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The Practice of Decolonizing Migration Studies

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Decolonizing thought, a useful effort for academics committed to social justice and equity, requires examining the colonial and imperial premises undergirding scholarship and teaching. I explain what I think it takes to develop a decolonial approach to migration studies, offer examples from in my own career, and end with some suggestions for scholars interested in decolonizing migration studies.

KEYWORDS: academic scholarship; colonial logics; decolonize; global racial structures; imperialism; migration.

INTRODUCTION

To decolonize is to undo colonization. There is no doubt that this age of "decolonizing" studies is rightly vulnerable to critiques of being more performative than substantive (Tuck and Wayne Yang 2012). We scholars and authors are not restoring ownership of land to those living on it before colonial occupiers arrived, nor are we relieving anyone's terror resulting either from that occupation or from its military and sociopolitical aftermath. That does not mean, however, that our work has no value. "What can be met can be moved" (Halifax 2021). The first step, then, is believing that we can meet and then overcome the challenge of decolonizing academic scholarship.

WHAT IT MEANS TO DECOLONIZE MIGRATION STUDIES

What do we mean when we say a discipline or subfield of academic thought and practice is colonized? Colonization means an outside force has taken literal control, installing economic, political, and cultural systems that allow them to exercise power by siphoning off resources from those who would otherwise control the means of their own sustenance if they had not suffered the colonial infiltration. No discipline or disciplinary subfield became colonized without centering people who had the power to define that field. The followers of colonized schools of thought profligate more ideas meant to exclude subaltern and allied perspectives. Conversely, no subfield can be decolonized without centering the work of those who challenge the colonial status quo. To destabilize entrenched colonial schools of thought also requires

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teaching against their maintenance, insisting that learners at all levels face the realities of the ignorance to which they have been subject about injustice in human history and contemporary social life. (See Loewen 2018 and Morris 2017 as examples.)

By its very nature, the sociology of migration in the United States is a colonial project because the very idea of migration to the United States is a concept born of and into a colonial mindset. Settler colonialism made aliens of the indigenous people living in North America at the very moment the land on which the inhabitants lived was "discovered" by wandering and lost European voyagers (Galeano 1997; Glenn 2015). Colonizers birthed the "United States of America" on stolen lands and created naturalization processes leading to citizenship that were reserved only for "free white persons" (Haney Lopez 2006). The new nation's administrators at the same time reserved the rights to deport any noncitizen deemed "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States" and to capture as prisoners any "citizens or subjects" of nations with which they were at war (MPI 2013). Then, they created their first immigration laws, each of which were racially exclusionary and xenophobic (MPI 2013). The premanumission decision in *Sanford v. Scott* (1853) disposed of any idea of incorporating people *made racially black by their enslavement* (Bashi Treitler 2013) when the ruling ensured that free Africans and their North American-born descendants would never be citizens (National Archives 2022). European colonizers simultaneously colonized the idea of migration when they used genocide, enslavement, displacement, and war to found a nation on exclusionary racial hierarchy, reserving the topmost position and the requisite spoils for themselves (Bashi Treitler 2013; Marx 1997; Steinberg 2001).

As these ideas about human hierarchy and the march of human progress took root, sociology's founders were defining its principles, seeking out concepts that increase the validity of the analyses of social life, and developing methods they believed sufficiently scientific to bring forth believable proofs. These were men and women of their time, and their perspectives shaped their findings and proclamations. Migration scholarship is no different. The most popular and entrenched paths in migration studies have justified rather than questioned exclusionary practices, since migration scholars are cut from the same cloth of the social life that they study. Yes, there were always scholars who fought against a colonial logic from which migration studies was born, and some have even managed to distribute critical and progressive ideas throughout the profession. But as Steinberg sees it, their works have not changed the discipline to any great extent.

