

Different Brushstrokes: Amending Colonial Cultural Legacies in Arts & Cultures Curriculum

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Contingencies: A Journal of Global Pedagogy, volume 4, number 1, Winter 2025;

<https://doi.org/10.33682/fdvw-wpgd>

Abstract:

In his famous TED talk video, African American artist Ted Kaphar asks and enacts the question: “Can art amend history?” On a large reproduction of a 17th century painting by Frans Hals, Kaphar applies sweeping strokes, obscuring the row of imposing Dutch figures so that a small dark-skinned boy – tucked to one side – commands the space. Art historians, Kaphar claims, had only engaged with the Dutch figures and ignored the black boy. Rendering the boy singularly visible, Kaphar explains, “shifts the lens” to “amend” and not necessarily “erase” the racial structures and biases of the colonial past.

In my article I explore specific ways to decolonize arts and literature curriculum by amending and altering the focus, and also retrieving past erasures. Two specific modalities will be discussed. One, to highlight and study cultural networks that displace Eurocentric models: for example, the Indo-Persianate early-modern connections that generated extraordinary artistic and literary innovations in India, such as Amir Khusrau’s *Khamisa* stories. Secondly, anti-colonial and postcolonial interventions by artists who incorporate western forms and techniques and reinvent them for divergent purposes. Included in an arts curriculum, these works and approaches vibrantly “amend” colonial pasts, preconceptions and priorities.

Keywords: Titus Kaphar; Decolonizing Art History; Thomas Macaulay; Shonibare

Introduction

In a famous TED talk video, African American artist Titus Kaphar asks and enacts a question – “Can art amend history?” – that has “decolonizing” significance for arts and cultures curricula (Kaphar 2017). On a large reproduction of a 17th century painting by Frans Hals, Kaphar applies sweeping strokes, obscuring the row of imposing Dutch figures so that a small dark-skinned boy – formerly tucked to one side – commands the space. Art historians, Kaphar asserts, had only

engaged with the Dutch figures and ignored the black boy. Rendering the boy singularly visible, Kaphar explains, is an attempt to “shift the lens,” to “amend,” but not necessarily “erase,” the racial dynamics and biases of the colonial-era past.

In my article I explore some specific ways to “decolonize” arts and literature curricula by amending and altering the focus, and also retrieving past erasures. Two specific pedagogical modalities are discussed: one, to highlight and study cultural networks that displace Eurocentric models; secondly, to examine anti-colonial and postcolonial interventions by artists who incorporate western forms and techniques, yet reinvent them for divergent, even subversive, effects. Details of these modalities, as well as specific examples of course materials, are based primarily on my “Arts and Cultures” courses at New York University’s Liberal Studies; however, their premises and objectives are applicable for decolonizing Liberal Arts curricula in other academic settings.

Before elaborating these curricula approaches it is necessary to address and explain the vast, multifaceted, tenacious entrenchment of ideologies and practices inherited from colonial era proclivities and purposes within cultural institutions, and engage useful scholarly conceptualizations of what “decolonizing” might entail, especially in academia. Indeed, as the Introduction of the book *Decolonising the University* asserts, “it was in the university that colonial intellectuals developed theories of racism, popularised discourses that bolstered support for colonial endeavours and provided ethical and intellectual grounds for the dispossession, oppression and domination of colonised subjects” (Bhambra et al. 21). Therefore, as my article will demonstrate, frameworks for decolonizing the curriculum can “help to reveal something about the machinations of empire in general and the deeply understudied relationship between

coloniality and pedagogy” (Bhambra et al. 4) while redressing, even reversing, the neglect and suppression of indigenous cultural products and histories.

The project to reveal and dismantle colonial vestiges is usefully informed by “two key referents” that the Introduction of *Decolonising the University* suggests as the “political and methodological coordinates” in educational decolonizing efforts (Bhambra et al. 2). First, it “re-situates... colonialism, empire and racism” as “empirical and discursive objects of study” and “as key shaping forces of the contemporary world,” especially “in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view.” Second, it “purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis” (Bhambra et al. 2) through cultural interventions.

