

Decolonizing the Episteme: Knowledge, Empire and the Academy

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Monday 3-5

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The Western academy claims authority over knowledge of the human condition. How are imperial and colonial legacies implicated in this claim? What does it mean to decolonize the “episteme” - the exclusive set of premises, dispositions and procedures that are claimed to produce valid and generalizable knowledge? This course will seek answers to these questions, principally by addressing the colonially induced segregation of humanity into the “knowers” and the “known”. The first part of the syllabus examines some key academic disciplines and traditions of inquiry that have produced and upheld the segregation of knowers and known – the sociology of knowledge, the classics, anthropology, ethnography, and languages. In the second part of the syllabus, we will examine key political and practical challenges to decolonizing the episteme in the contemporary era, especially issues involving curricula and student populations as well as (neo-imperial and neo-liberal) economies of knowledge. The aim of the course is to gauge the depths to which empire and its legacies structure academic authority and knowledge claims, as well as to clarify the challenges inherent in decolonizing the academy.

The course requirements are as follows:

Essay (4000-4500 words), due 29th March – 60%

Your essay will engage with the narrative of Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (see week 6). The question you will address is as follows:

- *In what ways and to what extent might we read Ella Townsend’s spiritual ascendance as a critique of anthropology?*

You only need to consult the readings in weeks 4, 5 and 6. But: I do expect you to mobilize every reading as part of your argument (albeit some more than others).

A successful essay will:

- a) Critically interpret the *Louisiana* narrative by reference to the segregation of humanity into knowers and known (broadly conceived);
- b) Examine the complicity of some (not necessarily all) anthropological concepts, premises and logics which arise out of the readings in week 4 and 5;
- c) Treat said concepts, premises and logics as well as Brodber’s narrative with care and nuance (even if with force).

Syllabus design (7-8 pages – single spaced), due in class on 29th April – 40%

Halfway through the semester I will (randomly) pair you with another student. As a pair, you will negotiate and construct a syllabus for a graduate-level course. You will begin this assignment after you have handed in the essay. You will discuss your syllabi in the class on 29th April; however, you will send an electronic copy of your syllabus to the class by the 25th April. Please note that the syllabus should be in the form of a .doc or .pdf, 7-8 pages in length (single-spaced).

The title of the syllabus will be in the form of: **Decolonizing X**, whereby X will be any subject of inquiry that you and your partner deem to be worthy. However, the subject chosen must be (made) amenable to an engagement with some of the conceptual and practical issues raised in the course.

The structure of the syllabus will be:

- Title;
- General abstract (including: why the course matters, what its learning aims are, and the rationale for the topic structure);
- Assignments (including: what to do, how to do it, what it tests);
- A list of topics (including for EACH topic: a brief introductory paragraph and rationale for your selection of readings; a list of 2-3 readings).

This is a fairly neutral structure. However, if you wish to depart from this design, then you must clearly justify why you are doing so by reference to the intellectual challenges of the course.

Students will read, in advance, all the other syllabi – but they will do so *with their partners*. As a pair, students will come up with at least one question or probe for each syllabus. Bear in mind that the questions and probing need to focus upon the conceptual, practical and pedagogical challenges of decolonizing the given subject matter.

A successful pair will:

- 1) Produce a syllabus that engages with the conceptual, pedagogical and practical challenges of decolonizing the episteme;
- 2) Produce a syllabus in which all the parts logically connect or inform each-other;
- 3) Take part in the critical questioning of other pair's syllabi and respond thoughtfully to critiques of their own syllabus given by other pairs

Syllabus

1. Whose order of knowledge?

We start with two texts that help to frame our inquiry. How does Foucault illuminate the nature/meaning of the “episteme” via a discussion of a “certain Chinese encyclopedia”? What is Longxi’s critique of Foucault’s treatment of the encyclopedia?

- Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Tavistock, 1970), Preface only
https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2013/SOC911/um/Michel_Foucault_The_Order_of_Things.pdf
- Zhang Longxi, “The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West”, *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1), 1988

2. The (Occidental) Sociology of Knowledge

In weeks 2 – 8 we engage with the conceptual and disciplinary histories that implicate the academy in imperial rule and thus present the need to decolonize the episteme (the set of premises, dispositions and procedures that are claimed to generate valid knowledge). Firstly, we turn to the sociology of knowledge tradition. How is Weber’s sociological argument concerning academic instruction predicated upon a claim to the uniqueness of occidental knowledge? How might we bring this argument into tension with Said’s critique of oriental knowledge production? And how might all these issues implicate the concept of “modernity” in the segregation of humanity into knower and known (Bhabra)?

- Weber, Max. 1982. “Science as a Vocation.” In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, 129–56. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
<http://www.wisdom.weizmann.ac.il/~oded/X/WeberScienceVocation.pdf>
- Edward Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered", *Race and Class* 27 (2), 1985
- Gurinder Bhabra, "Historical Sociology, Modernity, and Postcolonial Critique", *The American Historical Review* 116 (3), 2011

3. The Classics

Why are the “classics” valued as a cornerstone of liberal education? In fact, what is such an education supposed to cultivate in the student? The Yale Report provides some context and answers. WEB Dubois’s famous argument with Booker T. Washington over the scope and content of Black education is very much associated with the prospect of a liberal education: so how might we read the value of the “classics” through a critical race lens? Meanwhile, between the publication of the report and *Souls of Black Folk*, Edward Blyden addresses these questions to the Pan-African project in his inaugural lecture as president of Liberia College.

