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# KNOWING OUTSIDE OF ENGLISH: DECOLONIZING AT YORK

Alexandra Kingston-Reese  and Shazia Jagot\*

## Abstract

In early 2020, Eugenia Zuroski published a short article in *MAI* journal's toolkit series critiquing conventional introductory exercises in the university classroom. Called 'Where Do You Know From?', the task 'illustrate[s] the importance of attending conscientiously to the ways we relate to one another in the classroom as part of our pedagogical and political responsibilities'. In this piece, Alexandra Kingston-Reese and Shazia Jagot discuss where they know from and how this knowledge has impacted their teaching, research, and development of the University of York's Decolonising Network.

In early 2020, Eugenia Zuroski published a short article in *MAI* journal's toolkit series critiquing conventional introductory exercises in the university classroom.<sup>1</sup> Called 'Where Do You Know From?', the task 'illustrate[s] the importance of attending conscientiously to the ways we relate to one another in the classroom as part of our pedagogical and political responsibilities'. By redirecting the social curiosity of knowing where others come from back onto the self, Zuroski encourages us to interrogate our own intellectual heritage, preoccupations, and gaps. Zuroski stresses how vital it is that 'settler scholars give serious thought to the ways in which even the most seemingly mundane academic structures and conventions can reproduce colonialist hierarchies of power' and 'alienate' students who can end up feeling that the

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenia Zuroski, 'Where Do You Know From?: An Exercise in Placing Ourselves Together in the Classroom', *MAI Journal* <<https://maifeminism.com/where-do-you-know-from-an-exercise-in-placing-ourselves-together-in-the-classroom/>> [accessed 27 January 2020].

institution ‘disregards their ways of knowing and being’.<sup>2</sup> Instead of perpetuating an imperialism structured around a single model of intellectual engagement, this simple question offers students the opportunity to re-centre their learning in their own ways of knowing and being, as well as providing a way for institutions to rethink their traditional hierarchies, canons, and critical frameworks.

Appearing at the beginning of 2020, Zuroski’s question has not only been a prescient one, but has become our guiding light for refining our own feminist decolonizing praxes as we set up our cross-period, interdepartmental Decolonizing Network at the University of York. Both of us have led decolonizing efforts in our fields within our curriculum – contemporary and American literature, and medieval literature – and have engaged in singular, often siloed, decolonizing activities within the institution, but our key ambition for setting up our network is to mobilize individual efforts as collective action. This has only become more urgent in a year in which the global pandemic and Black Lives Matter remind us that our pedagogies have deep ethical, if not political, responsibility, especially as they related to intersectional feminism and anti-racism. The core challenge is shifting that unconscious position into conscious action.

As a medievalist and a contemporary literary scholar, we offer two perspectives from either end (almost) of York’s Department of English and Related Literature’s period specialisms. Ever since it was founded in 1963, as one of the University’s first six departments, the department has had its roots in European, American, and African literatures. It is unusual, too, because of its emphasis on ‘relatedness’: we have historically valued translation as a core component of literary study, and teaching foreign literatures either in translation or in their original language. Thinking comparatively, across and between borders, is a crucial part of what we do.

In the conversation that follows, we reflect on how theorizing how we know outside of English has informed our decolonizing praxes in our teaching since setting up our network.

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**Shazia Jagot:** As someone who has been asked ‘where are you (really) from’ countless times, I felt empowered by Zuroski’s repositioning of the tiresome question and I’ve been able to reflect on it with relative ease. But articulating my *knowing from* as an academic, and reconciling what Zuroski notes is an ‘academic convention’ of separating ‘who we are’ from ‘what we know’ and

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that Zuroski is writing from an American context, and thus uses different language for decolonizing.

‘what we are here to learn’ is proving to be a really difficult exercise. How did you find it?

**Alexandra Kingston-Reese:** I think the simplest way of describing my *knowing from* is as a feeling of intellectual outsidership. I grew up in Aotearoa New Zealand (a multicultural nation that is still grappling with the aftermaths of British colonialism), gained my PhD at the University of Sydney in Australia, and now teach contemporary literature in Britain. While now I can see the privilege of that education, at the time I worried that I felt outside of the centre of Anglophone contemporary literary scholarship (which is very much located in Britain and the USA). Being outside of that ‘centre’, my literary education involved reading around the world and in translation from an early age, perhaps because growing up in Aotearoa feels like living on the edge of the world, and I was lucky to learn in classrooms where indigenous perspectives were actively privileged.<sup>3</sup>

Moving to the UK to take up a lectureship at the University of York in 2016, brought home to me how often English literature is skewed as a national literature. However international and liberal our department is, I still don’t feel entirely at home in the curriculum I teach – perhaps because I am an immigrant in an increasingly hostile post-Brexit Britain. I see a big part of our challenge as harnessing these different positions of knowing for a primarily white student body.

