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## **The (Un)timely Death of a Brown Body: The Colonial Gaze in Educational Research**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, I attempt to respond to the question of “What does research do to me?” in relation to my Brown body. More specifically, I situate how the colonial gaze frames such a body as damaged, depleted, and wholly oppressed. In that examination, I call to attention the ways in which research, including educational research, upholds narratives that are steeped in racism and how those contribute to the orientation of white bodies as taking up more space (Ahmed, 2007) and frames them as being more theoretically knowable Chakrabarty (1992). Accordingly, the “Other” body, deemed as a threat to white spaces, is confronted by feelings of devaluation and exploitation (Truong and Museus, 2012) when researching race or when naming racism. In situating those realities, I turn towards a project of Browning (Gaztambide-Fernández and Murad, 2011) in making sense of my own experiences with educational research as a contemporary and emerging scholar in the field.

## What Does Research Do to Me?

What does research do to me? Such a question, at least for me, is fraught with tensions. This is because I cannot dissect the question without reflecting on the hauntology that comes with it. Everywhere I go, the presence of my ancestors follows me in some (un)life resurrection and the spectral form that I might come to be. This ghostly confluence is perhaps telling in a way. I live or perhaps escape death, at every turn. I run from a colonial gaze which seeks to extricate me. Being cognizant of the dangers that lie in the precarity of this, I invoke the work of Bhattacharya (2009) on othering research, researching the other waxed against the “messiness” of theoretical and methodological space. And like dos Santos Soares (2019), who comes to anthropological research, I enter educational research as the “Other” of Western thought. Like her, I seek to change paradigms in that spatiality, specifically within schooling and society.

As someone who comes to the space of research with a void, it is fitting then that I share a poem to elucidate the ashes and embers that emanate from this burning body—one that lingers on the precipice of death:

*A Brown body lays in front of me,  
flung open and heavily dissected,  
limb by bloodied limb.*

*The entire corpse is sprawled out  
like a slaughtered map of  
arteries, capillaries, and veins  
no longer running a pulse.*

This poem is unfinished much like most of what I write. But what it offers, ever so slightly, are words that are evocative and visceral about my own body and identity, even if much of my existence has been surreptitious. According to Gee and Otiniano Verissimo (2016), racism can impact someone even before life begins. Over time, as racism compounds and unfolds, racialized trauma inevitably follows. At times, it comes in the form of vicarious traumatization (Kendall, 2020), wherein secondhanded experiences can take form. To make sense of this, I come to research to exhume—to stitch and thread—the experiences and stories about the Brown body, but what I read is often problematic and troubling. It is ascribed as dirty, monstrous, unrefined, and vile. This taxonomy and its appropriation of the Brown body is nowhere as nearly pillaged as it is in research. It is ploughed and rummaged like a cadaver—one still holding onto a faint pulse. In other words, it becomes a corpse that comes to research to decay and decompose. Even when I examine and interrogate the Brown body in its bounty and expanse, it always meets a/n (un)timely death. This is the crux of what research does to me. It brings me to my own contrition, leaving me in wonderment as to whether the shelves full of taxidermy will include me next.

## Damaged, Depleted, and the Role of Educational Research

Perhaps this fracturing of the Brown body within research emerges from the fact that it is disseminated as damaged-centred. Indigenous authors and scholars have been at the forefront of addressing and challenging this. According to Tuck (2009), for example, “the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (p. 413). Said differently, it is a (mis)representation of the body of colour as being only and wholly oppressed. This fragmentation of the Brown body occurs when methodologies are uncritical and unmediated (Cruz, 2001). A lack of contextualizing and situating positionality is one way this materializes. In the context of critical ethnographers, although applicable and transferable to others, Madison (2005) defines positionality as something “to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (p. 8).

When these forces remain unchallenged, the researched body, such as the Brown body, framed through a colonial gaze, can ripple dangerous (mis)representations and stereotypes. For example, it often renders “Third World Women” as singular and monolithic (Mohanty, 1984), (re)producing false narratives and representations that said women are inherently oppressed. Like Mohanty, I have come across this notion of the “Third World” being depicted as such. As an Indian living in the diaspora, it is not unfamiliar for me to have to confront stereotypes of the homeland as being ‘dirty’ and ‘poor’ through Western eyes. India, in that manner, is for the Westerner a school field trip—a place to visit while bashing every part of it when returning home, whether that “home” is on stolen land or that the white person’s home profits off exploitation, is never a part of the conversation. The murderous spree of India by the British Raj, in addition to elsewhere in the Global South, is left unsaid. The researcher, in this case the colonizer-turned-traveller, only seeks to appropriate Indian communities and cultures, and to footnote the rest as emptied and pitiable ‘subjects’ in ‘need’ of being ‘saved’ from themselves.

