

Decolonial/Anti-Racist interventions in Tibetan/Buddhist Studies – AAR Roundtable, Colorado 2019

**Natalie Avalos, Matthew King, Nancy G. Lin, Dawa
Lokyitsang, Karin Meyers, Annabella Pitkin, Sangseraima
Ujeed, Riga Shakya**

This roundtable session held at the 2019 meeting of the American Association of Religious Studies explores how decolonial analytics and praxis can be applied productively in Tibetan/Buddhist Studies. As scholars, it is critical for us to consider how the racialized perceptions of non-Western religious traditions and peoples are tethered to their continued structural dispossession. A decolonizing intervention here means making the material hierarchies among peoples and their knowledge systems legible but also interrogating the politics of knowledge production in light of these overlapping colonial histories. Our discussion explicitly explores how our choices as scholars have effects in the real world, including how we represent Tibet and the Himalayas/Buddhism in our publications and teaching, the current inequalities of access to academic capital for Tibetan and nonwhite students/scholars, etc. We draw from Indigenous Studies approaches that center Indigenous knowledges and voices, given the history of their marginalization and ask how can we better center Tibetan/Himalayan voices/epistemologies in the study of Tibetan Buddhism.

Settler Colonialism and Tibet

Natalie Avalos, University of Colorado, Boulder

Settler colonialism is a kind of colonialism that seeks to eliminate Indigenous inhabitants (through genocide or ethnocide) and replace them with settlers, who seize lands and resources (Wolfe 2006). Settler colonialism is a structure that endures over time by continually reinscribing ideologies and legal structures that naturalize Indigenous dispossession, for instance, using race as a grammar to encode asymmetrical relations with subjugated peoples. Since Tibet's 1959 invasion by the People's Republic of China (PRC), over 130,000 Tibetans now live in diaspora as landless refugees abroad. An estimated 7.5 million Chinese settlers live alongside 6 million Tibetans within the borders of Tibetan. While settler colonial theory developed in European descended contexts, such as the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, these projects need not be predicated on white supremacy in order to operationalize the grammar of racialization for

the same ends. White supremacist settler colonial projects have instead created a template of modern imperial power that understands civilizing discourses as a means to an end, namely the appropriations of lands. Like U.S. forms of settler aggression, the PRC racialized and criminalized Tibetan lifeways, centrally religious traditions, to justify and naturalize Tibetan dispossession. Although PRC discourses claim their annexation of Tibet was a benevolent act of development and even a response to outside imperial threats by the U.S., we could better understand this annexation as a direct mapping of a settler colonial template of power. Framing Tibet's geopolitical reality as Chinese settler colonialism visibilizes the operations of power at work to keep it subjugated and re-signifies this reality to the greater world.

If You Meet Buddhology on the Road, Kill It!

Matthew King, University of California, Riverside

A unique product of colonial relations and forms of power, Buddhist Studies is positioned to not just follow but lead collaborative efforts to think about what Alejandro Vallega calls the “radical exteriority” of the human sciences. Intending to commit “acts of epistemic disobedience,” as Walter D. Mignolo puts it, that “de-link” epistemologies from colonial hierarchies of knowledge, Buddhist Studies scholars are well positioned to chart the otherwise of enduring universals associated with secular humanism, liberal models of human agency, pluralist representations of race, religion, and the national subject, and unilineal models of static History—all fundamental to models in the humanities and social sciences and all tied inextricably to colonial regimes of truth. Few, if any, of the objects, analytics, and topographies of knowledge currently associated with Buddhist Studies could withstand a rigorous decolonial unlinking. Abandoning claims to a unique (ie. transcultural and transhistorical) object, “Buddhism,” the ruins of Buddhist Studies ought instead to lead the humanities and social sciences in disaggregating and thinking radically outside that fundamental binary that birthed its problematic terms: West/nonWest. Such a decolonized Buddhist Studies, if it still chose to bear that name, would therefore shift its analysis to the production of disparate categories of people (etc.) through the representational strategies of political discipline: moving beyond a critique of representations of “Buddhist” life as such, or of its supposed inaccuracies, or of the “real” relationship of text and context, to what Ann Laura Stoler artfully describes as “the changing force fields in which these models were produced... from the high gloss print of history writ-large to the space of its production.” Without this fundamental, almost geologic, unlinking, how will the doing of Buddhist Studies (or any other humanist endeavor) ever do

more than reproduce the modernist staging of the West as site and source of universal knowledge and History, even if under a proudly raised decolonial flag?

