

A Short Lesson in Subjugated Knowledges

BY [SARA FRYKENBERG](#) on [MAY 3, 2016](#) · (7)



In [her Presidential Address](#) at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 2011, [Dr. Kwok Pui-lan](#) outlined a history of Religious Studies and its relationship to colonial projects, challenging the membership to apply post-colonial theory and analysis to our scholarship and teaching, think with and relate to our global colleagues, and start asking questions about what studying religion

does *for us*, “rethink[ing], reimagin[ing] and recreat[ing] our discipline.”**[1]** Responding to this call, I have been slowly working to include postcolonial discourse in each of my classes, lower division, upper division, graduate and undergraduate.

This year in my Christian Sexual Ethics class we discussed another piece by Kwok from the 2010 volume [Sexuality and the Sacred, Second Edition: Sources for Theological Reflection](#) entitled “Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus,” wherein Kwok asks us to consider the relationship between Jesus’ (obscured) sexuality and a racist imperial agenda. At some point in our discussion of this piece, it became important to discuss [Foucault’s](#) notion of “subjugated knowledge,” which is to say, the kinds of knowledge that are excluded from dominant discourse when our way thinking and knowing itself becomes “subject” to a dominant culture. We connected this to the idea of the colonization of the mind—that thought, literally, can become colonized too and so, altered.



In a somewhat successful and somewhat unsuccessful attempt to explain these ideas, I asked my students to put themselves in the shoes of a colonial citizen and asked them:

“After you have successfully conquered someone, what do you do to help ensure that you maintain your power?”

They came up with a variety of answers from stealing the wealth and position of the colonized people, to demonizing the indigenous, violence, granting special favors to a few, and eventually with some guiding, to the issues of controlling language and education that I had been hoping to discuss. Reflecting upon this discussion and a similar one in another class this semester, both with the students in class and on my own, I found myself somewhat conflicted about my presentation of this particular material.

I teach at a college where the student body is primarily women of color from Los Angeles, so it has not escaped me that actually, many of my students can be counted among those who have been “colonized,” while my heritage definitely makes me a member of a colonizing culture. The fact that my classrooms, like many California classrooms, are a mix of documented and undocumented immigrants, and U.S. citizens, further complicates this discussion—particularly in light of the United State’s position as “empire” within our global economy. As stated in Kwok’s presidential address:

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the term ‘Empire’ to describe the globalization of capitalist production and the declining sovereignty of nation-states. Empire is different from the imperialism of the previous era, when Europe controlled distant lands. Today, Empire is all-pervasive since it has no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries (Hardt and Negri 2000: xii). [2]

Living in the heart of the empire, I am still thinking through my particular relationship to colonial history, neocolonialism and pedagogy.

Yet, returning to the question I asked my students, what I learned despite my own best efforts, my training in critical pedagogy, my research, my confusion and my uncertainty, is what we educators already know: our students are often the best teachers within a classroom. After listing the many ways ‘we’ might secure our power within a colonized region, one student observed [3] (and I am paraphrasing from memory):

“I find it rather macabre that we all so easily gave you answers to the question of how to colonize someone. If you were to have asked us about how to wage [Guerrilla warfare] we probably wouldn’t be able answer.”

“We” can give many answers for how to colonize someone; but for many of us, it often

takes special training, years of education, reconstructive projects, task forces, books upon book of reading, listening through the loud and ever present static of dominant culture, constant vigilance, one's own liberation, the liberation of others, etc. to learn *how to think* otherwise.

We are indeed in a close relationship with violence.

Yet, I am still struck by the power of this student's statement, by the subjugated knowledge that re-presented and grounded Kwok's challenge for me in a concrete way in the space of my/our classroom. I am grateful for their short, yet deeply felt lesson in subjugated knowledge.

[1] Kwok Pui-lan, "2011 Presidential Address: Empire and the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 2016, 84 (1), pg. 297.

[2] Ibid, pg. 286.

[3] The student gave me permission to use the question and reflect upon it within this blog.

Sara Frykenberg, Ph.D.: Graduate of the ***Women's Studies in Religion*** program at ***Claremont Graduate University***. Sara's research considers the way in which process feminist theo/alogies reveal a kind transitory violence present in the liminal space between abusive paradigms and new non-abusive creations: a counter-necessary violence. In addition to her feminist, theo/alogical and pedagogical pursuits, Sara is also an avid fan of science fiction and fantasy literature, and a level one Kundalini yoga teacher.

7 replies



Carol P. Christ

May 3, 2016 • 12:13 am

Let alone how to create a non-violent revolution that puts power in the hands of the people. Our educational system is clearly skewed towards the interests of the "victors," who are also in most cases oppressors. Thanks for the post!