*the colonizers*

*trace bodies*

*make maps*

*out of flesh*

Similarly, educational researchers also play a role in “the possible hidden costs of a research strategy that frames entire communities as depleted” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409). According to Paris (2019), “educational research often calls us out our names, meaning that educational research often names people and communities not as they are but as the academy needs them to be along damaging logics of erasure and deficiency” (p. 217). It can also be an extractive process (Gaudry, 2011), reeking in acts of exploitation and retrogression. In that act of domination, there is a perpetual depiction of sorrow and tragedy without the contextualization of power and privilege. To this end, Tuck and Yang (2007) explain, “We observe that much of the work of the academy is to reproduce stories of oppression in its own voice” (p. 227). As such, researchers are less interested in their responsibilities to the communities they “study” and more towards an academic focus on “truth” (Gaudry, 2011). It is mostly the “truth” of the colonizer that pervades the discursive space of academia. Chakrabarty (1992) contends that the university, as such, as an institutional site, produces discourses that cohere to a master narrative.

Some of these narratives can be overtly racist. One such example is seen in a now retracted article from 2020 in the journal, *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition*, which used the term ‘coloured’ to refer to “minoritized” groups of women in South Africa, in addition to egregiously claiming that these women are at risk for low cognitive functioning. Research like this traffics a racist agenda while also being erroneous and unsubstantiated. Other forms of such research vis-à-vis the dominant narrative can be subtle, but also virulent. Returning to the Indian body, as I continue examining my own Brownness in relation to colonialism, I think of educators and their appropriation of yoga. In a race to see who can out-appropriate the other, white educators engage with and offer research on the practice of yoga in schools. Rarely, does this educational research around yoga mention its roots in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. Instead, white perspectives suspend our cultural knowledge (Ausman, 2020). These practitioners and researchers ignore and silence the Brown bodies and identities who not only practice yoga, but who must grapple with the erasure of their cultures and religions. Instead, the emphasis is on who can excavate the most from a practice that has an exotic allure to them. As a result, all these researchers do is appropriate the Brown body and then display it in the name of artistry, chanting namaste, albeit incorrectly, in the background.

### **The Orientation of Bodies in Space(s)**

It is through this “display” of the bloodied, depleted, and torn body of colour that I am terrorized by what research can do to me. I believe this happens because the orientation of space forms around some bodies

more than others (Ahmed, 2007). In that manner, educational research orients the dominance of “[w]hite, middle-class, monolingual, cis-hetero-patriarchal-ableist ways of being at the expense of all others” (Paris, 2019, p. 218). In fact, through her evocative title for one of her poetry collections, Shraya (2016) reminds me that *even this page is white*. As such, the production of Western knowledge dictates all other knowledges to be ‘less’ worthy, including through the act of resistance on the surface of white pages. Even when enacting the project of Browning, borrowing the words of Gaztambide-Fernández and Murad (2011), I cannot escape the colonial gaze. In that manner, research that examines anticolonialism and antiracism responds to or works against the gradients and iterations of whiteness. I mention this because one might argue that my own examination of myself as the “Other” is a reverted colonial gaze, whereby there is an unintended exoticization of the self as a subaltern speaker. So, even as I seek to be free from whiteness, the very act of seeking refuge away from unfreedom cannot be journeyed without being trapped in a colonial derivative of some form. Ahmed (2007) offers the following to contextualize the pervasiveness of such whiteness:

Spaces are orientated ‘around’ whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. We do not face whiteness; it ‘trails behind’ bodies, as what is assumed to be given. The effect of this ‘around whiteness’ is the institutionalization of a certain ‘likeness’, which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space. (p. 157)

This results in the onslaught, at least for me, toward lifelessness because of this constant reverberation of whiteness. I am a Brown body trying to survive a white world that has been erected by way of colonization. It is a world that does not only want me to become invisible and reduced; rather, it would prefer to have me disappear. Perhaps it is true then that “brown life is an unbroken bearing of the weight and hollow of the active absence of brown life” (Shraya, 2016, p. 50). In the structure and system upholding white privilege and white supremacy, Brown life is even more absent.

In many ways, then, it is the absence, or perhaps the hiddenness of the Brown body in a long-lost atlas, that is further hindered by the daunting and harrowing process of educational research. More specifically, research for students of colour, particularly those who focus on race and other intersections, can feel a deep sense of alienation, fear, and isolation. Racism and racial trauma are a part of the navigation of graduate studies for students of colour (Truong & Museus, 2012). It can include being told that experiences of racism are being “exaggerated” or “taken out of context” when such accounts are brought to attention. These microinvalidations aim to dissuade people of colour from naming and validating their experiences of racism in the so-called institution. The fact that this is such a recurring experience is troubling, but more so, it is disappointing, especially when examining the perfunctory nature of so-called researchers in the field of education.