WORKS CITED

Mignolo, Walter. 2009. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom". *Theory, Culture and Society*. 26 (7-8): 7-8.

Stoler, Ann Laura. 2008. *Along the Archival Grain*. Princeton, N.J.; Princeton University Press.

Vallega, Alejandro A. 2014. *Latin American Philosophy From Identity to Radical Exteriority*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press

What language we dare learn and speak: decolonizing the study of Tibetan poetry

Nancy G. Lin, University of California, Berkeley

More than thirty years ago bell hooks wrote of how language is a place of struggle, a site of both oppression and liberative potential.¹ Following her work, I seek to create space for studying snyan ngag, the classical tradition of Tibetan poetry, belletristic prose, and poetics, as a decolonial endeavor. In my remarks I noted the neglect of snyan ngag in western language scholarship, as well as expressions of distaste colleagues have shared with me: that it is contrived, artificial, baroque, pedantic. Repurposing Pierre Bourdieu's social theory of taste, I sketched how Romantic and Transcendentalist movements shaped highbrow tastes in English poetry. Their valorization of subjectivity, naturalness, and freedom from formal verse conventions became hallmarks of authentic poetry that continue to carry weight today. Concomitantly, they shaped western notions that authentic religion is rooted in personal, direct encounters with the divine or with true reality. It is therefore no surprise that western scholars have favored Tibetan poetry that seemingly accords with these aesthetics and values, including songs of Mi la ras pa and the Sixth Dalai Lama, to the exclusion of snyan ngag. In place of such fraught value judgments, I provided an example of

¹ bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework* 36 (1989), 15–23.

how snyan ngag suggests its own capacity for transformation. A verse by Zhu chen Tshul khrim rin chen (1697–1774) praises the goddess Dbyangs can ma for leading sentient beings to omniscient buddhahood through poetry and song. Here wisdom and eloquence are intertwined by the intricately crafted fusion of style and content. By attending to Tibetan sources such as these, we can question biased tastes, assumptions, and values, while furthering our understanding of key Tibetan/Buddhist epistemologies.

WORKS CITED

bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework* 36 (1989), 15–23.

Decolonizing “responsibility” in Tibetan and Buddhist Studies: A Structurally Decolonizing Praxis

Dawa Lokyitsang, University of Colorado, Boulder

What does it mean to be a *responsible* scholar attuned to decolonization as a method? As Mohawk anthropologist Dr. Audra Simpson has pointed out, it’s important not to fall into the delegitimizing trap of justifying Native scholarship on the basis of identity politics and justice alone. This matters, but a deeper reason relates to the way in which Simpson engaged the distinction between *resistance* and *refusal*, which has to do with distinction between *event* and *structure*. This cuts to the heart of the question. Scholars are encouraged to do the right thing through the logic of ethics, but this presumes we all need encouragement to do this. Some of us don’t. We are already doing it. However, like refusal, obligation, necessity, and every day realities are the non-episodic qualities that structure the daily lives of Indigenous peoples, researchers or otherwise. By naming refusal, Simpson has not presented a new fashionable anthropological turn (Simpson 2014). While her conceptualization is novel and valuable, the reality of refusal is something that Indigenous peoples have experienced throughout the history of colonization. If colonization was an event, then as Simpson points out, resistance would be enough. It’s not. As Patrick Wolf notes, colonization was and remains structural (1999). Therefore, modes of decolonization must too be structural. If we truly want to decolonize, we must reimagine legacies of episodic conceptualization as structural—moving away from the resisting colonial encounters by

ethical outsiders, toward the refusal of colonial structures by obligated stake holders, for whom non-obligatory ethics loses all meaning.

For research to be considered truly decolonial, it must, argues Linda Tuhiwai Smith, prioritize Indigenous voices, histories, epistemologies, and their struggles against settler colonialism (1999: 129). I invite researchers to consider a structurally decolonizing praxis. This would not only involve theories and methods generated by community members with whom you work, it would also employ the genealogy of works produced by other Indigenous scholars dealing with this very issue.

WORKS CITED

Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (London: Zed Books, 1990).

Wolfe, Patrick. *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4), 387-409, 2006.