Thomas Macaulay and Colonial Knowledge Formation

While my focus is primarily on curriculum’s contribution to the “alternative ways of thinking about the world,” it is important to clarify seminal components of colonial knowledge structures that a decolonizing pedagogy seeks to contest and replace. An excellent source for foundational colonial knowledge formation is Thomas Macaulay’s 1835 “Minute on Education” in which he advocated the adoption of English for higher education in Indian institutions. Macaulay’s arguments vividly advance the colonial assumptions which need to be reviewed, reassessed and dismantled for decolonizing purposes, both in analysis and through curricula choices. They contain the ideas that constructed “the foundation of European higher education institutions” initially in colonized territories through which “the totalising logic of domination could be extended: European forms of knowledge were spread, local indigenous knowledge suppressed, and native informants trained” (Bhambra et al. 5), but eventually also adopted by western institutions.

First is the unequivocal, indeed flamboyant, assertion of the superiority of European intellectual and creative works evident in the notorious claim of Macaulay that “I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues.... I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia...And I certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit [sic] poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations” (Macaulay 2). Such Euro-supremacist claims may seem risible, even ignorant, but they have long commanded the composition of academic canons that privilege western sources. As Paul Gilroy writes in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, “constructing colonised people as non-knowledge producers creates a geography of negative knowledge whereby knowledge that comes from or is influenced by that geography is always already inferior to European-derived knowledge” (Gilroy 234).

Secondly, Macaulay’s colonial educational mission confidently envisages that “the morality, the philosophy, the taste of Europe” will “produce a salutary effect on the hearts and understandings of our subjects” to ensure “pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism” and bequeath an “imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws” (Macaulay 3).

Notions of this “imperishable empire” linger in universities and cultural institutions, and are so insidious that Carol Azumah Dennis insists in “Decolonising Education: A Pedagogic Intervention” that to challenge or dislodge it requires more “than updating pre-existing categories” and “engaging instead in guerrilla acts of ‘epistemic disobedience’...from and within knowledge that have been rendered invisible” (Dennis 190).

Thirdly, Macaulay’s proposal doesn’t confine itself to noble empire-civilizing aims: it conceives a global network of Anglophone linguistic affiliations that is vital for the commercial success of

the British empire: “Nor is this all...English is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the East. It is the language of two great European communities which are rising, the one in the south of Africa, the other in Australasia; communities which are every year becoming more important, and more closely connected with our Indian empire” (Macaulay 3). This seemingly innocuous, but colonially-mandated, Anglo-centric network persists, especially in English departments, and broadens with European (and later American) metropolises at the center controlling and dominating cultural exchanges and circulations across different parts of the world. As the University of Chicago English Department noted in a July 2020 statement, “English as a discipline has a long history of providing aesthetic rationalizations for colonization, exploitation, extraction... Our discipline is responsible for developing hierarchies of cultural production that have contributed directly to social and systematic determinations of whose lives matter and why” (quoted in Quayson and Mukherjee 11).

In Macaulay’s text are thus embedded the multiple material, political, and cultural processes of colonialism that “frame the West as sole producers of universal knowledge” (Gebrial 30). Dennis therefore endorses the “epistemic disobedience” for decolonizing education which starts with questioning the geopolitics of knowledge which “universalises European thought while subalternising and invisibilising all other epistemes” (Dennis 196).

