

Emotions and Coloniality: Doing Commitments as Decolonial Resistance

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A born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost
And with age his body uglier grows,
So to his mind cankers

— Prospero, speaking of Caliban

Remember, first to possess his books
For without them, he is but a sot, like I am

— Caliban, speaking of Prospero's books¹

For almost three hundred years, audiences have to greater and lesser degrees experienced the emotional weight and freight of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Read as an allegory of colonialism, its central characters and themes provide an opportunity to consider social relationships within a newly emerging modernity/coloniality — gendered, patriarchal, class and social status, racialized, and environmental. A large and important commentary has explored many dimensions of colonialism in the play and while I will not explore that body of work explicitly; it does inform my attempt here to briefly consider how emotions are sociocultural inheritances.² That is, the production of *The Tempest*, not long after the settlement of Jamestown and the launching of the British Empire in North America and the Caribbean, reflects and comments upon precisely that newly emerging social order. In doing so, the play can be recognized for orienting its actors and audiences toward emotional responses within a colonial order. To be sure, I am not arguing that such responses are uniformly or uncritically taken up. Nevertheless, the characters, script and context of *The Tempest* are coordinated to elicit surprise, disgust, love, anger, joy and happiness. These emotions operate within coloniality, and as such are informed by their circumstances.

For example, the happiness achieved by Prospero, Miranda, and Ferdinand at the play's conclusion occurs as they regain their assured places at the pinnacle of that social order, securing wealth, status, health, and the resolution of a political dispute for themselves and their future generations. The emotion of happiness the audience thus feels is generated by that resolution and affirmation of a racialized social hierarchy. Similarly, audiences' emotional responses are guided by disgust for Caliban and he is left alone on his island, outside the social order, half educated in a resource-depleted environment.

On this reading, *The Tempest* provides a way of considering how Shakespeare orients audience emotions toward a happiness that is only achieved through a divinely established racialized hierarchical social order.³ Not unlike Sarah Ahmed, my own orientation here is “to do genealogy, to wonder about the present by wondering about

the how of its arrival.”⁴ For me, the emotions of settler colonial happiness are thus an arrival or inheritance of cultural forces as they affirm the material relations necessary for the continuation of that happy social order. Moreover I want to highlight the importance of reasoning through the genealogy of representations of happiness as an emotion; I find this crucial for preservice teachers and students more broadly.

Emotion as sociocultural inheritance in relations of coloniality I believe complements Peter J. Nelsen’s project in his essay “The Imperatives of Feeling.” We seem to agree that the exploration of emotions by European American preservice teachers is a valuable part of taking up antiracist education. Unlike Nelsen, however, I am less optimistic about a project that centers the self-reporting of one’s emotions. Indeed, I may be arguing here that what one is relating in such moments is what one has inherited and has seen acted out by others around them. Thus there is less a need for individual self-examination than for an interrogation of how individuals arrive at the emotions they experience in social settings.⁵ And so while we may have differing approaches to the ultimate location of emotions, I think we both agree that emotional inheritances can be interrupted if not refused. My comments here on inheritance are offered up as a way shift the attention to the sociohistorical to lead us away from the central problems Nelsen’s essay addresses — white guilt as an emotion that disables commitments to antiracist education. He seems to overlook the arguments of various feminists and poststructuralists that emotion is socially, not individually, situated. As Sianne Ngai has explained, “[M]ost critics today accept that far from being merely private or idiosyncratic phenomena ... feelings are as fundamentally ‘social’ as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional object of historicist criticism ..., and as ‘material’ as the linguistic signs and significations that have been the more traditional objects of literary formalism.”⁶ This is in part why I return to the notion of inheritance as it suggests both a collective process with a material presence other than one’s one “self.”

