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## Haunted History: Power and the Epistemology of Undergraduate American History

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# Haunted History: Power and the Epistemology of Undergraduate American History

Charlie Birge

## Introduction

Growing up, I learned to view knowledge as something you could obtain only by going to school. I thought that everything worth knowing was contained in the “official archive” of institutionalized education. This meant that I viewed historical knowledge as something external to me, and I was unable to see how I was personally implicated in the social processes that I was studying. In other words, I did not understand myself as an inheritor of and agent in the power-laden historical process. Thus I was blind to the systems of power in which I was embedded, foreclosing my ability to challenge them.

My epistemology began to change through my experiences in American Studies, where my professors encouraged me and my peers to contextualize knowledge in systems of power. I learned that scholarship should not only be about looking for and analyzing important evidence, but should ask *how* the archive of evidence was constructed, and how this process related to power. Further, my professors pushed us to think about sources of knowledge that existed outside of institutional archives, and how these sources of knowledge were also related to power. To this end, we shared our personal experiences in the education system, and I learned to view lived experience as an invaluable source of knowledge. By listening to other students’ experiences in school, I began to see how the epistemology of Western education privileged some while oppressing others.

I realized that my own educational experience was one of privilege, and that this privilege was intimately linked to my epistemology. As a white, upper/middle-class male, I always felt included and was taken seriously in school, was socialized to be confident in my ability to master the curriculum, and saw myself reflected in my role models and in the curriculum with which I was engaged. Outside of school, I had access to

additional resources and cultural capital which were indispensable to my education. Because of my privilege and success, I viewed myself as a “model” student, which became an important aspect of my self-esteem. I was deeply invested in school, so I came to view it as the purveyor of society’s most important knowledge.

Thus by reflecting on my lived experience, I began to see that my intersecting privileges wove together to formulate my epistemology—that is, my conception that knowledge was something that needed to be legitimized and conveyed through an institution. Further, I realized that my epistemology had rendered these systems of power invisible to me because I understood the power-laden historical process as something external to my personal life—something that I viewed as a neutral observer.

This reflection on my lived experience became the inspiration for this paper. I wanted to examine in greater detail how the epistemology of academic institutions encourages or discourages students to see and critique power. I thus turned to undergraduate American history survey courses, which provide students with an opportunity to place themselves in the power-laden historical process.

Before I begin my analysis, I want to pause to acknowledge the complexity of how students may or may not see power through the academic study of history. I understand that many students, unlike myself, do not need any course at all to see and understand systems of oppression; their lived experiences have provided them with more of an education on power than could ever be provided in an academic setting. However, I want to avoid constructing a binary of “privileged/doesn’t-see-power” vs. “oppressed/sees-power.” I understand that students who inhabit marginalized identities may also be uncritical of power because they have internalized oppressive messages as a means of survival, and that this is a very different issue than

power's invisibility for students of privilege. Further, I acknowledge that many students have experienced varying degrees of both oppression and privilege (indeed, studying at a four-year college is itself a privilege), and that their ability to see and critique power involves many complex intersections. Finally, I acknowledge that all students always have agency in their education; some may see and critique power regardless of course content.

Thus, I want to stress that the question of how students critique or do not critique power because of their background is beyond the scope of this paper. My work is focused on how American history survey courses encourage or discourage students to see and critique power, regardless of their background.

### Defining Power and Situating the Academy

To define power I draw on the work of Roderick Ferguson and Michel Foucault, who understand power as “intentional and nonsubjective,” that is, “a complex and multisited social formation” not formulated by or “embodied in an individual or group,” but dispersed throughout the whole of society according to an understandable logic.<sup>1</sup> Ferguson writes, quoting Foucault, “I use *power* as shorthand for a plurality of relations, arguing that ... power is the [Foucault:] ‘name that one attributes to a complex *strategical* situation in a particular society.’”<sup>2</sup> In other words, power determines who has access to resources and opportunities, and can be understood as a “distribution of life chances.”<sup>3</sup> This distribution or “strategical situation” is reified through systems, such as racism, capitalism and

<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 7. Here Ferguson cites Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 7. Here Ferguson cites Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow this term from Dean Spade, who coins it to describe how “power is not primarily operating through prohibition or permission but rather through the arrangement and distribution of security and insecurity.” See Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*, 109-110.

imperialism, that channel resources away from some individuals and groups toward others according to a discernible logic. In short, I define power as an abstract force that is responsible for the many forms of social oppression.