- The Yale Report (1828), Part II: *Liberal Education and the Classical Curriculum*
<https://collegiateway.org/reading/yale-report-1828/curriculum>
- WEB Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) chs 3, 6 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm#chap03>
- Edward Blyden (1882). *The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans*. Cambridge: John Wilson and Son.

4. The Anthropology of Rationality

Anthropology is primarily responsible for making a science out of dividing humanity into knowers and known. However, anthropology as we know it also emerged out of abolitionism. So while anthropologists from the mid 19th century onwards mostly accepted that a competency to reason was shared by humanity across time and space, they were still concerned to evaluate the competency of different peoples and cultures to exercise a rationality adequate to the challenges of the modern (imperial) age. How do these tensions manifest (differently) in Frazer and Malinowski? Does Winch, a philosopher, manage to redeem a “decolonizing” logic from social anthropology?

- James Frazer, "The Scope of Social Anthropology: A Lecture Delivered Before the University of Liverpool, May 14th, 1908" <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Stout80-t15.html>

- Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology." In *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1954) *
- Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (4), 1964

5. **Ethnographic Authority (Revoked)**

Ethnography pertains to the systematic description of peoples and by the late 19th century had become the distinguishing method of anthropology. Initially, ethnography was informed by speculative prehistory and ancient history. In the early 20th century, however, ethnography increasingly became synonymous with contemporaneous "fieldwork". Fieldwork required the anthropologist to cohabit "native" communities for an extended time. How did anthropologists argue that they were equipped – as outsiders – to faithfully represent and then critically evaluate the contemporary cultures of natives (Geertz)? In fact, what allowed (Western) anthropologists to access "natives" in such a significant manner (Clifford)? And how has the (epistemic) authority of the ethnographer been questioned and even revoked (Trask, Rennie)?

- Clifford Geertz "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28 (1), 1974
- James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority", *Representations* 2 (1983)
- Haunani-Kay Trask, "Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle", *The Contemporary Pacific* 3 (1), 1991
- David Rennie "Grounded Theory Methodology as Methodical Hermeneutics." *Theory & Psychology* 10(4) 2000

6. **Anthropology in the Service of Liberation**

What happens when anthropology is subverted, and re-tasked to serve liberation rather than empire and colonialism? Erna Brodber's novel, *Louisiana*, describes such a process. Brodber is a Jamaican social theorist and novelist. Her book is, in part, an allegory to Zora Neal Hurston, the famous African-American writer who trained as an anthropologist at Barnard College, Columbia University, in the late 1920s.

- Erna Brodber, *Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

7. **Geography and Reason**

In much of the Western canon, the distinction between knowers and known coalesces through a cartographic imagination. In short, geography, race and cognitive competency are fundamentally entangled – conjoined, even. Kant is known for his "practical reason" which, deriving from noumenal premises and being ends-oriented, aspires to a universalist treatment of the human condition. Yet Kant also believes that the competencies required for a human experience of the world are differentially distributed across nations, races and geographies. How does Anzaldua challenge Kant's cartography with her focus on borderlands and "mixedness"? And how does Hau'ofa seek to decolonize the human geography of the Pacific – the largest natural feature of our planet?

- Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004)
- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987) chs. 1-3, 7 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/550a1c94e4b0545b6579edde/t/5ad37252562fa71762289962/1523806813791/gloria-anzaldua-borderlands-la-frontera_the-new-mestiza-aunt-lute-books-1987.pdf
- Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands", in *We Are the Ocean* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008)

8. Spring Break

9. Language and Reason

The distinction between knower and known has usually been evaluated in terms of cultural competency; culture, in turn, has usually been refracted through language. As famously claimed by Whig politician Thomas Macaulay in his 1830s report on an (imperial) Indian education system, some languages are superior in their ability to convey knowledge. Thiong'o disputes this claim by drawing attention to colonialism's complicity in language-learning. Provocatively, Gikandi implicates the coloniality of the English language in the promotion of postcolonial critique.

- *Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835.* http://www.columbia.edu/itc/meaac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind* (Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981), chs.1, 4 <https://www.uibk.ac.at/anglistik/staff/davis/decolonising-the-mind.pdf>
- Simon Gikandi, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (3), 2001

10. Rhodes Must Fall

This week begins our engagement with contemporary political and practical challenges to decolonizing the episteme. The Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement has confronted many of these challenges. From its beginnings in Cape Town in 2015, RMF has spread to other sites of higher education including Oxford University – the Alma Mater of Cecil Rhodes (RMF Oxford; Nkopo, Madenga & Chantiluke). How do Hutton and Beard's critiques of RMF implicate some of the conceptual issues that we have engaged with so far? Mngxitama, a controversial South African activist, asks whether RMF is enough in-and-of itself to decolonize the university when material resources continue to be distributed in an Apartheid-like manner. Rao contemplates the wider context of the "statue wars" on and off campus.

