Performing Indigeneity

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Spectacles of Culture and Identity in Coloniality

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Introduction: Why Performing Indigeneity Matters

The Afro-Caribbean philosopher Frantz Fanon describes the challenge he faced during his interaction with the white world, in which he felt that he was expected to 'behave like a black man or at least like a nigger', in contrast to his own expectation of behaving like a 'man' – like a normal human being (Fanon ([1952] 1967: 114). This resulted in a secreting of race, in what he calls 'secreting blackness', because he had to hide that which he was and perform that which he was not, only to suit the expectation of another 'man', in this case, a white observer. This is an example of the performance of indigeneity, which is the focus of this book. In these pages, I explore the construction and performance of indigeneity, which can take various forms, some overt (as in performances for tourists), and others more subtle, and the role that such performances of indigeneity play in the perpetuation or dismantling of power structure(s) of 'modernity/coloniality'[1] today.

Performances of indigeneity can be characterized in terms of representations of what Blaut (1993) describes as 'the colonizer's model of the world'. Thus, as impositions of the colonizer's imagination of the self and the 'Other', performances of indigeneity are imbued with arrays of expectations that lead to the phenomenon that Gordon (2013: 66) views as akin to 'secreting indigeneity', an idea that he borrows from Fanon's 'secreting blackness' as another form of indigeneity. This description is in line with most performances of indigeneity, where the 'front stage' displays of indigeneity in many tourist sites are presented as though they are 'back stages' of the quotidian experiences of culture, with a view to meeting the expectations of powerful tourists. What is hidden, secreted, in such tourism spaces where the 'front stages' are presented as 'back stages' is the humanity of the oppressed subjects, which is embodied in

1. The use of the double-barreled term 'modernity/coloniality' is predicated on the notion that, in practice, modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive and therefore, cannot be treated in isolation from one another.

their genuine sense of alterity – an alterity that does not negate their humanness as history-making subjects.

To deal adequately with the role of performing indigeneity in either sustaining or transcending the power structure(s) of modernity/coloniality, I begin by examining why performing indigeneity matters in the first place. There is no single answer to this question, since the meanings of performing indigeneity are multitudinous and depend on a variety of reasons. Hence, the question of performing indigeneity, particularly why it matters, is not a stand-alone question. It must be examined along with other related questions such as to whom it matters, and when it matters. In other words, the motivations behind the phenomenon of the performance of indigeneity across time and space are not just varied and compounded, but are also mediated by specific intervening variables, which include interest groups and the power dynamics between them.

In this introductory chapter, I have deliberately collapsed the time element, which is one of the determining factors in clarifying the meanings of performing indigeneity, into something that decolonial scholars have characterized as the moment of modernity/coloniality (Grosfoguel 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo 2009). I have also found it useful to divide the interest groups involved in performing indigeneity into two broad categories, namely the colonizer and the colonized. This is in line with the purpose of this book, which is to contribute to a liberation discourse – a discourse that highlights behavioural tendencies among the oppressed that can lead to an amelioration of the condition of oppression, instead of aggravating the 'colonial wound'.

As a subject who is a member of the communities that survive on the oppressed side of the 'colonial power differential' (Mignolo 2005), in what Gordon (2007) calls the 'hellish zone of non-being', I believe that it is fitting for me to contribute to a greater understanding of what may influence and assist oppressed subjects to wage a successful struggle against colonial domination, and to address that which may worsen the condition of oppression. As will be seen later in the book, the manner in which oppressed subjects exercise their agency can either shorten or prolong their condition of suffering, depending on whether they can distinguish between revolutionary and non-revolutionary actions in the modernity/coloniality structure. Thus, I am concerned with urging the oppressed subjects to engage in resistance that will have a diachronic effect on the power structures of modernity/coloniality, instead of engaging in actions that contribute synchronically to those structures, thereby prolonging our suffering on the dominated side of the colonial power differential.

In my pursuit of answers to the question of why performing indigeneity matters in this age of modernity/coloniality, I discovered that this phenomenon mattered first to the colonizer during the institution and in the maintenance of the modernity/coloniality project, and continues to matter more to the colonizer than to the colonized subjects who enact these performances. It seems that the colonial powers believed that they would not be successful in subjugating their victims without also engaging in a process that would discredit the histories of the colonized – histories that embody their sense of being human. Fanon explains this process as follows:

> colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By kind of a perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devastating precolonial history takes on a dialectical significance today. (Fanon 1961: 37)

