

The Politics of Cultural Knowledge

Njoki Wane, Arlo Kempf and
Marlon Simmons (Eds.)



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the seekers of alternative forms of knowledge.

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Njoki Wane
Arlo Kempf
Marlon Simmons

FOREWORD

Emerging debates about the “inclusion” of multiple forms of knowledge and the search for diverse representation of bodies in the academy show hopeful signs. But we caution that “inclusion” can be anything but equal. One can be included while still existing on the margins. For many Indigenous and colonized peoples, the call for the renewal and affirmation of Indigenous and local cultural knowledge emerges out of recognizing the value and relevance of such knowledge in their own right. There continues to be alarming concerns about the general erasure of Indigenous identities, ideological [mis]representations of the colonized experience and the colonial encounter that simply enhance on-going colonial and colonizing projects. Coupled with myths that conveniently either deny or forget the roots of the colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands, we see the continuing presence of colonial and imperial racism today.

Racism has always been a product of colonial and imperial relations. Colonial tropes and “technologies of representation”, the normalizing gaze of the colonizer, disciplining around the borders and boundaries of what constitutes “valid knowledge” and how such knowledges should be produced, interrogated, validated and disseminated are all, in fact, more than Foucauldian forms of institutional surveillance. These significant acts and practices both reveal and constitute fundamental contestations about power, representation, and how we come to claim the authenticity of voice and experience. These acts and contestations also help us recognize the power of the colonial [racial] dominant irrespective of the intersections of difference or how we come to terms with the diffused nature of power and/or the asymmetrical relations of power. Colonial racism has appropriated, and continues to appropriate, Indigenous lands, languages, and cultural resources. The racism of globalization today can be found in the commodification of Indigenous cultures and their knowledge ostensibly to serve the needs of Capital. In effect, the imperial ambitions of Western capital seem to be “running amok” but also in a “grand style” as far as the colonial oppressor is concerned. Challenging the ideological, material, political and symbolic effects of erasure and negations of Indigenous histories, identities, experiences and, in particular, cultural knowledge has come at a huge cost to critical Indigenous and racialized scholars. We risk losing what it means to be human in the never-ending battle to contest and lay bare the race, class, gender, [dis]ability, and sexual domesticizing of spaces.

In current times it is refreshing to see [more so in the academy] the level of myriad intellectual engagements that are helping to destabilize the complacency and dominance of particular ways of knowing masquerading as universal. A discussion of cultural knowledge is important as part of the interrogation of dominant and hegemonic procedures of knowledge production, validation and dissemination globally. For someone who has been writing about Indigenous knowledge since the early 1980s, I have come to realize the connections between questions of Indigeneity and cultural knowledge as powerful and insightful in the politics of intellectual decolonization. Writing from the North American and Canadian context, I also

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acknowledge that I am able to speak of Indigenous and local cultural knowledge as a way to pay homage to my ancestral knowledge while acknowledging the context and politics of my physical location on Aboriginal lands. For many in a similar situation we speak of Indigenous and cultural knowledge to highlight the relevance of articulating multiple systems of knowing as a way to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric ways of knowing. We must welcome and encourage any moment and politics to claim Indigenousness as a space to subvert hegemonic knowings, and also to affirm both the particularities and the shared connections of the colonial experiences among oppressed, colonized and Indigenous peoples everywhere. Consequently, I have no intellectual appetite in devoting my energies and intellectual capital simply pointing to the complicities of colonized bodies thus leaving the disaster of Euro-dominance 'off the hook'. This is not to say I do not welcome such scholarship. It has its space. I simply have no desire for it and do not crave to undertake it.

Cultural knowledge speaks to the dynamism of cultures, a significance of a rootedness in place, history and culture. Colonial narratives have long subverted the power of local cultural knowings. But it is a testament of the power of such knowledge that they have survived and continue to offer guidance to human existence. A critical study of local cultural knowledge systems reveals that they are often well-woven together with theoretical explorations and they foreground local voices and the experiential reality. Hence, the study of cultural knowledge entails the understanding and writing the experiential into a theory of social existence. It requires that our analysis become lucid and laced with clearly delineated systems of thought and not necessarily engaged in a search for definitive answers. The authenticity of experience and voice implies taking the experiential as an entry into theory.

