Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education

Mary Jo Hinsdale
Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

This book is for higher education faculty and staff who wish to deepen their approach to mentoring all students, but it is especially concerned with “outsider” students – those who come from groups that were long excluded from higher education, and who have been marginalized and minoritized by society and academia. Mentoring is difficult work for an abundance of reasons, and – given higher education’s troubled history of exclusion, as well as a contemporary context fraught with social and power imbalances – it can be especially challenging when the mentorship takes place across dimensions of difference such as social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or ability.

Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education examines the seemingly spontaneous and serendipitous connection between mentor and protégé, and points to a new vision of mentorship based on a deep sense of reciprocity between the two. Hinsdale proposes that if more mentors take a responsive, decolonizing approach to their work across difference, then the promise of social and class mobility through education might be realized for more of our students and the tide might begin to turn toward an increasingly inclusive, intellectually open academy.
Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education
MOBILITY STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Volume 4

Series Editor

Jane van Galen, University of Washington, Bothell, USA

Editorial Board

Van Dempsey, School of Education, Health and Human Performance, USA
Paula Groves Price, Washington State University, USA
Stephanie Jones, University of Georgia, USA
George W. Noblit, UNC-Chapel Hill, USA
Diane Reay, University of Cambridge, UK
Becky Reed Rosenberg, UC Santa Cruz, USA

Scope

Works in this Series will explore the complicated and shifting landscapes of wealth, opportunity, social class, and education in the changing global economic landscape, particularly at the intersections of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. The Series includes work on education and social mobility within three major themes:

• Interrogation of stories of educational “success” against the odds for what these cases might teach about social class itself, about the depths of economic and educational constraints that have been surmounted, about the costs of those journeys, or about the long-term social and economic trajectories of class border crossers.

• Examination of the psycho-social processes by which people traverse class borders, including the social construction of ambition and achievement in young people marginalized from the academic mainstream by class, race, or gender. Works in the series will illuminate the complicated and contested processes of identity formation among those who attain upward mobility via success in school.

• Explorations of economic mobility within developing countries. New labor markets created by global consumerism are intensifying demand for formal education while also transforming individual lives, families, communities, and cultural practices. Meanwhile, high rates of migration in search of economic opportunity fuel debate about citizenship, assimilation, and identity as antecedents of economic mobility. How is formal education implicated in these processes?

Works are sought from the fields of sociology, anthropology, educational policy, economics, and political science. Methodologies may include longitudinal studies.
Mutuality, Mystery, and Mentorship in Higher Education

Mary Jo Hinsdale
Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA
For McNair Scholars past, present, and future ~ may your brilliance and open-hearted courage transform the academy.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix
Introduction xi

Chapter 1: Colonialism and the Academy 1
Colonialism, Coloniality, and Epistemic Privilege 7

Chapter 2: The Lay of the Land: Contemporary Resonances of Colonialism 13
No Sense of Belonging: Not Our Space 15
An Alienating Environment 17
Tense Relationships 19
Of Messy Roles and Contested Spaces: Walls We May Not See 21

Chapter 3: Education as a Colonizing Effort: A Bit of History… 25
The Weight of History 28

Chapter 4: Discourse and Hierarchies in Opportunity Programs 37
Discourse, Power, and Knowledge 38
Putting the Pieces Together: Mentoring in an Alienating Context 41

Chapter 5: The Risks of Traditional Mentoring in a Troubled Context 45
Traditional Concepts of Mentoring 45
Traditional Concepts of Mentoring and Mentoring across Difference 50

Chapter 6: Nurturing Trust and Mutuality: Protégés Speak Out 63
Marie and Dr. Manne 63
Abriella and Tori 68
Anali and Vivian 71
Revisiting Ethics 76

Chapter 7: Moving toward Responsive Mentorship 79
Billy and David 84
The Rational Community 88

Chapter 8: The Community of Strangers: Celebrating the Alterity of Protégés 95
Call and Response: Listening for the Community of Strangers 98
Call and Response: Entering Conversation 104
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 9: Mentoring for Transformation: Armando Armando and Amani The Risks of Recognition

Chapter 10: Opening Possibilities for Responsiveness and Connection: Witnessing and Mentorship A Commitment to Witness Staying Connected Kristie and Suzanne An Ethic of Love

Chapter 11: Power, Vigilance, Connection, Mystery: A Closer Look at Responsiveness

Chapter 12: Toward Mutuality in Mentorship: Taking Mystery and Connection from Theory to Practice Prelude to the Research Mentorship Moving into the Research Process Research Postlude Transforming Disconnections

Afterword

References
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many stories, observations, conversations, and writings lie behind this book. I offer my heartfelt gratitude to the insightful people who have discussed mentoring with me, challenged me, encouraged me, and provided living examples of responsive mentorship across difference. You are too many to name, but I must recognize: Frank Margonis, Keith Embray, Lesa Ellis, Brian Avery, Scott Gust, Bridget Newell, Cathleen Power, Belinda Otukolo Saltiban, Eduardo Duarte, Barbara Applebaum, Christopher LeCluyse, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Audrey Thompson, Clifton Sanders, Tom Hawk, Hikmet Loe, Colin Ben, Araceli Frias, and of course, the kind and supportive editor of the Mobility Studies and Education book series, Jane Van Galen. I thank each of you for your friendship and for the attention, care, and responsiveness you give to your students and to me. This book would not exist without you, and I hope I do you justice.

I am also deeply indebted to John Robandt for his patient support through this lengthy project, and to the four-footed writing companions who were with me every step of the way.

Finally, I am grateful beyond measure to the McNair Scholars who honor me by sharing their lives and educational journeys with me. From you I have learned more than I can say about persistence, courage, and an ethic of love. With all my heart, thank you.
INTRODUCTION

The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

—Audre Lorde

Another book on mentoring? Don’t we know how to mentor by now? The mentoring literature is broad and deep; mentorship has been extensively studied in the fields of education, psychology, business, and nursing. There are models of feminist co-mentoring,1 peer mentoring, cross-generational,2 and team or networking mentoring.3 Why would a mentor consider the potential impact that taking a decolonizing stance toward a protégé might make? Why delve into relational pedagogy and ethics to rethink what it means to work with students in mentoring relationships that cross differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability? Because when we mentor students from groups that have been excluded from the academy, we engage with people who continue to face marginalization and painful situations on a daily basis; because when students are pushed out of school, we lose bright minds and new ideas; because we learn about ourselves and have new scholarly vistas opened to us; because it is so very difficult to contribute to massive systemic change, but one-on-one interactions are the level at which we can have an effect.

Educators profoundly understand the importance of diverse learning environments. Consider President Zimmer’s Diversity Statement from the University of Chicago’s website:

The University of Chicago is distinctive in many respects, but perhaps in none more so than our singular commitment to rigorous inquiry that demands multiple and often competing perspectives. The nature of questions being asked and the perspectives being engaged are often a function of the diversity of experiences and outlooks of those participating. Diversity for the University is therefore particularly germane to our core perspective. We must ensure that our scholarly community is composed of a rich mix of individuals who, through their own distinctive viewpoints, contribute to the intellectually challenging culture of the University.4

He continues, detailing a history of academic inquiry that has depended upon the contributions of groups who were not always represented in elite institutions. And he elaborates the mutual benefits of partnerships between the university and its surrounding community. In closing, he writes:

A commitment to diversity is central to our mission of discovery…. We have an obligation to see that the greatest variety of perspectives is brought to bear on the issues before us as scholars and citizens. We therefore celebrate our tradition of inclusion and recognize that our success as an institution depends on its ongoing renewal.5
INTRODUCTION

These are admirable words, and there may well be institutions that live up to them. But their ability to do so rests on higher education’s capacity to provide a barrier-free road into the rarefied world of research and dynamic academic inquiry. The question then becomes: how do underrepresented students and their multiple perspectives enter the academy? Some are sustained by an innate drive and passion to pursue their educations, and will persist in spite of obstacles; many more are mentored by professors who nurture their talents and support them over rough terrain. Mentorship is often essential to marginalized students’ persistence through higher education.

But do these mentors generally welcome the “competing perspectives” of the students with whom they work? If my recent conversation with a student is any indication, the answer to this question is no. She lamented that among her friends who are graduate students, many have had to abandon their scholarly passions to conduct research that would enhance their future marketability for academic jobs, or their advisors’ interests. Some have shifted from qualitative to quantitative practices in the process; the student straightforwardly related her disappointment with and resentment toward an academy that discourages the questions she wishes to ask and the research methods she hopes to employ.6

As director of a research opportunity program, my sustained daily contact with low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented undergraduates has made clear to me that their relationships with institutions of higher education are inherently tense. The tensions may not be visible at all times, but they drift just beneath the surface, ready to rise up when provoked by negative academic or social interactions. These students enter college after traversing an academic path that has weeded out many of their peers; indeed, the nature of education for underrepresented groups has been called subtractive by some scholars.7 Traditional concepts of mentoring do not recognize the deep and abiding tensions that marginalized students might feel in the university. Neither do they encompass the problematic context of higher education itself, which can present a minefield of obstacles and threats to students who confront the status quo with new ideas. Higher education is at odds with itself: I agree with President Zimmer that academic discovery thrives on challenging received wisdom with new perspectives. Yet, the system rewards those students and researchers who are best assimilated into its norms and expectations. To do otherwise risks remaining on the margins of one’s chosen academic discipline.