What we can glean from the above observation is that from the onset of colonialism, the colonizer was insecure with the past of the colonized subject, since this past proved the humanity of the victims, while the colonizer sought to justify the colonial project on the basis of the perceived lack of human qualities of those same victims. In other words, performing indigeneity mattered to the colonizer, because indigeneity did not exist as a pre-given ontological state of being; indigeneity was something the colonizer wished for, in order to justify the project of modernity/coloniality. However, the fact that the indigeneity which the colonizer fought so desperately to construct during the institution of the modernity/coloniality project did not exist as a pre-given ontological state of being does not therefore mean that, at this moment in history, there are no subjects and objects that are identifiable as 'indigenous'. It simply means that *indigeneity* emerged as a colonial construct with a purpose of giving credence to the colonial idea of radical difference between the qualities of being human in the colonizer and in the colonized subject – a difference that would justify the modernity-cum-coloniality project in the eyes of those who wished to raise voices of dissent. Thus, even though there is nothing pre-given about the indigenousness of the people and things that eventually came to be identified or classified as 'indigenous', there is now a socially constructed 'reality' of indigeneity whose roots are colonial.

Although indigenous people today apply the label 'indigenous' to themselves, this does not mean that their state of indigeneity is an inherent quality of being human. It only proves that 'being human' is itself reliant on a set of cultural and biological constructs. The difference between these two aspects of being human is that the cultural dimension can easily be tampered with from 'without', while the biological dimension is more resistant to human interference. It is therefore not surprising that when the colonizers sought to discredit the human qualities of the colonized subjects, they began by attempting to misrepresent their culture. Thus, it was through culture that the colonizers could begin to question the biological aspect of their victims, a development that may well explain why cultural racism preceded scientific racism. In other words, to the colonizers, culture served as an entry point to a more sinister version of colonialism and racism that would later question the non-Western subject's inherent ability to think, resulting in the development of the deficit theories in colonial psychology about the biological make-up of the minds of the indigenous subjects of the non-Western world.

In general, just as it is true that all cultural identities are socially constructed, it is also true that some are constructed more from 'without' than from 'within' their societal structures. Indigeneity is one such identity that has been influenced from without. The influence of this construct has been enormous, in terms of how both human beings and non-human beings are today labelled as 'indigenous', ranging from people and their languages to plants and animals.

In the history of modernity/coloniality, performing indigeneity has always been a constitutive part of the colonization process. Hence, most of the identities now labelled 'indigenous' can be considered colonial artefacts. Thus, the people who became indigenous subjects were also those who either became, or were already, victims of the colonial project. In other words, there cannot be an indigenous subject and object outside a colonial-type of relationship, since the idea of indigeneity is already co-constitutive of that which is perceived not to be indigenous. In the context of the colonial encounter, the idea of indigeneity therefore emerged as co-constitutive of the identity of the colonizer or settler, and many other terms that make such an identitarian concept possible. As a co-constituent of its opposite, the meaning of indigeneity can be deduced from an unpacking of the psychological state of the very subject who sees him/herself as not indigenous or labels the 'Other' as indigenous.

As I noted above, the identities of both people and things were reinvented under modernity/coloniality as indigenous, in opposition to the non-indigeneity of colonial invaders, but it was the identities of people that colonizers worked very hard to reproduce as indigenous. This was partly because people labelled as indigenous, unlike plants and animals, could resist this identification, and partly because their behaviour was not always in harmony with the interpretations of indigeneity that their colonizers accorded them. Since the victims' ontological state of being was not always suitable for interpretations that justified colonialism, the colonizers took it upon themselves to teach the colonized subject to perform indigeneity in a way that justified the colonial project – a project predicated on claims that there was a need to 'civilize' all those people that lacked the acceptable qualities of being human.

Ever since the advent of modernity/coloniality about 500 years ago, colonizers have invested in performances of indigeneity by subjects who exist on the dominated side of the colonial power differential in order to institute and sustain colonial domination. However, this does not mean that performing indigeneity has always mattered only to the colonizer, and not to the victims of colonial domination. It simply means that in the atmosphere of modernity/coloniality, performances of indigeneity have been predominantly conditioned by the urge to dominate and not by a sense of genuine intercultural exchange between the colonizer and the colonized. Thus, it was the colonized who were coerced to perform their indigeneity in ways that suited the views of the colonizers, in order for the colonizers to claim that colonialism was a process of civilization. In this way, indigeneity became a sign of a lack of civilization – a void that the colonizers were ready to fill as their salvationist duty. This then created the illusion, through performances of indigeneity, that colonialism was a 'gift' to the colonized (see Césaire 1972). Such an understanding of why indigeneity matters to the colonizer provides us with an impetus to explore ways in which we can make performances of indigeneity serve as sites of genuine intercultural dialogue, rather than what scholars such as Tamasese and Waldegrave (1994) described as 'rituals of domination'.