In naming the acts of resistance and decolonization, a study of cultural knowledge must pay attention to those moments when acts of resistance simply insert the oppressed body into colonial, hegemonic spaces and relations. Cultural knowledge is also about healing and reconnection and so it is also important to note that not all healing is about resistance or social activism. The experience of knowledge as healing can be individualized and the challenge for us is to move into an understanding of healing as collective politics. We must engage cultural knowledge from the heart, making the connections of body, mind and soul. Claiming the 'Indigenous' today must seek to repair the damage caused by colonialism and colonial relations. Indigenousness concerns a search for holism and the repair of spiritual, emotional, physical material damage to oppressed communities through colonial practices. We must focus on commonalities and differences in knowledge production noting that for example, spirituality is not the same everywhere for all Indigenous communities. It is important to recognize how power and relations of colonialism and re-colonial relations have scripted and continue to script us differently.

The anti-colonial presence has been well historicized. These histories tell us the anti-colonial is about praxis and about being able to self-determine through critical consciousness. The authors in this collection broach cultural knowledge through an anti-colonial framework, which works to critique dominant forms of knowledge that continue to provide an articulating tool to express the emerging conditions of the human. Such forms of knowledge exert a particular disciplinary pressure on

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oppressed and colonial subjects by subjugating our different cultural forms and expressions. The affirming of our cultural knowledge allows us then to offer a counter-hegemonic reading, which works to disrupt the production and dissemination of colonial knowledging endemic to civilizing narratives of what it means to be human. Cultural knowledge positions identity and, by extension, identifications as historically constituted and laden with politics. Aptly, this collection reminds us that we can no longer continue to allow identity as constituted through the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and religion to be shaped and formed simply through the contours of economic materialism. *The Politics of Cultural Knowledge* takes up the problematic of colonialism as historically informing the human condition and searches for ways to work with and outside the constraints of Euro-modernity. In claiming cultural knowledge the authors are faced with some key questions, such as: How is difference, heterogeneity, shared experiences and collective histories understood through our complicated locations? And how might this reading diverge and converge from contemporary readings of cultural knowledges as a site for decolonization? Ultimately, *The Politics of Cultural Knowledge* edited by Njoki Wane, Arlo Kempf and Marlon Simmons, challenges the mainstream oeuvre of cultural critique.

George J. Sefa Dei
Toronto, June 2010

NJOKI WANE AND MARLON SIMMONS

1. INTRODUCTION

The Politics of Cultural Knowledge

This collection is an outcome of teaching a course on cultural knowledge and colonial education for eight years. The course has created space for critical dialogical engagements with educators, learners, activists, and students involved in the process of reclaiming their Indigenous knowledge or making sense of their Indigeneity. A key to the many dialogues during class discussions has been to move the learning debates beyond the halls of academe or beyond goals of bringing about change that focus on issues of cognition, inclusion, discrimination and integration, to an emphasis on critical self-reflexivity that would allow for the interrogation of individual beliefs, values, biases and hence, work towards uncolonizing the mind. The dialogues have taken into account the social, political and cultural changes that impede transformation, and have called for a rethinking of the dominant seductive ideologies that serve to marginalize other people's ways of knowing. The course readings have pointed to different ways of conceptualizing and engaging in transformative learning and uncolonizing procedures. The readings attempted to challenge the status quo and offer alternative ideas and interpretations that allow for the dismantling of the persistent ambiguous connections between the known and the unknown; the self and the constructed other.

The terms "transformative" and "uncolonizing" have often been assigned different meanings, which have contributed to the messiness and contradictions evident in the different discussions on transformation and uncolonizing. One of such contradictions has to do with the contestations on who should be carrying out the transformative and uncolonizing work. In the course, we took the position that all humans are implicated in the process. However, the extent of individuals' involvement differs significantly considering the societal hierarchies and power structures we find ourselves in. As a result, we argue that transformation is about creating spaces and possibilities for excluded and oppressed individuals, groups, and communities to define themselves, create/recreate and claim/reclaim their taken for granted and appropriated values, meanings, and purposes independent of any external ideological or cultural impositions. These spaces could be created through the media, schools, work places, communities, healthcare avenues, ecological spaces, policy making, etc. This requires that we all consciously and responsibly reflect on how we make meaning of our world. In Cranton's (1996) words, such transformative learning would entail a rethinking and interrogation of our preordained assumptions, perspectives and expectations, and working towards empowering the disempowered.

