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Intervention

Interventions: Bringing the decolonial to political geography

Lindsay Naylor [a, *], Michelle Daigle [b], Sofia Zaragocin [c], Margaret Marietta Ramírez [d], Mary Gilmartin [e]

[a] Department of Geography, University of Delaware, United States
[b] Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, Canada
[c] Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO-Ecuador), Critical Geography Collective of Ecuador, Ecuador
[d] Department of Geography, University of Washington, United States
[e] Maynooth University, Ireland

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Interventions: bringing the decolonial to political geography

Lindsay Naylor, Department of Geography, University of Delaware

Within and outside geography there is a strong interest in the inequities between states and peoples. While work in political geography, particularly in critical and feminist geopolitics, deconstructs discourse and peoples narratives as we seek to understand and represent these inequities, in many cases scholarship remains embedded in western ways of knowing and understanding the world (see: Sharp 2013a,b). Additionally, even as we undertake critical analysis we tend to rely on a discourse of a bifurcated globe, cultivating a problematic north-south divide (Murphy, 2013; see also; Naylor, 2014). This global division largely ignores the geopolitics of knowledge production, as well as the scale of empire, which creates multiple and competing peripheries and signals the need for a reframing or retheorizing that is attentive to multiple and diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world. The main drive of these interventions is to show new ways to incorporate such ways of knowing and being into postcolonial discussions in political geography through decolonial theory.

Imperialism and colonialism are the ways in which 'others' are actively constructed. Yet, the economic, political, and social relations enacted during the conquest and colonial period operated under a system of power still largely present in contemporary relations between people and states (Quijano, 2007a,b). Engagements with reframing imperialism/colonialism stretch across disciplines. Decolonial theory is rooted in the humanities and more recently is being mobilized in the social sciences and education studies with varying results (on decolonizing education studies see: Tuck & Yang, 2012). The decolonial operates as an intervention in time and space as it deconstructs the idea of a "post" colonial, which Grosfoguel (2011) and others argue tends to imply an 'end' or 'after' to colonialism and colonial power/knowledge dynamics, while in many cases simultaneously reinforcing similar hegemonic relations (cf. Mignolo, 2000, 2002; Moraña, Dussel, & Jáuregui, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Walsh, 2007). Indeed, Walsh notes that "while colonialism ended with independence, coloniality is a model of power that continues" (2007:229). Decolonial theorists argue that colonial power/knowledge dynamics remain embedded in scholarly work and that an encounter and dialogue which reconfigures knowledge production is necessary.

The recognition of the subjugation of knowledge and the creation of artificial difference in the colonial/imperial is part of the project of thinking through the colonial difference, which is put forth by decolonial scholars who seek to dismantle the geopolitics of knowledge and advance knowledge from alterity (cf. Mignolo, 2002). The colonial difference is the site of othering whereby systems of knowledge are hierarchized (Mignolo, 2000). To think from the colonial difference then is to not only acknowledge centuries of imperialism and contemporary 'othering,' but also to recognize and speak from the underside. Thus, contributors to this set of interventions were asked to address the question of *how the colonial difference might provide better understandings of political entanglements across space?* The broad purpose of this set of interventions is to bring new voices and perspectives to the decolonial through geography, something that we are well-positioned to do as scholars seeking to understand and explain difference across space.

For decades geographers have sought to critically engage an imperial/colonial past. Since the 1990s postcolonial theory has been deployed by geographers as part of this project (Gilmartin & Berg, 2007). The use of postcolonial theory in political geography assists with locating the violence of imperialism, empire, state-

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: lnaylor@udel.edu (L. Naylor).

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formation, and global trade. In seeking to illuminate the uneven relations between states over time postcolonial scholars attempt to make visible marginalized peoples and places. However, in political geography, the postcolonial is critiqued for relying on, in many cases, western knowledges and a western, post-structuralist canon (e.g. Foucault, Derrida, and Gramsci). Furthermore, as Gilmartin and Berg note, Anglophone postcolonial geographies are "less likely to refer to the writers and theorists of anti-colonial struggles, and more likely to refer to a triad of postcolonial theorists: Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak" (2007:120). It has mostly, if inadvertently, set-up a western/non-western binary that privileges the west. In relying on this canon, political geographers may be construed as using the 'master's tools' to emancipate the 'other' (cf. Koopman, 2008). This theoretical framing and binary thinking tends to neglect the political and economic agency of the so-called 'other,' as well as non-Western ontologies and epistemologies. Indeed, postcolonial political geographies often perpetuate an asymmetrical geopolitics of knowledge, producing studies *about* the 'other' rather than co-producing knowledge or generating knowledge from within sites of alterity (see: Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 170; Gilmartin & Berg, 2007).