This book is for higher education faculty and staff who wish to deepen their approach to mentoring all students, but it is especially concerned with mentoring “outsider” students—those who come from groups that were long excluded from higher education, and who have been marginalized and minoritized by society and academia. Ushering outsiders into the academy is a complex and at times daunting task. Despite decades of effort, the diversification of higher education has been slow, even if there have been some improvements. I argue that one reason for this slowness is a conception of mentoring that is not up to the task. Mentorship is important at all levels of education, but I am especially concerned with undergraduate and graduate students. Although mentoring is often a practice that reproduces and maintains the
exclusionary nature of the university—it can easily become one of the “master’s tools”—some mentors perform a vital task for underrepresented students as they navigate higher education. They help students attain a certain degree of comfort in the academy while simultaneously maintaining their personal, scholarly, and cultural integrity. But a mentor’s tasks, as well as her relationship with the student, are deeply complicated, and this is especially so when mentorship occurs across differences. (I hasten to add, however, that although intuitively it may seem that a mentor whose background is similar to her student’s will be a “better” mentor, this is not necessarily the case.) Among the myriad concerns that might trouble a mentor’s relationship with a protégé are the student’s personal experiences of educational barriers and negative academic interactions; the exclusionary history of higher education that is alive in an institution’s campus climate; the mentor’s unexamined academic and social expectations regarding her field of inquiry and her own socialization into the field (how does one mentor differently from how she was mentored?); and the mentor’s assumptions about underrepresented or first-generation students and relationships with them. Not every mentorship is troubled by these issues, but negotiating them can be extremely difficult for the mentor and risky for the protégé. In an effort to find a way through the tangles of mentor/protégé relationships across difference, this work braids together history, sociology, and philosophy of education to rethink mentorship.

My own experiences of mentoring take place within an undergraduate research opportunity program that aims to overcome years of exclusionary practices in higher education. As program director, I work directly with students, especially during the graduate school selection and application process. Over the eleven years I have worked to prepare underrepresented and first-generation undergraduates for doctoral study, I have also observed the interactions between many protégé/mentor pairs during our two-month summer research intensive, as well as through the academic year. From the beginning, some professors stood out as superb mentors, but others did not seem to have a clear idea of how to mentor the students. I have also noticed that some faculty consider only the social and political dimensions of diversity efforts, thinking they are just a matter of skin color, or socioeconomic status. However, far more significant is the academic dimension. Once included in our scholarly conversations, diverse students will help reinvigorate the academy, expanding the circles of our collective knowledge. To be truly free, academic inquiry depends upon intellectual plurality, and this in turn depends upon the inclusion of those who have been left outside the gates of the ivory tower.

In an attempt to better understand the elements of fruitful mentoring relationships, I have read widely on mentoring, but I have not found the answers to my questions in the mainstream mentoring literature. Mentoring is often left undefined, simply assumed to be helpful. On the other end of the spectrum, handbooks point the way toward “effective” mentoring and detail the behaviors and ethical rules a mentor should follow. Such books may be helpful beginnings, but little attention is given to relational qualities of the mentor/protégé bond, and how a mentor might cultivate
INTRODUCTION

these. For instance, in what ways might we deepen the directives to “get to know your mentee” by going for a chat over coffee and to “build trust”? Why do some mentors seem to have an innate ability to develop relationships with their protégés? They may need to work across differences of race, class, sexuality, gender, ability—or any of their intersections. It is a common occurrence. Yet, these mentors develop relationships that allow them to teach what might be alienating knowledge and research protocols, while still encouraging protégés to bring their embodied and culturally-grounded knowledge into the research process. Personally, I have experienced both strong connections and disconnections with students. According to the guidebooks for mentors, even in relationships that ended in disconnection, I had done what was needed to establish trust and encourage a good relationship. I had kept promises, been consistent and reliable, and confronted problems with honesty. Pondering these disconnections, it seemed clear to me that some other forces were at play.

As difficult as any disconnecting experience might be, I can also point to relationships with students that have been surprising in their delightfulness and unexpected connection. Sometimes, students are astonishing in their openness to me and to the academic and emotional journey we take together. Yet, I am but one thread among complexly interwoven services and people, and for a large part of a student’s journey, I must rely on a research mentor’s support and guidance. Recall the student who was disappointed by her interactions with faculty who were not interested in her boundary-pushing ideas, and whose peers had to adjust research projects to their disciplinary norms. She has come to question whether she belongs in the university at all. I am confident she would agree that mentors who expect only to socialize their protégés into the existing norms of their discipline, and who do not question their field’s body of knowledge or research protocols, are not helping to broaden the academy. Mentoring outsiders calls for an open, responsive approach to students—one that welcomes not only their bodies and social experiences, but also the knowledge they bring and the questions they wish to research.

My goal is to better understand and articulate what is happening in these mentor/protégé relationships—to point toward a new vision I could not find in books or articles that reduced mentoring to a list of qualities, traits and behaviors, and where relational problems were usually ascribed to a deficiency in the “at-risk” student. As I considered what was missing from the literature, I felt a need to pose more basic philosophical questions about mentoring, to try to illuminate the seemingly spontaneous and serendipitous connection between mentor and protégé. My questions are guided by my own disconnections with students, my interactions with well-intentioned mentors who struggle to relate to protégés, as well as my observations of more superficial, process-oriented mentors who do not often seem concerned with truly understanding the nuances of mentorship across difference.

Sometimes ...theory arises out of failed practice, when pressing problems challenge us to find new organizing principles and to make sense of what
INTRODUCTION

happened. But new theories arise out of failed practice only when we can silence old commonsense theories long enough to acknowledge tensions and to complicate our thinking.12 And so it is with this work. At its root, it arises out of failures to connect with students, and the need to complicate our understanding of the role opportunity programs play in higher education.13 I do not wish to hold myself as an example of someone who has it “all figured out,” someone who has all of the answers. The issues I confront in this book and in my work constantly call me into question: every day I see another example of the limits of my understanding. I do not claim to be “a ‘knowing [middle class] white’ who has grappled with her whiteness [and class privilege], who claims to have a much better perspective than other whites, who is finished with her work, and is sharing her wisdom.”14 It is for this reason that I use the word “decolonizing” as I grapple with what it would mean to rethink mentorship from the ground up. As philosopher George Yancy pointed out to a colleague, the “‘anti’ in antiracist [and anticolonial] “suggests a way of constantly taking up the fight and being more consistent at it” (G. Yancy, personal communication, January 7, 2013). To my mind, the “de” in decolonize points to the same dynamic. Responsive, decolonizing mentorship is an ongoing work. I do not offer a new guidebook for mentors; I do not offer a new set of rules and prescriptions for a mentoring approach to all students. Although I cannot assure readers that the road will be a smooth one, I offer some indications that I hope will enable us to rethink our pedagogical relationships with students, especially those across differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

A mentor’s good intentions are not enough to overcome the difficulties inherent in working across difference within the context of higher education. Modern academic structures, disciplines, and traditions are slow to change legacies of an intellectual past founded on exclusion and colonialism.15 And because of the university’s hierarchical nature, mentors and protégés who attempt to work together across difference are always already in a difficult position merely by virtue of the academic power differential that lies between them. To complicate matters even further, academic conventions and research protocols generally negate the experiences and cultural situatedness of first-generation and underrepresented students, but they often wish to trouble the waters by adding their culturally-grounded voices and research to the academic conversation. Further, they fight an uphill battle against deeply rooted and inescapable deficit images, language, and discourses. And when, in addition, the mentoring relationship crosses differences in social and historical position, students will understandably enter it with trepidation, feeling their vulnerability. Trust is hard to develop, and students may be fearful of approaching or being open to professors simply because they are from the more dominant group and hold academic authority.
INTRODUCTION

In these conditions, a significant aspect of mentorship is helping a student learn to cope within an institution that denies her experience, and holds her at arm’s length. But for the institution to transform, mentors must accomplish far more than this. Naming the history, experiences, and discourses students are simultaneously defined by and work against is, therefore, the first step in this project.

