Foucault, Biopower, and a Postcolonial Ethics of Mentoring in STEM Research

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In her essay, "Empathy Blues at the Colonial Difference: Underrepresented Undergraduate Women in STEM," Mary Jo Hinsdale brings up some very important issues of the role of empathy in mentoring women in STEM fields. She poses an important question of why there are still so few women in science. A *New York Times* magazine essay quotes Meg Urry, current director of the Yale Center for Astronomy and Astrophysics: "Women [are] leaving the profession not because they [aren't] gifted but because of the 'slow drumbeat of being underappreciated, feeling uncomfortable and encountering roadblocks on the path to success.'"[1]

By suggesting several lines of inquiry that can be combined to address how we might enrich the scientific community with more inclusive STEM departments, Hinsdale begins with Sharon Todd's nuanced discussion of responsible educational community and empathy, which she then supplements with Sandra Harding's work on the continuing impact of colonialism on modern Western knowledge systems and Maria Lugones's on the coloniality of gender and decolonial feminism. In conclusion, Hinsdale argues that pedagogical relations with first-generation women or women of color in our science classrooms are complicated by the intertwining colonialities of how knowledge is produced and gender.

By integrating Sandra Harding's critique of modern Western science, Hinsdale suggests that reading scientific inquiry against the backdrop of coloniality helps illuminate contemporary science practices. She writes, "In profound ways that we don't often acknowledge in our daily lives on college campuses, [Mary Louise] Pratt, Harding, and [Stephen Jay] Gould illuminate how scientific practices and academic disciplines are deeply intertwined with the European history of exploration, colonization, and exploitation of the planet."

What is at stake when we ask what constitutes a science? Hinsdale goes on to discuss Michel Foucault's argument about that science is concerned with power and its effects.[2] Hinsdale claims that "historically what counted as 'science' was decided by the powerful colonizers; they institutionalized knowledge practices and controlled scientific discourse, and in so doing, delegitimized other ways of knowing the natural world. Projects that benefited the colonial enterprise were favored."

By using Frank Margonis's concept of political intersubjectivity, Hinsdale correctly states that our "everyday interactions in the classroom, the laboratory, and the scientific community are often fraught with tension for underrepresented women that may be hard for us to apprehend, whether or not we also occupy a social position among the fractured loci of the colonial difference." Those who are included within the political space of academic privilege are political subjects because they have the ability to develop not just themselves but the overarching curriculum, thereby

influencing how work in STEM fields is conducted. Those who are excluded from this dialogue are not political because they are not given the opportunity to express themselves.

Women, often minority, feel they are marginalized in the dominant STEM culture because they transgress a prevailing cultural and political regime that might best be described as predominantly European or Western. Their treatment can be understood through disciplinary terms, in juxtaposition with laws and regulations of what the scientific paradigms prescribe as criteria for valid research. Because of their non-Western, perceived orientation, they form a threat to the dominant discourse or regime, in turn, preempting a disciplinary framework that will manage, suppress, or force out the potential threat so that it does not upset or overturn the existing regime. Biopolitics is at work here through disciplinary measures.

According to Cristian Iftode, the concept of biopolitics specifies a network of power relations in which the "telos of our existence is practically reduced to the ideals of physical and economic health of the society's members, and the subjectivity of human beings is being realized by a repertoire of disciplinary techniques aiming at the 'normalization' and leveling of individuals."[3] One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death."[4] Within the context of STEM culture, Foucault's point is that such a culture doesn't actually offer an open stage where all of the individual partaking in the knowledge are invited to freely pursue their interpretation of situated knowledge. The modern individual is a product of biopolitics, "nothing else than a historical correlation" of a specific "technology."[5] This exercise of disciplinary power within the context of a neoliberal production of knowledge, according to Iftode, doesn't amount to the "use of physical violence or direct threats; but it nevertheless constitutes a structure of actions aiming to control our minds, bodies and actions,"[6] "a block of capacity-communication-power" that "incites," "induces," "seduces," "makes it easier or more difficult" to obey.[7]

In order to facilitate a notion of an alternative discourse, current feminist and postcolonial scholarship and practice in STEM fields and in the larger academy must continue to reinforce a splitting that is happening within the Western and marginalized discourses surrounding academic women's identity. These images must be challenged by those women as active agents in a third space. Deconstructing racist discourses, particularly those that emphasize the need to modernize traditional culture and lived spaces, will generate a view of culture, religion, sexuality, and race as interconnected, where identity is not a homogeneous, monolithic identity, but one that is shifting, changing, and contradictory.[8]

In her attempt to reinvent experience against the scientific determination of existence as manifested by the current STEM culture, Hinsdale proposes an ethics of difference as a way to respond to the culturally dominant logocentric logic of experience produced through the idea of sameness and the power relations instituted in it.[9] In articulating an ethics of empathy, it would be useful for Hinsdale to theoretically contextualize exactly how she is using the term "empathy." What Hinsdale tries to

do through undertaking an examination of empathy in the STEM climate is to try to bring to light this non appropriate relation to the other that is based on an ethics of responsibility rather than power. One that is negotiated between an obligation for the other and the agency of the subject.[10]

This inclusion of difference, right at the very source of being, might point to a way to promote peaceful, mutual renewal through the interaction of diverse influences. By relegating all the differences and particularisms, such as race, sex, class, and ethnicity, to the private sphere, a liberal production of knowledge supports the notion of the abstract public and the disembodied political subject separated from the body, race, and sexuality. Yet Hinsdale argues that the political diversity of women cannot be affirmed without challenging the abstraction of the production of dominant knowledge.

Unfortunately, current discourses that profess to be inclusive may actually work to create new forms of exclusivity if the only ideologies presented are those defined within standardized definitions of normalcy. The assurance of tolerance within this context implies intolerance by the fact that acceptance of the other in this case presupposes the appropriation of the other into the self, thereby annihilating the other into a projection of the self.[11]

Consequently, our main purpose as postcolonial critics, in line with Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and others, becomes one of considering the inversion effected when "others" and otherness occupy a subject position in educational accounts and accounting practices.[12] The question, then, is, as Peter Taubman writes, "how do we talk about otherness without joining our voices to the canonical discourse but avoiding the potential pitfalls of the oppositional discourse?"[13]

1. Eileen Pollack, "Why Are There Still So Few Women in Science?," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 3, 2013.

2. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

3. Cristian Iftode, "Philosophy, Terror, and Biopolitics," *Public Reason* 4, nos.1–2 (2013): 229–239, 231.

4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (Victoria: Australia: Penguin Press, 1976).

5. Michel Foucault. "The Subject and Power," *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds., Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 222.

6. Iftode, "Philosophy, Terror, and Biopolitics," 231.

7. Foucault, The Subject and Power, 218–220.

8. Shahnaz Khan, "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space," in *Gender, Politics, and Islam*, eds., Carolyn Allen, Judith A. Howard, and Theresa Saliba (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 305–336, cited in Shaireen Rasheed, "Islam, Sexuality and the "War on Terror": Luce Irigaray's Post-colonial Ethics of Difference," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 31, no. 1. (2014): 1–15.

9. Shaireen Rasheed, "Sexualized Spaces in Public Places: Irigaray, Levinas and an Ethics of the Erotic," *Educational Theory* 57 no. 3 (2007): 339–350.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Peter Taubman, "Canonical Sins," in *Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text: Representations of Identity and Difference in Education*, eds., Louis A. Castenell and William F. Pinar (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 49.