In my experience, the most fragile remarks come when power and privilege, especially white privilege and white supremacy, are named. There is a form of an emotional disconnect that white people display (Eddo-Lodge, 2017), wherein acknowledging colonialism and racism renders a lack of accountability, engagement, and relationality. In one graduate studies course, for example, I remember pinpointing that white teacher candidates in Teacher Education perpetuate racism. A white graduate student indirectly, although clearly in response to my remarks, referred to my use of “white” and “whiteness” as being divisive. She added that white people also marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement. To her, white people have been committed to antiracism just as much as people of colour. However, she had dismissed and ignored the following: “The system of white supremacy was not created by anyone who is alive today. But it is maintained and upheld by everyone who holds white privilege—whether or not you want it or agree with it” (Saad, 2020, p. 3-4). These instances, however varying, are not uncommon. In another course, when I mention that Teacher Education is inherently racist, the reaction from many of my colleagues and the professor is telling. The colonizer’s question of “What proof do you have?” evades all else. It begs me to ask the following: How many more dead bodies do I have to exhume and resurrect to “prove” the structural and systemic nature of racism?

## **Knowledge Production and Theoretical Knowability**

If power and privilege are named, research does so in a way that placates to the dominant discourse, and, therefore, continues to make invisible the realities of Brownness. In the context of race and racialization, more specifically, Said's (1978) *Orientalism* draws attention to how Western tropes dominate the "Other". Several decades later, this continues to be a reality, even with/in research. In fact, the so-called academy continues to dictate what research is "permitted" and what is not. So, the Brown body has to appear palatable to the dominant narrative, namely whiteness. It has to placate to the status quo. To provide an example, I borrow the work of Hill Collins (1989), who is known for writing *Black Feminist Thought* and other riveting books. According to the author, "Black feminist thought can be suppressed by a white-male-controlled knowledge-validation process" (p. 752). This is because feminist thought, especially Black feminist thought, often examines the dominant narrative through a critical and intersectional lens. It seeks to redress patriarchal and racist junctures. As a result, Black women are often denied the knowledge production of Black feminist thought and their work can be deemed as being not credible research (Hill Collins, 1989). They are seen as a threat to the mechanics of an institution oiled by the heavy machinery of colonial and racist thought. How that knowledge is dismissed is a matter of further colonial critique. In my own experiences with research as a Brown body, I encounter the barrage of questioning of whether what I present is "permissible" to what research is "supposed" to be—that is, I have to adhere to the rules of the colonizer. I am informed that poetry has no place in research. A scribbled note of feedback speaks back to me. It says vignettes are not a form of research. This is the line of questioning that I face as a Brown man, but women of colour and trans people of colour are put under even further scrutiny when doing research differently.

But knowledge production that is attributed to a white author is received differently. White people are often lauded and praised for producing knowledge that focuses on race and racism. It surmises certain thinkers—specifically, white Europeans—as being what Chakrabarty (1992) calls theoretically knowable. For instance, Robin DiAngelo's work on white fragility has been highly regarded by white scholars interested in antiracism struggle and work. While DiAngelo's contributions are valuable, the emphasis on her research as one of the few sources on white fragility is disconcerting. There are several people of colour who have written about race and racism, along with an examination of whiteness, such as Ijeoma Oluo. Interestingly, even the critiques that surface about white fragility come from white people or conservative people of colour, whereas arguments rooted in informed opinions of experiences that are lived and factually coherent are rarely appraised. By that, I mean a deconstruction of white fragility that is less concerned with baseless and unhelpful rhetoric such as "not all white people" or "reverse" racism, and instead focusing on how white people dominate spaces, including research, around racial justice.

Another example of this is when research is published about Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous researchers. Such scholars often act as "gatekeepers" to Indigenous epistemologies, knowledges, and methodologies, "passing" on a role or "providing" space to an Indigenous scholar when the appropriator moves on to colonizing someone else. In both examples, even if the intention is to redress colonial research, the colonial gaze continues to hold the narrative and maintains a reach on who is and who is not allowed to do research. In fact, Gaudry (2011) mentions that most of the research on Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous researchers continues to be a process of extraction. While contextualized differently, I observe a similar form of this "gatekeeping" of who gets to do research in East Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and South Asian Studies, as a few examples. I find it peculiar that white researchers are so interested in "researching" bodies that are racialized, but they are reticent to use their privilege purposefully and to let their "own voices" speak to their experiences.

That last point also leads to concerns around practices of how those "gatekeepers" let the "Other" speak. To this, Abu-Lughod (1996) puts forth an analogous case in the form of the following question:

“What would our reaction be if male scholars stated their desire to ‘let women speak’ in their texts while they continued to dominate all knowledge about them by controlling writing and other academic practices, supported in their positions by a particular organization of economic, social, and political life?” (p. 469). Articulating that domination is perverse for various reasons. It considers that for knowledge to be validated it has to be through a hegemonic researcher, mainly someone who is white, male, cisgender, and able-bodied. It can, in some manner, render certain bodies as being more intellectually inclined by way of “taking up” space (Ahmed, 2007) and theoretical knowability (Chakrabarty, 1992).