> This outpouring of insurgent scholarship does not amount to a paradigm shift. It is not that the impact of this genre is "close to zero", but neither has its impact on mainstream sociology been great. For one thing, the production of victim-blaming discourses continues unabated, as one sociologist after another has propounded a theory that is little more than an iteration of the discredited culture of poverty thesis, with new rhetorical dressing. Nor should we put much stock in the fact that a series of progressives and people of colour have been elevated to the presidency of the ASA. Truth be told, this is essentially an honorific position. The President's major responsibility is to set the theme and programme for the ASA's annual meeting and to deliver the presidential lecture that invariably draws a gala audience. Without doubt, the project to decolonize sociology has spawned a canon of provocative texts, but they have yet to dislodge the power structure and dominant discourses within mainstream social science. There is a power elite within the academic enterprise consisting of elite universities, populated with "leading scholars" and "dream teams". These would-be avatars of knowledge burnish their reputations and reap grants to propagate their pet theories. They also enjoy

> easy access to the op-ed pages of major newspapers. In some notable cases, they have had the ear of the prince (e.g. Clinton or Obama), and therefore are instrumental in shaping politics and public policy. Through their grantsmanship, the power elite sponsor a coterie of doctoral students who remain loyal to their patrons and are rewarded with positions in leading universities. As for the nettlesome critics whose aim is to “decolonize sociology”, despite their scholarly productivity and their passion and conviction, their influence within sociology is marginal at best (Steinberg 2017:547).

Du Bois, now widely recognized as a disciplinary founder who developed many of the methods we now use to describe social reality (Morris 2017), in the end gave up on the idea that science can objectively look at the marginalized and let its progressive elite scientists speak, let alone represent well the subaltern (Bashi Treitler 2019; Spivak 1988; Steinberg 2016). Too, Kenneth Clark and Derek Bell both rejected optimism and embraced despair about the transformative power of the intellectual enterprise and the staying power of justice (Steinberg 2016).[2]

MY OWN EFFORTS AT DECOLONIAL MIGRATION SCHOLARSHIP

I feel as if, for as long as I have participated in academic life, I have been at work to shine a light on academia’s readiness to reify human hierarchies rooted in colonialism and imperialism. I first began my work in migration studies by learning demography in the doctoral program in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I understood right away that the migrants I knew lived in ways unrecognizable in the theories and formulas I was being taught in my classes.

For one, sociologists and demographers tended then and still lean toward understanding migration from the perspective of the power-holders in destination countries. That is, the most influential demographers studying migration in the United States at the time were using quantitative models to estimate migration flows, speculating that flows were a function of the wage that migrants expected to earn after crossing the border; and their results were used by politicians to try to stop the flow of migrants inward. Aging populations have relatively fewer workers compared to youthful populations, so aging populations need migrants to keep their economies healthy. Migrants’ work fuels economic engines, and bear the children that keep teachers, school administrators, pediatricians, and even amusement park attendants employed. Politicians ignore studies that showed that immigrants are a net boon to economies than a drag on them because they know that in the United States votes from a white electorate can be won with racially tinged anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Immigrants are good for an economy; race is not real; the world is not all white so neither can our citizenry be; we need more children even if they are brown; borders are social constructions; we made the laws and documents that govern our border crossings and they have changed and can change again; people are not legal or illegal. These ideas, supported by research, are shouted down. Words and phrases like black, Hispanic and Asian, illegal, migrant, foreigner, anti-American, and American are weaponized and twisted to mean something about what side someone is supposed to be on, as if there is justice in making sides in the first place. The intellectual enterprise of the academic decolonial project is to do what is required to untwist the knots of human wretchedness and privilege. We seek to teach that the benefactors of privilege made these knots knowingly and by their own hand. We can mark and analyze the historical and geopolitical contexts where social hierarchies and blockades are constructed, and study and dissect the social systems that perpetuate inequity and injustice. We can also prove that these systems make heritable that horrific privilege, allowing generations of white-racialized progeny to inflict terror, hunger, and landlessness on their fellow humans precisely because they erect policies and practices to dehumanize everyone but themselves.

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[2] Du Bois gradually came to the painful realization that the idea that the Negro problem could be remedied through scientific knowledge was a chimera. As he wrote in 1944, despite the success of the annual Atlanta Conferences, “so far as the world of science and letters was concerned, we never ‘belonged’; we remained unrecognized in learned societies and academic groups. We rated merely as Negroes studying Negroes, and after all, what had Negroes to do with America or Science?” (Du Bois 1944:par. 52; emphasis added). (Steinberg 2016:549; quoting from Du Bois 1944—see references.)

