

Emily Ngubia Kessé

Whiteness Should Be Introduced to Postcolonial Critiques of FSTS

Abstract: Subramaniam et al. (2016) exhorts postcolonial critiques of feminist STS to include Indigenous and decolonial knowledges from Latin America. I suggest that these intersecting contributions should also theorize whiteness as an important and overarching power structure. Whiteness historically contributed to and contemporarily still contributes to the shaping of our understanding of gender, sexuality, disability, class inequality and race relations, but has also structured and informed colonial conquests and empires. This also applies to the hierarchies of knowledge established within the academy, where, for example, contributions from Indigenous communities remain irrelevant and ignored. My article, using broad strokes of the brush, hopes to briefly establish the importance of considering whiteness in postcolonial analysis as it; 1) has globally structured socioeconomic and political relations by race, 2) was established through colonial violence, 3) necessitated the social construction of whites as a racial category, and 4) procured societal protections by law, enabling its operations to become entrenched in the norms of contemporary (postcolonial) society.

Keywords: postcolonial epistemologies, knowledge production regimes, whiteness, race, violent power relations

Weißsein sollte in die postkoloniale Kritik der fSTS eingeführt werden

Zusammenfassung: Subramaniam et al. (2016) regen an, dass die postkoloniale Kritik der feministischen STS indigenes und dekoloniales Wissen aus Lateinamerika miteinbeziehen sollte. Ich empfehle, dass diese sich überschneidenden Beiträge auch Weißsein als eine wichtige und übergreifende Machtstruktur theoretisieren sollten. Weißsein wirkte historisch und wirkt in der Gegenwart auf unser Verständnis von Gender, Sexualität, Ableismus, Klassenungleichheit und Rassismus, und hat auch die kolonialen Eroberungen und Imperien strukturiert und geprägt. Dies gilt ebenso für die in der Wissenschaft etablierten Wissenshierarchien, in denen beispielsweise Beiträge indigener Gemeinschaften als irrelevant gelten und ignoriert werden. Mein Artikel möchte darlegen, wie wichtig es ist, Weißsein in der postkolonialen Analyse zu betrachten, denn Weißsein 1) hat sozioökonomische und politische Beziehungen weltweit nach der Kategorie *race* strukturiert, 2) wurde durch Gewalt etabliert, 3) machte das soziale Konstrukt von Weißen als eine Kategorie von *race* erforderlich, und 4) verschaffte sich gesellschaftliche Absicherung durch Gesetzgebung, die es ihr ermöglichte, ihre Eingriffe in den Normen der heutigen (postkolonialen) Gesellschaft zu verankern.

Schlagwörter: postkoloniale Epistemologien, Wissenschaftsforschung, Weißsein, race, gewaltvolle Machtverhältnisse

Introduction

Science and Technology Studies (STS) have advanced knowledge production by weaving together modes of historical and contemporary knowledge production with their social contexts, organization, and controversies. STS has convincingly established itself as a multidisciplinary field of science that is based on theoretical and empirical engagement with the material, while revealing that science and society cannot be studied in isolation but should be seen through a reciprocally complex tandem relationship that is constitutive of each other. In current times where COVID-19 has ravaged the world and disproportionately affected Black people and People of Color, followed by the shock waves that streamed through the world after the public witnessing of the murder of a Black man – George Floyd in 2020 through a teenager’s cellphone camera – various fields of science including the neurosciences have begun reflecting on the relevance of race(ism) to knowledge formation and our understanding of the world.

Critiques of colonial science and their hierarchies are already established in the field of STS (Harding 1994, 2011; Schiebinger 2004; Seth 2009; McNeil 2005; Anderson 2002 to name but a few scholars), which is probably one of the pioneering disciplines of research demonstrating how science and their technosciences on the one hand, and the societal complexities, histories and cultures on the other hand co-constitute each other. These intersections are hardly obvious in the natural sciences including the cognitive neurosciences. It is interesting to me for example, that when the neuroscientists explore the notion of race and racism, they explore it with a detachment from themselves. Scientists in that field paint themselves as observants of a phenomenon that takes place ‘outside’ the confines of their scientific apparatus – a societal issue from which (neuro)science (and natural sciences at large) remain sterilised. Moreover, when race and racism are addressed as in some fields of the social sciences including Gender Studies, the approach taken is that of almost exclusively examining the effects of racism on Black people, Indigenous people and People of Color (BIPOC). While this approach has been fruitful in exposing the damaging effects of colonialism, enslavement and racialized discrimination, it still excludes the exploration of whiteness; a deep-seated socioeconomic political structure that not only generates the effects that are lived by BIPOC as race and racism, but one that also conceived the project of colonial subjugation.

I would like to start this endeavour by reflecting about the role of science in what is known and what remains unknown. I have been in higher education for twenty years now in the context of Africa, Europe and Northern America, and it surprises me, yeah it in fact shocks me to apprehend the fact that the histories and contributions of Peoples of Color in their integrity remain absent within the ivory towers. The Maya civilization, a non-white civilization, is historically one of the world’s oldest civilizations, famed for having developed a highly sophisticated writing system and for possessing highly advanced scientific expertise in the fields of art and architecture (Proskouriakoff 1950; Spinden 1975; Stierlin 1964), agriculture (Coe 2011; Whitmore/Turner II 2000), mathematics (Thompson 1971; Kallen 2000) and the astronomical system (Leon-Portilla 1990; Coe