The norms of our academic institutions arise out of colonial practices and assumptions of knowledge production that continue to situate minoritized students in a “less than” position and resonate in their lived experiences. But it is sometimes hard for mentors who have been socialized into the power norms of this hierarchical world to see how to decolonize either our assumptions or our understanding of what constitutes knowledge. Like fish, we cannot see the water in which we swim: we are not transparent to ourselves. For this reason, we will first examine the deep connection between European imperial expansion and the contemporary academic enterprise. After illuminating the common academic experiences of first-generation and students of color, I describe the contentious educational history of the students I wish to serve. Personal memoirs, along with narratives of student and teacher experiences play an important role in my analysis. I hope to reveal the still living legacy of the academy’s exclusionary history so that I might persuade mentors who may think otherwise that race, class, and other dimensions of difference are indeed relevant to higher education. Because the nature of mentorship and the lessons we can learn are similar from one level of education to another, I will cull stories from both undergraduate and graduate students.

With the academic scene set, we can then critically examine the mainstream mentoring literature. To destabilize and remove authority from the academic hierarchy that traditionally positions mentor and protégé, I turn to the postmodern theories of relationality articulated by philosophers Gert Biesta and Alphonso Lingis. These spring from the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, in which the relationship with the other precedes any knowledge we can have of her. The other is a mystery who calls us to relationship, and that relationship is inherently ethical. In a Levinasian approach, a mentor must focus on her relationship with the protégé, and develop a sense of mutuality, before teaching disciplinary norms or research methods. Mainstream, traditional mentoring ethics offer only rules to follow: mentor and protégé are each well-defined, separate individuals, and the academy situates them in ways that limit their interactions. For Biesta and Lingis, however, the other is always a mystery who calls us to respond, and our subjectivity – our sense of ourselves as an “I” with our own thoughts and perceptions, as an agent in the world—is brought into being in the event of responding. Mutuality replaces hierarchy, and our responses can disrupt the academic context that pens mentor and protégé into a circumscribed space of relationship and action. I ask mentors to develop a set of skills that has not been the traditional province of mentorship:

…the ability to simultaneously maintain multiple viewpoints, to make quick shifts in discourse orientation,…to work elbow to elbow with people
INTRODUCTION

differently positioned in the university hierarchy, to negotiate cultural and social difference, to handle the inevitable blurring of [relational] boundaries, and to regularly renegotiate issues of knowledge, power, and ownership.

In such a relationship, culture, social positions, and history are not elided, nor are they given unchallenged power over individuals. But holding these in mind, mentors can enter what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as the Coatlicue state, an unstable, contradictory space; it is a space of possibility where mentors are challenged to rethink their practice.

Working with students from different social positions has challenged me to do just this; and the mentors who “get it” seem to have an innate understanding of how to make quick shifts in their relationships with protégés, whether these are social or academic. They learn to “realign their understandings” about both their own subjectivity and the student’s. This is an important move. However, the political nature of mentorship across difference calls me to go more deeply into the nature of responsiveness and subjectivity, and for this I turn to Kelly Oliver’s work on witnessing. Oliver takes Levinas’ ethics as a starting point, but shifts toward the urgent ground of political action that moves beyond domination. Her philosophical stance is a fruitful way to conceptualize a mentorship that disrupts individualistic theories of subjectivity, while recognizing that mentor and protégé are embedded in a messy context where history and culture are always part of the relationship’s fabric.

This speaks to one tension inherent in my project: the desire to make concrete for mentors the potential concerns of their protégés is at odds with my understanding of individual subjectivity (my sense of myself as an “I,” as an agent in the world) borne out of responsive relationship. I ask that mentors inform themselves on the history and common experiences that hurt students. These are sociological realities—the lived experiences of students of color and first-generation students in the university. Yet, I also ask mentors not to reduce students to less than their wholeness, but to see them as far more than predictable exemplars of common patterns. They are mysteries to whom we must respond as individuals, and we do so, even as we better understand their uniquely situated selves through frameworks that include the history of their social groups. Neither do I want to invite the idea that “good” mentorship is the cause of which students’ persistence in the academy is the effect. There are talented students who will struggle with academic life in spite of powerful mentoring, and there are those who will respond well to more traditional models. Further, any one mentoring relationship may well make use of multiple approaches. Like any relationship, mentoring is not a linear affair, but can be rather messy. One day it may be best to offer concrete direction to a protégé; the next day the mentor may be called to assume a vulnerable stance and accept what she does not (and often cannot) know.

Another point of tension in this work is my use of both critical and postmodern understandings of power. Relationships between different positions in the academic hierarchy — whether professor/student, professor/administrator, faculty/staff, graduate student/undergraduate student — will suffer from power imbalances, as
understood in a critical, modernist meaning. And any discussion of colonialism rests on a concept of power as an object one can hold and a force one can exert; further, it is a lived reality in our society that there are dominant and nondominant social groups. Yet postmodern approaches to both power and subjectivity are also useful to my task. They can help us find ways to destabilize and disrupt modernist systems of power. My hope is that I successfully inhabit an uncomfortable intellectual space that lets the critical and the postmodern rest together and inform one another. I strive to reveal a path that allows postmodern theories of subjectivity and relationality to transform mentoring relationships situated within the academic hierarchy, a setting that all too often puts a contemporary face on colonialism. Concrete examples from student narratives will, I hope, bring life to the theoretical stance I propose, and will allow us to reconceive mentorship.

An ethical question lies at the heart of efforts to diversify the university, to include those who have been historically excluded and are thus relative newcomers to the academy: How do we welcome that which is different? How do we greet the arrival of the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner? Marginalized students are frequently made to feel that they are outsiders who are “guests in someone else’s house”; their bodies and their ideas are not welcome in the academy. When they share their experiences with me through written or verbal testimony, they call me to bear witness to their pain. The ethical pedagogical response must acknowledge our relational wounds and seek to mend them. Clearly, relations across differences of race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality can be complex, but I would argue that difficulties can also arise in mentor/student relations when the faculty member’s social background is similar to the student’s: it is no protection against the perils of one’s own academic socialization and potential assimilation into Eurocentric norms imbued with the legacy of colonialism. How do faculty overcome imperial modes of relating to students that may trouble their work? How does one encourage open, responsive pedagogical relations? How might faculty nurture underrepresented students’ ideas and support them to speak and write in their own culturally-grounded academic voices?

The crux of the matter is this: mentoring across difference is difficult work for an abundance of reasons, and our mentorship is embedded within a context that is full of social and power imbalances. But if we can negotiate the way through and avoid pitfalls, if more mentors take a responsive, decolonizing approach to their work across difference, then the promise of social and class mobility through education might be realized for more of our students and the tide might begin to turn toward an increasingly inclusive, intellectually open academy. Responsive mentor/protégé relationships would bring new perspectives into each academic discipline; over time, webs of responsive scholarly relationships would have the opportunity to transform the structures of the university itself. Higher numbers of underrepresented students might enter the professoriate, and would, in turn, become mentors. Some might enter the administration where they can effect policy changes.
INTRODUCTION

This work is written with an eye to mentoring relationships that cross racial, ethnic, social, and economic differences. They often encompass differences of gender, sexuality, or ability as well. The context of my inquiry is opportunity programs, however, the concerns I address are found in many domains across university campuses. It is my hope that mentors will find ideas in these pages that will help deepen their relationships with all students.

THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

Because none of the words I might choose to describe my students perfectly characterizes them, readers will find that I vary my language depending on context. “Underrepresented” speaks to how many students from a given population are in the academy, while “minoritized” and “marginalized” speak to the forces that position them as less capable, their knowledge less central to the academic enterprise, or in need of the dominant group’s assistance. “Outsider” speaks to the ways they have been excluded from the academy. More often than not, I lean toward using “underrepresented” because first-generation students as well as other diverse groups (based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, or ability) are not represented in higher education in the numbers they are found in the general population. I hope, kind reader, that when you meet the word “underrepresented” you will hold in mind another dimension: these students’ ideas are also underrepresented across the academic disciplines.

My choice of “protégé” as opposed to the common “mentee” is easier to explain. The word means “protected” in French: one facet of a mentor’s role to protect underrepresented students from the social and academic violence that might befall them in the university, as well as to protect and nurture the new perspectives they bring.

NOTES

5. Zimmer.
6. All of my personal interactions with students and mentors are based on actual events. Details are omitted or changed to protect privacy.
INTRODUCTION

11 Johnson.
15 Hinsdale, 2012a, p. 418.
16 Grimm, p. 2.
18 Grimm, p. 3.
CHAPTER 1

COLONIALISM AND THE ACADEMY

“My education has beaten and battered me.” So begins a fellowship essay by a young Latina I came to know during her undergraduate years. Margarita reveals a deep pain shared by many underrepresented students in colleges and universities across the United States. She speaks to our nation’s “history [which] has left us with deep relational wounds, separating people who have endured forms of colonial attack…from European descendant peoples.” We are a polarized society. Mary Louise Pratt would describe the U.S. as a “contact zone”—a “[social] space of imperial encounters” where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” As an expression of that society, the contemporary American university is certainly a contact zone between underrepresented students and the dominant academic culture; in it we see the repercussions—and repetition—of colonial wounds. Without awareness of the history and relational dynamics that affect the protégé across the desk, mentors may unwittingly fall into well-trodden academic pathways that underrepresented students find hurtful—or at the very least—put them on guard. If we do not appear trustworthy, a student holds us at arm’s length and the possibilities for mentorship wither.

