

# Postcolonial, Decolonial and Critical Race Theory

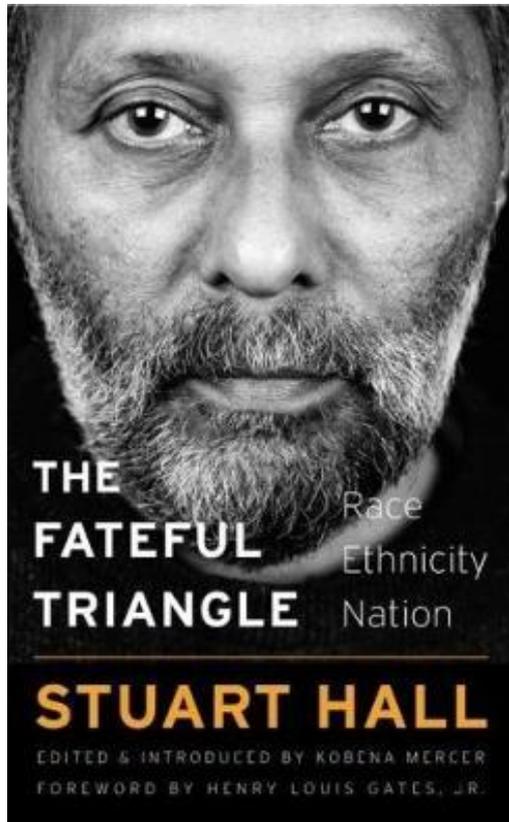


**in Geography**

## Why do geographers look at race?

*“Race does not exist. But it does kill people.”* (Colette Guillaumin, “Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology”, 1995: 107)

When geographers talk about ‘race’, they usually don’t talk about someone’s



ethnicity, but about a ‘racialised’ person. That means, someone who has been attributed with particular physical and/or performative characteristics to mark them as different. Most places in the world have singled out groups that are racially oppressed, which often include religious minorities. Racialisation is tied to power, for instance, gaining hold of land, property and labour, but also to cement racialised versions of national identity and coherence that give a particular group advantages over others. With this, it works in two directions: there is racialisation to gain or maintain a unique access to property, such as the invention of “bloodlines” to create “nobility” (who ones the most land in the UK?); and there is racialisation to prevent people from gaining or holding power, such as the naturalisation of slavery (racism). This is why people such as Meghan Markle, Barack

Obama, or King Henry I of Haiti (1762-1820) have caused such controversy amongst White supremacists. Both directions are still in operation on a legal level (e.g. the Royal Family; ‘hostile environment’). Racialisation occurs at all scales, including planet’s division into the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ to individual interpersonal interactions. These divisions and interactions have extremely long-lived economic and social consequences.

In this zine, we will mostly be focusing on racial oppression (racism), bearing in mind that the two sides of racialisation are intimately tied together. Racism is not only pervasive, but is also traceable through geography: people affected by racism often face problems accessing land, housing, services and basic treatment as a human being. These problems lessen or intensify when people move to different geographical areas, because racial hierarchies will be different. Further, geographers and other academics have actively participated in racism, and some continue to do so, for example, by justifying colonialism, and even biological and environmental determinism. Please not that this lecture/zine is explicitly written from the perspective of anti-racist geographical scholarship and emphasises the responsibilities that geographers carry in understanding, communicating and actively working against processes of racialisation around the world.

## A short history of European racism



Racism in Europe is closely connected to economic expansion. Take, for example, sugar production. When Europeans learned to cultivate the Asian sugar cane (image on left) in the Middle Ages, the initial production took place in the Mediterranean. When the areas of cultivations became cut off through the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, production was moved to the newly discovered Americas. Due to labour shortage from the combined effects of the plague in Europe and genocide of American indigenous populations, Africans were imported as slave labour. In order to break solidarity between indentured workers from different parts of the world, and to give European settlers exclusive access to colonial wealth, African slaves were given a different legal status: their condition was inherited. In order to justify legal discrimination and economic exploitation, science was called upon to prove the superiority of people of European descent vis à vis 'inferior races', and particularly people of African descent, who constituted the biggest source of cheap labour by the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As racial science became increasingly invalidated, racists started claiming a 'racial spirit' that marked people apart. While much of this propaganda was anti-Darwinist ('we didn't descend from apes'), it also used the Darwinian idea of evolution - with white supremacy as its natural outcome. Slavery was eventually abolished when Europeans started to cultivate sugar beet after US independence, undercutting imported sugar prices. Together with a population explosion that led to a ready supply of cheap labour, slavery was becoming obsolete and eventually abolished, ostensibly on moral grounds. The Brussels Accord of 1890 officially abolished all slavery, including white slavery that was still practiced into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, in the Ottoman Empire. When African slaves were freed, they were frequently replaced by other cheap labour, for example, by Indian labour in the case of the Caribbean. As racial discrimination and unfree labour remains a powerful way of maintaining cheap labour and "Western" economic dominance, it has merely adapted to new geopolitical situations.