**SJ:** I’m really taken by your expression of outsidership. My own *knowing from* is tightly bound up with similar feelings that are rooted in the intersections of my gender, religion, race, and class – I am, to put it bluntly, a working-class British Muslim of Indian origin via Southern Africa. I grew up in Leicester, a diverse, multilingual, multicultural city where no one ethnic group holds the majority – it is a far cry from York or some of the other places I’ve lived in the UK and abroad. My *knowing from* is also deeply entrenched in my family’s history of migration where empire and colonialism are not abstract historical events but lived realities.

This all informs my position as a medievalist – one who has a ‘global’ outlook, and who is most comfortable when teaching, learning, and researching in environments that at the very least recognize literature from a broader multilingual perspective. My *knowing from* drives my desire to understand and work towards undoing the formation of the discipline, especially to recognize

<sup>3</sup> This is by no means the standard across education in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as Rebecca Kiddle, Bianca Elkington, Moana Jackson, Ocean Ripeka Mercier, Mike Ross, Jennie Smeaton, Amanda Thomas’s *Imagining Decolonisation* (Wellington: BWB Texts, 2020) demonstrates, but I was lucky that this formed a large part of my literary education.

and assert that the teaching of literature in a national context is exclusionary and marginalizes those already at the fringes of faculties and student bodies.

Zuroski's exercise forces us to expose our personal identities in a professional context. I don't know about you, but this makes me feel quite anxious.

**AKR:** I wonder if it feels especially exposing as female scholars; decolonization is also a deeply feminist action. As Zuroski says, 'Academic intellectual authority—what we think it looks, sounds, and feels like; where we think it *comes from*—is precisely the problem, the structure that perpetuates imperialism in our spaces of learning and intellectual engagement.'<sup>4</sup> Perhaps making these structures visible necessarily involves some element of exposure?

**SJ:** Absolutely. And I feel doubly exposed too: as a female scholar who belongs to the global majority but who is invariably in the minority in academia *and* within my specialism. But uncovering one set of structures feeds into the other. York has a long history of teaching a broad medieval curriculum where textual traditions and languages from across medieval Europe have always been given space in the undergraduate degree. I feel comfortable working within this space especially because there has been a conscious effort at York to expand the remit of 'medieval' that takes us beyond Europe. Moving this towards a *conscious* decolonizing pedagogical approach is still a work in progress. A vital first step is to confront the terminology we use and to demonstrate that our pedagogical approach is not driven by national or linguistic ideas of what constitutes medieval literature.

I balked the first time someone called me a medievalist (I was in the first term of my PhD). I only began to feel comfortable with the label when I landed a post-doctoral research fellowship and was lucky enough to work in a research centre dedicated to examining medieval literature in non-nationalizing and multilingual contexts. This was revelatory to me and it allowed me to pursue my research interests, which cut across England/Europe and the Islamic World working across Middle English and Arabic in particular, without being hemmed into a national canon. It was during this period of my career where I began to understand and critique the structures that underpin the formation of Western medieval literature too.

**AKR:** I never used to know what to call myself. 'Contemporary scholar' fits best because it doesn't require identifying with a particular approach or methodology, like being a globalist or post-colonialist does. I am still perturbed at being asked to convene a first-year global literature module – which later became a module called 'Empires and Aftermaths' – because,

<sup>4</sup> Zuroski.

among other departmental things pertaining to understaffing and being early career, I was a global *person*, not a global *expert*; as if I had a certain cache of knowledge simply from not being from 'here'. I've sometimes been called a comparativist, even though I work mostly in the English language, because of the role that translation plays in the work of the authors I write about (Valeria Luiselli, for example). Contemporary literary study and comparative literary study naturally cultivate reading across and between borders, without privileging one national tradition or aesthetic movement.

**SJ:** Just recently, I was called a comparativist, but I'm never sure what to do with that label. I'm not trained in comparative literature (it is not a very present discipline in the UK) and in my work, I attempt to move beyond comparison and into connections between languages and literatures in ways that could be defined as transnational or transcultural. These frameworks, while not without their flaws, have also been generative for exploring the movement and interaction of ideas or literary narratives across different geographies and languages, while also recognizing the specific, local context in which they appear – and indeed, which national canon has claimed the narrative and/or author. But I still have to work hard to explain myself as a 'medievalist' – it is a term laden with baggage. It is fascinating to hear you speak about the synthesis between contemporary and comparative literary study across borders, because the same can really be said about medieval literature too.