Performances of indigeneity, which have always mattered more to the colonizers than the colonized subjects who performed them, mostly under duress, have now become a norm throughout the Western and non-Western world, 'normalizing' colonial power relations even where they are no longer mediated by official colonial structures such as colonial-settler governments. The absence of official colonial authority may give the erroneous impression that most performances of indigeneity today no longer serve any colonial purpose in a world order that is deemed to be postcolonial. As I will show later in this book, there is more continuity than change in how performances of indigeneity continue to serve to preserve the modernity/coloniality project, suggesting that claims of a postcolonial order are fallacious.

In the context of modernity/coloniality, the idea of indigeneity was produced through three processes of colonization that happened simultaneously. These were the colonization of time, space and people. In respect of time, the colonization process positioned indigenous people out of time; hence, indigeneity is conceivable as a 'function of temporal imposition' (Gordon 2013: 60), whereby indigenous cultures are imagined as relics of the past. These cultures are presented as cultures of a particular people in particular spaces that required colonization in order to 'fast track' them into 'catching up' with the cultural orientation of the colonizer – a cultural orientation that is presumed to be up-to-date or 'modern' in the Western space in which it is produced. This, however, creates a problem for the colonized subject, akin to the 'zombification of culture' which Fanon ([1952] 1967) read as an attempt to deny indigenous people the right to live a proper open-ended life of intersubjective relations and contemporaneity. Thus, the idea that their cultures are 'backward' and 'primitive' has compelled colonized and racialized indigenous subjects to invest in systems of modern assimilation. This investment, as Du Bois (1898, 1903) pointed out, has culminated in a sense of self-alienation, and therefore marks the first stage of a double consciousness.

As I observed at the start of the chapter, performances of indigeneity represent 'the colonizer's model of the world' (Blaut 1993: 1), adopting the colonizer's imposed imagination of the self and the 'Other', to enact arrays of expectations and 'secreting indigeneity' (Gordon 2013: 66) or 'secreting blackness' (Fanon [1952] 1967: 114). These 'front stage' performances of indigeneity, especially in tourist sites, presented as though they are 'back stages' of the quotidian experiences of culture, may meet the expectations of powerful tourists, but secrete the humanity of the oppressed subject. That humanity needs instead to be embodied in their genuine sense of alterity – an alterity that does not negate their humanness as history-making subjects. In other words, what we need is a decolonial praxis, in which cultural difference is not equivalent to degeneracy as it is in colonial praxis.

With specific reference to the construction and imagination of indigeneity in Africa, there is ample evidence that the identity of the African indigenous subject, like that of indigenous people of the non-Western world in general, is an identity of people that has suffered its own share of over-determination by a Western-centric colonial perspective. The negativity that comes with the idea of Africa, an idea of Western origin, is so overwhelming that, in the words of Mbembe (2015: 1), 'speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally', because 'Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of "human nature"'. As I will argue in Chapter 3 of this book, the negative portrayal of Africa and its indigenous subject, particularly the black people of the region derogatorily called 'sub-Saharan Africa', has a long history, which includes iconographic representations of Africans as animal-like in Europe, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Colonial Symbolic World as a Crime Scene

My writing of *Performing Indigeneity: Spectacles of Culture and Identity in Coloniality* was primarily inspired by my engagement with the question of the role of performing indigeneity in both sustaining and transcending the moment of modernity/coloniality, but there are other recent developments in my social locale that made the writing of this book urgent. These events can be broadly categorized as the eruption of the decolonial currents in South Africa that have made the subject of indigeneity one of the most popular 'grammars of change' in the much broader agenda of seeking to achieve a genuinely decolonized world order.

The question of the role of performing indigeneity in a world system predicated on the logic(s) of modernity/coloniality as two sides of the same coin is neither new, nor confined to the South African context. However, recent events highlighting the dominance of 'colonial symbols' in the landscape of 'post-apartheid' South Africa has given a new impetus to discussions around the topic of indigeneity. In particular, student movements such as the #RhodesMustFall and the #FeesMustFall protests have reminded us once again that there is a symbiotic relationship between the world of the 'symbolic' and the 'life world' which we experience in our daily lives, as the world of the symbolic normalizes our life world. In other words, the symbolic world has a practical bearing for the lived experience of a people, since colonial symbols serve as tools of social control and, therefore, create a 'pathos of inequality'.

The most recent challenge to the symbolic world in South Africa began on 9 March 2015, when South Africans woke up to a rare student protest at the University of Cape Town. The students were calling for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes mounted on campus. Rhodes was a British colonist and businessperson who was in charge of one of the most brutal series of atrocities, lootings and genocides against the indigenous people of southern Africa through his British South Africa Company in the heyday of the colonial encounter. It is not surprising that the students who resented the presence of this 'colonial' statue at the University of Cape Town were predominantly from black communities which still bear the negative impact of Rhodes's racist colonial adventures in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the students who spearheaded and participated in the protests against the presence of the statue came not only from a black racial background, but also from the background of an impoverished class whose circumstances cannot be reasonably explained outside the history of the colonial encounter between white settlers and indigenous people who lost their most important sources of livelihood as a result of that encounter.