Indeed, Sylvia Hurtado, director of UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, once wrote that university faculty often act as “academic colonizers.” Hurtado’s comment may seem like an unusually strong claim, unless we take a moment to reflect on the scarring legacy of the voyages of discovery. Science (with a capital “S,” if you will) is generally held up as an ideal model for value-free inquiry practices, and scientific mentorship is often viewed as a training program that also initiates students into this worldview. Subtle cues and messages can deter outsider students. For example, in an effort to be honest, a kind-hearted professor with a reputation as a brilliant but tough teacher emphasizes the difficult work ahead. The Latina science student, however, receives these conversations as cues that the professor “lacks confidence in me,” and she chooses someone else to serve as her research mentor. Of course mentor/protégé relationships across difference are not always foreclosed by such dynamics. However, given that many academic disciplines aim to emulate scientific practices, a very brief account of the colonialism inherent to the sciences is a necessary foundation for my project of reconceptualizing mentoring. I do not wish to infer that nothing good has come from the methods and norms of modern Western science, nor that we should abandon all of its practices. However, it is important to
recognize that they arise from a deeply troubled past, and that the effects of this past now color the academy as a whole.

In *Imperial Eyes*, her fascinating study of travel writing, Mary Louise Pratt describes how two events that took place in 1735 shaped “European elites’ understandings of themselves and their relations to the rest of the globe.” That one year saw the both the publication of Carl Linné’s (Linnaeus’) *Systema Naturae (The System of Nature)*, and Europe’s first major international scientific expedition. Linnaeus developed a classificatory system designed to categorize all forms of plant life on the planet, whether or not they had previously been known to Europeans; the French-led La Condamine scientific expedition was intended to determine the exact shape of the earth—was it a sphere or a spheroid? According to Pratt, these two events led to the development of a “planetary consciousness.” By employing the classifying and descriptive methods of natural history to create a new understanding of both knowledge production and global social relations, European elites organized the world around themselves and to their sole benefit. She suggests that this new consciousness “is a basic element constructing modern Eurocentrism, that hegemonic reflex that troubles westerners even as it continues to be second nature to them.” Scientific travel narratives written by explorer-scientists communicated the results of scientific expeditions to the European elites, and Pratt reveals how through this form of writing “…science came to articulate Europe’s contacts with the imperial frontier and to be articulated by them.” She asserts that through his “totalizing classificatory” schema Linnaeus’ *System of Nature* “launched a knowledge-building enterprise” that had “a deep and lasting impact…on the overall ways European citizenries made…sense of their place on the planet.” Scientists were held up as people who produced order out of chaos, who observed, represented, and classified the world in a way that distanced them from the object of observation. The classification of—and distancing from—nature included the distorted and poisonous racial ranking of humans. Stephen Jay Gould has thoroughly documented the historic (and more contemporary) practices of ranking humans that were, in their day, considered the apex of scientific study. Now discredited, the effects of imperial projects of racial classification are still felt: the formerly colonized continue to be excluded and marginalized, albeit in more subtle ways, and the former colonizers do not easily apprehend the gaps in their knowledge about the social world they have created.

Moreover, the “order out of chaos” view of science and scientists is persistent. But scholars in science and technology studies such as Sandra Harding have brought critical questions to bear on our common-sense understanding of modern Western science. They question whether we can truly engage in neutral, value-free research practices, and they cast a wary eye on the idea that science constructs knowledge for the universal good and social progress. Critiques include militarism, corporate profiteering, environmental destruction, theories that demonstrate racial or sexual inferiority, and the failure of modern Western science to benefit the developing
world. In profound ways that we don’t often acknowledge in our daily lives on college campuses, Pratt, Harding, and Gould illuminate how scientific practices and academic disciplines are deeply intertwined with the European history of exploration, colonization, and exploitation of the planet. “‘Real sciences’ are supposed to be transparent to the world they represent, to be value neutral. They are supposed to add no political, social, or cultural features to the representations of the world they produce, and to leave the world unchanged by their research projects.” But, as Harding rightly points out “…maximizing cultural neutrality… is itself a culturally specific value…. valuing abstractness and formality expresses a distinctive cultural feature, not the absence of any culture at all.” The privileging of a neutral stance can be traced through the research and writing practices of virtually every academic discipline, and it is at odds with the world views of many formerly colonized peoples.

The European scientists of the Enlightenment believed they could be objective outside observers, that they could separate themselves from what they observed—a notion, I would add, that was put to rest by physicists in the early 20th century. Using their methods to draw a line between knowledge that could be considered science and what could not, they set in motion a long discussion that carries through to this day regarding what deserves to be called “science.”

The knowledge systems of other cultures, it was routinely asserted, were infused with magic, superstition, religion, and other forms of irrationalism and anthropomorphism, making them unreliable guides to nature’s regularities and their underlying causal tendencies, and leaving the thought of those cultures firmly lodged in the premodern. Such knowledge systems did not deserve the name “sciences,” and because of their cultural elements they could not be integrated into a unified or harmonious relations with modern Western sciences. Judged against the “coherent, unified representation of nature’s order, or at least one that exhibited a harmonious relation among physics, chemistry, biology and other sciences,” the knowledge systems of the cultures with which the explorer/scientists came into contact were considered unintelligible as Science. The intelligibility of the Other’s knowledge – scientific or otherwise—continues to be a thorny academic problem, as I will show in later sections of this book.

Which disciplines deserve to be included under the aegis of Science remains an open question: the definition of what to “count” as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields varies from one agency to the next. What is at stake when we ask this question? Michel Foucault exposes the argument about what constitutes a “science” as one concerned with power and its effects. Historically, what counts as “science” was decided by the powerful colonizers; they institutionalized knowledge practices and controlled scientific discourse, and in so doing, delegitimated other ways of knowing the natural world. Projects that benefited the colonial enterprise were favored. Harding notes that
[The problems that have gotten to count as scientific are those for which expansionist Europe needed solutions. Those aspects of nature about which the beneficiaries of expansionism have not needed or wanted to know have remained uncharted. Thus, culturally distinctive patterns of both systematic knowledge and systematic ignorance in modern sciences’ pictures of nature’s regularities and their underlying causal tendencies can be detected from the perspective of cultures with different preoccupations.]

Other scientific traditions were silenced and cast aside. The result was that “…European expansionism…changed the ‘topography’ of global scientific knowledge, causing the advancement of European sciences and the decline or underdevelopment of scientific traditions of other cultures….” This is a very significant point, and it can be applied to other academic disciplines: systemic patterns of knowledge and ignorance are just as surely found in literature, political science, and history.

Harding stands with other philosophers and sociologists of science who have pointed out that culture always leaves its mark on the production of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. In practice, this means that the class, racial, and gender concerns of imperial nations have deeply influenced the history of science. Power resides with those who name and organize natural and social realities, and it became impossible for outsiders to pose certain questions. For example, Harding asks:

In what ways have the existing projects in physics, chemistry, engineering, biology, geology, medicine and environmental and other sciences been excessively contained by Eurocentric assumptions and goals? How have the conceptual frameworks and practices of Eurocentric philosophies of these sciences guided and made them appear not only reasonable but also the only such reasonable kinds of sciences?

She asserts that “(c)onventional accounts of science present it as the discovery and testing of hypotheses, implying that the laws of nature had been there all along, untouched by human hands or thought, until some clever or lucky scientist managed to detect them.” This concept of scientific discovery is widely taught in schools, and it claims to represent the world as it is—at least, one small piece of the natural world. But such accounts obscure “how social and political values and interests seem to flow out of scientific work ‘behind the backs’ of the scientists. The representational account seems to absolve the scientific enterprise of any responsibility for the various politics that flow from its representations.” Yet, Harding contends that our modern Western science has a “political unconscious” and this is exposed when we take as our starting place those knowledges that have been pushed to the margins, discounted, and (to use Foucault’s term) subjugated. I agree with Harding that we gain a more realistic understanding of the Eurocentric tendencies in Western science if we take the point of view of the colonized when we think about the history of encounters between Western sciences and other cultures’ knowledge systems.
Harding’s line of questioning can be broadened and reinforced by engaging with the work of indigenous Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, provides valuable insight into the troubling legacy of imperialism and colonialism in the contemporary university. She writes:

From the vantage point of the colonized…the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary…. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. Just knowing that someone measured our ‘faculties’ by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are.