Raping the women is another effective way of exerting control.

★ Like



Esther Nelson

May 3, 2016 • 5:43 am

“Education” is never neutral. It always carries agendas. Thanks for a great post.

★ Like



Nancy Vedder-Shults

May 3, 2016 • 11:45 am

One thing that comes up for me is the absolutely urgent need to imagine a world free from oppression and how to get there. Thanks for this post, Sara. Keep up the good work.

And on a personal note, I’m finally reconnected with FAR after more than a month’s absence. I’ve been very busy editing my book, so when I stopped getting emails about the posts here, I just let it slide. Thanks, Xochitl, for sending the emails again.

★ Like



Aied Alrashedi

May 4, 2016 • 8:26 pm

I appreciate the insight that you provide regarding the consequences of imperialism in relation to language and education. As an Arab Muslim from Kuwait, I have often wondered if it is possible to receive a proper, unbiased education from the American university that I currently attend. While I see that there are certainly attempts being made—many of my professors are open-minded and willing to engage in conversation that challenges cultural norms and conventions—even, as you write, our thinking can become colonized. As a result, it is hard for me to know if the conversations that we are having are ones that will move us toward freedom from colonialism, or if whether we are simply adding layers to this colonialism.

★ Like



bertrandleopengpsychology4all

May 5, 2016 • 12:43 am

Molweni (Xhosa greeting for hello)

I enjoyed this piece and thought of it as a brilliant adjunct to the current circumstances of education in South Africa.

I am quite interested in the notion of 'Empire' being boundary-less and I believe it speaks to a totalitarian construction of global society, one that tends to be limitless and ultimately pervasive. Postcolonialism is now becoming a foregone discourse, and neo-colonialism may be simply throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What I speak of here is the fundamental epistemology humanity engages with. Knowledge, as this epistemology, is an object that tends to be confused with methodologies on how we derive it.

Most of the time it seems to be grounded on discourses rather than any intrinsic quality we can agree upon; what ensues is a begging of the question and we are then back to square one!

As an African, I am loathe to speak of 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems' as this is assumptive and patronising. I also cannot disregard the imperial nature of colonial education pervading our beliefs on the constituents of knowledge, seeking to further subjugate our positions in the global matrix.

★ Like



charles66alf

May 5, 2016 • 3:34 am

Thanks Sara for your post on subjugated knowledge. Recently I was talking to Dr. Mariasingam, (michael.mariasingam@gmail.com) (http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/Resource_library/proceedings/46942_2011.pdf) a research fellow from Wisconsin University, about Holistic Education for Integration, and he came out with a statement saying that many of our students lack a 'Global Mindset and are locked within their context and frame of reference.' I was touched by his passion to help his students become global thinkers. And the big challenge for us all teachers and people involved in accompanying young

people would be to facilitate a culture of openness, respect and universality. Although I come from a particular religious background my exposure to other religious heritage, sociological thinking and psychological insights challenge me everyday to be open and learn from whatever is good and universal. Fundamentalism and fanaticism are prevalent in many educational and formative initiatives around the globe. A true educationist, teacher, guru, parent or a leader whatever may be the role one has, it is important to have universal altruistic thinking and contextualised fraternal living. It is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning.

My dream is to provide possibility for our young people around the world to become truly universal along with their search for excellence. It try share similar ideas in my other blog as well (www.charlesalphonse.blogspot.com)

As I do some studies on psycho-sexual affectivity & beauty, I am also interested to know more about your thoughts on Sexual Ethics and particularly your thoughts on Jesus's Sexuality. I shall try to read your materials and get back to you. All the best in your journey.

★ Like



Jeseter O' Neil

May 8, 2016 • 11:49 pm

First I want to say this was a great piece. I am Black and Filipino so my heritage is one of the colonized. So when I saw this post I had to read it and was grateful i did. One aspect of colonization and ways of subjugation of people that is overlooked is the use of religion on culture. When America subjugated Africans and Native Americans they did two things, one is they used religion as a context to justify their subjugation of people and two they used religion as a mass control tactic. Ill give an example of just how religion can also effect the psychology of a person being subjugated. Jesus is portrayed as a white male. So if your are any other race you are told that a man of another race is the son of God and that implies power. I read a great piece that points out that if you make the image of power similar to you then for generations people will not question your power because your image, the most powerful in Christianity is a image of someone similar to you and people will fear and respect that image. This also implies to women, they see a male figure head as the most powerful image in the Christian world and that implies that male domination is ok.

★ Like