The essays in the reader are informed by experiential knowledge and research findings. They reflect different perspectives that are informed by diverse histories, cultures, voices and narratives, which offer a critical interpretation concerning our understanding of the uncolonizing process and reclaiming one's Indigeneity. This approach yields significant questions with regard to transformative learning in the contexts of cultural knowledges; colonial education; spirituality; ecology, feminist anti-racist and queer pedagogy; popular culture; globalization; critical pedagogy and cultural studies. As a result, the essays will generate creative tensions that inform, interrogate and expand our views of what we have come to take for granted as knowledge and the possibilities of transformation. More importantly, the essays will acknowledge the divergences and similarities of Indigenous ways of knowing and help with disentangling the tensions in the different un-colonizing processes. These connections are important because they challenge us to have dialogue among ourselves in an effort to understand how to deal with the colonial ethos, post-colonial or neo-colonial thought.

Although as authors of this reader, we may not have directly experienced the first way of the colonial past, that of, violence, famine, poverty or genocide yet, we are aware that colonization never stopped and a discussion of decolonization is a constant reminder that, we are constantly confronting these realities at our doorsteps, inside our own homes, and through normative procedures of the media. As a result, we are confronted with this sense of place and belonging because the self is inextricably bound up with these colonial histories that confront us on a day-to-day basis. We can no longer ignore the violence in distant lands because we are intrinsically connected. The oppressions taking place in various parts of the world have colonial and neo-colonial histories. By engaging in critical transformative dialogues with these histories, we would be encouraged to seek responses, or rework our ways of knowing, spiritualities and cultures that could contribute to the disrupting of the power and politics that perpetuate the divide between the 'we' and 'them'; the 'self' and the 'other'. We, the contributors of this reader, come from different histories and communities, however we have a common goal, to unlearn and learn from each other and our communities of learners. We are endeavoring to transform our damaged cultures and recreate traditions that speak both to our situation as educators. It is important that we take on the responsibility to assert our knowing and processes of learning and teaching. Consequently, this reader reflects on important differences in the values, histories and relationships of the different groups in our society. The book attempts to draw people together with the hope that such an exercise will be an opening to individual and institutional transformation. Although some people might argue that we are moving on and developing; it ought to be remembered that the process of recolonization persists. For example in Africa, the idea of economic development and establishment of social conditions conducive for all parties was unanimously supported by rulers of ex-colonial states without paying attention to the voices from the grassroots. These grassroots voices, which were at the forefront during the struggle for independence, were silenced either through military force or through poverty. For most African people then, political independence was nothing but a divisive tool for exclusion and discrimination.

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As we engage in these dialogues, it is crucial that our engagement is holistic. We should ask ourselves, what it is that we want to achieve; do we want to engage in a dialogue as an exercise to stimulate our intellectual abilities, play with words and discourses or do we want to write a counter-discourse on transformative uncolonial learning? In the transformative and uncolonial educational thought, our goal is to search for ways of dismantling both the tangible and intangible forms of colonialism. We need to find ways of dealing with psychological traumas that have been colonially imbued. We need to ask ourselves how colonialism as a theory, a project, a praxis, a discourse has managed to produce itself: politically, socially, culturally, materially and ideologically? We need to find ways of dealing with spirit injury. And above all, we need to ask ourselves how we can move beyond further colonial desires that favor individualistic material gain over community needs. Through multiple interpretive prisms this reader attempts to address these broad questions.

Colonization, oppression and systemic discrimination that disoriented Indigenous peoples remain a significant challenge today. This trauma, suffering dispossession, violence, discrimination and pain persist. Colonization has detached Indigenous peoples from their cultural ways of understanding their experiences. They have been separated from their spiritual and physical relationships with both humans and nature (land, water, resource and territories). Such de-linking is further evidenced through the exclusion, silencing and negation by the educational system of Indigenous peoples.