### How do geographers look at 'race'?

There are a number of lenses through which geographers look at race. I will describe three current approaches that foreground race and the differences between them: postcolonialism, decoloniality and critical race theory (CRT). Again, different authors can interpret each approach very differently, but there will be a few things that authors agree on, such as the historical period or geographical area they use as a starting point. Don't worry if you encounter texts that are stylistically odd or make references to texts that you don't know: we will be discussing some useful pointers. The idea is to develop an awareness of how theories move in the world – both through academia and other spaces – and how/why they are being performed in particular ways. As part of this, we will also look at how theory and theorists themselves are racialised.

## Postcolonial Theory: against “the West and the Rest”



Postcolonial theory is currently the most popular way of theorising race in Geography. Although it followed in the wake of 20<sup>th</sup> century decolonisation, this body of theory does not imply that colonialism is over – in fact, it stresses that its work still needs to be undone, both on a material and cultural level. Postcolonial theory originally did not emerge from Geography, but from literary theory. Many of the initial authors came from, or were part of the diaspora of, the Middle East and South Asia, and were concerned by the on-going hold of the colonial imagination on formerly colonised populations. In response, they pursued a project of **challenging European/ Western ways of seeing the world by writing from the perspective of the colonised**. A famous example is the book *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said. In this book, Said shows how Europeans have exoticised the Middle East and other geographical areas as a backward ‘Other’ (here we have the nature-culture binary again!). This idea has served Europeans to assert their superiority and impose a ‘civilising’ mission that went hand in hand with subjugation and economic exploitation.

A key strategy used by postcolonial authors is to show how Europe and its compulsive exoticisation is equally (or even more) strange. Their aim is to destroy the illusion that the Western perspective is the only valid or ‘modern’ one, and that only the cultured West can properly produce history. The move to question the centrality of Europe is also called ‘provincialising Europe’ (Chakrabarty, 2000). Ideally, postcolonial theory works to remove brain-washing in both directions: both coloniser and colonised need to realise that Western superiority is effectively a myth or temporarily successful ‘gaslighting’ that continues, for instance, through development narratives.

This aim to ‘provincialise Europe’ has consequences for method: it **questions Western monopolies on knowledge**. This shows in both style and the role of the author. For instance, the role of Western expertise is questioned and its sidelining of non-Western authors. In terms of style, postcolonial writing spans a great variety of approaches and political positions. For example, you will find that some authors have adopted a very playful approach that embraces the creative potential of ‘rendering strange’, while others pursue a much drier style that is aimed at communicating power inequalities on the ground and is often suspicious of playfulness. Of course, you can also creatively speak to power, so there are many different methods in between. Have a look at articles by geographers such as Patricia Noxolo, Parvati Raghuram, Divya Tolia-Kelly and Clare Madge, and their stylistic and methodological differences. At present, postcolonial theory has become somewhat associated with an overly complex and self-referential writing style that, some academics and activists say, stands in the way of its very mission. On the other hand, postcolonial critique still offers powerful tools and performances for contesting geopolitical power.

## **Decolonial Theory: modernity is coloniality, decolonisation is not a metaphor**

Decolonial theory or 'decoloniality' has only recently become more prominent in UK geographical discourse. The currently most prominent school of decolonial thought is based in Latin America, and therefore authors usually date colonialism back to the Renaissance and the conquest of the Americas. For scholars of decoloniality, coloniality is the key to understanding modernity. By coloniality they mean the way Europeans have **related to other people, environments and knowledges 'in a similar way to property'** (see Bhambra, 2014: 118). This is modernity has seen so much sexism, racism, genocide, ecocide, forced migration etc. The aim of decoloniality is to disentangle both mentally and materially from the condition of coloniality. In your lecture on gender, you will already have come across the scholar María Lugones and her concern with the 'decoloniality of gender'. Examples of decolonial activism include the Zapatista movement (film on YouTube!) and other indigenous autonomy movements. Indeed, many decolonial theorists draw on indigenous knowledge frameworks.