If one accepts my definition of the decolonizing project, I feel confident that the body of my academic work falls within it. Demographers seek to count processes that make populations grow or shrink, like births, deaths, and migrations in and out. As a doctoral student studying demography, I learned to use large data sets to estimate the numbers of immigrants expected to arrive given economic conditions in the destination (not the origin nation) using formulas ideologically based on rational-choice models about what migrants think their wages will be. The literature evolved when those estimates failed to predict ever-increasing numbers of migrants, and demographers changed formulas mainly to account for migrant misinformation about wages, not the economic, social, or political conditions in either place. Theoretical models were about migration chains, expecting that if one migrant crosses the border they will bring more, and each of those they brought would also bring more, and so on. What I knew about migration contradicted all this.

I also concentrated my studies on a second subfield, the sociology of economic change, which surely did not ignore inequalities on global North–South relations. While I appreciated the subfield's focus on global systems and the colonial links between sending and receiving nations, what I learned did not help me decipher what troubled me about demographers' analyses. I also found it to be so macro- (and still big data-) oriented that I could not see how to fit what I knew about migration into the subfield. At the time I was doing my dissertation research, I did not see a lot of room for migrants' stories to engage with macro theory, even the discourse of the "new international division of labor" that was the rage at the time thought more about commodity chains, piecework, and such. In these analyses, goods traveled freely but people did not, so migrants' lives were not the focus of study.

In my doctoral program I was, luckily, encouraged by two women professors to pursue research on an idea that emerged from the disconnectedness between what I learned about migration and what I experienced as the child of immigrants. I had already left doctoral study in economics because I could not reconcile the ways it seemed to ignore lived realities while developing models of the socioeconomic world that were to me wholly biased by a similarly colonial mindset. My professors' encouragement helped me lean into my (perhaps wrongheaded) expectation that sociology would leave me enough room to contest prevailing thought. I never thought it would be easy, and I knew I would have to show proofs they would find sufficiently scientifically valid and speak my findings in ways that were acceptable, even though I also knew that not all ideas are considered equal. [There is a reason Kuhn's (1962) writings about paradigm shifts are still popular.] Academia poses as a meritocracy, but we have all seen the studies that show enduring inequities in peer-reviews of works for publication and proposals for funding; student evaluations of classroom teaching; and quests for tenure, promotion, or "merit" increases in pay. Everything, from the topics we study, to whether our findings reach eyeballs and ears outside of our own classrooms, is scrutinized by the academy's gatekeepers. It begins in graduate school and does not ever end.

I grew up in the center of a migration network. I sought to complete a dissertation that could explain scientifically what I knew through what I learned to call participant observation. First, I had to find the methods that would make the science rigorous enough to stand up to the scrutiny of my dissertation committee, and later, of journal reviewers and editors. The only way to "prove" what I knew (as autoethnography, still far from revered, was not a thing then) was to go into the field and get the data from the immigrants themselves.

I used field methods (ethnographic interviews, and participant observation) to collect oral histories of migrants in my extended family that allowed me to map their mutual aid networks. I first had to teach my advisers that "family" in the Caribbean means something quite different than it does in the northern academy, and therefore "family" was a legitimate source of data collection. I had to show that field methods were a useful way of collecting migration data to answer demographic questions formerly (and incompletely) answered by quantitative methods. My methods of collecting oral histories employed the most basic rule of ethnography—immerse yourself in the field to listen and observe with the aim of learning how your research subjects understand the composition and boundaries of their environment, choices, agency, and the social structures that impinge upon all these. Thus, I learned that racism certainly shaped how their networks operated; but when I began my work, race was a wholly separate sociological subfield from migration studies, so I also had to fight for conversational space between them. I was encouraged then to leave off my findings about race because, presumably, that had little to nothing to do with migration. After doing the exceptionally difficult work of analyzing the microdata of oral history to tell a macro level story of global racial and migration structures, I got a top job at one of the top sociology departments in the nation. But I could not get my research published. The reviews rejecting my first articles were so harsh that I fell into a depression and could not write for nearly a year. I realized that I would never be able to sufficiently justify a shift in migration theory with the 25 pages an article allowed me, so I had to teach myself how to write a book (Bashi Treitler 2007). I had learned that making public critiques of assimilation theory was dangerous as its adherents ran every major outlet for publications and grants in migration studies.