In this volume, our goal is to respond to the dialogue of transformation through engaging in learning/living as a process of uncolonizing one's self. The voices and disparate narratives that have been shaped by colonial and neo-colonial procedures, whether tangible or intangible, move beyond overworked metaphors of integration, multiculturalism or cohesive living. Together, we explore the various discourses, theoretical frameworks and ideological proclamations that have been employed to analyze, critique and also interrogate the everyday assumptions of transformative learning that enable individuals to un-colonize themselves. We encourage readers to engage in critical dialogues that will interrogate, challenge and disrupt the power and politics that perpetuate societal hierarchies and divisions. This broad mapping points to the diverse ways of dialoguing, evoking, and practicing transformative learning in multiple contexts.

LOCATION OF ESSAYS

We begin with Njoki Wane's chapter, *African Indigenous Feminist Thought: An Anti-Colonial Project*. Wane, in her discussion, questions and identifies some of the limitations of Western educational thought that did not speak to her lived moments as an African woman. In doing so, Wane engages with the experience of African feminism in order to better understand how the lives of African women can be transformed. Through the context of a feminist discourse, Wane's intention is to make meaning of the myriad ways dominant relations of power and knowledge come to govern men and women in our societies.

John Catungal's, *Circulating Western Notions: Implicating Myself in the Transnational Traffic of 'Progress' and Commodities*, is concerned with the particular

items that immigrant communities in Canada send to their families in other parts of the world. He discusses the role of these mobile objects in producing cultural meanings and transnational affective relations. Catungal utilizes autobiographical stories that he shares with his transnational family as a way to explore how and why immigrant communities send gift packages, parcels and letters. He is also interested in how these transactions can inform our understandings of care, culture and commodities. Catungal argues that these stories of transnational circuits have much to tell us about the role of these transported items in cultural and knowledge productions, especially in the context of the present fragmented but connected transnational community formation. He tells us that such stories enable us to interpret how the circulation of these items among transnational social units functions in a duplicitous way. In thinking about questions of care and the complexity of cultural meanings in these transnational stories, Catungal foregrounds how immigrant communities come to occupy and navigate a difficult space somewhere between transnational modalities of caring and of complicity.

Marlon Simmons, in his *The Race to Modernity: Understanding Culture through the Diasporic-Self*, discusses the experience of the Diaspora and the necessary communicative strategies for survival. Simmons is concerned with questions of identity as identity comes to be regulated and simultaneously formed through the Diaspora. In particular, he is interested in the way Diasporic culture becomes governed through the socio-historical formations of Euromodernity. The matter of race centers his discussion to help with disentangling the way space comes to be constituted through bodies of the Diaspora.

In *Remembering the 1947 Partition of India Through The Voices of Second generation Punjabi Women*, Mandeep Kaur Mucina explores the experiences of seven, second-generation Punjabi women raised in Canada to families that were impacted by the Partition of India. In doing so, Mucina delves into themes of honor and everyday resistance in the lives of Punjabi women. She inserts her own stories and perspective as an insider to the issues explored, and at the same time, Mucina brings the voices of these women together to speak about identity, intergenerational memory, and the complexities of growing up in Canada as second generation women. Altogether, Mucina draws from the myriad ways Punjabi women resisted expectations placed on them from the private and public spaces of their lives.

Devi Mucina's *Moving Beyond Neo-Colonialism to Ubuntu Governance* is an exercise in 'remembering' what is shared common Ubuntu knowledge for an informed Maseko governance within the Ubuntu worldview. Mucina amplifies the importance of the land for Ubuntu peoples, and also the way in which Inkatha (unity) reflects the knowledge formed through the lived experience of Ubuntu peoples. He is interested in thinking of the Diaspora through Maseko Ngoni identity. His intention is to find ways in which Ubuntu languages could come to form lived possibilities for Africans such as Maseko Ngoni. Ultimately, Mucina hopes to regenerate and revive Maseko political entities and governance through historic-cultural memories and knowledges that centre the African through Ubuntu identity.

Yumiko Kawano's *Being Part of the Cultural Chain* locates colonialism in the context of Japan and points to the different ways in which colonialism comes to be