This essay explores the relationship between the academy and power by examining the academy's epistemology; that is, the manner in which the academy legitimizes or delegitimizes knowledge through both its archival and pedagogical practices. I agree with scholars who have argued that the academy, through its epistemology, largely colludes with power; it houses, organizes, and produces knowledge according to its needs, thus reinforcing systems of oppression. In *The University in Ruins*, literary scholar Bill Readings argues that North American colleges and universities have become corporate brands that operate entirely according to the imperatives of market performance, and that all aspects of higher education have become commodified under a generic discourse of “excellence.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Readings claims that the academy serves capital's drive to accumulate surplus, reinforcing its collusion with power. In “Epistemologies of Empire: Sexuality and Knowledge within the Neoliberal Academy,” literary scholar Meg Wesling argues that the epistemology of the academy is deeply influenced by neoliberal logic. She writes, “neoliberalism represents not simply a set of economic and social relations but an epistemological terrain in which our categories of knowledge are possible.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, neoliberalism limits the academy's ability to critique power. In *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Roderick Ferguson adds that the academy is a site in which power maintains itself by appropriating the critical formations that challenge it. While identity-based social movements of the 1960's and '70's threatened

<sup>4</sup> See generally Readings, *The University in Ruins*, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>5</sup> Wesling, “Epistemologies of Empire: Sexuality and Knowledge within the Neoliberal Academy,” 295, 297-299.

power, these formations were archived, and thus neutralized by the academy. Ferguson writes that “power enlisted the academy and things academic as conduits for conveying unprecedented forms of political economy to state and capital, forms that would be based on an abstract—rather than redistributive—valorization of minority difference and culture.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, through this process of archivization the academy appears to attend to critiques of power, allowing it to maintain a progressive image. This was and continues to be beneficial to the academy in a neoliberal climate that values abstract multiculturalism. Taken together, Readings, Wesling, and Ferguson make a strong case that the academy is compliant with power through its epistemology; its archival and pedagogical practices are determined by neoliberal capitalism and allow it to incorporate and neutralize critical formations.

However, these scholars examine the academy only in a general sense, which is where I locate my intervention. I examine how the academy’s collusion with power manifests itself in a specific site: undergraduate American history survey courses. In these courses I examined what material was taught, how it was taught, and how it was organized. I found that all of the courses I examined followed similar patterns in their epistemologies: all of them employed primary sources as “evidence” and secondary sources as “analysis;” historical time was organized in a linear, chronological fashion; discrete categories were used to conceptualize history (e.g. “political” or “economic” history); critical discourse on race, class, and gender was incorporated according to a neutralizing institutional logic, and knowledge was presented as external to the student—that is, that it can only be obtained through a professor or through the study of scholarly material and not from everyday experience.

These epistemic characteristics seem obvious for a history course, and they are not problematic in themselves. However, they have

serious limitations which these syllabi generally do not take into consideration. Thus, without critical reflection, they operate according to a nefarious logic. I argue that the epistemology of undergraduate American history obscures power, glosses over the complexity of history in which power is embedded, and is more likely to inhibit, rather than encourage, the student’s capacity for self-knowledge. These courses encourage their students to emerge with an over-simplified, alienated understanding of history, thus limiting their potential to recognize and challenge power. However, I also claim that these attempted negations “haunt” the American history course as “ghosts.” This haunting provides a basis for imagining a new understanding of history that draws on literary imagination and indigenous epistemology, specifically the *Te Ao Māori* of New Zealand’s Maori people, to render power visible and encourage the student’s capacity for critical self- and collective knowledge. Thus, I suggest how the archival and pedagogical practices of the American history course can be reformulated to rupture, if only in this specific site, the academy’s collusion with power.

**Note on Methodology**

I chose to analyze undergraduate American history survey courses because they provide the student with a direct opportunity to locate themselves in the social world as an agent in the power-laden historical process. Almost all of the courses I analyzed surveyed US history from roughly the Civil War to the present, which encourages this contextualization.

