

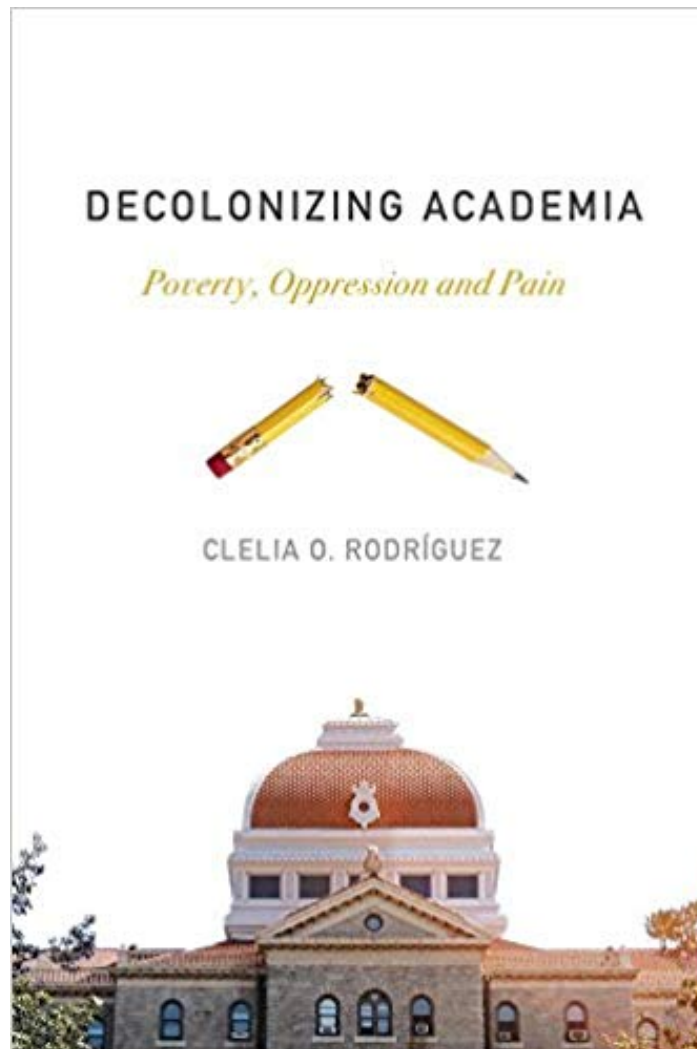
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain

Reviewed by Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz



DECOLONIZING ACADEMIA: POVERTY, OPPRESSION, AND PAIN (2018)

Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain by Clelia O. Rodríguez (Fernwood Publishing, 2018)

At a time when NYC Mayor Bill DeBlasio urges, unsuccessfully, an abolishment of specialized high school testing after only seven black students were granted access out of an entering pool of over 900,¹ and when CUNY and SUNY report on the receipt of multi-year million dollar grants to secure open educational resources for undergraduates across the state,² and as adjuncts of the very same city university are rallying to strike for an increase of their salary to a basic \$7k³ to be on par with adjunct pay across the city landscape, the book project, *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain* is published by Fernwood Publishing in Toronto, Canada. These public events of educational access are not unrelated. At CUNY, librarians and educators are realizing that part of the equation for supplying open and equitable education is to also address issues of racial and economic inequity on a global scale. To navigate these disparate points, re-scale our initiatives, and transform our pedagogical perspectives, we must supersede time via ancestral connection and space by denouncing borders. Immediately after reading *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain*, I contacted the author, Clelia Rodríguez, and asked her to keynote a closed conference of CUNY graduate students, many of whom were adjuncts, some library students, and mostly students of color. She accepted.

Situating itself within a framework of critical race theory, this literary, spiritual, and ancestrally grounded collection of prose, vignettes, letters, poems, manifestos, and odes posits an agenda that rejects the colonial violence of our vastly white and isolating academic landscape and works to awaken our connections to the non-linear knowledge we possess in our bones.

