, look no further than the university, a place where a few, or maybe even all five of these kinds of communication are happening at the same time. So when one part of the university might be working on a project, the preservation and revitalization of Native languages, while someone down the hall is teaching a course on real estate speculation. Yet, somebody else is down the hall teaching another class on decolonial approaches to XYZ in terms of paradigms. There are many types of communications for Torrico that happen simultaneously, but I'm here to suggest that while these sort of happen in multiple ways, and talk with each other, the university system in the United States really is primed to reproduce a specific type of settler communication, settler colonial communication. This is really the brand of American universities today, and the characterization of those universities to sort of disavow the history of Indigenous removal, and then to promote an epistemology of U.S. settler colonialism, I think, is part of how we come to grapple with that history, and also where we need to make these interventions. So, in other words, producing a single colonial worldview, and rendering all others 'incomunicable', is at the heart of what many of our public universities do today. And for me, this ongoing project, which is sustained by numerous modes of production in the university, especially those that pertain specifically to knowledge production, are in need of interrogation. Institutions of state learning that are implicated in this process of rendering peoples and lands incomunicable are guilty, if they are built from the wealth made off of stolen land, and if they are actively pursuing a single-universal worldview.

So to make this case, I want to talk briefly about the legacy of land-grant universities in the United States, and how the perception of higher education today is really shaped by this legacy. For those of you who attended last week, we were privy to an amazing performance by an amazing group of scholars who sort of introduced us to this idea of how disposition of Native peoples begot the land-grant university, and how many of the institutions that we're connected to are, in some ways, networked to those original land grants. The Land-Grant Act of 1862, for me, is an example of a federal policy enacted to benefit individual citizens, and U.S. citizenship directly. It is often referred to as the Morrill Land-Grant Act, named for Justin Morrill, a Vermont senator who enacted the bill. It was originally proposed in 1857, and it took 5 years to pass, mostly out of objection from Southern states, and from some others who thought the bill lacked other elements of training, like engineering and military training. But the demand for agricultural colleges at the time was so high, that Morrill persuaded others to enact. I think that ironically, though, the reason why food, or agriculture was such an important mechanism at the time was because of the insufficient ability for settlers to use and create a symbiotic relationship with the land. They were destroying land faster than they could produce the food to feed the growing number of settlers, and the panic spurred Justin Morrill to write this bill. Also, 5 years later, in the midst of the Civil War, actually, where we have no congressional members from Southern states, the vote passed and became a congressional act. The bill basically took Native lands that were seized, or obtained through treaty, and sold them, along with the mineral rights and extraction rights. In order to fund agricultural colleges and universities in each of the, what at the time was 34 states, but now is in all 50 states. Each state was granted 30,000 acres of land by the United States government, and, along with agricultural education, the bill did implement engineering and military training as part of the core curriculum, added to the classics curriculum that was taught at private universities at the time. So, while most states in the West seized and sold lands within the state borders, for example, like New Mexico and Arizona's land-grants were built on lands sold and seized from within New Mexico and Arizona respectively, other universities like Cornell, MIT, and Penn State used the sale of unceded lands in places like Wisconsin, California, and the Dakotas, to profit students back East. So, in many cases, land-grant universities still own the script, which is the rights to the mineral and the land. And these scripts can be sold for somewhere upwards of 10 to 20 times the original amount. The plated amount is sort of an investment that is still continuing to pay off dividends for universities, and again, these dividends are off the backs of stolen land. Signed the same year that the Homestead Act was signed, again both of these represent the direct transfer of Indigenous lands and value extracted from those lands to the hands of private citizens. If you add to that, the training that's offered by these universities, then, not only are citizens being - are profiting off of the land, but then are being trained to further develop that land in a way that benefits settler colonialism.