My work draws on course syllabi from the following institutions: Kirkwood Community College (Cedar Rapids, IA), University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN), Normandale Community College (Bloomington, MN), St. Olaf College (Northfield, MN), Augsburg College (Minneapolis, MN), University of St. Catherine’s (St. Paul, MN), Hamline University (St. Paul, MN), and Carleton College (Northfield, MN). I obtained these syllabi by directly contacting the professors who wrote

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<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 8.

them. This sample of schools is fairly representative of American colleges and universities, although it is limited in geographical scope (I conducted this research from Macalester College in Minnesota, and contacted schools mostly in this region). I have been granted permission to analyze and quote all of these syllabi by their authors.

Because of limited time and resources, I only engage with syllabi to discuss the pedagogical and archival techniques of undergraduate American history. My work would be greatly augmented if it included classroom observations and student and professor testimonials, because a course is obviously an experience, not a document. Thus, I intend my work as a critique of the most general characteristics of the history survey course, and I hope it informs further, more in-depth research which goes beyond syllabi to engage classroom experience.

**Part I: The Epistemology of History: Obscuring Power, Complexity, and Self-Knowledge**

I examine four key tenets of the epistemology of the undergraduate American history course: the binary categorization of primary sources as “evidence” and secondary sources as “analysis;” the strategic representation of minority difference; organization based on simple linear chronology and distinct categories of analysis; and the encouragement of stultification, or the incapacity of the student to produce their own knowledge. These tenets together greatly obscure power and historical complexity and disconnect the student from knowledge that could be obtained from the lived experiences of both themselves and their peers.

History is studied and taught through the use of primary and secondary sources. The primary source is commonly understood as a document or object that was produced during a particular historical period that is being studied. They are considered evidence of that time period’s ideologies and power relations. The secondary source is commonly understood as analysis and/or

summary of primary source (and sometimes additional secondary source) material produced by an author who is removed from the time period in question. Most of the history courses I examine rely on this binary distinction between primary and secondary sources, and relegate primary and secondary sources to different forms of analysis.<sup>7</sup>

The distinction between primary and secondary sources alone is not a problem. Indeed, it is necessary and presupposed by any scholarly endeavor (including my own). However, power is obscured when secondary sources are viewed solely as analysis, and not as a form of primary evidence as well. Secondary sources are themselves shaped by, and therefore evidence of, power-laden ideologies. When secondary sources are understood as neutral analysis, the ideologies that underlie this analysis are rendered “transparent,”<sup>8</sup> or invisible. Thus the problem of the primary/secondary source binary is a result of

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the syllabus from Normandale states as a course objective, to “[u]nderstand the difference between primary and secondary source material” (Rayson syllabus). The syllabus from Augsburg states to the student, “your job in this course is to identify the causes and effects of historical change, assess the historical context of past events, and differentiate among different types of evidence. You will use primary source material as well as secondary source readings” (Lansing syllabus). The Carleton syllabus states, “On the days for which you read chapters from the the textbook and accompanying articles, I will lecture part of the class and solicit discussion and questions for part of the period. On the days for which you read primary sources ... the class will be entirely participatory. On these days in particular, I will be assessing your engagement with the class and the material” (Zabin syllabus). Further, the syllabi from St. Olaf, University of St. Thomas, Hamline University, and Carleton College all include special primary source anthologies or textbooks that differentiate between primary and secondary sources in their required texts (Fure-Slocum, Williard, Zmora, and Zabin syllabi).

<sup>8</sup> I draw the notion of “transparent” ideology from Roderick Ferguson. He argues that the Civil Rights Movement renders the ideologies of nationalism and liberalism transparent because it articulates full liberation solely in terms of inclusive American citizenship, which presupposes nationalism and liberalism. See Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 3.

what goes *unsaid* by the syllabi; they do not explore the possibility that secondary sources can be treated as primary evidence of ideology and power in a particular historical period, especially the present.

The second epistemic tenet is the inclusion of topics that address historical issues of race, gender, and class. These identity-based formations are critical components of American history, and their representation in an institutional setting can be a site of struggle. While they can reveal and challenge power, power also has the ability to archive them in a manner that neutralizes this potential. As noted above, Ferguson claims that this has been especially true of the academy since the 1960s, when many oppressed groups in the US began to challenge power by analyzing their collective marginalization based on race, gender, and class difference. In response, the academy developed archival techniques that incorporated these critical formations in terms of abstract representation, ignoring and silencing their radical redistributive demands and upholding power.<sup>9</sup>

