

Discussions on how to decolonise academia are far from new. As scholars, we are keenly aware that the current privileged knowledge structures have co-built the world we live in with all its shortcomings. Besides the wider effects of these discourses and narratives, the way in which we have studied book history has also been affected. This was the larger topic that gave way to the panel on decolonising book history that took place during *SHARP in Focus* on 15 June 2020 organised by [Melanie Ramdarshan Bold](#) and [Danielle Fuller](#).

The participants were: [Marina Garone Gravier](#) (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), [Priya Joshi](#) (Temple University), [Jean Lee Cole](#) (Loyola University Maryland), [Kinohi Nishikawa](#) (Princeton University), [Derrick R. Spires](#) (Cornell University), and [yours truly](#) (Leiden University). This post provides a very short summary of the points I heard addressed. I invite you to watch the whole roundtable [here](#).

## **Naming the elephant in the room**

The goal of the roundtable was to start a conversation on how the problem of colonialism in book history is seen/ignored and experienced, and to exchange ideas on how to decentre our field. We did not ponder or wonder if colonialism is a thing or whether it is present in book history—it is in fact a thing, and it is very much present. We did not recount personal experiences, as there is no end to testimonials about colonialism once you start listening for them. Our focus was specifically on how to decolonise book history scholarly practices.

The panelists offered six distinct approaches, yet the general consensus was that we need to be reflective on how our ways of thinking and working tend to replicate the structures that have supported colonisation. After all, the institutions that grant symbolic value to our research have been built on colonial epistemologies.

Most of us strive to give a voice to those left out of historiographies: those on the periphery, the subaltern, minoritized and enslaved peoples. Yet this approach demands ethical awareness of how we use/interpret those voices. We must be careful not to exploit communities for our own academic gain, nor should we replicate structures of oppression by simply “adding them in.” Instead, we should recognise how these communities have used

and understood print technologies and printed materials.

The audience also weighed in on what decolonising means to them. Some, for example, do this by developing a more inclusive concept of curatorial authority (Lisa Conathan, Williams College), while others avoid solely focusing on the coloniser's point of view when teaching a course (Katherine D. Harris, San Jose State University).

## **How to untangle centuries of violence (and incompleteness)**

Decolonising book history begins by “dismantling the coloniser’s logic, definitions, and structures,” as mentioned by Derrick R. Spires. In practice this demands we look critically at how subjects and sources are organised, which bibliography is canonised, which sources are privileged, and which voices are heard or not owing to publishing gatekeeping. Plus, we need a counter discourse to tackle these issues—e.g.: naming the “mediocrity of replication,” which prioritizes the same type of studies, or appealing to “the way things have always been done” and tradition as standards of quality.

One of the main subtopics tackled during the panel were archives and the implicit value they convey. What counts as a valid object of study? What do archives say and silence? Here, we discussed how knowledge is organised and privileged. But also, as Kinohi Nishikawa noted, we need to be mindful of our own centre/periphery trajectories when working between different repositories.

The strategies each of us has devised to deal with primary sources can be summed up in two courses of action. The first is to look beyond the sanctioned archives and focus on other materials and collections which may or may not have been organised as/into archives. Examples can be found on Jean Lee Cole’s studies on comics in the United States or Marina Garone Gravier’s research on women’s and indigenous printing practices in Mexico.

The second action is to use the existing silences and organization of the archives and turn

this against them. According to Priya Joshi the researcher can also see “the archive as a contact zone with the past and with the barbarism that we might undo [...] it’s not what one reads, but how.” In my own research (Elizondo), I compare the absence of books from inventories with the presence of other cultural objects in Colonial Mexico. Both strategies of approaching the archive seek to “uncover” what has been left out as worthy of studying.

The different strategies followed by the panellists have not been chosen by a difference of opinions on the best practice but on the availability of materials. Some regions and periods have left no other traces than the sanctioned archives, as noted by audience member Devin Fitzgerald: “in premodern China people routinely burned their papers—so that “sub-altern” archive just doesn’t exist.” As historians we are used to these gaps, we just need to shift the focus and change how we look at archives. This step alone will not suffice, and this process is more difficult and complex than it may seem at first.

## **The elephant’s cousin: resources**

Another important aspect the panel raised was the disparity of resources, which is palpable not only between the Global North and South (for lack of better terms) but within each country and region. These disparities are manifest in who has access to reading and writing in journals, who receives a fellowship, or who can travel and present at conferences.

Examples of the differences in access seem to be caused mostly by the concentration of resources and network opportunities at elite Global North institutions. Cases mentioned by panellists and audience members included a reviewer returning a paper to a scholar in the South recommending they read certain articles or books that the local research library does not carry; a graduate student not being able to apply to a fellowship because they needed to finish paying off their student debt; or scholars not applying to conferences because of the lack of funding in their own institutions to travel abroad.

The roots of these issues are systemic and therefore our actions as individuals will always be limited in their effects. We can pass on articles to colleagues who don’t have access to those materials. Nevertheless, reviewers should be mindful when they suggest readings. There can

be prizes for the best thesis from a graduate student, but this won't help out those graduate students that have to work in order to study.

These problems demand not only that we reconsider how fellowships and prizes are given but also how the flows of knowledge are organised. Expecting scholars from the Global South to submit articles in English in addition to the challenges they face seems crass. Additionally, we must recognise that research in book history is an extremely time-consuming and intellectually demanding endeavour.