Methodological strategies for decoloniality strongly vary according to geographical regions, as histories of colonisation differ. While decoloniality does not equate decolonisation, many decolonial scholars are hoping that their theorisations can lead to decolonisation. After all, the challenges of people such as Mahatma Ghandi, Frantz Fanon and Nelson Mandela have contributed to setting actual processes of decolonisation in motion. For you, as a student, accessibly written handbooks such as *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012) by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith may be useful for understanding your relationship and responsibilities in your geographical research.

I would also like to point to an article entitled 'Decolonization is not a metaphor' (2012), an intervention by indigenous and ethnic studies scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. This article criticises the way 'decolonisation' is being used as a way to improve on colonial structures (e.g. making a curriculum or faculty more diverse), thus belittling **indigenous demands for self-determination and reparations** (including land restitution). The main argument in this article has virtually become a yardstick to measure commitment towards de-linking from colonial structures. The controversy around the 2017 RGS-IBG 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledges' conference (see Esson et al, 2017) gives you a taste of how geographers are not just spread across a theoretical spectrum, but also a political one. How far can we be truly decolonial in an academic setting that is itself a pillar of coloniality? The work of geographers Michelle Daigle, Jayaraj Sundaresan and Sarah Hunt may also give you a sense of the stakes.



*Image: Ghillar. Sovereign Union. First Nations people protesting outside a 2016 'Recognition' meeting of Former PM Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten at Kirribilli House, Sydney.*

## Critical Race Theory: moving beyond institutional racism



Critical Race Theory (CRT) came out of US legal studies in the 1980s and brought together predominantly African American scholars who looked at institutional racism and the processes that continue to benefit white people. Effectively, CRT **sees the world as 'wholly racialised'** (as put by the author Toni Morrison, 1992) and specifically looks at racialisation as enshrined in law (Painter, 2010). It looks at who benefits from racialisation (you may have come across the phrase 'white privilege') and who continues to have an interest in maintaining it. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who you have already encountered in the lecture on gender, is a critical race scholar, for example. Geographers who identify as critical race theorists include Ruth Wilson

Gilmore, Katherine McKittrick, Audrey Kobayashi, Patricia Daley, James Esson and Adam Elliott-Cooper. Institutional processes that geographers are examining include the education system, migration, prisons and the workplace.

Methodologically, critical race theory has a strong focus on theory as activism, and activism feeding into theory. For example, you will find social movements such as Black Lives Matter and lobby groups such as The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) influenced by, but also significantly feeding into CRT. Further, CRT places and emphasis on **sharing and analysing historical and current examples** of experimental institutions, economics and other systems, such as African American co-operatives (Nembhard, 2014) or Black Panther Party health care and school programmes (Nelson, 2013). While CRT comes out of the US context and the frustrations of black activists with lack of progress following the civil rights era (Price, 2010:15), it has been taken up across the world by activist-scholars. What CRT asks you to do is to analyse supposedly 'neutral' processes such as law and organisational structures and show how skewed, exclusionary, unstable and lethal they are. Recent UK based critiques include Robbie Shilliam's *Race and the Undeserving Poor* (2018) and the edited collection *The Fire Now* by Azeezat Johnson et al (2018).

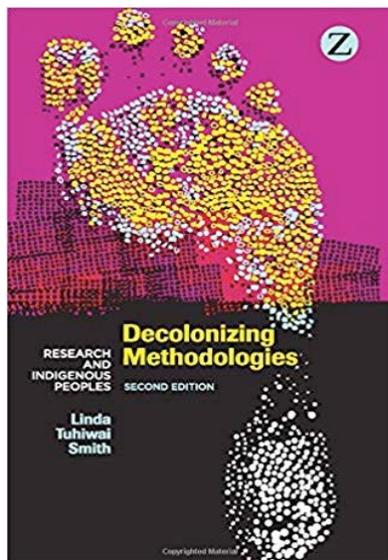
While many people across the world have found CRT's attention to how exclusions are performed useful, the approach has also been criticized, mainly for allegedly ignoring inequalities between minorities and geographical areas (e.g. Price, 2010; Cheah, 1994). The postcolonial scholar Pheng Cheah, who researches dehumanisation through language, disapproves of CRT's fixed hierarchical imagination of 'race' e.g. people of colour as 'marginal' or 'bottom' (1994: 16). Instead, he advocates for a greater sensitivity shifting legal and racial lines. CRT scholars have taken some of this criticism on board, especially when it comes to transnational and inter-minority inequalities (see Crenshaw's 'intersectionality' argument). In addition, there have been related movements such as LatCrit (Latinx focused CRT).