This neutralizing logic informs the syllabi I analyzed. All of the courses appear to attend to the critiques offered by the formations of race, gender, and class (and other forms of difference),<sup>10</sup> but they do not self-reflect on the

<sup>9</sup> See my introduction or Ferguson, *Reorder*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> All of the syllabi include readings and make references to topics that address issues of race, gender, class, and other forms of difference. For example, the University of St. Catherine syllabus states, “[a]s a survey course, the intention is to cover a long span of time, taking into account, as much as possible, various American experiences resulting from gender, race, and class, ethnic and regional diversity” (Carroll syllabus). University of St. Thomas’s course states, “[s]pecial emphasis is given to the relation of racial minorities, ethnic groups, and immigrants to the dominant culture” (Williard syllabus). In Augsburg’s course, “[t]hemes include the significance of race, gender, and ethnicity in American culture, the rise of identity politics.” (Lansing syllabus). Students at Hamline University “will discuss the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, the Civil Rights Movement and its effects on American society” (Zmora syllabus). The remaining courses assigned primary source readings that contained the voices of power-

limitations of representing these formations in an academic setting. Although these critical voices are still valuable, many voices have been left out, and the power-laden process of academic archivization is never discussed. Once again, power is obscured by what goes unsaid by the syllabi.

The third epistemic tenet of the undergraduate American history course is their categorical and temporal organization. The courses I studied break history into distinct categories that are useful for analysis, such as economic, political, cultural, and social history.<sup>11</sup> These courses are also all organized by a linear chronology, in which time moves forward uniformly and events can be placed on a timeline according to the logic of cause-and-effect.<sup>12</sup> While these are often necessary organizational tools for the study of history, they have the potential to ignore its complexity, rendering some of power’s maneuvers invisible. Thus, what is important for my analysis is, again, that these courses do not

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critiqueing subjects, but these were often assembled in textbooks or anthologies which themselves operate according an academic, archival, and potentially neutralizing logic.

<sup>11</sup> Categorization appears in statements such as the following: “Course Description: A social, political, cultural, and economic history of the peoples of the United States from the Reconstruction period following the Civil War to the present” (Williard syllabus); “This course surveys U.S. history drawing on social, cultural, and environmental history as well as political and economic history” (Lansing syllabus); “We examine a range of changes in the political, social, cultural, and economic life of the U.S.” (Fure-Slocum syllabus); “As a survey course, the intention is to cover a long span of time, focusing on the most significant social and political developments in United States history” (Carroll syllabus); “This survey will cover social, economic, and political issues in American history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Zmora syllabus).

<sup>12</sup> All of the courses use linear past-to-present chronology to organize historical material. This is explicitly conceptualized as a process of cause-and-effect in the courses at Augsburg and Kirkwood, which state, respectively: “[we will] explore concepts and explain the ‘cause-and-effect’ nature of history” (Ford syllabus), and “your job in this course is to identify the causes and effects of historical change” (Lansing syllabus).

self-reflect on the limits of representing history through linear chronology and categories of the economic, political, social, or cultural. I am again concerned with what is *left out* by the syllabi.

Foucault provides important insights concerning the complexity of history, showing how it can be obscured by simple categories and linear temporality. In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault theorizes the complexity of history by elaborating on Friedrich Nietzsche’s conception of genealogy. For Foucault, genealogy entails examining the world not as the result of a simple, steady, developmental process, but as an emergence from myriad accidents, dispersions, detours, reversals, and errors; “truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, history is infinitely more complex and irrational than a simplistic analysis of cause-and-effect, linear temporality, or tidy categories could account for.

Historian Emma Pérez applies a Foucauldian critique in her analysis of Chicana history, arguing that it is over-reliant on “metahistorical tropes” which rely on binary categories (e.g. colonizer/colonized, exploiter/exploited, same/other, man/woman) that ignore the fluidity and complexity of human history, creating silences.<sup>14</sup> This critique is applicable to the use of the much broader categories such as political, economic, social, and cultural history in our context of general US history. For example, they imply that a cultural producer is not simultaneously a political or economic actor, ignoring the complex links between culture and political economy.

Thus the temporal and categorical organization of these courses, along with the lack of self-reflection on this organization, create an oversimplified understanding of history. This obscures power because its maneuvers are woven deeply into the fabric of dense, complex history. Indeed, sociologist Avery Gordon reminds us that

“power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply. We can and must call it by recognizable names, but so too we need to remember that power arrives in forms that range from blatant white supremacy and state terror to ‘furniture without memories.’”<sup>15</sup> Thus, when historical complexity is glossed over, some of power’s maneuvers are rendered invisible.

