Epistemic Decolonization
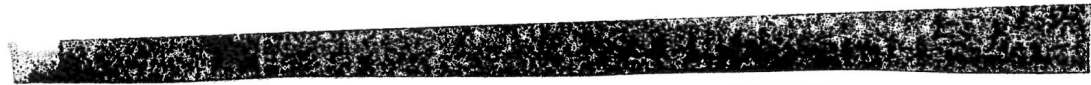
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"The hegemonic modern/colonial and Eurocentred paradigm needs to be decolonized. But how does epistemic decolonization work? What is its grammar (that is, its vocabulary, syntax and semantics)?" [Mignolo 2007:485].

'Epistemic decolonization' is a phrase that one hears more-and-more often these days, but what does it mean? Some things are immediately obvious. The notion of an episteme is a philosophical term from the Ancient Greek word of similar pronunciation which refers to knowledge, science and understanding. In a more contemporary sense it derives from Foucault's usage in *The Order of Things* (1994), in which an episteme refers to the historical a priori and underlying assumptions that ground knowledge and discourses in any particular period (it thus becomes possible, for example, to talk about a "modern episteme"). To talk of

epistemic decolonization, then, is to suggest that knowledge itself has been colonized, and needs to be decolonized. This is an arresting idea, but what, precisely, does it mean? What forms does the coloniality of knowledge take, and how should we set about decolonizing the episteme?

In this short essay I will try to answer the first part of this question, on the different forms taken by the coloniality of knowledge (that is, the different ways in which knowledge has been colonized). Because it does not make sense to talk about such high-flown ideas in an abstract way, I will try to be specific, and will exemplify my argument by referring to a single discipline, the discipline of archaeology. In my own work, I have argued that the coloniality of knowledge exists as a form of deep inscription in disciplines like archaeology. We might think of this as a kind of hidden legacy, or ambiguous inheritance, passed down to us as we are interpolated into disciplinary worlds of practice. I have also argued that the coloniality of knowledge has at least three dimensions, a structural and logistical dimension, an epistemic dimension, and an ethical and moral dimension. Extending this argument to the discipline of archaeology produces the following account, which is a brief summary of longer published versions [Shepherd 2015, 2016, in press].

A first dimension of the coloniality of archaeology is structural and logistical. A significant part of the historical development of archaeology as a discipline took place in colonial situations. Archaeology tended to

operate as an expeditionary science, in which territories of the global south and global east figured as field sites and research opportunities, sites from which to harvest or collect data [Shepherd 2002, 2015]. Frequently, the flow of data or information was in one direction, and was basically extractive. Information, observations and objects moved from locations in the global south and east, to the disciplinary metropoles in Europe and North America, where they were worked up into publications (site reports, regional syntheses, typologies and systems of classification, and so on). In the ordering of rank and hierarchy in the discipline, scholars in metropolitan institutions held primacy, while scholars in the global south were frequently treated as local enablers or collaborators "on the ground" [Shepherd 2002, 2015]. Local assistants on the periphery of the discipline were described by a variety of names: informants, diggers, or often just "boys" [Shepherd 2003]. Key metropolitan journals and publishing houses and university presses held sway in the politics of publishing, and citation circles centred on figures in the global north meant that certain debates and lines of investigation were pursued, while others languished. All of which is to say that in its structural and logistical aspects, the discipline of archaeology recapitulated relationships in the colonial worlds of practice that had been such a formative part of its development as a discipline. I would argue that this situation, which I have described as an historical situation, is still very much with us and forms part of the inbuilt coloniality of the

discipline, in its structural and logistical aspects [Shepherd 2016]. In fact, I would argue that in an era in which migrancy, cultural hybridisation and social media have vastly complicated the scope and complexity of transnational exchanges, academic and disciplinary worlds of practice offer some of the most lingeringly colonial situations that we have, as witness the habitus of the average Fellows dinner at Cambridge or Oxford.

In a way, the structural and logistical aspects of the coloniality of disciplines like archaeology are readily visible. The wonder is that they are not commented on more often, or with more outrage. A second dimension of coloniality is more subtle in that it demands that we interrogate the accustomed categories and concepts through which we think, as well as our understanding of what knowledge is and how knowledge works. This is coloniality in its epistemic dimension. The task here is slightly different. It involves understanding how the twinned contexts of colonialism and modernity express themselves in the way in which knowledge is thought and constructed in the disciplines. In the case of archaeology, this takes us to core notions of time, place and personhood. For example, with regard to time we might tell the following story. Colonialism/ imperialism is not only concerned with the conquest of space or territory, but also with the conquest of time [Shepherd 2016]. The conquest of time takes many forms, including the cancelling or subalternization of local histories and temporalities, and

their replacement with modern Western understandings of time and history. The contours of this understanding of history are familiar: to be of the non-West is to stand outside of history, to dwell figuratively in the time of the past, and so on. Archaeology, in this account, becomes one of the technologies whereby people and territories in the global south are enfolded or interpolated into modern Western temporalities and versions of history [Shepherd 2016].