While not always, such privileged dismemberment, as not only gazing but the act of appropriating and exploiting the expanse of a marginalized body, can put it up for debate. I have observed this through discussions in classrooms in both Teacher Education and graduate studies, which are now sites of fieldwork and observation for me, where white students debate whether racist practices and policies should be changed and replaced. As such, there is an exhibition not only of gazing but a white-washed practice of dismissal and silencing. Coming back to Abu-Lughod (1996), I am not surprised that educators, whether teacher candidates or teachers already in the classroom, “include” voices of colour and then regurgitate those same voices to model dominance. But not only can the recapitulation of the Brown body or any “Otherized” body be dangerously flawed, as well as the colonial production that the subaltern is incapable of speaking (Spivak, 1988), the lack of “own voices” remains modest in comparison to research of the colonial gaze.

### **Towards a Project of Browning**

At a personal level, the experience of graduate studies has also made me confront the realities of focusing on racial justice, especially as a student of colour. I am told that my work is “unprofessional” because I draw attention to racism in Teacher Education, including at the institution where I study. To name an elsewhere space is acceptable, but to name the faculty or the university is blasphemous to the institution. Even generally, however, Truong and Museus (2012) mention that there is a devaluation of research on race along with students experiencing exploitation and racial microaggressions. The authors suggest that this can lead to racial trauma, including but not limited to depression and disassociation.

Indeed, the ramifications of being deemed “not academic enough” or “too scholarly” start to wear me down. Yet, white people can focus on “water is wet” research and be applauded and recognized. Having experienced and observed this, I have realized that Browning research requires an openness and willingness to be radical—to resist and subvert. I am not interested in the banality and hollowness of academic research. Nor do I come to research to be bored and disengaged, so, while this body can be tampered with to be less poetic, the poetry cannot be removed from it.

*For a moment, the Brown body breathes —*

*Heaves out a hymn that reaches past the dead.*

*It reads like an act of subversion, and despite being lifeless,*

*Despite this emptiness, it reaches another world—a possibility.*

So, what does possibility mean to me? Borrowing the words of Cruz (2001), “the deconstruction of the body may offer the possibility of revealing how identities are discursively created and how the brown body is constructed through the narratives and the social mores of our communities” (p. 664). As Cruz does so in relation to Chicana theorization, I employ her analysis onto my own Brown body, as a South Asian. By “researching” my own experiences as a Brown man, I am able to situate how I have both marginalized and privileged intersections. I get a sense of the narratives that shape who I am. In tandem, while I do not

always consider myself a researcher, I believe in the power of resurrecting this body of mine. I know that the Brown body is an aesthetic that mirrors colonial makers, whether willingly or not, but Gaudry (2011) reminds me that research can be leveraged to fight colonial domination. It can (re)frame and (re)story the “Other” along with ways of ethically and relationally engaging, especially with historically marginalized communities, without appropriating, damaging, and harming.

Educational research can also support racial literacy to confront racism (Kohli et al., 2017). As such, I heed the words of Alvi (2015) “to address the marginalized voices within racialized discourses in educational research” (p. 85). Perhaps it can even emerge as a spectral act that coheres the future to the ancestral past. To imagine livelihood in a state of freedom (Wazyatawin, 2009). I depart with these words, whether a/n (un)timely death awaits me or not, acknowledging that subverting the colonial gaze is powerful. Like curriculum theorists Gaztambide-Fernández and Murad (2011), in that way, I want to “light the fire and expose ourselves and our ideas to the heat; that we become more rather than less burnt; more rather than less dirty; more rather than less ‘Brown’” (p. 14).

### **Final Words: I Am Here**

Situating these reflections, what message can I offer with this in mind? Alas, there is nothing I can tell you. There are no words I can share. There are no stories that will make this less difficult. All I can offer is my existence. The fact that I am here and that I am not already an ancestor, waiting to embrace you once you die, is the solace that I can provide. Instead, I am here alongside by you and my presence is one I share lovingly with you. On that note, I end with the following poem:

*the map  
of a Brown body  
has lines for all its contours  
where one fault line merges with another  
and somehow all the shades  
collapse like plate tectonics  
into an atlas*

I want to write my own atlas—one that is not mapped out of my flesh—with all its scars along with all its possibilities. And, of course, in the words of bell hooks, “Contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands” (hooks, 2000, p. 209). This, to me, is a reminder that I can be both empowered and oppressed, and how I engage within that duality, even disrupting it, is significant in how I respond to the question about research that I continue to contend with.

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