I'm going to post a link here, in the chat, and if you get a chance, I really encourage you all to check out LandGrabU.org. The authors -- Lee and Ahtone -- in that project describes in detail how through cession of land, the term used to describe the forced forfeiture of land, usually through a manifestation of violence, led to the investment in what we now call land-grant universities. According to the researchers, there's vast evidence suggesting that the act was actually intended to fortify U.S.'s capacity to dispossess Native peoples from lands, which

affected almost 215 Indigenous tribes. The effort transferred the value of more than 10.5 million acres of land, and, into revenue, the United States would eventually use to build universities with the mission of educating farmers, engineers, and soldiers. The website, which again I shared the link with you all, it details not only these large transfers, but it goes into the sale of each parcel of land that was dispossessed and how they have directly impacted each states' land grant. The sheer volume of land, and the amount of money that was made from that transfer is just astonishing. But when seen at the individualized, localized level, you get a sense of how many dispossessions had to take place in order for, what we consider our modern university system, to even be operating. Some of the most notable examples of land-grants include the University of Arizona, New Mexico State, the University of Minnesota, the University of California, Texas A&M, dozens of others that are Research I universities, some of which maybe some of us work at. And so for some state systems like Minnesota and Michigan, that land-grant is really central to the state's agricultural and scientific military medical training, but for most states, like New Mexico, this mission has been networked through the state systems. So, nearly all states whose public education system is networked in this way, has distributed the land-grant mission to all of its public universities, right? This mission, this quest for universal vision for knowledge production, again, contributes to the dispossession of lands of Native peoples, renders both Native peoples and lands incomunicable.

I think that we can see this and the way that it operates in our colleges, in our universities. For today's agricultural college, the goal has been to teach the methods of turning land into profitable food sources, a process that renders lands, again, 'incomunicable', destroying what Altamirano-Jimenez describes as that symbiotic harmony. Engineering schools, their goal is to build the machinery of future colonization, whether that be tools of war, tools of exploration, tools to terraform lands once stewarded by Native peoples into permanent settler encampments, right? The goals of engineers are not to meet the lands of the environment, the goals are to meet the demands of the settler imaginary that continues to grapple with a crumbling environment, begot by the settler imaginary, and as a settler imaginary builds more technologies, we see those technologies really just turn into more coloniality. Medical schools were built to extend the lives of settler classes, to ensure the production and reproduction of settler populations. Law schools reproduce settler sovereignty by teaching generations of lawyers to maintain jurisdiction over Native lands and people. Business schools teach us how to protect and multiply white settler wealth, I mean even in the social sciences we oftentimes reproduce settler classifications of race and gender and ability, thinking that we're doing critical or decolonial work. When scholars use these elements as variables, really they end up just recreating the same distinctive differentiates that motivate white settler colonial population productions in the first place. I even look at museums and other archives that we hold at universities, where the practice of rendering something archivable is really, sort of like a cultural taxonomy. It's about rendering something dead, or unalive, and then categorizing it within our own single vision of what history is. These practices of our modern university really all participate, for me, in this spirit of a land-grant, which has been modelled in higher education through the state university system. The model is driven really by a single ideological motive: reproducing settler colonial logics, the economic machinery, social values, and legal framework for the advancement of the settler project.

But I don't think this has to be the case; and in fact, the spirit of the I4C Collective has been to push us, to think about what this university might look like, or other universities might look like if we were to really invest our creative capital and our collective intelligence into bringing about this change. For me, this change looks like the pluraversity, not the university. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a Brazilian author, who writes in his book, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, that while Foucault describes the difference between knowledge and ways of knowing in his project in archaeology, the critique of knowledge by Foucault and others, and the attention paid to that critique has really left little room for the celebration of ways of knowing the world; multiple ways of knowing the world. For de Sousa Santos, this dynamic is embedded in the erasure of what he calls, "epistemologies of the South". The innumerable ways of knowing the world which fall outside of the singular colonial epistemology of the North: "The epistemologies of the South affirm and valorize the differences that remain after the hierarchies have been eliminated. Rather than abstract universality, they promote pluraversality, a kind of thinking that promotes decolonization, Creolization, or Mestizaje through the intercultural translation." So, rather than reproducing a single ideology of colonial knowledge production, why not make a university into a space where learners can engage with a wealth of possibilities, that multiple ways of knowing the world might offer. This is not just thinking about interdisciplinarity, though. Because, for me, interdisciplinarity ties multiple strands of the same colonial network together to reproduce that same network. We should really be thinking about the possibilities of opening up the university to new ways of knowing the world, and not just rendering the world knowable. This is an important distinction, I think, between the university and the pluraversity. And this word bills primarily on scholars like Arturo Escobar, and others like Walter Dignolo and Katherine Walsh, to develop a notion of pluraversity that not only embraces multiple ways of knowing the world, or Southern epistemologies, but also celebrates the multiplicity of cultural orientations to the natural world. In my opinion, the notion of the pluraversity is not simply about transforming the university, which means transforming the land and the capital and the people, into a site where multiple worlds can be sustained. What if we were able to use the capacity, use this energy of mobilizing change, to really tackle one of the biggest crises facing humanity today. So, that said, I'll sort of end my talk by advocating for one specific way that beneficiaries of the university, you and I, can leverage our power to change the coloniality embedded within the university.