This makes me think that where we *know from* is intractably connected with who we are and an expectation that there is a 'here' and 'elsewhere'. Do you find this is the case in your teaching?

**AKR:** I've found that when teaching texts from across the world, national traditions and hegemonic aesthetic movements somehow always end up being the default – and indeed, the very idea of comparison in transnational approaches too reinforces the national. There is this insidious, unconscious centring that happens. As the convenor of 'Empires and Aftermaths' for three years, I was fully aware of how it was the only first-year core module that taught non-white writers (though thankfully not anymore). Students work out from the late seventeenth century, move through the imperial developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and investigate the transitions and consequences – or aftermaths – that dominated the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Though teaching the history of British imperialism is vitally important, especially for British undergraduates, as convenor I wanted to ensure we contextualize the impact of colonialism in literature outside of Britain. Students now read about the effects of the Spanish Empire on Chilean and Peruvian poetry, and American imperialism in African

American literature and Mexican literature, and this has led to lots of students choosing dissertation topics on Latinx literatures. Supervising these projects has been a wonderful experience for me, as it has illuminated how much reading texts in translation hasn't only made students confront the monolingualism of their reading, it has made them better readers. It requires you to question what texts are, who authors and translators are, how language works . . .

**SJ:** For me, it also makes one question, or at least pause, on the use of English too. I have so many thoughts on what it means to read in English translation, but I want to first pick up on what you've said about the challenge of tackling default positions because working outwards seems to be a model we're both following. I was hired into a post that held the title 'Global Literature' and while medieval studies are taking a global turn, what this means in practice for teaching a 'global middle ages' (and as a research position) is still up for discussion. I came to the department just after the implementation of the curriculum review but I have had an active hand in shaping how we diversify and decolonize the degree. Even before I landed at York, I spent my energies carefully constructing modules and curating reading lists that embedded different literary traditions, geographic spaces, and non-Christian religions that have not only been marginalized but are almost absent in the majority of teaching of medieval literature in the UK. In my first year at York, I was able to do this in a second-year undergraduate medieval module where students read texts originally written in Latin, Anglo-Norman, Middle English, and now also, Arabic. Across three weeks students move from exploring texts and spaces in medieval York, to Chaucer in his wider European context, to fourteenth-century Mamluk Egypt, moving from the local to the global without privileging England as the only space of importance in the medieval period. In practical and accessible terms, incorporating Arabic texts onto the module was easy enough to do because students were already being asked to read texts in modern English translation. If we can read an Anglo-Norman medieval romance in modern English then we can read an English translation of, say, an Arabic travelogue. Here, I see translation as a vital pedagogical tool that opens up different cultural and geographic spaces to all students at a particular stage in their learning, while also introducing them to the variety of historical and sacred languages of the period. I try to ensure that students are given some sense of the original language in ways that connect the language to the text. For instance, for the Arabic texts, I introduce the genre or a key concept using Arabic terms so the text is not divorced from its original context. What's interesting to note is that the only text that students read in the original is Chaucer's Middle English. But even here, we read Chaucer in the context of his own multilingualism and place

his poetry in dialogue with other European literary and linguistic traditions. It is always thrilling to unsettle any preconceived notions of English and to demonstrate that English has always, and continues to be, formed and connected to other languages, other places, and other cultures. Guiding students through a vernacular that is both familiar and foreign is really valuable and the linguistic foreignness of Middle English allows us to move quite flexibly from the local to the global in this way.

What continues to become clear to me is that ‘the medieval’ – however it is understood – is a foreign land to so many students and undergraduate study is an opportune moment to introduce students to a wider medieval world.

**AKR:** We see this occurring in global reach, too. Most of our students come in with very little knowledge about American history, and have trouble contextualizing its literature and culture within their own experience. More recently, I have redesigned the second-year undergraduate twentieth and twenty-first-century American literature module so that it isn’t confined to the USA. Rather than introducing our students to American literature via transatlantic modernist poetry, I frame the module with Ocean Vuong’s 2019 novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, a novel about immigration, belonging, and language – I work backward to the Harlem Renaissance as an originary site of American modernism. It has involved rethinking American imperialism not simply as the extension of cultural and military power, but in terms of racist and colonial attitudes towards Native American, Chicanx, and Asian American populations.