The final epistemic tenet of the American history course is the concept of “stultification,” which philosopher Jacques Rancière defines as “the first knowledge that [the teacher] transmits to the student: the knowledge that he has to be explained to in order to understand, the knowledge that he cannot understand on his own. It is the knowledge of his incapacity.”<sup>16</sup> These courses can be considered “stultified” in light of, once again, what is absent from them. The lived experiences of students are never cited as sources of knowledge that are valid alongside academic sources.<sup>17</sup> Through this lack, it is implied that students obtain historical knowledge exclusively through engagement with the professor and course material. Thus, students are encouraged to develop a “knowledge of [their] incapacity,” and are alienated from knowledge obtained from their own experiences in the context of the course. This allows power to remain unchallenged because students are less likely to recognize its

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” 275, quoted on Ferguson, *Reorder*, 123

<sup>17</sup> While stultification is generally present among the courses that I analyzed, there was one important exception, which is important to note. The Augsburg course states: “Your coursework should prepare you for your vocation and, more broadly, your life. Life is complicated, joyous, hard, and exhilarating. Navigating it successfully requires skill, reflection, confidence, values, understanding one’s place in a community, and knowledge. The humanities offer particular and crucial preparations in each of these realms” (Lansing syllabus). Against stultification, this statement places course content into conversation with lived experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 146.

<sup>14</sup> Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 8, 13-27.

manifestations in their own lives; they are encouraged to view the power-laden historical process from a distance, as a scholarly observation mediated by the academy. When the agency in developing self-knowledge is not cultivated, neither is the capacity to act against power. With stultification, the student is more likely to become another document in power's neutralized academic archive.

In sum, the epistemology of these courses greatly obscures power—especially its operations through dense historical complexity—and does not encourage the student's capacity to challenge it. Through its pedagogical and archival practices, the undergraduate American history course aids the academy in its collusion with power. And yet, these history courses do provide us with a way to recognize power and complexity, and connect students to lived experience as a vital source of knowledge. As I have shown, these problems are largely a result of what is *left out* by these course syllabi based on their epistemic tenets. That which is left out or negated does not fully disappear; it remains as a *ghost*. The ghosts of power and complexity *haunt* the syllabi, even though they are invisible within these courses' system of historical representation. Despite this, ghosts can be engaged with, and when properly listened to empower the haunted to imagine new forms of representation that include these negations.

To clarify what I mean by “ghosts” and “haunting,” a detour is necessary into the work of Avery Gordon. She explains how ghosts are created with the example of 19th century slave narratives. Although these narratives give voice to actual slaves, they were obtained and published by white abolitionists and tailored to suit the aesthetic sensibilities of the white middle-class, attempting to assert the slave's humanity on terms that would be understandable to them. Thus the slave narratives did not imagine what type of complex person the slave could be beyond a white middle class definition of humanity, and these unimagined possibilities haunt us, existing as ghosts. They are vaguely perceived but unseen and nearly

unthinkable through the epistemic framework of the slave narrative.<sup>18</sup>

Like the slave narratives, undergraduate American history is haunted by negations of power, historical complexity, and the student's capacity for self-knowledge. And yet, they exist in the “negative space” of the syllabi as ghosts, which call for something to be done. Gordon suggests that ghosts can be hospitably received by stretching the imagination through different forms of representation, especially in art and literature.<sup>19</sup> Exploring the possibilities of different forms of historical representations—that is, theorizing a new epistemology of history—is the task of the second half of this essay.