## Spotting differences

As you may be able to gather from these descriptions, differences between theoretical approaches can sometimes be difficult to discern, even for experienced scholars. There are a few guides to help you gain a sense of the theoretical direction an author is coming from. First of all, it is important which **era of racialisation** authors are concentrating on (e.g. colonisation of the Americas from around 1500). This era is often also tied to a particular **geographical area** from which the authors are writing (e.g. South/North America, Africa, India, Micronesia) and particular types of colonisation (e.g. settler colonialism). This, in turn, results in different perspectives, demands and often also **styles of communication**. It also affects how authors view current political and cultural constructs such as 'modernity' or 'the West', or the solutions they propose against racism. A useful image to keep in mind from popular culture is the struggle in the film 'Black Panther' (2018) between the different anti-colonial positions embodied by T'Challa and Erik Killmonger. It is quite easy to find recent debates around race in the media, and a number of recent TV series and films have not only taken on race as a theme, but are using characters to explore different positions (e.g. Cleverman, Dear White People). Lastly, there are **different bodies of literature** that authors are drawing upon.

Postcolonial: Edward W Said, Homi K Bhabha, Gayatri C Spivak, Edouard Glissant  
Decolonial: Walter Dignolo, Anibal Quijano, María Lugones, Tuck & Yang  
CRT: Sojourner Truth, W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Huey P. Newton; Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Cornel West, Kehinde Andrews

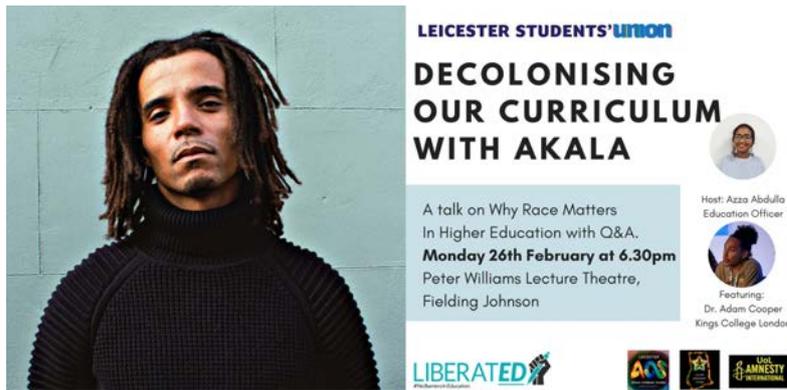
## What does all this mean for you?



*"Not seeing race does little to deconstruct racist structures... Seeing race is essential to changing the system." (Eddo-Lodge, 2017: 84)*

Reni Eddo-Lodge echoes Stuart Hall's call that "...any attempt to contest racism or to diminish its human and social effects depends on understanding how exactly this system of meaning works, and why the classificatory order it represents has so powerful a hold on the human imagination." (Stuart Hall, 2017: 33). Starting to 'see race' is a first step towards understanding how racialization is embedded fabric of geography (environments, people, everyday objects, constructions of the nation etc). A key question to ask is how we have been affected by racialization.

Have we benefitted from it or has it caused obstacles in our lives? As a geographer, you should also ask yourself how you represent within your research: what geographical topics are you attracted to? How do you see your research participants and how do they see you? What authors do you consult for your research and how do you find them?



There are also different initiatives that address racism at universities – not just in the form of hate crime, but the university as a participant in racist practices. Our institutions often tell us that we are ‘post-

racial’, meaning that race and racism isn’t an issue anymore. At the same time, initiatives such as ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ have shown that race continues to be an issue. While university managements have started to take these concerns seriously, there have been arguments over the conditions of changing not only the curriculum, but also the entire apparatus of the university (what universities should be for, how/who they should teach, how they should be financed, who should run them). Look for related events at your local Student Union. These are all things that are literally happening around you and that shape the future of race and geography.

## Resources

*Why is my curriculum white? (NUS campaign)*  
[www.nus.org.uk/en/news/why-is-my-curriculum-white/](http://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/why-is-my-curriculum-white/)

*Race, Culture & Equality Working Group of the RGS-IBG:* [raceingeography.org](http://raceingeography.org)

*Global Social Theory:* [globalsocialtheory.org](http://globalsocialtheory.org)

*undercommons manifesto:* [www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf](http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf)

*A Third University Is Possible:*  
[manifold.umn.edu/read/a-third-university-is-possible/](http://manifold.umn.edu/read/a-third-university-is-possible/)

*Preventing Prevent Handbook (NUS Black Students)*  
<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/preventing-prevent-handbook>

Also check out zine fairs for other zines/magazines such as Consented, Oomk, Mashallah News, Odd One Out, Skin Deep.

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