A similar decolonizing imperative has emerged in recent years among numerous practitioners of art history who have acknowledged, and sought to correct, Macaulay-inflected colonial biases inherent in the discipline. Several contributors to “Decolonising Art History” – a notable collection of responses from art historians, artists and critics – reiterate Jas Elsner’s view that “the discipline of art history as conducted worldwide today is fundamentally Eurocentric,” adhering to “the categories we have received from colonialism” (Grant and Price 18). In the

same collection, Tim Barringer's conviction that "art history can decolonize itself only to the extent that it acknowledges that Euro-colonial art and our discipline itself are themselves products of empire" (Grant and Price 4) leads to Dele Layiwola's injunction that "decolonizing art history...is the attempt at a more robust methodology of art history which will be more accommodating and tolerant of other world civilizations" (Grant and Price 27).

Decolonizing Global Liberal Studies Courses

I apply such strategies to the teaching of literary texts and visual arts that are components of my Arts and Cultures courses. At NYU's Liberal Studies in the past, the courses in the Arts and Cultures sequence might have privileged western sources as representing "the great works" whose values, themes, and aesthetics were considered normatively universal, if not superior, as argued by Macaulay. Western assumptions informed the periodization, chronologies, and choice of materials in the design of these courses. However, in recent years, Liberal Studies has seriously engaged in moving towards a more "global frame-work," with more inclusive and geographically diverse materials and methodologies. According to the current description of the Arts and Cultures courses:

The Arts and Cultures sequence investigates literary, musical, visual, and performing arts from prehistory to modernity in a global framework. It treats the works of cultures from around the globe as texts in their own right, as contexts for each other, as ways of understanding the civilizations in which they were produced and their trans-regional connections.

The specific approaches that the rest of my article will discuss are intended to amplify and concretize possible "global frameworks" as well as to incorporate a "decolonizing pedagogy" described by Dennis as "centred on multiplicity...that accepts the 'cacophony of

voices’...identities defined in their own terms, an otherness premised on political, ideological, epistemological multiplicity” (Dennis 197), and in the process “interrogates the existing cultural interpretive monopoly of European knowledges, assumptions and methodologies” (Dennis 202).

There is ample opportunity within Arts and Cultures courses to enlist a “robust methodology” in discussing issues of colonialism and empire, especially those resulting from the post-15th century period of European expansion and conquest. Both the choice of materials and interpretive strategies contribute to teaching and learning that can participate in the “epistemic disobedience” of decolonizing. In Arts and Cultures classes we already engage texts and artworks that depict the designs, desires, and depredations of colonialism – from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to the pillaged Benin Bronzes in global museums of the west. Students and I also examine narratives of anti-colonial resistance and struggle, e.g. reading Frantz Fanon alongside the film *The Battle of Algiers*. Additionally, postcolonial critics have reminded us that European works of the 18th and 19th centuries that are not set in the colonies and do not deal directly with colonial issues also participate in the discourse, images, and tropes generated by colonial attitudes and circumstances. To excavate and examine such colonial connections – e.g. the exotic flowers in Dutch still life paintings or grand European architecture made possible through colonial wealth, or the colonially sourced luxury objects on a dressing-table in Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” poem or the dark-skinned boy retrieved by Titus Kaphar from Frans Hals’ painting honoring Dutch notables – reveals the ubiquity of colonial systems and signifiers in domestic spaces. Drawing attention to such elements partially makes visible the colonized other; however, it is a glimpse afforded within the sumptuousness of European cultural forms, assured in their cultural powers.

Therefore, I would like to elaborate two somewhat different strategies deployed in my Arts and Cultures courses that seek to extend Kaphar's intention of "shifting the focus" to (1) the transregional cultural energies of other cultural geographies that "abandons Europe as a point of reference," (2) non-western artistic activities that mediate western forms with indigeneity on their own terms. The examples presented from my courses counter Macaulay's colonial premise of the inherent superiority of western cultural products and the primacy of Eurocentric networks of cultural influence and exchange. While several examples pertain to Indian cultural developments in transregional contexts, similar examples are available in other geographical locations and cultural networks.