## Part II: Something To Be Done: a New Epistemology of History

I have attempted to show how undergraduate American history is haunted by that which is rendered invisible by its epistemology. These invisibilities align the history course with the academy's collusion with power. I now turn to the task of imagining a new epistemology of history that encourages students to engage hospitably with the ghosts of these courses, drawing on the

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<sup>18</sup> Gordon, 142-146.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon reads Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* as a model for engaging with ghosts and imagining the slave's humanity that *could be* beyond a white understanding. For example, Gordon notes that the protagonist of *Beloved*, an enslaved woman named Sethe, tries to escape bondage not when she is taught to read and write, but when learning to read and write becomes intolerable to her. For Sethe, literacy does not function as a validation of humanity (as it does in the abolitionist slave narrative); on the contrary it, entails participating in the elite white ontology/epistemology that forms the very basis for the economy that forces her into slavery. Sethe's rejection of literacy allows us to engage with the negative space left by the traditional slave narratives and imagine her complex personhood that could be, for which we don't have a functional system of representation beyond imagination. Using the imagination, we can begin to carve out an epistemological/ontological space for Pompey's humanity that fully validates his “corrupted” African American background.



literary imagination of writers of color and the epistemology of the indigenous Māori people, *Te Ao Māori*. I hope to show that these archival and pedagogical tools render power, historical complexity, and the student's capacity for self-knowledge fully visible, and therefore disrupt the academy's collusion with power. What follows should be understood as examples of how an alternative epistemology of history could be formulated, and not an exhaustive theorization.

Emma Pérez argues that the literary imagination can function as a powerful form of historical representation. She notes that traditional historiography is itself necessarily a form of fiction because it can never truly represent what actually happened. Thus fiction can be a useful tool in representing the events and experiences of the past.<sup>20</sup> Performance studies scholar Shane Vogel corroborates this claim, arguing that poetry can be understood as an alternative historical archive that captures experiences that are too complex to be legible to official forms of documentation.<sup>21</sup> Following Pérez and Vogel, I claim that when taken as historiography, the literary imagination, especially of writers of color, greatly aids the student of history in clearly understanding power and historical complexity.

Recall that power is obscured through the strategic archivization of minority difference; the history syllabi organize the voices of marginalized subjects according to an institutional logic that neutralizes their critique of power. Further, this logic is transparent because it *appears* to voice this critique even though its presentation has been curated by scholars far removed from the experiences of marginalized subjects. However, the literary imagination can render this logic (and therefore power) visible by bearing witness to how the academy attempts to archive and neutralize the subtleties and complexities of minority culture. To demonstrate this, Roderick Ferguson analyzes

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. The main character of the novel, Gogol Ganguli, an American boy of South Asian descent, was named by his Bengali parents after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. According to Bengali custom, Gogol is his "pet name," and he is referred to as Gogol only by his parents. They also give him the "good name" Nikhil, which is to be used among teachers, friends, and on official records. On his first day of school, the American teacher is confused about which name to use, and uses his pet name, Gogol, in the school's official records.<sup>22</sup> The institution thus encroaches on different parts of Gogol's cultural identity in an attempt to contain its breadth and complexity and limit its potential as a critical formation.<sup>23</sup> As Ferguson shows, *The Namesake* reveals how power operates through Western institutions to archive and neutralize minority difference according to its needs. Lahiri's literary imagination renders power visible.

Literature can also represent history with deep and dense complexity, allowing one to trace the subtle and erratic maneuvers of power that escape a simple categorical or chronological analysis. Cultural studies and literary scholar Lisa Lowe demonstrates this through her analysis of Asian American literature. For example, Lowe engages with imagery of blood in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's novel *Dictée*, which deals with South Korean history during roughly the first half of the 20th century. Lowe argues that images of blood "hemorrhaging, emptying, flowing, erupting □ allude to splitting, breaking, and dividing—of tongue, body, family, nation," and therefore disrupt Western historical narratives that rely on a framework of linear, chronological progress.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 166

<sup>23</sup> Ferguson, *Reorder*, 171-172

<sup>24</sup> Lowe highlights the danger of relying on linear chronology to represent history. She describes how developmental narratives in American historiography incorporate the history of Asia into the imperial project of the United States. For example, popular American novels often portray Asian nations as requiring US salvation to "develop" into economically and politically modern nations. See Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 106, 109-111.

<sup>20</sup> Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Vogel, "Closing Time: Langston Hughes and the Queer Poetics of Harlem Nightlife," 400-401.

This representation of history likewise problematizes categories such as political, economic, cultural, and social history; they all flow together through the imagery of blood. Lowe shows how the ghosts produced by oversimplified chronological and categorical analysis can be recognized through Cha's literary imagination.