## **And now, what?**

We exchanged many ideas on how to decolonise the curriculum: which books we read and give to students, whom we cite, how to critically look at existing scholarship and its silences. But we also discussed what steps we personally take and how we can raise our voices, whether we are in positions of power or just as colleagues to our fellow book historians.

The participation from colleagues on the chat was heart-warming and gave us food for thought. For example: on the issue of gatekeeping, Zachary Lesser noted that because book history and bibliography rely on technical knowledge “there are many people who want to use that technical knowledge for exclusionary purposes.” While Teresa Zackodnik added, “Thinking that the differences between conceptualizations of ‘the material’ in book history is one way to come at this gatekeeping. Material isn’t only about the physical book.”

We realise many book historians want things to change—we want to be more curious, questioning, and creative in our research. This is not to diminish the research being done now; we want to improve it by expanding it and include as many colleagues and research subjects as possible.

For 2021 we hope the panel can take place again in the **virtual SHARP**. In 2020 we solely broadcast a conversation that many book historians have been having with colleagues, mentors, and themselves. Let’s continue this open exchange, figuring out how to do less provincial book history research.

## A small reading list

During the conversation, panellists and members of the audience suggested some readings on the subject. Although they can be found on the appendix of the video, they are also listed below:

### *The text from Walter Benjamin on archives*

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, 253–264. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

<https://seanstorm.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/benjamin-theses-on-the-philosophy-of-history.pdf>.

### *Publishing gatekeeping*

ACMRS Arizona. "It's Time to End the Publishing Gatekeeping! – A letter from RaceB4Race Executive Board." *Medium*, June 11, 2020.

<https://medium.com/the-sundial-acmrs/its-time-to-end-the-publishing-gatekeeping-75207525f587>.

Hope Wabuke (@HopeWabuke), thread on racism at the National Book Critics Circle. June 11, 2020. <https://twitter.com/HopeWabuke/status/1271125513243934728>. Thread also available at <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1271076878745505794.html>.

*Letter to the Poetry Foundation from Fellows + Programmatic Partners*. Public letter. June 6, 2020.

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf4u5Ns8Blz0gutuanOHF6I026Xi0dE9IT36HQtg5pDKeT5uQ/viewform>.

Dignidad Literaria. *An Invitation to Oprah Winfrey from #DignidadLiteraria*. Public letter. February 12, 2020. <https://lithub.com/an-invitation-to-oprah-winfrey-from-dignidadliteraria/>.

*Decolonising practices – describing and cataloguing*

Fagnan, Luc. 2020. “Decolonizing Description: First Steps to Cataloguing With Indigenous Syllabics”. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals* 1 (1), 33-40. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder21>.

Farnel, Sharon, Denise Koufogiannakis, Ian Bigelow, et al. “Unsettling our Practices: Decolonizing Description at the University of Alberta Libraries”. *Google docs document*, undated.  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sQkyOL-lhbXjtPketlhtLT9wmRlfQunt682Q6qm5uzo/edit>.

Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee. “Cataloging Ethics Bibliography.” Unpublished manuscript.  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bHtghhSL54PFlekIwnmHpF9O\\_2KR\\_GMq5GWIBgNLKDg/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bHtghhSL54PFlekIwnmHpF9O_2KR_GMq5GWIBgNLKDg/edit)

*On Dorothy Porter’s “Negro Collection” (1930)*

Helton L.E. 2019. “On decimals, catalogs, and racial imaginaries of reading”. *PMLA*. 134 (1): 99-120.

Nunes, Zita Cristina. “Cataloging Black Knowledge – How Dorothy Porter Assembled and Organized a Premier Africana Research Collection.” *Perspectives on History*, November 20, 2018.  
<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/cataloging-black-knowledge-how-dorothy-porter-assembled-and-organized-a-premier-africana-research-collection>.

*On the library world*

Hudson, David James. “The Whiteness of Practicality.” unformatted postprint. 2017.

*(lack of) Diversity in Academia*

Adams, Richard. "Fewer than 1% of UK university professors are black, figures show." *The Guardian*, February 27, 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/27/fewer-than-1-of-uk-university-professors-are-black-figures-show>.

de Brey, Cristobal, Lauren Musu, Joel McFarland, et al. 2019. *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018* (NCES 2019-038). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019038.pdf>.

"Race/ethnicity of college faculty. " *NCES (Fast Facts)*. Accessed August 3, 2020.

<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>.

*Underrepresented & Underpaid Diversity & Equity Among Canada's Post-Secondary Education Teachers*. Canadian Association of University Teachers. 2018.

[https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/caut\\_equity\\_report\\_2018-04final.pdf](https://www.caut.ca/sites/default/files/caut_equity_report_2018-04final.pdf).

*On non-western types*

"Face/Interface: Type Design and HCI Beyond the Western World." Conference website.

Accessed August 3, 2020. <https://www.nonlatin.org/>.

*Opportunities*

Lingua Franca, an electronic imprint of SHARP that translates and publishes both new work and work which has already appeared in languages other than English.

<https://www.sharpweb.org/linguafranca/>.

Fellowships at The Bibliographical Society of America.

<https://bibsocamer.org/awards/fellowships/>.



## On Decolonising Book History

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