First and foremost, I think that the university must become a site of reconnection to the natural world. In our time of global crisis, when Western thought has severed our connection to the environment, it's really time to transfer the university into a place where reconnecting to the natural world is embedded into every aspect of the institution. Just to be clear, studying the natural world is not the same thing as rebuilding the connections. We have been studying the natural environment for decades, and despite that, very little has been done to push people back into connection with the environment. In fact, I think that things have really only gotten worse. For me, the pluraversity must support efforts to connect people with lands at all levels, including an investment in Indigenous ways of relating to the natural world. From agriculture to astrophysics, the pluraversity should be a site where multiple ways of knowing the world, and really knowing the cosmos, are rejuvenated and taught, not just from a single Western orientation of science, but from multiple ways of understanding and knowing nature and the

cosmos. Business schools should not be teaching students how to invest in stock futures, but rather should be teaching about the economic value of symbiosis with nature. We should be investing in natural and environmental futures, and we shouldn't necessarily be thinking about the value that's implicit in minerals and extraction, but we should really be thinking about the value implicit in the human capacity to build networks in nature. I feel that every aspect of the university will ultimately transform, and, for me, rendering the natural world communicable, communicable, is its new mission. Mignolo and Walsh describe this as relationality:

"Relationality doesn't simply include other practices or concepts into our own. Relationality is what some Andean Indigenous scholars, including Nina Pacari, Fernando Huanacuni Mamani, and Felix Patzi Paco, refer to as *vincularidad*. *Vincularidad*, or relationality, is the awareness of the integral relation of interdependence on all living organisms, of which humans are only a small part, with both territory and the cosmos." *Vincularidad*, for me, refers to both the sovereignty and the interconnectedness of multiple systems that all contribute to what we know as the natural world. This concept recalls Altamirano-Jiménez's work, where she describes the need to "center the ontological relationship between the human and non-human worlds, but also engage actions that uphold and maintain Indigenous relationality." Right, so it's not, for her, just about recognizing that connection, but about foregrounding that connection. *Vincularidad* demonstrates a commitment to a recovery, it demonstrates a commitment to a rejuvenation of knowledges that have been erased. But not erased off of the earth, simply rendered 'incomunicable'. We have the capacity through this type of research to render, then again, that natural world communicable. I think that this is really the spirit of what Erick Torrico described as 'comunicación humanitario', and in reality, for me, this is what the humanities, in general, should be striving for.

I just want to briefly mention that as part of my research on *vincularidad* and relationality, I've been working with a group of scholars here at UNM to develop a pilot study on multi-user virtual environments. As part of this study, we are going to be testing Altamirano-Jiménez's hypothesis. We anticipate that folks who participate in this environmental simulation who are willing to embody the natural environment, will start to develop relationships with other users within the simulation. We anticipate that the strategies that folks develop in the virtual simulation can be carried over to folks who are living in the real world, and our hope is that these epistemologies, especially Indigenous feminist epistemologies become foregrounded as ways for us to think about restructuring our research focuses, not only in the humanities but across the university.

So, I'll end by saying that commitment to a new vision of *vincularidad*, or relationality of higher education, can foreclose the practices of rendering peoples and lands 'incomunicable', which have been present in U.S. public university systems for roughly 150 years. In conceptualizing the pluriversity in the United States this way, my hope is to shift away from the land-grant model of the university towards a conception of a land-back university, right? So on one level, this means organizing behind a mission of promoting Indigenous sovereignty, as la paperson or Wang Yang writes about in *A Third University is Possible* - I completely agree with this. But on another level, I strongly urge us to think about how reassembling the energies and the resources of our institutions, can really tackle the most imminent crisis facing humans today, and that's global climate catastrophe. Let's imagine together for a second that we can live in a

future where students in our institutions learn to connect again with a world that has been rendered mute by the settler colonial project in the United States, rather than simply participating in that process of rendering it 'incommunicable.' So, I invite all of you into dialogue about these ideas through a question and answer session, but before I just wanted to say thank you all so much for attending, thank you to the organizers of this event for having me and allowing me to share my ideas. It's really been an honor, thank you.