**SJ:** This – and Vuong’s incredible novel – makes me think about multilingualism in the form of multiple Englishes and also, the imperialism of the English language. We’re back in some ways to the ‘relatedness’ of our degree which gives our students the opportunity to take on and work with other languages, but there are serious issues at stake in teaching texts in English translation – we do not want to replace one exclusionary structure with another. I bring my working knowledge of Arabic and developing language skills to the classroom as a way of always ensuring the translated text is connected to its original context as much as possible. I know that much more can be said about multilingualism, translation, and decolonization, especially which languages are valued in academia and who has access to language learning, questions that are all the more pressing in the post-Brexit world we now face. So much of what we’ve discussed so far speaks to the wider structural issues that need to be addressed as we work to decolonize our discipline: not only how we use translation and how we open up the study of English literature as a multifaceted multilingual discipline, but our hiring practices, and our willingness to work in non-hierarchical, collaborative frameworks in



order to redo (rather than just undo), what we understand and expect from the teaching of our literary period.

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Locating ourselves and where we *know from* chimes with the stance that Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh express in their work *On Decoloniality*, where they emphasize the importance of recognizing and understanding the ‘decolonial *for*’ –

how those who live the colonial difference think theory, theorize practice, and build, create, and enact concrete processes, struggles, and practices of resurgent and insurgent action and thought, including in the spheres of knowledge, territory-land, state, re-existences, and life itself. And, on the other hand, the question is how this praxis interrupts and cracks the modern/colonial/capitalist/heteropolitical matrices of power, and advances other ways of being, thinking, knowing, theorizing, feeling, acting, and living for us all – the *otherwise* that is the decolonial *for*.<sup>5</sup>

It is these *fors* and *firms* that motivated us to start a decolonizing network at York, working in the space ‘of affirmation and reaffirmation that disrupt and unsettle coloniality’s negations’, in Walsh’s phrasing, that ‘takes us beyond an *anti* stance’. We want to do more than just undo what we know, but to show how decoloniality can reshape *how* we know.

Our first effort to do this is to begin with conversation, to engage with allies across the university, and to understand the challenges that lie ahead as we seek to decolonize not only our department, but wider institutional structures. Alongside our colleague, Lola Boorman, we established a Decolonizing Network in the summer of 2020 that has gained swift and momentous traction in surprising and exciting ways. Though we started with the specific undertaking to discuss the overt, and subversive, ways in which English as a discipline must grapple with decolonization across period specialism in both research and pedagogy, the network quickly grew beyond this disciplinary boundary. Within the space of two meetings, we gained members from across faculties, professional services, research centres, and students studying at every degree stage. The network has created a space to *cohere* across the university and has already begun to facilitate student collaborations and activities. We have been invited to speak with colleagues in other departments in our faculty (History, History of Art, Politics) and colleagues in our respective research centres, in order to share our collective experiences and

<sup>5</sup> Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, ‘Introduction’, in *On Decoloniality Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, ed. by Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 9–10.

to chart ways forward together. Such connections have meant we have facilitated two cross-faculty PhD student-led grants and encouraged our students in English to collaborate with their peers in History to plan an undergraduate conference. From this network, we have then been invited to sit on the University level committee responsible for driving work on decolonization at York – a role that we share between us.

Intra-departmentally, we have found that it has allowed us to open up a non-hierarchical space with staff and students to engage in the intellectual groundwork of decolonization. But as much as this recognizes that there must also be cross-disciplinary action to ensure that practice-based knowledge is shared and discussed, the grassroots work must come from within the discipline. For these reasons, we are keen to not lose our interest in translation and multilingualism – a distinctive strength for our department – and we have particular aims to stimulate discussion about the crucial, but often forgotten, role that this plays in decolonizing literary study. When we talk about decolonizing the discipline of English literature, are there unintended consequences for linguistic imperialism? How might we undo this?

The challenges of establishing a network have not escaped us. By setting up the network we have become default experts in decolonization, no matter how often we point out that we have no claims to expertise. Establishing such a collective has necessarily placed pressure on our already pressured workloads, too, and we have come to wonder whether it is the place of scholars to facilitate such cross-discipline and cross-faculty discussion – and if not, how best to ensure the discussion is continued. We launched the network because no such institutional entity existed, but it quickly grew too big for us – a sign of the huge appetite, but paucity of structure, for this work. As we turn our attention to the upcoming academic year, our aim is to refocus the network within our discipline in order to continue to learn and actively work to decolonize our curriculum and teaching pedagogies. However, in order to do this, we have to also ask – are there other, new models of workload that could make this work more visible and central, rather than additional, to our teaching duties? Do we not only need to undo the structures that govern the shape, positions, and entry-points of our modules, but the institutional structures that govern our time?

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