**Decolonising Hispanic Studies: Some Reflections**

Following a Twitter call for reading lists that academics had actively tried to decolonise, I submitted the two syllabi of two five-week blocks of classes that I designed for first year undergraduate Hispanic Studies modules at Durham University in 2016/17. But my attempts at ‘decolonising’ the syllabi were, on reflection, only partial. Here, I explain how and why I attempted to decolonise these courses, and how and why I could – and should - further decolonise the reading lists in the future.

The reading lists that I have submitted were for two short blocks of classes included in larger core modules. This is because level one and two modules in Modern Language and Cultures at Durham are always team-taught: each teacher designs one or two five-week blocks for each module. One of my blocks was on Saharawi Friendship Generation poetry, for the module “Conflict and Violence in the Spanish-Speaking World,” and the other on Equatoguinean modern short stories, poetry and music for the module “Identity in the Spanish-Speaking World.”

In my view, part of the work of decolonising Hispanic Studies must involve recognising Spain’s past and present role in its former African colonies. I currently know of no Hispanic Studies higher education courses that teach on the culture, history, societies or politics of Spanish-speaking Africa other than the University of Ghana and the University of Equatorial Guinea (if any readers can correct me, I would be delighted).

The absence of Western Saharan and Equatoguinean cultural production from Hispanic Studies courses upholds colonial structures in several ways. One, it implies that the literature, music, art, theatre, music and cinema of these two countries are somehow less worthy-of-study than their Spanish or Latin American counterparts. To entirely overlook all African contributions to Spanish-language cultural production risks reinforcing the white superiority complex that has reigned for the last 500 years, not to mention the concomitant [potential effects on students of colour (and indeed on white students)](https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/race-for-equality/). Arguably, this gap in the curriculum is also a throw-back to the wider European colonial epoch when ‘native’ cultures were folklorised and devalued.

Two, the absence of ‘Spanish Africa’ reflects Spain’s concerted efforts to erase these two countries from its collective memory. Upon Equatorial Guinea’s independence in 1968, the Spanish administration declared classified all information relating to its former colony. Still today, the Spanish cultural body the *Instituto Cervantes* (the Spanish equivalent of the British Council) refuses to be linked to any event focused on Western Saharan cultural production. As I further explain below, recognising the existence of Western Sahara does not fit with the Spanish government’s diplomatic strategies in North Africa.

Anecdotally, it is curious that I found it impossible to teach my ‘first choices’ of Equatoguinean novels on this course. María Nsue Angüe’s novel *Ekomo*, penned in Spanish, was only available in French translation. Likewise Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel’s award-winning *By Night the Mountain Burns*, again originally written in Spanish, was only available in English. Ávila Laurel’s most recent book, *The Gurugu Pledge*, a novel about sub-Saharan migrants waiting to cross the fence at the Spanish enclave of Melilla to enter “fortress Europe,” has never been published in Spanish at all – the author had it directly translated into English for publication in the UK.

Third, leaving Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea out of Hispanic Studies courses furthers the collective ignorance of, in the UK and Spain, ongoing colonisation in Western Sahara and neo-colonialism in Equatorial Guinea, and the role of British and Spanish corporations and governments in upholding (neo)colonialism in both cases. Western Sahara is officially the last remaining colony in Africa. Legally speaking, Spain never decolonised Western Sahara. It merely sold it to neighbouring Morocco, which continues to occupy the country whilst the Moroccan king amasses a personal fortune selling off the country’s immense natural resources. All of the oil companies active in occupied Western Sahara are British, or partially British-owned. Spanish fishermen, via illegal trade agreements with the EU, pay Morocco to access Saharawi waters, whilst Spain supports Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara in return for Morocco’s help in preventing “illegal immigration” through the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa. In Equatorial Guinea meanwhile, all the artists studied in my course actively and artistically denounce their country’s decadent and violent dictatorship, and the (British, Spanish and American) companies that uphold it by paying the dictator to access Equatoguinean resources.

My main aim, in 2016, was to get Western Sahara and Equatorial Guinea on the core Hispanic Studies syllabi at Durham. For the reasons explained above, this for me was, in itself, a step in decolonising my discipline. Nevertheless, to my shame, I hadn’t considered, in 2016, my own Eurocentric bias when it came to theoretical readings.

Looking at the reading lists I have submitted, you can see examples of the wealth of Saharawi and Equatoguinean scholarship written from a cultural studies, political science or anthropological perspective. But, at least for the Western Sahara syllabi, the theoretical core readings on Nonviolent Resistance Studies are predominately by European and US authors. In 2016, I went straight for the canonical readings in Nonviolent Studies. Perhaps due to white privilege, it did not occur to me to explore research produced in, for example, African universities on this subject, which may be missing from the canon due to structural racism (and this structural racism includes issues such as the lack of visas and funding for African scholars to attend certain conferences, European and US-published journals being considered as more prestigious than African ones and failing to publish African scholarship, UK institutions prioritising strategic relationships with only prestigious US universities, African researchers not having institutional access to key journals, or the opportunity to explore historical documents on their own histories held in European archives, and so on…).

My oversight means my students potentially missed out on excellent scholarship from outside the US and Europe. My oversight reinforces the whiteness of my disciplinary canon. My oversight helps to [keep the curriculum white](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xe-rP7-2R2U). I could do better. Decolonising the curriculum requires on-going reflection and self-criticism. I am keen to share my existing syllabi because it is imperative that Hispanic Studies, as a discipline, incorporates Africa into its regional foci. But to ‘fully’ decolonise would require much progress on my initial 2016 effort.