The example of measuring skulls may be historical, but Smith is careful to point out that “[i]mperialism still hurts, still destroys, and is reforming itself constantly.” It is not a thing of the past; rather, the notion of post-colonialism is a chimera, and the university is one site where imperialism continues to hurt the formerly colonized. Through our normalized, accepted educational practices, even well-intentioned professors and mentors may become implicated in colonialism when the boundaries of “acceptable” knowledge are used to discipline the colonized “through exclusion, marginalization, and denial.” I would add that Western research protocols are a prominent “disciplinary technology” that marginalize other viewpoints and…constantly [reaffirm] the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge. This form of global knowledge is generally referred to as ‘universal’ knowledge, available to all and not really ‘owned’ by anyone, that is, until non-Western scholars make claims to it.

Tellingly, Smith writes of her own experiences with “universal” knowledge: “I frequently have to [orient] myself to a text world in which the centre of academic knowledge is either in Britain, the United States, or Western Europe; in which words such as ‘we’, ‘us’, ‘our’, and ‘I’ actually exclude me.”

Just as Harding points out that “value free inquiry” is in itself a value, Smith reveals the cultural orientation inherent to Western academic research, including “a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power.” That is, what counts as knowledge must be recognizable (intelligible) within an implicit understanding of the “rules” governing how the world works. Each of our academic disciplines has its own rules regarding what
constitutes knowledge, but all stem from the Eurocentric stance that came into being with western peoples’ “planetary consciousness.” Smith makes another point that is vital to my attempt to reconceptualize mentoring when she writes that “scientific and academic debate in the West takes place within these rules.” But beyond the exclusion and marginalization of colonized (and enslaved and otherwise “othered”) peoples’ knowledge, there were more dire consequences of European expansion and imperialism. Smith sadly encapsulates the effect of imperialism on indigenous peoples as a process of systematic fragmentation which can still be seen in the disciplinary carve-up of the indigenous world: bones, mummies and skulls to the museums, art work to private collectors, languages to linguistics, ‘customs’ to anthropologists, beliefs and behaviours to psychologists. To discover how fragmented this process was one needs only to stand in a museum, a library, a bookshop, and ask where indigenous peoples are located. Fragmentation is not a phenomenon of postmodernism as many might claim. For indigenous peoples fragmentation has been the consequence of imperialism.

Smith echoes Pratt when she writes that the Enlightenment “provided the spirit, the impetus, the confidence, and the political and economic structures that facilitated the search for new knowledges.” As she further notes, imperialism deeply intertwined with, and was the foundation for “the project of the Enlightenment [which] is often referred to as ‘modernity….’” Modernity is considered to have ushered in the industrial revolution, the development of public education, and the development of disciplines in the sciences. Or, as Harding puts it: “Modern Western sciences themselves emerged as part of a massive and lengthy process of shifting from the social formation centered on feudalism to one centered on Liberal democratic and capitalist political and economic relations.” To counter the marks our imperial history has left on science, Harding would have us “take seriously how others see us, themselves, and the world.” Similarly, Pratt calls us to reverse the Linnaean gaze and look back at European ideals and knowledge practices from the imperial frontier. Both would have us listen, truly listen, to Smith’s critique of research—writing from an indigenous perspective, she reverses the gaze and proves herself a keen observer of Western knowledge practices and their consequences. Academic mentoring is one such practice, and taking seriously underrepresented students’ viewpoints of the academy and of ourselves as teachers and mentors is a crucial first step to decolonizing mentorship.

This is the gift outsider students can bring to the academy. It does not matter whether they are students of the sciences or the humanities—if faculty and administrators are open to them, marginalized students allow academics to see themselves through new eyes and to hear new ideas. But fresh perspectives can only enter scholarly conversations if the common sense voices can be stilled and entrenched practices and modes of relating to students can be questioned.
Margarita continued her essay with the story of a white male who was so angered by her contributions to a diversity class that he later sent an email asking her not to return: she was not welcome, as far as he was concerned. Such personal conflicts take place within a broader academic milieu saturated with our troubled colonial history. Underrepresented and first-generation students must endure academic spaces that do not, as a general rule, welcome their perspectives or their bodies. Rather, they are required to negotiate mainstream curricula and bureaucratic processes that deny their ways of knowing and cultural foundations. When African American, Native American, and Latina/o histories and perspectives do appear in the curriculum, they are generally seen as “add-on” courses that fulfill diversity requirements, not central to the dominant academic enterprise. The same can be said for academic work that focuses on social class, gender, or ability.

We have already examined how the sciences are implicated in the continuation of imperial knowledge norms and practices, but the problem exists across the curriculum. As Smith explains,

> Academic knowledges are organized around the idea of disciplines and fields of knowledge. These are deeply implicated in each other and share genealogical foundations in various classical and Enlightenment philosophies. Most of the ‘traditional’ disciplines are grounded in cultural world views which are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems. Underpinning all of what is taught at universities is the belief in the concept of science as the all-embracing method for gaining an understanding of the world.

The process of producing knowledge that Smith describes contributes to the “unintelligibility” of marginalized students’ knowledge. At this juncture, Nelson Maldonado-Torres’ description of coloniality is helpful for understanding just how difficult it can be to create conditions that will allow minoritized perspectives to thrive in the academy.

Coloniality “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture,…intersubjective relations, and knowledge production. It is maintained alive in books[and] in the criteria for academic performance….” Resonating with Pratt’s idea of the “hegemonic reflex,” Maldonado-Torres writes that for those of us who are descendants of colonizers, coloniality is part and parcel of our very being, that the “ego conquiro” predates the “ego cogito” of Descartes. He contextualizes coloniality: it arises out of the social/historical setting of the conquest of the Americas and is “characterized by a permanent suspicion” toward the colonized. Indeed, their very humanity was questioned, as we saw in the colonial knowledge enterprise of the “scientific” classification of the races. For Maldonado-Torres, then, the skeptical attitude at the
heart of Descartes’ thinking person must be “understood against the backdrop of an unquestioned ideal of self expressed in the notion of the ego conquiro.” He asserts that this notion of the self is alive today, and often manifests in an imperial attitude that European-descended settler peoples must guard against. I would add that academics of any background must guard against a suspicious imperial attitude because the bodies of knowledge in many fields of study, as well as our academic bureaucracies, have developed hand in hand with colonialism. We question and sometimes outright ostracize the subjugated knowledges that outsiders wish to bring into the academy.

The concept of coloniality helps illuminate the often hard to see threads that centuries of academic practice have woven into the contemporary university. The cloth is sometimes fashioned into an invisible straightjacket that binds us into old ways of conceiving of knowledge, knowledge production, and relations with students. Further, the intertwining histories of colonial social relations and the production of modern western knowledge systems create contemporary openings for acts of violence. Coloniality can help us understand why, in the classroom where Margarita finally saw herself in the curriculum, she became—once more—the object of an overt (academic) colonial attack.

To better see how coloniality has maintained its grip on the academy into the 21st century, it is helpful to consider the “epistemology of ignorance,” a term philosophers Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana take from Charles Mills’ book *The Racial Contract*. Epistemology is generally accepted to refer to a group’s “ways of knowing”—what constitutes “knowledge” and how do we know what we know? Sullivan and Tuana define the epistemology of ignorance as “an examination of the complex phenomena of ignorance… [it traces how the different forms of ignorance] are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices.” The epistemology of ignorance is located under the broader rubric of social epistemology, which acknowledges that any knower must be situated within her social and historical groups, and that knowledge construction is based on—and sometimes limited by—our social relations. Put another way, the “solitary Cartesian cognizer” is an impossibility: all knowledge is culturally situated, and knowledge is created in our social relations. As Linda Martín Alcoff describes it: “All knowers are situated in time and space…. [Our specific social location will have a bearing on] the ways a knower will make judgment calls about issues of coherence, consistency, relevance, plausibility, and credibility.” These are all concerns that relate directly to the validity of knowledge claims, and “sound” academic practices must possess all of these qualities. Alcoff further asserts that “knowers are not all ‘epistemically equal.’” Margarita’s story exemplifies an exchange between unequal knowers: her situated knowledge was not valued in the classroom. By contrast, the knowledge produced by the scientist/explorers of the 18th century was just as surely situated in their own time and space. Even though their knowledge was limited, and indigenous people might well have refuted many of the scientist/explorers’ claims, they were easily accepted by the European elite. The effects of privileging this knowledge linger.
Students like Margarita must learn dominant ways of knowing to be successful in the academy, but the student who challenged her does not need to understand her knowledge practices, or even to accept her lived knowledge as credible and relevant to the class discussion. His particular ignorance was not accidental. Certainly social groups can be dominant based on any number of factors—race, class, sexuality, ability, or gender—but Shannon Sullivan, Nancy Tuana, and the authors in their book aim to describe the effects of racial dominance and willful ignorance on our knowledge systems. “...[T]he ignorance of the racially privileged often is deliberately cultivated by them, an act made easier by a vast array of institutional systems supporting white people’s obliviousness of the worlds of people of color.”

The university is one of many institutions that support dominant groups’ ignorance of other groups.