As early as 2001, Dowler and Sharp recognized the pitfalls of postcolonial theory in political geography arguing: "The experiences of the marginalized are used as the raw materials for postcolonial theories but this does not require an opening of the process of theorizing to the knowledges and wisdom of the marginalized (2001:170)." Sharp (2009) argued for a more critical approach (and removed the oft used hyphen), which examines knowledge production. Such critiques suggest that additional avenues for theorizing political entanglements across space and scale are necessary. These interventions are an attempt to build on/branch out from earlier criticisms of the post- and postcolonial through a decolonial approach. The contributions to this set of interventions use existing critical work, which assists with deconstructing normalizing discourses and also reinvigorates discussion building from work done in the past two decades on the postcolonial and subaltern in geography more generally (cf. Blunt & McEwan 2003; Coombes, Johnson, & Howitt, 2013; Escobar, 2001; Gregory, 2004; Koopman, 2011; Radcliffe, 1997; Sharp, 2009, 2011; 2013a,b; Sidaway, 2000; Slater, 2004). The contributing authors offer the decolonial as a way to make visible and address ontological and epistemological violence of scholarship (cf. Sundberg, 2014).

The decolonial requires rethinking/retheorizing from alterity and multiplicity in knowledge production. Put simply, we need more and different perspectives and to more deeply consider privilege over knowledge and where it 'sits.' The decolonial is foremost an attempt to think outside the western canon and western ways of knowing to advance multiple knowledges (Grosfoguel, 2011). A decolonial approach is one that recognizes the differences created by the conquest and perpetuated in contemporary unequal relations between people and states. Grosfoguel argues that viewing the underside of the colonial difference "forces us to look at the world from angles and points of view critical of hegemonic perspectives" (2002:209). Thinking from the colonial difference does not negate western ways of knowing, or specify thinking from a "fixed geopolitical place," but is instead a rethinking of space and time that is multiple and varied (Vallega, 2014, p. 175).

A number of strategies are mobilized by decolonial theorists in thinking from the colonial difference. These approaches include (but are not limited to) relational ontologies, which attempt to erase nature/culture divides (Escobar, 2008); transmodernity, which liberates subjugated knowledges (Dussel & Mendieta, 1996); border thinking, which implores a rethinking from multiple 'sides' (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2000); and those that theorize a geopolitics of knowledge that (re)considers spaces of knowledge production (Daigle & Sundberg, 2017; Mignolo, 2002; Naylor, 2017; Walsh, 2007).[1] These interdisciplinary perspectives offer opportunities to reframe examinations of multi-scalar and multi-sited processes and interstitial spaces from the global to the body. Decolonial analyses make visible the cracks in universals while simultaneously opening up pluriversal spaces.

The decolonial however, does not erase the problems of the postcolonial. This set of writings, while launching an intervention in political geography also provides a platform to critique and reimagine decolonial theory through a geographic lens. While decolonial approaches provide an arena to redirect our thinking, Asher (2013) argues that it does so via conflating the theoretical and the political, which undermines the project. Moreover, the writings in decolonial scholarship are in many cases populated by a heterosexual and heteronormative male gaze (Mendoza, 2015, p. 100; see also: Ramírez's contribution here), sidelining the position of other genders. Compounding this issue is that decolonial theory is very rarely used to engage gender, sexual identity, nature, or economic difference (Asher, 2013; Escobar, 2007; Lugones, 2007; an exception includes the writings of Anzaldúa). How then can we critically engage political questions around identity, race, gender, and sexuality using a decolonial framework? Such political questions are already underway in the sub-discipline, however, a key component of these interventions is to reemphasize calls for scholars to address these questions in a way that is attentive to the geopolitics of knowledge production, which is fundamentally concerned with power. In these ways political geographers can contribute to dismantling colonial/imperial power relations within and beyond the discipline.

In thinking through the aftermath, or the "post" of colonialism, the contributors to this set of interventions advance a number of approaches to think through questions raised by political geographers and to argue for an approach that moves away from universalizing knowledge production and toward many knowledges through attention to: border studies and border thinking, sexuality and gender, settler colonialism and indigenous sovereignty, and embodiment.

Using settler colonialism as an analytical entry point, Michelle Daigle discusses indigenous political geographies and argues for a decolonized approach to indigenous/researcher positionalities. Indigenous sovereignty and futurity form a key feature of this analysis and Daigle urges recognition of, and accountability to, indigenous ways of knowing, understanding, and embodying citizenship, diplomacy, and nation. She pushes for a decolonial praxis that is attentive not only to how we produce knowledge, but how we can simultaneously dismantle colonial/imperial power relations. The decolonial here assists with teasing out the everyday realities of undoing settler colonial experiences.

Sofia Zaragocin notes that the settler colonialism experienced by indigenous peoples globally is not only racialized, but gendered. She notes that the body-politics of a postcolonial world are unevenly written across space. Zaragocin argues for a decolonized feminist geopolitics that is attentive to the plurality of knowledges, genders, and bodies and that is tied to place. Drawing from work in feminist geopolitics and Latin American feminist theory Zaragocin depicts an indigenous, decolonial geography that promotes a body-territory. This framing allows for a decolonial feminist geopolitics that is attentive to the violence of subject and territorial formation (particularly as it relates to gender and sexuality) and the

[1] The Royal Geographical Society theme for 2017 explicitly focused on decolonizing the discipline of geography and two forums discussing the theme were published in anticipation of the conference (see: Noxolo, 2017; Radcliffe, 2017).

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