

Towards Academic Freedom: Decolonial Praxis

The Value of Freedom: Academic vs. Expression Panel Discussion, UBC, March 20, 2015
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I would like to begin with indigeneity as a starting point for thinking about the conditions of the present and our relationship to social justice as scholars and activists. Here at UBC we have ritualized [recognition of the colonial history](#), which has not passed and is therefore our colonial present configuring relations between settlers and indigenous peoples.

What does it mean to take seriously Indigeneity as the starting point for thinking, listening, and conversing? How would our relations with one another, with this land, and with our histories change, decentering the settler-colonial perspective as we seek to reorient solidarities towards another future, which is yet to be determine?

I am speaking today as a white woman, a settler colonial who has the privilege of living on these lands and learning from my relations with many generous people, animals, trees, lakes, oceans, and vegetables I grow in my garden. I am also deeply troubled by the ongoing colonial violence that shapes our daily lives and that impacts all of us in profound and life-changing, sometimes life-ending ways.

So, for me, as a white woman approaching the question of academic freedom in the context of a panel that is part of these events taking place within the [Rule out Racism](#) initiative, I have to begin by asking questions:

What would ruling out racism look like? How would we do that? Is there some outside place to which we could somehow banish racism?

Or might there be a way to think about how I can be accountable to the racism that is mine and the ways in which racialization functions and produces the privileges that I, as a white person, am both accustomed to and benefit from? Only then might there be such a possibility as academic freedom. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have noted in their important essay by the same title, [“Decolonization is Not a Metaphor”!](#)

We must start, and not end, with ourselves. As [bell hooks teaches us](#), if we want to work towards social or societal transformation, we first need to look at how we are dominated by and also how we dominate others (“Feminism: A Transformational Politic”). This means not just

thinking about intersecting relations of power, force, and domination, but actively seeking to be accountable to, and indeed to address, the ways in which we are all implicated.

How do gender, race, sexuality, ability, and other social determinates, produce bodies and embodied relations that we are, from the start, implicated in? There have been activists, intellectuals, and academics of colour who have been thinking, writing, and speaking about intersectionality, not for decades, but for centuries now. Yet, we white people, and here I mean both inside and outside the university, all-too-often approach racism as something that is done by others. We look at how groups of people are marginalized, but we do not often enough look at whiteness as a cultural logic and white supremacy as an ideology that is a constitutive part of who we are as individuals and as a culture.

So, for me, rather than ruling out racism, I would like to acknowledge its foundations presence—to look closely at it, to think constantly about it, and to commit to learning and un-learning, to listening, to decentering the coercive force of whiteness as a cultural norm, and to unsettling my colonial privileges as a life-long process.

Only then will academic freedom become more than a mantra, as a political practice with consequences that may transform not only who we are and how we live our lives, but who we might like to be and how we might like to live. Only once we have reversed this current slide into the adjunctification and temporization of academic labour, a process that is both highly racialized and whose impact on the very notion of academic freedom is acute, only then will there be the possibility of academic freedom.

Until then, I remain cautious with regards to academic freedom and fearful that it is all-too-often deployed as a strategy that produces its opposite, wielded as little more than a discursive tool to maintain a status quo, which remains, for many, unliveable.

Works Cited:

hooks, bell. "Feminism: A Transformational Politic." In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist: Thinking Black*, 19-27. New York: South End Press, 1989.

Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor". *Decolonization: Indegeneity, Education & Society*. 1.1 (2012): 1-40. Web. 10 Sept. 2013.