Consider, for example, an anthropology founded on the “obvious” truth of racial hierarchy. Or a sociology failing to confront the central social fact of structural white domination. Or a history sanitizing the record of aboriginal conquest and black exploitation. Or a political science representing racism as an anomaly to a basically inclusive and egalitarian polity.... In whatever discipline that is affected by race, the “testimony” of the black perspective and its distinctive conceptual and theoretical insights will tend to be whitewashed out. Whites will cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions.

I agree with Tuana, Sullivan, Mills, and Alcoff that it is necessary to understand the role of ignorance in our ways of knowing, as well as in any analysis of the social and political spheres, because studying ignorance “has the potential to reveal the role of power in the construction of what is known and provide a lens for the political values at work in our knowledge practices.” To use Harding’s language, studying ignorance and looking for our blind spots can reveal the political unconscious of our discipline’s knowledge.

Although Mills considers whites’ ignorance of other racial groups a “group-based cognitive handicap,” he allows that it is “not always based on bad faith.” White ignorance can be due to impersonal “societal-structural” causes—members of dominant groups might form “mistaken beliefs...because of the social suppression of pertinent knowledge.” And we have seen that a mighty centuries-old imperial enterprise has indeed fragmented and suppressed many peoples’ knowledges. Consider Alison Bailey’s description of Mills’ Racial Contract: it is partially held in place by an implicit consensus about cognitive norms: it concerns what counts as a correct interpretation of the world, and what actions are right and legal in it. Signatories to the Contract must be socialized into epistemic communities. Agreement with the officially sanctioned reality allows some to be contractually granted full cognitive membership in the
(white) epistemic polity. If you follow the official epistemic regulations, then you are in. Redundance

Clearly, this idea resonates with Harding’s, Pratt’s and Smith’s descriptions of imperial knowledge practices.

There is hope, however. Mills states that white ignorance is a tendency, but it is not insurmountable. Once we admit that “certain social structures [such as academic mentoring] tend to promote...crucially flawed [knowledge] processes [it is incumbent on us to figure out] how to personally extricate oneself from them (insofar as that is possible), and to do one’s part in undermining them in the broader cognitive sphere.”65 When it comes to mentoring across difference, there are typical ways that we foreclose opportunities to students and deprive ourselves of new knowledge perspectives. Professors who were trained in long-standing academic traditions may fall into these patterns regardless of their ethnic or socioeconomic background. But to extricate ourselves from them will first require some understanding of the contemporary sociological realities as well as the historical background of educational exclusion that confront minoritized students when they enter the academy.

NOTES

1 The student and the statement are real; her name has been changed for privacy.
6 Jill is a STEM student whose choice of mentor was based on interchanges such as this.
7 Pratt, 2008, p. 15.
8 Pratt, 2008, pp. 15–16.
9 Pratt, 2008, p. 15.
11 Pratt, 2008, p. 28.
12 Pratt, 2008, p. 25.
17 Harding, p. 4.
18 Harding, p. 47.
19 Harding, p. 5.
20 Harding, p. 5.
21 The National Science Foundation includes a broader list of behavioral sciences than does the Department of Homeland Security. For the latter, the definitions are used in granting visas to students and foreign workers.
COLONIALISM AND THE ACADEMY

23 Harding, p. 43.
24 Harding, p. 42.
25 Harding.
26 Harding, pp. 61–62.
27 Harding, p. 8.
28 Harding, p. 10.
29 Harding, p. 3.
30 Harding, p. 6.
31 Smith notes that colonialism as a practice is considered “but one expression of” the more encompassing concept of imperialism (p. 22).
33 Smith, p. 20.
34 Smith, p. 71.
36 Smith, p. 66.
37 Smith, p. 37.
38 Smith, p. 44.
39 Smith, p. 45.
40 Smith, p. 29.
41 Smith, p. 61.
42 Smith, p. 61.
43 Harding, p. 13.
44 Harding, p. 31.
47 Smith, p. 68.
49 Maldonado-Torres, p. 245.
50 Maldonado-Torres, p. 244.
51 Maldonado-Torres, p. 245.
52 Maldonado-Torres, p. 245.
53 Foucault, 1980.
57 Alcoff, p. 42.
58 Sullivan and Tuana, p. 3.
59 Mills, pp. 33–34.
60 Sullivan and Tuana, p. 2.
61 Mills, p. 15.
62 Mills, p. 21.
63 Mills, p. 21.
65 Mills, p. 23.
CHAPTER 2

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Contemporary Resonances of Colonialism

The coloniality of being and knowledge has material consequences in marginalized students’ lives, no matter their discipline. Every day they spend on a predominantly white, middle-class campus brings challenges for first-generation or working-class students, and students of color. These groups have all been underrepresented in their own ways, but they share a history of being actively excluded from the academy. In the main, colleges and universities emphasize the Eurocentric knowledge and cultural values of the middle and upper classes. Students from other groups must negotiate intellectual and social landscapes that were created over the course of centuries during which they were excluded from the construction of new knowledge. The colonizers deemed local, indigenous knowledge to be inferior, and this imperial attitude is still alive in the standards, curriculum, and processes of the contemporary university.

Merely looking at the representation of previously colonized groups, after forty years of opportunity programs, the academic landscape is not greatly changed. Consider the world students of color enter when they start college.

The extent of diversity within higher education can be illustrated by examining minority representation at all levels of higher education, from students to presidents. If each level is viewed as a transition point, minority representation declines at each stage (except between faculty and administrator levels). In 2007, minorities accounted for 31 percent of undergraduate students, 24 percent of bachelor’s degrees conferred, 20 percent of doctoral degrees, 17 percent of full-time faculty, 18 percent of full-time administrators, and 13 percent of presidents.

If we confine the data to African American, Latina/o, and American Indian full-time faculty members, we find only 9.5 percent are members of these underrepresented groups, and they are 24 percent of the undergraduate population. At 4.4 percent of the total, foreign faculty outnumber Latina/o and American Indian faculty put together; they are only a shade behind the 5.4 percent share of African American faculty. By contrast, 77 percent of full-time faculty and 60 percent of undergraduates are white. With recent awareness about other dimensions of diversity, there has been a significant push to retain and graduate first-generation students. Understanding that it is vital for us to educate as many youth as possible, the Chronicle of Higher Education focused its 2010 special report on “Diversity in Academe” on working-class students and economic diversity. A sizeable number of these are
first-generation students. A study by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that first-generation status was significantly and negatively associated with lower bachelor’s degree completion rates even after controlling for a wide range of interrelated factors, including students’ demographic backgrounds, academic preparation, enrollment characteristics, postsecondary coursetaking and academic performance.

A substantial overlap exists between populations of first-generation students and students of color, but those working-class, first-generation students who identify themselves as white often feel uneasy in our institutions of higher education. It is little wonder: like ethnically underrepresented students, they seldom see themselves reflected in the professors who teach their classes, and the curriculum they learn generally excludes their history.

The personal stories and social histories of these students are not the same, but all too often they are confronted on college campuses with similar forms of emotional, social, and political violence. Faculty and staff who grew up in more dominant social positions may not find this violence readily apparent; it can be hard for them to recognize, or they might minimize its impact. However, those of us who work with underrepresented students routinely witness the academic and emotional stress placed upon them by the sometimes unintentional hurtful words and actions of the campus community, as well as by higher education systems that seem to have a never-ending ability to place barriers in their path. And, because we are socialized into as well as constrained by academic systems and culture, we sometimes find ourselves unwitting participants in these events. Our individual relationships with students distill the larger forces at play in their experience of the academy.

To illuminate the difficulties underrepresented students confront, I offer the words of the students themselves. Drawn from a large body of research into the college experience of students of color, many of the quotes to follow discuss racism or classism in the form of microaggressions. Chester Pierce and his colleagues defined racial microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders. They further maintain that … the cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions.” Subsequent scholars have expanded this definition to encompass the experiences of other groups of marginalized students, and the quotes used in this section will underscore that microaggressions are not merely a white/black phenomenon. Situations such as those described in the following passage are a daily occurrence; dealing with them takes a severe emotional and physical toll on students, and has a deep effect on their academic progress. Microaggressions may be sorted into large thematic categories which are consistent across minoritized groups.

The quotes below draw from studies of the collegiate experiences of Black, Latina/o, Native American students, as well as working-class students who may belong to any (or multiple) racial or ethnic group(s). It is very likely that many of the
students are also first-generation. I will focus on the themes most pertinent to this work: the sense of being an outsider, and interactions with faculty and administrators. The pervasiveness and thematic consistency of microaggressions across groups and institutions points to the systemic nature of the problem they pose; hurtful words may be spoken by individuals, but they represent more than personal bigotry. They are a living, often unconscious, expression of the academy’s exclusionary history which is permeated with coloniality. Such comments and actions taint an underrepresented student’s expectations and interactions in virtually every domain across campus and they are sustained by academic and social structures that alienate marginalized students. Further, it is important to remember that negative interactions with peers as well as in the community surrounding campus will also shape their college experiences. Their words testify to the truth of the burden imposed on minoritized students and the “tremendous amount of psychological energy expended on managing and negotiating microaggressions.” It is a weight no student should be made to carry. Listen to their voices.