The reader enters the book project with a decolonizing pedagogy articulated as its frame and *Unlearning* as its center. To Unlearn is to peel back layers, for which Rodríguez details twelve: Trespassing, Rawness, Reading "Time," Shame, What About Decolonization, Networking, Who's Counting?, Who's Hiring?, Why Are You Here?, Tragedy, The#Shithole Syllabus, and Intellectual Masturbation. Followed by the unlayering in the *Unlearning*, the reader is submerged into a decolonizing journey that finally situates us in conversation with each other and ourselves.

Readers of *Radical Teacher* may already be familiar with a part of this journey in *Unlearning*. "The #shitholes Syllabus: Undoing His(Story)" debuted in the 2018, volume 111 issue of *Radical Teacher*. Presented as an unconventional syllabus, the article responded to Trumpism or "#45&Co's" designation of shithole countries, situating the reader at the center of this underpinning, curating her rage, and imparting a decolonial perspective onto her students' *Unlearning*. The differences between the openly accessible *Radical Teacher* publication and that which appears in *Decolonizing Academia* are the additional unapologetic verbiage, the use of a traditional syllabus structure, complete with headers and truncations, and finally the extracted footnotes section, similar to that coined

in Junot Diaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, where the "fuku" of his people had been traced, and considered as subtext beyond time and space. These extensions of prose and form alongside an urgency for action are the features of Rodríguez's collection that pull the reader into the text directing us to locate ourselves inside the trappings of academia as they pertain to geography, race, and academic status. Her reimagining of colonial structures is illustrated in her application of unconventional formats like the "#shitholesyllabus," which highlights that "there is no such thing as a safe space. this university was built by slaves,"⁴ or "UNapologetic letters" which hold blood-signed contracts⁵ and texts-as-poems to name just a couple to start.

To respond to the decolonial frame, Rodríguez acknowledges that "decolonization sounds and means different things to me, a woman of color, than to a white person."⁶ This was an apparent truth during Rodríguez's keynote in the room of mostly students of color; many points of entry by Rodríguez were either lost to or a direct calling out of white faculty who were interested in engaging in this process of *Unlearning*. Discomfort or distance may be felt by white allies (or people of color who grip the notion of privilege similar to those who urged for the maintenance of specialized high school exams) in the reading of this book. Though it is likely not meant for the eyes of the onlooker, I recommend everyone read this important text, as the shift in centering one's positionality, the discomfort in that, may be an important layer to *Unlearning*. Rodríguez however, professed without concern for those whom she could not reach. And for this, I realized I was witnessing what others may have seen in the great orators of our yesteryear, what I imagine it must have felt to see Audre Lorde or feel the vibrations of Pat Parker's poetry: the embodiment of unapologetic survival. No, Rodríguez was not concerned if the others didn't get it – this talk of decolonization – if they couldn't hear her, or if they shuffled in their seats. The snaps, gasps, and wide-eyed responses in that room of over 80 mostly students of color meant that she was speaking to us head-on and with the intention of breaking Us open.

Rodríguez's keynote was received like her book's layers, as the internal dialog of she who is the audience of this project, a mirroring. The Us that she urges to act is the woman of color scholar, living and working in the United States of America, but whose research and focal point, and potentially place of birth, is on colonized land outside of this country, yet responsive to "geographies of the North, schools of the North, universities of the North, libraries of the North."⁷ To this end, Rodríguez has curated a first-person-from-multiple-perspectives narrative that speaks to the isolation of junior scholars of color who face the ingrained contradiction of their academic positions as researchers, grant-recipients, accepted applicants, adjunct professors, doctoral candidates, reminding Us that "one thousand sacrifices later, you're a university professor."⁸

Rodríguez supplied voice to what had, until my reading of her work, felt like my own silent narrative. As a lesbian of color from an immigrant family, becoming a non-teaching faculty member at a doctoral granting public institution, and an adjunct faculty member of a private graduate institution, I internalized what many scholars of color wedge deep into

the contours of our own isolations: micro-aggressive tugs, direct dismissals, tokenized requests, and the resultant imposter syndrome. Beyond the personal daily experience, "survival mode"⁹ requires that we feed academia, pacifyingly upholding institutional structures that are bound to our own colonial oppression. "The more one endures the pain, the higher the compensationcompensationcomensationcompensation..."¹⁰

Decolonizing Academia can be read like a scroll as each section bleeds our collective blood to the next. This direct connection to the text, I attest, means the collection could be used as a tool for social change, as an object passed between hands of scholars as they approach their journeys toward advanced studies, tenure, grant proposing, professing, and content production. This book is that reminder of separation, warning us that academia is and will remain a colonial structure.