- RMF Oxford. 2015. "Oxford Students Call for Cecil John Rhodes Statue to Fall." *Rhodes Must Fall Oxford* (blog). November 4, 2015. <https://rmfoxford.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/041115rmfpressrelease1.pdf>
- Athinangamso Nkopo, Tadiwa Madenga & Roseanne Chantiluke, "Skin Deep: The Black Women of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford", in RMF Oxford (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall* (Zed Books, 2018) *
- Will Hutton, "Cecil Rhodes Was a Racist, But You Can't Readily Expunge Him From History." *The Guardian*, December 20, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/20/atonement-for-the-past-not-censorship-of-history>.

- Mary Beard, "Cecil Rhodes and Oriel College, Oxford." *The Times Literary Supplement. A Don's Life (blog)*. December 20, 2015. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/cecil-rhodes-and-oriel-college-oxford/>
- Andile Mngxitama, "Is a Decolonised University Possible in a Colonial Society?", in O. Rutazibwa & R. Shilliam (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (Routledge, 2018) *
- Rahul Rao, "On Statues (III)." *The Disorder Of Things (blog)*. August 23, 2017. <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2017/08/23/on-statues-iii/>.

11. The "Traditional Student" and the "Hidden Curriculum"

Returning to a theme of Weber's, this week we reflect upon whom the Western academy is designed to teach. Read Oakeshott and Searle with an eye to discerning the social, economic, cultural, racial and gendered attributes that best depict the "traditional" student. Why do non-traditional attributes – and their human bearers - threaten the habitus of higher learning? How are the fault-lines between competent/traditional and incompetent/non-traditional students reproduced by the "hidden curriculum" (Margolis & Romero)? And what challenges must be faced if one seeks to decolonize the "student" and the "curriculum" (Heinemann & Varela)?

- Michael Oakeshott, "The Idea of a University", *Academic Questions* 17 (1) 2004 [1950]
- John Searle, "Is There a Crisis in American Higher Education?", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 46 (4) 1993.
- Eric Margolis and Mary Romero, "'The Department Is Very Male, Very White, Very Old, and Very Conservative': The Functioning of the Hidden Curriculum in Graduate Sociology Departments", *Harvard Educational Review* 68 (1), 1998
- Alisha M.B. Heinemann and María do Mar Castro Varela, "Contesting the Imperial Agenda, Respelling Hopelessness: Some Thoughts on the Dereliction of the University", *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies* 20 (3), 2017

12. The Political economy of imperial knowledge

At some point, a pedagogical commitment to decolonizing the episteme must address the economic legacies of colonialism and empire. What, then, is the political economy of imperial knowledge? To address this question we first turn to Mamdani's narration of the post-colonial fate of the "African University" system. We then examine, in general terms, the ways in which neoliberal globalization has exacerbated and/or transformed imperial economies in terms of the turning of public knowledge into private capital (Minai). Finally, we consider the way in which neoliberal agendas affect decolonizing agendas in the global north (Hong) and academics in the global south (Raju).

- Mahmood Mamdani, "The African University", *London Review of Books* 40 (14), 2018
- Naveen Zehra Minai, "Challenges for Academics in the Global South — Resource Constraints, Institutional Issues, and Infrastructural Problems", *The Scholarly Kitchen*, August 2018 <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/08/16/guest-post-challenges-academics-global-south-resource-constraints-institutional-issues-infrastructural-problems/>
- Grace Kyungwon Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University under Globalization." *Meridians* 8 (2), 2008

- Reggie Raju, "Predatory Publishing from a Global South Perspective", *Library Publishing Coalition Blog* (2018) <https://librarypublishing.org/predatory-publishing-global-south-perspective/>

13. Universities Otherwise

Is it possible to conceive of the university otherwise, as an institution with a decolonizing ethos, one that builds alternative bodies of knowledge, practice and commitments to society and humanity? This week we critically explore a range of options. Returning to the thematic of a "liberal education", Edward Said addresses the American University in Cairo on the cultivation of such a tradition in the Arab-speaking world. We also look at Nathan Hare's original proposal for a department of Black Studies at San Francisco in the late 1960s. Finally, we examine the bold prospect of a "university of the land" (Unitierra) - an indigenous inspired response to the modernization project of the Mexican state.

- Edward Said, "On the University / لجة مة " *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 25 (2005)
- Nathan Hare, "A Conceptual Proposal for a Department of Black Studies". In *Shut it Down! A College in Crisis*. Washington D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office (1969) <https://archive.org/download/shutitdowncolleg00orririch/shutitdowncolleg00orririch.pdf>
- Multi-Sense Media, "Re-learning Hope: A Story of Unitierra" <https://player.vimeo.com/video/172681670>

14. Curriculum Presentations and Final Reflections

This week we discuss the curriculum assignment and close with some reflections on the course as a whole.