In reading Nelsen’s essay I was haunted by the question that Begum Ozden Firat, Sarah De Mul, and Sonja van Wichelen pose in their *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice*.⁷ They ask “how do you do commitment” such that we are focused on “issues of epistemology and methodology rather than ontology and identity”⁸ Nelsen’s call for educators to publicly explore their emotional states with regard to white privilege and the guilt associated with it does not seem to me to be the same thing as exploring how emotional states toward African and Native peoples have been coordinated in a variety of settings — theatrical, philosophical, economic, and the like — as a racialization of labor necessary for colonization.

Indeed, by noting Charles Mills’s work on the “epistemology of ignorance,” it is an interrogation of a way of knowing which is organized by structured blindness and opacities.⁹ As the work of Mills, Firat, and so many others attest to, that epistemology is facilitated through schooling, theaters, economics, and so on. Their question seems to be, How do we know what we know?, or What kind of thinking have we inherited?, and less on how we respond emotionally in coming to these realizations. Again, how do you *do* commitment? Does one *do* commitment to antiracist education as public self-reporting of emotions? Or does one do commitment by a refusal and

resistance to the emotions of happiness and guilt inherited through and necessary for a continuing coloniality?

My concern with the pedagogy Nelsen advocates is that it remains within a question of white identity, all due respect to Alain Locke. My fear is that with an audience of European American preservice teachers such moments of self-reporting of emotions is too easily moved toward a form of happiness that is already coordinated by relations of coloniality. Thus as Ahmed argues, we should be killjoys and malcontents as forms of resistance to a happiness that we inherit through a social order where it generally remains the case that the darker one's skin, the less one earns. Recognizing that organization of emotions present in the portrayal of Caliban can provide students the resources for an active refusal of such an inheritance — including that of guilt — as a disruption of coloniality. And in committing to that project there is no return to a state of happiness through the experience of guilt and that inability to return to naïveté is a good thing. It is one of the first turns to a mode of decolonial resistance and an unstable philosophical probing for the possibility of life worlds built around the desire for nonoppressive sociality.

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (London: Collins Classics, 2012).

2. See for example Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. I want to acknowledge that this claim needs to be mediated by a close reading of Gonzalo's speeches in Act II Scene I, where he speaks of the island as a potential commonwealth. While Shakespeare seems to be indicating with this speech the very ideas that are moving toward more egalitarian social structures, Shakespeare's other characters Antonio and Sebastian mock Gonzalo's ideas. Thus the emotional response elicited is one of happiness for the status quo of monarchy.

4. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 218.

5. On both of these points, I would highlight the work of Claude M. Steele, particularly *Whistling Vivaldi*, as helping to strengthen Nelsen's engagement with social and experimental psychology on the relation between emotion and commitment. See Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (New York: Norton, 2011). Likewise, I would encourage him to consider the work on Intergroup Dialogue that has developed at the University of Michigan over the last twenty-five years as examples of classroom pedagogies that deliberately structure group processes for emotional development in young adults on issues of intersectionality, race, inequality, alliance building, and commitments to positive individual and social change. See Ximena Zuniga, Gretchen E. Lopez, and Kristie A. Ford, eds., "Intergroup Dialogue: Engaging Difference, Social Identities, and Social Justice," special issue, *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 1 (2012), <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ueee20/45/1#.U9BfEIBdUoc>; Craig John Alimo, "From Dialogue to Action: The Impact of Cross-Race Intergroup Dialogue on the Development of White College Students as Racial Allies," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 45, no. 1 (2012): 36–59, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10665684.2012.643182#.U9BeuIBdUoc>; and "The Program on Intergroup Relations," University of Michigan, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://igr.umich.edu/about/institute>.

6. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 25, quoted in Mitchum Huehls, "Structures of Feeling: Or, How to Do Things (or Not) with Books," *Contemporary Literature* 51, no. 2 (2010): 419–20.

7. Begum Ozden Firat, Sarah De Mul, and Sonja van Wichelen, *Commitment and Complicity in Cultural Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

8. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

9. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).