Cultural Networks Independent of European Presence

Prior to, and separate from, European contacts, the Indian Ocean region (extending across west and far east Asia) developed vibrant, flourishing trade and cultural relations over many centuries. The popularity of ceramic imports from China impelled local artisans of 9th century Iraq and Iran to copy and improvise their own ceramic creations. A blue-and-white bowl in the Metropolitan Museum of Art reveals how Iraqi potters of the 9th century attempted to emulate "the luminous quality and hard body of Chinese whitewares" ("Calligraphy in Islamic Art," Metropolitan Museum of Art website). Similarly, a later example from Safavid Iran in the Art Institute of Chicago collection "shows the influence of Chinese art in the six lion-like creatures along the rim, as well as in the cloud forms behind them" ("Dish with Floral and Animal Decoration," Art Institute of Chicago website).

Numerous such cultural networks can be traced involving premodern India. The extensive transmission of Hindu and Buddhist ideas and art from India to parts of Southeast Asia and China – the lavish illustrations from the *Mahabharata* epic on walls of Angkor Wat temple; the

massive Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Indonesia, Buddhist cave art in China, the 16th century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (based on the 7th century journey to India of Chinese scholar Xuan Zhang) – offer important examples to examine cultural exchanges and adaptations, as well as the frictions and tensions that accompany these exchanges.

Within India, the influence of the Persian language and artistic forms, during an extensive period of Muslim rule, produced significant artistic developments. Persian artists were invited to royal court ateliers by Mughal dynasty rulers, and their interactions with local artists resulted in unique combinations of indigenous Indian and Persian traditions. Innumerable pages of illustrated manuscripts display a variety of cross-cultural fusions – the Persian vertical format or subdued pastels coexisting with Indian bold primary colors or larger human forms. The marble splendor of the Taj Mahal combines Persian garden designs and mosque architectural elements with Indian rooftop *chhatris*.

The Persian literary influence manifested in the Persian language flourishing in official and creative circles, culminating in Persian literary production in India surpassing that in Iran proper. One such example is *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* or *The Hamzanama*, composed in India, first in Persian and later in Urdu (a language derived from Persian, Arabic, and northern Indian languages).

The Hamzanama represents a Persian story-telling form, the *dastan* – an oral tradition of narrating, modifying, extending, inventing around existing stories, generating new one – and is about the part-historical, part-fictive, heroic figure of Amir Hamza, whose adventures effortlessly occupy and connect transregional spaces. He is located in the Sasanid court of Naushervan, fights enemies in the lands of Franks and Chinese, woos Naushervan's daughter, is

embroiled with *jinn* (also *djinn*, or genies) and *peris* in a supernatural realm, and at the end fights and dies for the Prophet's cause.

These stories traveled to India around the 12th century, and were transcribed first in Persian into splendidly illustrated manuscripts in the 15th century court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, and later compiled and eventually published in Urdu. In an Arts and Cultures class, by studying representative sections of the sprawling epic, students can encounter the transcultural wonders described in the Introduction to an English translation by Musharraf Ali Farooqi: "Though their roots are in Persia and Arabia, the stories of Amir Hamza blossomed most fully on the Indian subcontinent – a crossroads of religions, languages and narrative styles. ...The richness of India's modes of cultural expression – particularly its blending of Sufi Islam and the mythological repertoire of the older strains of Hinduism" (Farooqi et al. xxi).

Apart from the *dastan* tradition and the *Hamzanama* stories, other texts also circulate in this Indo-Persian network – such as the Indian versions of Nizami's *Khamseh* romances (which includes *Layla and Majnun*) by Amir Khusrow Dehlavi. Thus Indo-Persian confections and connection, as realized in India, allow for a reorientation of localities and globalities that challenge the normative core/periphery concepts prioritizing the west. These literary works defy Macaulay's colonial denigration and dismissal of local Indian literature; their inclusion in the syllabus redresses the epistemic violence they previously suffered. It can never be an empty gesture of mere postcolonial tokenism – their context is too consequential, their content replete with literary delights, their compositions wonderfully executed.