Decolonizing Dependent Arising

Karin Meyers, Rangjung Yeshe Institute

In modern Buddhist studies the categories of "religion" and "philosophy" follow a colonial logic that advances Euro-American cultural hegemony while delegitimizing other perspectives and experiences. Aspects of traditional Buddhist worldviews that do not conform to modern naturalism, rationalism or materialist science are cast off as "religion," as topics that might be of some historical or cultural interest but not worthy of serious philosophical or existential consideration. In regard to dependent arising, this enables interpreters to elevate aspects of the doctrine compatible with modern (and colonial) perspectives as having some purchase on reality, while dismissing associated ideas concerning karma and rebirth, cosmology, magic or soteriology. A similar pattern applies to Buddhist devotion and ritual. What would happen if instead of dismissing these ideas and practices we took them as potent challenges to the assumptions, values and ways of life that inform the modern academy?

Our climate and ecological crisis demands that we take such challenges seriously. This crisis exposes a catastrophic failure of the modern episteme, as well as the destructiveness of the colonial mindset that informs the ways of knowing and being reproduced in the academy. While modern science and technology may be critical to avert further ecological destruction, in order to deploy this knowledge wisely and repair our relationship to the more-than-human-world, it may also be critical to learn from indigenous communities whose ecological knowledge and relationships have been disrupted by colonialism.

Dependent arising is relevant to this work. Although some modern interpretations of the doctrine are highly ecological, they tend to be naturalistic. By contrast, traditional interpretations accommodate a diversity of worlds and a rich ecology of seen and unseen other-than-human relatives, which better support contact, care and responsibility for these relatives. In other words, a decolonized dependent arising provides a potent philosophical framework for repairing our world(s).

Knowledge and Power: Centering Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist Epistemic Authority

Annabella Pitkin, Lehigh University

Discourses of rationality, secularism, and modernity that emerged within European and North American colonial projects often caricature Tibetan and Himalayan intellectual and religious life, either as anti-modern, trapped in magic and superstition, or as expressing an ideal “rational religion,” whose insights mirror those of the natural sciences, but only when “irrational” elements like devotion, ritual, or yogic power have been edited out (Lopez 1998). In this sense, Religion Studies discourses surrounding secularism and rationality position Tibetan thinkers and knowledge systems within exigencies of “epistemic rather than religious conversion” (Mignolo 2012). Lama Jabb has highlighted the epistemic and material erasures that both result from and enable “the scholarly preoccupation and public fascination in the West with Tibetan Buddhism” (2015). Definitions of the legitimate subjects of scholarly inquiry affect who can do scholarship, and what research is funded or published. The stakes of knowledge production are not simply epistemic; they are territorial, pragmatic, economic, and professional. A decolonizing approach must therefore center Tibetan and Himalayan epistemic authority as a part of centering sovereignties of Tibetan and Himalayan social, political and religious power.

Tibetan and Himalayan accounts of yogic power, teacher-student lineage connections, and guru-disciple devotion, articulated in genres

like *mam thar*, *gsol 'debs*, *gser phreng*, and *chos 'byung*, are often targets for colonizing and Orientalizing projections. My presentation asked what forms of power Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist authors exercise when they recount, interpret, or even strategically conceal histories, memories, and vocabularies of yogic power, devotional practice, and teacher-student lineage connection? How do accounts of power and devotion - as practices of recollection, identity and moral personhood - directly intersect with assertions of both territorial and intellectual sovereignty? And in what ways can devotion and accounts of yogic power function most fully as forms of refusal?

23 and Me: Tibetan Buddhist Reflections on its “DNA”

Sangseraima Ujeed, University of Michigan

Tibetans, Mongolians, Nepalese, and Bhutanese identify as “family” in a shared “Wider Tibetan Buddhist Sphere”. Despite the “Tibetan-ness” ascribed by Western Academia, Tibetan Buddhism was not a unilateral transference of a tradition. Rather, it was subject to cross-assimilations over time, in the development of which different ethnicities played a formative hand. The very “Tibetanness” of “Tibetan Buddhism” needs decolonizing, itself a terminology created by the 20th century Eurocentric quest to isolate/define the “other”.