The imagery of blood is also used to describe the military suppression of the 1960 student revolts:

"I see the streets covered with chipped rocks and debris. Because. I see the frequent pairs of shoes thrown sometimes a single pair among the rocks they had carried. Because. I cry wail torn shirt lying I step among them. No trace of them. *Except for the blood. Because. Step among them the blood that will not erase with the rain on the pavement that was walked upon like the stones where they fell had fallen. Because. Remain dark the stain not wash away. Because. I follow the ring crow their voices among them their singing their voices unceasing the empty street.*"<sup>25</sup>

Lowe argues that the unconventional grammar and syntax in this passage disrupt the notion that we can rely on cause-and-effect linear chronology to conceptualize history. The violence described does not follow logically from a definite cause, but is experienced by the narrator as entirely irrational, shown by the repetition of "because" as a single-word sentence.<sup>26</sup> Power's maneuvers (represented here by police suppression) through complex history are also rendered visible, because we see how it operates and makes itself known through subjective confusion and irrationality.

Thus, through their analyses of Lahiri and Cha's work, Ferguson and Lowe show that the literary imagination of writers of color are archival

<sup>25</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, quoted in Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 110.

methods that render power and historical complexity visible, providing a hospitable environment to engage in conversation with the ghosts that haunt the undergraduate American history course.

The final haunting that must be attended to is that of the student's capacity for self-knowledge, which is rendered invisible through stultification. To imagine a "de-stultified" epistemology of history, I turn to an example of indigenous pedagogy that centers lived experience as a source of knowledge. *Te Ao Māori*, the worldview of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, provides such an alternative. While Western epistemology removes knowledge from a real-world context through abstraction and institutionalization, Maori knowledge is firmly grounded in the real, experiential world. Ideas are continually tested on a basis of day-to-day practicality, and group members are judged on their ability to put knowledge into practice, rather than by (supposedly) neutral, standardized tests that measure the ability to memorize abstract concepts.<sup>27</sup> Thus, if this framework were applied to the history course, students would be encouraged to "read the world" as a primary historical source through their lived experience. Likewise, they would learn to place academic knowledge obtained in the classroom in conversation with their lived experience. *Te Ao Māori* would ensure that students are not alienated from knowledge, and would provide them with the capacity to recognize and challenge power.<sup>28</sup>

Another central tenet of *Te Ao Māori* is the development of caring, nurturing relationships and community through the learning process itself.

<sup>27</sup> Macfarlane et al, "Indigenous Epistemology in a National Curriculum Framework?", 107-108

<sup>28</sup>As mentioned in the introduction, I am not arguing that students always fail to recognize and challenge power as students of American history; many do, despite stultification.

I am arguing that *Te Ao Māori* would *encourage* students to recognize and challenge power, especially those with privilege.

With *Te Ao Māori* education, the development of knowledge is not a private task but a collective responsibility; students assist one another according to their strengths and weaknesses, eschewing hierarchical standards of ability and merit. While *Te Ao Māori* encourages students to reflect on their social position based on individual experiences, it also necessitates a sharing of these experiences. This provides students with an even deeper perspective on their social position and how it relates to history. Under *Te Ao Māori*, every student's experience—both in and outside of the classroom—is valuable for the collective learning process.<sup>29</sup> Not only does *Te Ao Māori* render visible the capacity for self-knowledge, it reveals the capacity for a collective knowledge bound by nurturing care.

I have now sketched an example of an alternative epistemology of history that attends to the ghosts of the American history course. The literary imagination provides a means of recognizing power and its moves through historical complexity, and *Te Ao Māori* ensures the student's capacity for self-knowledge and their ability to challenge power. This epistemology of history has the potential to rupture the academy's collusion with power.

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The epistemology of undergraduate American history is haunted by that which it negates as an archival tool of power. While such hauntings are a symptom of these courses' alignment with the academy's collusion with power, they provide an opportunity to re-imagine the epistemology of history in a manner that challenges power. New archival and pedagogical tools can be employed to render history's ghosts visible and beckon them into conversation. These transformations would change the undergraduate history course so fundamentally that it might be

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<sup>29</sup> Macfarlane et al, "Indigenous Epistemology in a National Curriculum Framework?", 118-120

barely recognizable as a history course, and thus perhaps this essay reads more like a critique of the discipline of academic history generally. However, this points to the notion that perhaps we need to completely re-imagine what history *means*, and that such a re-imagination could begin with the archival techniques and pedagogies of the history course. Regardless of how my work reads, I hope it adds to the tradition of resisting power in the academy—of transforming the academy into an institution that fights power rather than aids it.

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