Eventually, my research, and the books that came from it, made contributions that challenged and even overturned many ideas that were "givens" in migration research. First, I showed that even though black Caribbean ethnics migrated from western Hemisphere nations that on paper had *carte blanche* to enter the US, in fact they were barred from access, as they were in Canada and the UK. As black migrants they were fully aware of how their race had disadvantaged them (Bashi Treitler 2004). Black migrants in all three destination countries organized their networks in what I called a hub-and-spoke model of migration, which operated wholly differently from the chain migration model that still prevails over migration studies (Bashi Treitler 2017). That network form explained so many of the migrants' outcomes. It showed previous work attributing black Caribbean socioeconomic success relative to African Americans to their "work ethic" or superior "culture" does not hold up. In general, my work showed the flaws of assimilation theory as explanation for migrant socioeconomic "success" or "failure" (Bashi Treitler 1998). Instead, my work showed both race and ethnicity to be socially constructed hierarchies that shape outcomes for newcomers and citizenry alike (Bashi Treitler 2013). In the end, after I was tenured and promoted, I wrote openly about the white supremacist leanings within the assimilationist paradigm that still rules migration studies (Bashi Treitler 2015).

WHAT CAN WE DO TO DECOLONIZE MIGRATION STUDIES?

To decolonize sociology, we must first understand the discipline was formed under the influences of colonialism and imperialism and used to justify oppression. We are then called upon to dismantle and critique those justifications, and build theories and methods that shift the discipline's vision so we openly recognize power imbalances and re-humanize the denigrated and marginalized. Decolonizing migration theory means moving beyond Eurocentric perspectives that view migration primarily as an individual choice driven by economic factors, and instead recognizing the systemic and structural forces that shape migration patterns. It means acknowledging the agency and resilience of migrants themselves, rather than viewing them solely as victims or passive actors. Decolonizing migration theory also calls for the inclusion of voices and perspectives from marginalized groups, such as indigenous peoples, people of color, and migrants themselves. This means, too, recognizing the ways in which larger political and economic systems shape migration policies and practices, and the role of power and privilege in shaping migration experiences.

Other scholars have shown how we can move toward these goals. Glenn (2002)'s scholarship shows how race and gender oppression cemented colonialist hierarchical formations of citizenship and labor. Burawoy (2021), channeling Morris (2017), explains how a Du Boisian approach to decolonizing sociology properly centers race in global and historical contexts, and insists we produce scholarship that is moral, reflexive, interdisciplinary, and publicly engaged (see also Steinberg 2007). Connell (2006, 2018) demands that we center voices made peripheral in a global economy of intellectual production, cease intellectual activity that erases and excludes those voices, and be more democratic as we create new agendas and epistemes.

However, as I have noted, we have not managed to change the field. We face several obstacles in pursuit of this decolonizing project, and while we might despair, we have to carry on undoing the lies told by our teachers and repeated by our politicians (Loewen 2018). We can recognize our privilege in the global north and its institutions of higher education and employ it to include the perspectives of the marginalized. We can be creative in our methodologies to reach the right voices, and then work to amplify them. We must acknowledge though, that however earnest our efforts to democratize knowledge, our research earns us publications, tenure, salary increases, and other returns that reify the international intellectual division of labor. Still, we must do the work. We must bring to the fore knowledge producers made peripheral, and make our institutions, departments, and classrooms more inclusive. We only have to look for these marginalized voices to find them (Connell 2006). Still, even this is not enough.

> . . .[A] new critical consciousness is needed, and this can be achieved only by revised attitudes to education. Merely to urge students to insist on one's own identity, history, tradition, uniqueness may initially get them to name their basic requirements for democracy and for the right to an assured, decently humane existence. But we need to go on and to situate these in a geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict. We are nowhere near "the end of history," but we are still far from free from monopolizing attitudes toward it . . . The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment (Said 1994:330–331).

I recommend two practices to migration scholars intent on pursuing decolonial scholarship. Even if we do not change the discipline, or our institutions, we can at least make the legacy of our careers a more creative, open, and progressive landscape in which to grow new knowledge.