I say:

Academics, scholars, and doctoral students of color, I implore you to read *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain!*

You say:

How can I read this? I am too busy.

I say:

If you do not have an altar, this is the time to build one. Gather a sample of the following:

your "mother's religious *ofrendas*,"¹¹

salt,¹²

with photographs of resilient shadows,¹³

possibly grandfather, grandmother ... to feel the spirit of water,¹⁴

a lock of hair, find,

the rock's mantra¹⁵

take these things to a space outside of academia, as "there is no space or place in academia for earthy skin tones"¹⁶ because those of us who are too busy within these academic structures to open this book project are those of us who may need it most.

You say:

"[My tears are not for sale.]"¹⁷ But I don't want to be confrontational.

Rodríguez says:

"Note: I, as a woman of colour, do not care about white tears."¹⁸

This text can be interpreted as a meditation for the academic of color to adequately function or manage inside of the world for which they have been entrapped. Rodríguez's manipulation, and conversation with language is the method of this literary critique on academic culture and its implications for the lives and lineages of people and communities of color. "Sony recorders wrote in their proposals that their findings were going to help address social justice, not realizing that they were also shooting our memories and leaving our hearts drenched in dried bloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodbloodblood blood..."¹⁸

Decolonizing Academia could quickly become a change agent, if it is the medicine for the homesick as they embark on their doctoral program journeys, unknowing that they will experience tokenization, micro-aggressions, and will indeed shed tears.

Decolonizing Academia can be described as the "what I wish someone had told me" self-help bible or code book that every scholar of color ought to have on her nightstand, in her back pocket, and should only be put down if paying it forward. With this radical audience in mind, and the isolation of the academy as the space for which the conversation takes place, each section of the book calls like a whisper, but through its daring text, sounds as raging as a fire aiming to burn down the walls that have been built to sustain these spaces (including those in this presidency "#45&Co"). In the absence of other sister scholars, or in the human missteps of mentors, this book has the tools to act in place of community.

Devouring *Decolonizing Academia* has made me so full because once the layers were pulled back, what could I have left but my whole self ripened? I have come to a mirroring through my grandmother's eyes. Through this reading, I have been cracked wide open, each unlayering bringing me closer and closer to my center. I urge you to take hold of this digestible call to action. Each section reiterates not only the need for personal healing, but by naming the stakeholders of the scholarly world as ourselves and each other, we go on to acknowledge our global footprint, igniting a flame in the heart of the reader.

Notes

1. Elizabeth A. Harris, "De Blasio Proposes Changes to New York's Elite High Schools," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2018, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/02/nyregion/de-blasio-new-york-schools.html>.
2. "Governor Cuomo Announces \$8 Million for Open Educational Resources Initiative at SUNY and CUNY to Cut High Cost of Textbooks," Governor Andrew M. Cuomo, May 16, 2018, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-8-million-open-educational-resources-initiative-suny-and-cuny-cut-high>.
3. "CUNY Professors Rally; Adjuncts Demand '\$7K Or Strike!' - LaborPress," accessed April 5, 2019,

<http://laborpress.org/cuny-professors-rally-adjuncts-demand-7k-or-strike/>.

4. Clelia O Rodríguez, *Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression and Pain* / Clelia O. Rodríguez., 2018, 27.
5. Rodríguez, 101.
6. Rodríguez, 11.
7. Rodríguez, 45.
8. Rodríguez, 93.
9. Rodríguez, 99.
10. Rodríguez, 60.
11. Rodríguez, 98.
12. Rodríguez, 77.
13. Rodríguez, 34.
14. Rodríguez, 75, 131.
15. Rodríguez, 35.
16. Rodríguez, 105.
17. Rodríguez, 72–73.
18. Rodríguez, 27.
19. Rodríguez, 51.



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