The protest against the statue of Rhodes as a colonial figure at the University of Cape Town was soon dubbed #RhodesMustFall. The name resonated with what the students demanded in the university and in many other places in South Africa, where statues of him and other colonial figures continue to signify an invisible 'colonial power matrix' in an era that is presumed to be 'post-apartheid'. Thus, the student protests under the #RhodesMustFall rallying call and, later, the #FeesMustFall movement, used colonial statues as their launch pad towards protest against the real challenge of the twenty-first century – coloniality-at-large – the continued presence of different forms of colonialism that have remained intact despite the demise of formal colonial structures throughout the non-Western world. In South Africa, this coloniality-at-large has remained largely undisturbed, making a mockery of the idea of a democratic post-apartheid environment where a sense of common belonging is supposedly the new style of co-existence.

The protests of the #RhodesMustFall movement began at the University of Cape Town, but it did not take long for the message of the campaign to capture the imagination of the wider South African population, particularly members of disadvantaged communities, many of whom joined the call for the fall of colonial statues throughout the South African landscape. Soon, organizations such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a radical left-wing political party, made similar demands for the removal of colonial symbols, which included the statue of Paul Kruger on Church Square in Pretoria.

The debate that emerged from the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMust-Fall campaigns centres around the question of equality among the subjects who are meant to constitute a cohesive South African national identity. Ever since the advent of modern South Africa, this question has continued to divide communities along racial lines, as people begin to engage in discussion about the dehumanizing 'heterarchies of power' that cannot be disassociated from the advent of modernity/coloniality. One of the questions that puzzles many of the inquisitive minds in the wake of the calls for the fall of colonial statues in South Africa is exactly what bearing a symbolic expression, for example, in the form of a statue, has on the question of equality among citizens in a spatial-historical temporality renowned for achieving democracy, at least in terms of its constitution. Answers to this question obviously differ, depending on the various epistemic and social locations of subjects in the power structure(s) that mediate(s) their relationships in South Africa and globally. There were, indeed, some members of the South African population that saw no evil and heard no evil about the colonial statues to the extent of defending them as harmless memory reservoirs about 'our painful colonial past'. On the other hand, there were also some who were adamant that the colonial statues in a climate of colonially generated inequalities, such as those that are experienced in South Africa, are not only a reminder of the pain that was inflicted on the majority of the black population, but also serve to normalize the abnormal: the master–slave power relations.

At face value, the arguments both for and against removing these statues appeared to be well founded, but closer analysis reveals a paradigmatic problem about the argument for keeping the statues. First, it is an argument that is rooted in the very mindset that led to colonialism, namely the assumption that certain people are a 'people without history' and, therefore, must obtain their history from such colonial symbols. The problem with this claim used to justify colonial structures is that, if the preservation of history per se is so important, then that is not enough reason for this history to be reflected only through colonial figures of 'white men' instead of also through figures of other human beings whom the whites found in that particular place. Second, the argument that colonial statues should remain is predicated on a colonization of time, not only because history is made to begin with the arrival of white men in the region, but also because it deploys 'time' to distance colonialism and apartheid from the present predicament of black people. This approach implies that, where colonialism and apartheid are mentioned, they must be mentioned as mere legacies, whereas in reality they are presences that have survived the demise of the white settler government in South Africa in 1994, with the first democratic elections.

At the University of Cape Town, where the student protests began, the #RhodesMustFall campaigners associated the statue of Cecil John Rhodes with the feeling of alienation among black students at the institution – a feeling that was said to negate a sense of common belonging between white and black students within the same institution. Among the solutions proposed to address the presence of such alienating colonial statues, which are still scattered throughout the South African landscape, was the idea of replacing them with ones that represent the heroes of the majority of the population, namely the black people of South Africa. This, according to the proponents of the idea, will challenge the silencing of other voices in the story of the making of modern South Africa. They argue that a genuine intercultural dialogue about the history of South Africa will then emerge through the opening up of the symbolic landscape hitherto dominated by a one-sided historical narrative. It would also rehumanize the dehumanized subject(s) whose histories have been stolen under the false claim that they are a history-less people. In other words, the change that was desired as a result of these student uprisings was redress of the long-standing historical question of the humanity of the non-Western 'Other'. This was a justifiable endeavour, considering the hidden assumptions underpinning the unjust celebration of colonial figures such as Cecil John Rhodes, who not only plundered resources but also committed genocide among the people whose descendants are meant to be part of the student community of the university, and participate in the construction of a South African national identity in general.

The objective of dismantling the power structures of modernity/coloniality that protrude into the era that is deemed to be 'postcolonial' has always been a noble idea among the victims of such power structures. But it must be acknowledged that it is not always easy to discern this