NO SENSE OF BELONGING: NOT OUR SPACE

In his memoir, A Darker Shade of Crimson, Ruben Navarette, Jr. brings to life the experience of being one of the first Chicano students to attend Harvard.

The literature from the admissions office that cluttered my rolltop desk back home spoke of tradition….Who were they kidding? Tradition?…. After all, even before I attended my first class at Harvard, I knew at least two things. I was an intellectually starved Mexican-American boy from a small, stifling farm town in central California. And as my once-trusted white friends in high school had been good enough to point out, my brown behind being at Harvard had absolutely nothing to do with tradition.

With these words he paints a picture of the disorientation he felt as one of a “handful of African-Americans and other ‘disadvantaged’ minority groups [who] were invited to John Harvard’s secret clubhouse”; an exclusive, Eurocentric society, markedly different from his own Mexican-American tradition. Having been an outstanding high school student—one of a handful of Chicanos who found his way through institutional barriers and into Advanced Placement classrooms—he had applied to top colleges against the advice of most teachers and his principal. His experience is echoed by a Latina in Allen and Solórzano’s study of campus climate in feeder schools to the University of Michigan Law School:

I don’t think White students understand that we have to deal with [feeling unqualified and unworthy]. No one ever told them you can’t do it. Their counselors don’t say, “Honey you can’t go to college”…This one time, my counselor just told me that I should go home to raise children ‘cause that’s the thing I’m good for.
Such comments must certainly undermine a student’s sense of self-confidence when she finally reaches college; they become part of her personal history, and color her experience of the people she meets in the academy. Although newer programs attempt to address these sad dynamics, there are still many students who do not receive encouragement and support to continue into college education, and this sort of exchange is far more commonplace than many of us from more dominant groups may understand. I have been told strikingly similar stories by a significant number of the young women with whom I have worked.

Underrepresented students also lament the fact that students, staff, and faculty from dominant groups lack any appreciation of the sometimes painful circumstances they may have experienced. Another participant in Allen and Solórzano’s study remarked: “They [White students] don’t know what being [from a migrant farm worker family] is all about. They don’t care.” 15 Similarly, Tierney gives us insight into a Native student’s experience of coming to college:

A lot of teachers might know a lot about business or accounting, but they don’t know anything about Indians or what it’s like to be away from home. One problem for students is they don’t find people to help…. No one tells Indian students to go after their dream.

I would like to take all of my instructors and lead them through my life. Show them what it’s like to come off the reservation. They would see how Indian people hold onto each other real fast in order to hold the old ways together. They’d see how much trouble it is to make the decision to leave home and come to school, how Indian people love staying around and being on the reservation, at home. How it’s really a struggle to come here. I would love to have my instructors see that. Just to have them see the bonding that takes place. They’d see us right. 16

The words above highlight how entangled certain concepts are for marginalized students. This young man begins by echoing the thoughts of the Latina quoted above, discussing a lack of encouragement for Native students to “go after their dream.” He quickly turns, however, toward the idea that college faculty do not understand “anything about Indians:” they need to come to the reservation to see and learn, to “see us right.” In his experience, faculty are unaware of their cultural assumptions; they have no inkling of how little they know their students. How can a professor enter into a mentoring relationship across difference if she does not first question her assumptions and get to know her protégé? The flip side of this lack of awareness of others is a lack of personal awareness: dominant group students and faculty do not necessarily understand the privilege inherent within their own social positions. As one Latino student commented: “I think just the fact that they’re White. I don’t think they know the fact that that is an advantage. I don’t think they see it as an advantage.” 17 Yet another student names the unconscious nature of
much racism: “They [White people] don’t even know they’re racists. They never even think about a different perspective. They never had another perspective.”

It is far easier for middle-class white students to enter the university system: it rewards their perspective, their language, and their putatively neutral inquiry protocols and writing practices. But as Pratt, Harding, and Maldonado-Torres have made clear, “neutral” or “proper” academic curricula and discourses are in reality based in a white, Eurocentric culture and history that reflect the dominant students back to themselves. They do not need to assume another identity to perform well in school, and according to the student quoted above, they do not realize their own academic racism. This is in stark contrast to students of color and working-class students who must learn to understand and negotiate the dominant perspective and culture to thrive in college. They are left with a choice of assimilation or walking in two worlds—a choice that dominant students may face, but only if they choose to put themselves in the position of the outsider. It is not forced upon them. On the other hand, underrepresented college students are thrust into a world where they must constantly cope with seeing themselves as others imagine them to be. W.E.B. DuBois described this phenomenon long ago, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” The constant effort to “attain self-conscious [person]hood” that merges the two selves takes a toll on marginalized students as they struggle through higher education. If they do not assimilate, they expend a great deal of energy contesting the knowledge and history that alienates and denies them.

AN ALIENATING ENVIRONMENT

At Harvard, for the first time in our lives, my Chicano classmates and I were suddenly part of a racial and cultural minority. And naturally, we were as disoriented as Dorothy in Oz… All at once, the face of our immediate world had changed radically. It was a white face, with blue and green eyes; one that we did not recognize or trust. The experience was frightening.

Stories of alienation such as this are common in literature describing the experiences of underrepresented students. Navarette helps us viscerally understand his physical sense of deprivation upon entering Harvard: he hears no Spanish, the warm air turns chilly, and Mexican food is not easy to come by. He describes the disorientation and fear he felt even more deeply in the following passage:

I felt illegitimate. My scrutiny of the abrupt changes in my surroundings heightened. I felt misplaced. I had been admitted to this old and pristine institution. I had accepted. I had arrived. Now all I need was some degree of proof that I belonged there, that the rewards of Harvard were rightfully mine to claim.
The feeling of not belonging, of dislocation, is also beautifully articulated by two Ford Foundation Fellows, one in academic terms, one in emotional:

You can feel out of place in so many ways. For instance, having equal access is not only sitting in the same classroom with Whites, hearing the same lectures as Whites, reading the same books as Whites, or performing the same experiments as Whites. This is not equal opportunity because the content of these varied experiences validates the experiences of White men and ignores or invalidates the experiences of women and men of color and to a lesser extent White women.

As an undergraduate, when I walked on campus there was this stigma attached to being a minority student. It’s as if I had this “AA” pasted on my forehead for affirmative action student. Some people would say “oh, you’re being too sensitive about race.” But I would respond, “I know what I’m feeling and how I’m being treated.” I can’t ignore it. I don’t have the luxury of ignoring or rationalizing other people’s treatment of me and my feelings as being too sensitive...It’s a constant battle, it has to be fought, and it continues to this day.

As one new Ph.D. poignantly remarked, “There is this sense of feeling out of place. Not fitting in. It is a coldness that made an indelible mark on my graduate experience.”

Undergraduates express similar thoughts: “I’m not really comfortable... being in the classrooms. I know that I’m different and I’m reminded of it every day.” From assumptions that if they are on campus, they must occupy roles as cafeteria workers and waitresses, to assumptions that they are athletes rather than academic scholars, underrepresented students are given constant reminders that – at best—they are viewed as “guests in someone else’s house.” Students who are from marginalized racial/ethnic groups, or who were raised in a working-class environment, often feel out of place in institutions of higher education. Dominant group faculty and students do little to remedy this situation; indeed, they may not even recognize its existence. Their inability to recognize the social and academic violence perpetrated upon working-class and underrepresented students is in many ways a refusal to do so; it is a manifestation of Maldonado-Torres’ imperial attitude and it is one element of what Barbara Applebaum calls the “epistemology of complicity.”