Anti-Colonial and Postcolonial Incorporation of Western Cultural Traditions

There are two examples I would like to cite to illustrate ways in which dominant Eurocentric art histories can be dispersed and re-positioned for anti-colonial purposes or for postcolonial recuperation and reimagining.

Indian Modernist Art

European modernism, wrote the art critic Geeta Kapur, “offers the Indian artist” of the early 20th century, “a way of imagining Indian national culture as a revolutionary culture” (Kapur 2000). Indian artists of the early 20th century were aware of the radical revisionings and innovations of European modernism. Some, like the young Amrita Sher-Gil, had trained in Paris in the 1920s. In 1922, an exhibition of the German Bauhaus brought the works of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky among others to Calcutta. But it wasn’t a simple matter of Indian artists seeing and learning modernist aesthetics from European pioneers. The Indian artists were not passive borrowers, but, as art critic Partha Mitter writes in “Decentering Modernism,” their work shows a critical engagement with European modernism. They don’t just copy European artists, but adapt the liberating energies of modernism to create their own artistic vocabulary for their particular contexts, including the current anti-colonial movements. In many cases, they actually rework or even subvert famous modernist works. In the process, they affirm that modernism as movement or style is not monolithic, nor an exclusively “European event and accomplishment” signifying “European primacy” as promoted by the orthodoxies of art history narratives (in Grant and Price 52). It is important for students to learn that there are multiple, alternative modernisms, marked by a similar desire to represent new realities in new ways, but equally configured by their own histories and own locations, including in opposition to British colonialism.

For example, Gaganendranath Tagore was influenced by Cubist techniques but took liberties with Cubist principles and realized his own distinctive artistic vision through Cubism: the angular lines dissolve into flowing colors; geometric clusters are loosened by the space around them; sometimes a human figure swirls into the geometric patterns. Partha Mitter notes that “his cubes did not build up a systematic structure, but rather externalized the turbulent forces of inner experience, transforming the static geometry of Analytical Cubism into an expressive device” (Mitter, 2007, 20). Students also learn that Tagore’s Cubism has distinctive Indian antecedents: his Cubist forms aren’t exclusively inspired by European models, but also evoke and trace formal features of Indian Ajanta rock paintings.

In successive classes I have observed that students are most notably impressed by Amrita Sher-Gil, a young female artist, trained in Paris, who confronted and resisted the western male gaze, especially in her series of self-nudes. Mitter says Sher-Gil was “an original painter who worked in the context of global modernism, but has been generally written out of the history of western art” (Mitter, 2007, 98). Students appreciate how Sher-Gil counters the dominant male gaze of European modernist art and reclaims the female nude in depictions of her own brown body and straight dark hair. In these paintings she probes, questions, and disturbs issues of the exotic, of otherness, making them visible on her own body as an Indian woman. She investigates her own “colonial subjectivity,” suggests Saloni Mathur, and in her later work she engages it even more deeply, including complicating and subverting it (Mathur 2011).

One very striking example is her reworking of Paul Gauguin’s painting of a Tahitian woman, which Mathur claims is “rebellious, divergent, a historical statement” (Mathur 530). In this self-portrait she deliberately references Gauguin’s Polynesian idyll and dismantles it. A Polynesian wrap partially drapes her body, signaling the innumerable Polynesian women on

whose bodies Gauguin lavished his fantasies of Tahiti, making them alluring and available for a European audience. But Sher-Gil's figure is not available, her hands obstruct, not invite; she offers no flowers, a gesture by which Gauguin's women supposedly offer themselves and their island. Gauguin's Polynesian nude is thus recovered from her colonial subjection into Sher-Gil's empowered Indian space.