Modern temporalities tend to be linear and projective, or forward-looking. The past is ruptured from the present, and the present from the future. One of the functions of archaeology is to emplace the past within the past, physically and conceptually separating it from the present [Shepherd, Gnecco and Haber 2016]. Disciplinary regimes of care frequently take the form of physical and typological boxing. The gridding of a cave deposit in units of one square metre, becomes the opening act in a proliferating series of squares and boxes that characterize the work of the discipline. The fate of the buried dead vividly illustrates the capture, bureaucratization and governmentalization of the disciplined past [Shepherd and Haber 2014, Shepherd 2015, 2016]. In many contexts, the remains of the buried dead, figured as ancestral remains, have a particular potency and meaning, and intervene in contemporary ways of life. As remains in the ground, they frequently act as both literal and metaphorical guarantees of rights to territory, and the continuity of ways of life. In Southern Africa, as in

many other regions, one of the first acts of disciplinary archaeology in newly conquered territories, was to exhume the remains of the ancestral dead from burial sites and sacred places in caves, cattle kraals, rock shelters and sites on the landscape. Refigured as archaeological remains, they were first exposed through excavation, then photographed, numbered, measured, bagged, boxed, and transported to centrally located repositories. Frequently, this enterprise took the form of a kind of mass harvesting of the dead. The archaeological stores of the South African Museum contain approximately 10 000 boxes of material, of which an estimated 1000 boxes contain human remains. Stacked in cardboard boxes on floor-to-ceiling metal shelves, in the fluorescent glare of the museum store, the ancestral dead enter a new time/ space, marked by objectification and quantification (a discourse on empirical science), and the stasis of an eternal present (a discourse on conservation and preservation) [Shepherd and Haber 2014, Shepherd 2015, 2016]. Wrenched from any meaningful articulation with contemporary ways of life, they are returned to their communities of origin as points of data in authorized (that is, disciplined) histories. Hence one of the claims of disciplinary archaeologists to affected communities and publics: "we will give you back your history" [Shepherd 2007].

This short account of a larger, unfolding argument begins to illustrate the entanglement of modern conceptions of knowledge and science, with colonial worlds of practice. In my published work, I have explored

several ideas arising out of this entanglement. One has been to explore ideas around epistemic violence, drawing on the work of Foucault and Gayatri Spivak [Spivak 1993]. The brief account given above evidences three forms of epistemic violence associated with disciplinary regimes of care: a violence of objectification, a violence of excision (or cutting), and a violence of alienation. The first form of epistemic violence is perhaps the most familiar. The second form, the violence of excision involves the removal or cutting of phenomena from one context and regime of care, and their forced emplacement in another context (the archaeologist's trowel acts as an instrument of excision). The third form, the violence of alienation describes the process whereby phenomena are claimed for universal knowledge and Western science, away from their origins in local history, memory and practice [Shepherd 2015]. A second line of investigation in my work has been to explore the proposition that for much of its history, archaeology operated as a form of racial science. By this I mean more than the idea that archaeology was a form of science that operated in the racialized landscapes of colonialism and apartheid; I mean that archaeology was a form of science for which race was an organizing idea [Shepherd 2015]. In the first half of the twentieth-century, much of the energy of the discipline was directed towards developing typologies of race. Human remains, and especially crania, were a prized form of evidence. A standard method of excavation involved deep-trenching the back of cave sites, the likely location of

human burials. In Southern Africa, this disciplinary interest in human remains was accompanied by a vigorous, quasi-legal trade in human skeletons, many of them destined for museum collections in Europe [Legassick and Rassool 2000, Shepherd 2015].

A third dimension of coloniality is ethical and moral. This speaks to the rights and entitlements that disciplinary practitioners accrue as part of their training, that allow them to intervene in sites and situations, not only as a right of science, but as an act of virtue. In the worlds of practice of which I write, archaeologists routinely excavated sacred places ad burial sites [Shepherd and Haber 2014, Shepherd 2015]. When permission was sought, it was typically sought from the white landowner, rather than from the black or indigenous community attached to the site. Recently in Prestwich Street, Cape Town, archaeologists went over the heads of a self-identified descendent community of enslaved persons, to excavate an early-colonial burial ground near the centre of the city. While the aptly named Hands Off Prestwich Street Committee argued for non-excavation and the preservation of the site as a site of memory and conscience, the majority of archaeologists argued for the excavation of the burial ground on the basis of its scientific value. Colonial forms of entitlement were updated for contemporary times via a discourse on "cultural resource management" and via practices of troping. Archaeologists involved in the exhumations said "bones are like books", "leaving bones unexcavated and unexamined is like burning a library",

"each skeleton is a piece in a jigsaw puzzle", and "we will give you back your history" [Shepherd 2007, 2012]. Indeed, I would argue that while schools of theory come and go, and methods change through time, historically entrenched forms of entitlement are some of the most durable aspects of disciplinary operations.

This has been a necessarily brief tour through a complex terrain. My hope is that it might help to specify both what it meant by the coloniality of archaeology, and the possibilities of a decolonial reading. A host of questions follow: Could we imagine forms of practice that are not, in themselves, epistemically violent? Are there other ways of knowing, outside of the protocols of classification and empirical science? Is non-excavation an option? Could we imagine an archaeology of silence? How might we conduct the discipline so that it does not take the form of a white gaze on black bodies? Can we switch the dynamics between disciplinary centres and their peripheries? Can we imagine time differently? What would it mean to think in terms of ideas of co-presence and continuity? What would it mean to decolonize time? Can we begin the business of refiguring disciplinary rights and accountabilities? Can we imagine what a decolonial archaeology might look like? Or is the coloniality of archaeology so deeply written into the discipline, that we arrive at something else: not archaeology as we know it, but an anti- or counter-archaeology, a kind of archaeology after archaeology?

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