Dominant faculty exacerbate the situation when they label students who speak up as “too sensitive,” relegating painful interactions to the realm of individual rather than systemic action. When underrepresented students are made uncomfortable by dominant group students’ hurtful remarks in the classroom, faculty who do not or cannot—or refuse to—respond by honestly naming the dynamics at work perpetuate the cold campus climate. They contribute to making an “indelible mark” on underrepresented students’ college experiences.
TENSE RELATIONSHIPS

You know, you know… they just act like you don’t belong here.30

Interactions with faculty and administrators contribute greatly to students’ feeling that they are not truly part of the campus community. These interactions may not even be direct conversations. Take, for example, this young African-American male’s complaint:

I was [in the department building] and I was walking down the hallway…[and] one of the teachers’ doors was open. …She’s like, ‘Oh, I should have locked the door. My purse is in there.’ I was just [thinking to myself], wow, …maybe [she] should have kept that to [herself] or something, ok, oh. I reminded you that you should lock your door.31

Another African-American student elaborates a disheartening academic interaction:

…I was doing really well in the class, like math is one of my strong suits….We took a first quiz…and I got like a 95…he [the professor] was like, “Come into my office. We need to talk,” and I was like, “Okay.” I just really knew I was gonna be [told], “great job,” but he [said], “We think you’ve cheated… We just don’t know, so we think we’re gonna make you [take the exam] again.” …And [then] I took it with just the GSI [graduate student instructor] in the room, and just myself, and I got a 98 on the exam.32

These stories are not extreme, isolated incidents. The literature is replete with experiences where a staff member’s racist attitudes and actions result in a stinging microaggression. Further, students are frequently made to feel that they are not academically capable, and they rarely see themselves reflected in the curriculum. As one student commented, “The coursework is very straightforward. If there [are] any references to people of color as a whole, it’s very marginal…. I’ve never felt that people of color are necessarily incorporated into the material that we actually cover.”33 In recent years, some institutions have responded to such grievances by expanding their curricula to ensure every student meets a minimum diversity requirement; classes range from sociological ethnic studies courses to the literature of long-ignored groups to class and gender studies. Incorporating diversity issues into existing classes is a helpful initial move, but does not result in systemic change. Such efforts gesture toward answering this student’s complaint, however, because the classes are seldom seen as part of the core curriculum, marginalized students are once again made to feel like academic guests.

Working-class students who are white experience similar difficulties within the academy. Alfred Lubrano tells the story of a young woman’s experience studying Jane Austen in a college literature class:
“God,” Cheryl said aloud in class, “If I read another description of a ball gown I’m gonna go crazy.” Everyone was shocked. The professor looked at Cheryl and said, “Are you, by any chance, from working-class parents?”…Cheryl hadn’t seen that one coming. “It was a revelation,” she recalls. “I remember saying to myself, ‘Oh, so that’s what this is.’ To me, all that gown stuff was unimportant. But to the upper-class students, Jane was a goddess and all this made sense to them…. It made me think about all the students who had been given bad grades and rejected by teachers because they had a different way of looking at the world, having come from the working class. And literature is such a middle-class thing to do. You almost have to have come from money to pursue and understand it. So I got out of it and joined the Army.”

Just as students of color run into obstacles constructed by the whiteness of academia, so the working-class students must deal with the fact that college life is lived in a middle or upper-class space with middle-class rules and values. People from the working class must change themselves—or, at least, important parts of themselves—to fit. It is another form of assimilation. “Working class people, steeped in their own culture and standards, must leave that identity behind and live in a middle-class world. We must be saved from our state of original sin, says writer Valerie Miner.”

Interactions such as the Jane Austen incident create a chilly climate for working-class students, just as certainly as the Eurocentric curriculum and racially-oriented microaggressions do for the students of color.

Campus climate is a key concept to understanding underrepresented students’ experiences in higher education. It can be defined as the interaction among the following factors: the historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of various groups, the institution’s structural diversity (numerical representation of minority groups), psychological climate, and the behavioral dimension, which is characterized by relations among the groups on campus.

…the ambient, affective character of a place—the conditions that evoke feelings, either positive or negative, from the people in the organization. Climate is to the affective aspect of human beings in an organization what air is to the physical aspect. Climate is an organization’s emotional atmosphere. People breathe it.

Racist, homophobic, ableist, or classist acts or words, coupled with the ongoing anxiety inherent in attending a predominantly white, middle-class institution, can create an uncomfortable climate that will push students of color, working-class, and other marginalized students away if they do not feel they are supported. It is important to clarify that by “racist” I do not merely mean those isolated and glaring actions and words that are easily classified by the term. Joe Feagin’s definition is helpful; he explains that racism is “the socially organized set of practices that deny African Americans [and other targets of discrimination] the dignity, opportunities, spaces, time, positions and rewards this nation offers to white [dominant group]
Americans.” He also takes care to point out that targeted groups suffer physical, psychological, and social harm because they must use so much energy and time to develop strategies to cope with the effects of racist practices. These effects are well documented. Dominant group faculty and students who deny the harm done to others through this constant, sometimes subtle, undermining are complicit with it. They suffer from Applebaum’s epistemology of complicity.

Interactions such as those I have described, compounded by a curriculum that generally ignores their histories, can only create a stressful environment for minoritized students. Any attempt to mentor these students takes place within, and is already affected by, the exclusionary curriculum and stressful interactions that may occur with other students, faculty and staff. Comments and actions that result in microaggressions against them are buttressed by, and in many ways result from, their social groups’ long history of exclusion from higher education and the colonial nature of our knowledge systems. To return to Turner’s metaphor, too often students feel that they do not belong in the academic “house.” It is a house built with others in mind: those from middle and upper class, western European backgrounds whose arts and sciences form the cornerstone of the curriculum, whose social and political practices form the hierarchical administrative and academic structures, and whose expectations and attitudes frame the perception that those underrepresented students who seek to enter their “home” are interlopers.

OF MESSY ROLES AND CONTESTED SPACES: WALLS WE MAY NOT SEE

Before turning to a brief overview of the history of exclusion, upon which the foundation of the academic house rests, I must truthfully acknowledge that as both a student and an administrator, the academy is a place where I have very likely benefited from historically embedded exclusionary practices. The undergraduates with whom I work have not always been accepted into the spaces where I walk with relative ease; my belonging and ability are not constantly challenged as are theirs. I have come to know this not only through reading and study, but more importantly, through the graciousness of students who recognize in me someone who wishes to effect change. They have shared their lives with me, and because of their openness, I can understand on a more visceral level the truth of the words I read in books and articles, and from which I drew examples for this chapter. However, significant differences across race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality often lie between us: I am positioned as a white middle-class woman whose father earned a four-year college degree, and I am the recipient of a certain degree of privilege due to my skin color and social advantages. School was easy for me, and for the most part, college classes reflected my social and cultural history back to me; I did not experience uncomfortable and damaging effects from the mainstream curriculum. Now, as a college administrator, I am perceived by students to be well-integrated into the administrative hierarchy that has long dominated the institution of higher education. Not only has the academic system historically excluded the students I serve, it has
privileged those of my background. This history creates a multi-layered power imbalance between my students and me that complicates my work with them.

Even as I recognize these concerns I want to remain cognizant of Sara Ahmed’s critical questioning of the notions of diversity and inclusion. She asks us to examine the underside of diversity work—what is hidden and left unsaid.

What does diversity do? What are we doing when we use the language of diversity? … Strong critiques have been made of the uses of diversity by institutions and of how the arrival of the term “diversity” involves the departure of other (perhaps more critical) terms, including “equality,” “equal opportunities,” and “social justice.”

As a diversity worker, I aim to assist “diverse” students to become included in the academy. The existence of such special programs indicates that they are considered “outsiders” to the academy; they are strangers, the Other. Ahmed describes the process of “being made into a stranger, the one who is recognized as ‘out of place,’ the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as a crime or a threat,” further noting that the “emotions of fear and hatred stick to certain bodies [and] some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces.”

She asks us to consider how a very common question, “Where are you from?” in actuality often means “you are not from here.” The stories of microaggressions reveal how underrepresented students’ are marked by their bodies and made into strangers. And although their bodies do not necessarily set them apart in such a glaring way, first-generation students have remarkably similar experiences. Ahmed asks us to realize that the process of including these students at all levels of education is not without complication. In a Foucauldian twist on the concept, she states: “Inclusion could be read as a technology of governance: not only as a way of bringing those who have been recognized as strangers into the nation [or university], but also of making strangers into subjects, those who in being included are also willing to consent to the terms of inclusion.”

Bringing underrepresented students into the academy is important work, but as we move forward through my discussion of history, mentoring, and ways we might reconceptualize mentorship across difference, Ahmed’s critical questions must be allowed – however uncomfortably—to rest side by with and to inform our response to this corner of diversity work.

NOTES

2 Hinsdale, p. 417.
4 Ryu.
In the program I direct, for example, over half of the students would fit either of the program’s eligibility requirements: as a first-generation, low-income student, or as a member of a group underrepresented in graduate education. Indeed, the first-generation, low-income eligibility has long been regarded as a proxy for a student’s ethnicity.


Navarette, p. 49.

Allen & Solórzano, p. 8.

Allen & Solórzano, pp. 9–10.


Allen and Solórzano, p. 10.

Allen & Solórzano, p. 10.


DuBois, p. 39.

Navarrette, p. 59.

Navarette, p. 74.


Solórzano, p. 129.

Solórzano, p. 128.

Allen & Solórzano, p. 15.


Solórzano et al., p. 68.

Solórzano et al., p. 66.

Allen & Solórzano, p.15.


Lubrano, p. 82.


Turner, p. 356.
CHAPTER 2

38 Feagin, p. 7.
39 See, for example (Carroll, 1998; Hurtado, 1992; Swim, 2003).
41 Ahmed, p. 2.
42 Ahmed, p. 177.
43 Ahmed, p. 163.