I will conclude with ideas from the works of present-day British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, notably represented in his 2021 "African Spirits of Modernism" exhibition at the Stephen Friedman Gallery.¹ While Shonibare's customary use of colonially-traded fabrics is on lavish display in quilts and sculptures, the dominant innovation are Shonibare's refashioned African masks, which are deliberately appropriated and adapted from Pablo Picasso's previous appropriation of such masks for stunning effects in his transformation of modern art. Archival material accompanying the artworks records the burgeoning interest in African art in Paris in the 1920s. According to the gallery's website, "playfully described by the artist as 'Picasso in reverse,' this body of new work explores the relationship between African aesthetics and western modernist expression by juxtaposing icons of classical European antiquity with African artifacts from Picasso's collection." As Shonibare explains for the exhibition, "Picasso was interested in appropriating from another culture, and I also appropriate from European ethnic art." Students in my class have already encountered Picasso's use of such masks in his *Les Femmes d'Alger* and are familiar with the African masks' contribution to new artistic modernist forms, or as Shonibare describes, "you've had the whole kind of modernist temple, so-called high art, built on the back of the art of Africa. But that's never really confronted and acknowledged...that

¹ See <https://www.stephenfriedman.com/exhibitions/149-yinka-shonibare-cbe-ra-african-spirits-of-modernism/>.

‘African’ masks set them free from all previous western artistic values and rewrote the rule book about what an image can be” (Jones).

From the exhibition’s website we discern how Shonibare’s designs of quilts, sculptures, and a series of African masks allow the artist to play with his identity as a self-defined “postcolonial hybrid.” This postcolonial artistic conceptualization enlists colonial forms without abashment or abasement, transposing traditional African elements, and maintaining a delicate balance between colonial memory and decolonizing performance. For example, Shonibare designs an arrangement of brightly-colored masks that evoke the displays in French museums which inspired Picasso’s art. However, while Picasso’s incorporation of the masks in his works constituted their “colonization” – erasing their contexts, their particular significances, subsuming their features for his artistic aims – Shonibare’s recreated ceremonial masks are restored to their particular provenance pertaining to the Fang, Bamana, Bobo, and Nalu peoples, rather than a generalized category of “African.”

Students are especially fascinated by Shonibare’s appending of African masks to three classical Greek statues of a centaur, a sphinx, and the goat-legged god Pan. All are replicas of masks Picasso owned; all are covered in Shonibare’s signature batik fabric patterns that represent legacies of colonial trade between Asia and Africa. These layered contexts reconstitute the classical Greek sculpture (that students have studied in previous classes), as figures of classical western antiquity are endowed with gazes of varied African spirits. Information on the exhibition website instructs the students as much about postcolonial creativity as about the specific meanings of different African masks: “A young centaur is paired with a mask from the Baule people, evoking ‘yu’, strong spirit powers with human and animal features. The Sphinx, in turn, wears a Bamana hyena mask, worn by youngsters when initiated into the traditions of their tribe.

The okuyi mask from the Punu people, representing idealised female beauty, is worn by Pan, the half-man-half-goat god apparently embracing the feminine.” By merging powerful African imagery with western mythological figures, Shonibare creates a composite ideology, what he calls “a third myth”, exploring and reinterpreting colonial appropriation and postcolonial cultural identity. Colonial depredations are rendered as colonial dependence on African forms for European rejuvenation; the legacy of colonial cultural exploitation is conceded yet deftly superseded by the recuperation of artifacts enriched by their contexts and expressive powers. Studying Shonibare’s works, therefore, continues and extends the decolonizing project suggested by Kaphar’s “amending” of the Dutch painting to accord prominence and dignity to a figure previously subdued by a vision of colonial power.

All the methodologies, cultural networks, and works examined in this article are examples of possible materials and approaches in an Arts and Cultures curriculum that vibrantly “amend” colonial pasts and preconceptions. They “decolonize” by both evading colonial capture and invading colonial sanctities, and students encounter texts and art that assert their own histories and creative value.

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