My research focuses on the Tibeto-Mongolian aspect of the Wider Tibetan Buddhist Sphere. Throughout history, thousands of Mongolian monk-scholars travelled to Tibet to study Buddhism. They had Tibetan names, composed in Tibetan and often never returned to their homelands. The inter-transmission of Buddhist knowledge owed to the cultural and religious exchanges through generations of master-disciple relationships, transmission lineages, reincarnation, and travel, contributed to a cosmopolitan and geographically expansive tradition. These individuals did not see Tibetan Buddhism as the intellectual and cultural heritage of another. The very term *nang sog* “Inner Mongol” originally meant “Mongols who were insiders [of the Buddhist tradition]”. Only by reading the works of Tibetan Buddhists from different ethnic backgrounds together as part of a larger whole, can we gain true understanding of the tradition.

Compared to mature fields such as Classics, Theology, or Philosophy, Religious Studies is a rebellious teenager, Buddhist studies a toddler, and Tibetan Buddhist studies an infant –yet to discover and define their identity. “Tibetan Buddhism” as one of the most popular forms of Buddhism being studied and practiced globally today, still remains

a partial vision. According to Nye, “decolonization is a process, that works in many different ways... that aims to create large-scale transformation of all levels of the academy” (Nye 2019:25). Here, the insider and outsider must work together, and through collaboration between all those who have stakes in the tradition; western, traditional, and indigenous scholars, we can broaden our understanding of the “Tibetan” Buddhist world.

WORKS CITED

Nye, M 2019. *Decolonizing the Study of Religion*. Open Library of Humanities, 5(1): 43, pp. 1–45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.421>

On Vulgar Critique

Riga Shakya, Columbia University

My remarks are drawn from a forthcoming article of mine tentatively entitled “The Place of Orientalism in Tibetan Studies” which examines how Chinese and Tibetan intellectuals inside and outside the PRC engage with Saidean colonial discourse analysis. I share examples of colonial discourse analysis in the work of feted New Left literary critic Wang Hui, and more recently in the work of scholars of Tibetan Buddhism in China.¹ These scholars directly invoke Said’s *Orientalism* in a critique of Tibet scholarship in the west. Put briefly my argument is that their critique is vulgar. By which, I point both to a totalizing scope and blindness to Tibetan traditions and cultures as hermeneutic, and a crude reading of power/knowledge that unknowingly (or knowingly) lends itself to the linear narrative of national history. Yet rather than an accusation that Chinese scholars ‘vulgarize’ Said, it is Said’s argument in *Orientalism* itself that remains vulgar. His problematic critique becomes nothing less than a function of the very discursive formation he purported to critique reinforcing its formation and reasserting its power while so brilliantly exposing it. We might locate the problem in Said’s reading of power/knowledge, the place of individual agency in the formation of power discourses. By failing to make the liberal subject and its

¹ Wang Hui “The Tibet Issue Between East and West”, *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology*, 42:4, 7-30, 11, 2010. More recently Shen Weirong follows this logic in: Shen Weirong, “On New Qing History: Manchu Archival Sources? Orientalism.” (*Xin qingshi de renao he mendaο: Man wen wenxian? Dongfang zhuyi*), Shanghai Review of Books: http://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1787748 (accessed September 8, 2017).

sovereignty the locus and focus of a restructuring critique, a failure that Islamic legal scholar Wael B. Hallaq has claimed exonerates Orientalism as a “symptom, rather than the cause or chief culprit, of a psychoepistemic disorder plaguing modern forms of knowledge to the core”.² This pervasive logic does not depart from the parameters of stilted colonial discourse analysis, and their critique of the West is vulgar precisely because their approach searches for, to use Foucauldian terms, “immediate struggles” that look not for the “chief enemy” but for “immediate enemies”. The preoccupation with Orientalism in both the academy (not limited to China) and popular parlance (activists and community organizers) has occluded the richness of Tibetan historical and literary cultures as a critical hermeneutical resource. Decolonial thought, which seeks to delink from western epistemology in the form of the rhetoric of modernity, necessarily mandates the engagement of Tibetan ways of thinking as hermeneutic in an act of ‘epistemic disobedience’.

WORKS CITED

Shen Weirong. “On New Qing History: Manchu Archival Sources? Orientalism.” (Xin qingshi de renao he mendao: Man wen wenxian? Dongfang zhuyi), Shanghai Review of Books: http://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1787748, (accessed September 8, 2017).

Wang Hui. “The Tibet Issue Between East and West”, *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology*, 42:4, 7-30, 11, 2010.

Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

² Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).