First, extend your own range—broaden your scholarly networks, seek out unfamiliar authors, and read their works as extensively as possible. I actively sought to extend my scholarly networks globally, and years ago consciously decided to give less time to the American Sociological Association (ASA) and more to my involvement in the International Sociological Association (ISA). It was through the ISA that I met Dr. Manuela Boatcă of Universität Freiburg in Germany. Years later, we co-edited a monograph edition of *Current Sociology* titled *Dynamics of Inequalities in Global Perspective* (Boatcă and Bashi Treitler 2015). Our goal in that project was to critique the all-too-common approach to studying global inequality or international development/underdevelopment, an approach that did not account for colonialism, imperialism, genocide, enslavement, land confiscation, and other nation-decimating crimes otherwise disguised as social progress. The journal editor at the time was Dr. Sujata Patel of Savitribai Phule Pune University, in Pune, India. She rightly sent us back to the table to find authors from the Global South to consider, as how could we possibly organize such a critique without said voices? The task was overwhelming, even for us as scholars who have worked on all things global since we began our academic careers. We did our best, which I am hard-pressed to say was sufficient, but the time-bound restrictions on the publication process forced us to give voice to scholars born in the global south but working at western institutions. Now that we have been asked to consider a new project, we are scouring social media and other public forums, even before we put together a proposal, to locate scholars at far reach from us. Extending one's reach is ongoing, mandatory work.

What are some specific ways we might extend our academic reach? Find scholars outside of your comfort zone. Perhaps they are down the hall from you but seemingly miles away across gulfs of racial and gender categories. Or they are on the other side of the world, in disciplines and institutional spaces far away from your own. Find those who do the work that interests you and take principled positions that you admire. There are too many of us out there interested in setting the shoulders of our scholarship to the wheel of social justice for you to work at this alone. Invite them to give talks or share a stage in person or in Zoom workshops. Use their writings in your syllabi. Invite your graduate students to know about their work. Reach out in collaboration, or in colleagueship, or in friendship.

Second, and just as importantly, conduct yourself in nonhierarchical and equipoised ways. As a black woman, child of immigrants, and first-generation college graduate, I walk a fine line between seeking nonhierarchical engagement, and retaining the authority I have earned in my experience as a researcher, disciplinary citizen, and educator. I have noted far too many times when I let down my guard only to have my warmth be read as incompetence. Still, I continue to invite vulnerability in my conversations with students and colleagues. It never fails to make me ache when someone compliments me for my openness because they have experienced it so rarely. I detest the obsequious practice of reading someone's conference badge before deciding to start up a conversation, as if their recognizable name or the institution of their employ makes them worthwhile. We should immediately cease the practice of treating our colleagues as if their merit as a scholar or human being is stamped on their nametag, or is evident in the level they have reached in the professoriate, or in the rank their department or institution holds. When I permit graduate students to call me by my first name, I explain that by doing so I invite them to believe that we will one day be colleagues. I encourage my department and institutional colleagues to develop and establish the most democratic and consensus-building practices we can imagine. Surely forging mutually respectful relationships, and modeling equity for a not small number of academics who hold over-inflated expectations of the value of their privilege, are some of the most anti-colonial practices we can instill as we work for a more honest and honorable academy.

CONCLUSION

National borders are socially constructed lines we drew on the planet and used to define who can belong with "us" and who is everlastingly "other." To decolonize migration studies, we must question all perspectives that make xenophobic logics of racialized human valuation seem natural. We must decenter colonial perspectives by incorporating the knowledge of non-Western scholars and their communities. We must work toward toppling social, economic, and academic structures that reify human hierarchies and retrench attendant socioeconomic inequities. This all requires vigilance in identifying colonial and imperial distortions to what we know and want to learn about migration. These include interrogating academic contortions of language and logics that attribute causality to individual migrants while ignoring the systems in which they must move. We should no longer accept perspectives that see "culture" as agentic in socioeconomic success or failure, especially when these perspectives neglect the aforementioned systems. We must write and teach with clear language acknowledging that borders are human-made and border policies are made and unmade according to the needs of the powerful. Decolonizing approaches to migration studies organize our research and teaching around the tasks of uncovering and analyzing the ever-masking ever-changing oppressive nature of colonial social organization. By studying and analyzing the realities that cause human suffering in this context, and by teaching others what we learn, we help to open a path toward a more equitable world.

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