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Response 4: Decolonizing Research

In my last response paper, I looked at an article that discussed the Western appropriation of mindfulness from eastern teachings and how we in the West have transformed it from its original meaning surrounding collective health to fit a Western view of self-care and individualism. This is something that Western folk do frequently as we take other cultures ideas and innovation and warp them to suit our own values and beliefs. This has also been the basis behind colonialism and imperialism. Research is something that is often attributed to the west as we’ve always had the tendency to record and write our histories and philosophies down. This had created an ethnocentric and colonialistic view around what research is and how we go about it. In Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s book *Decolonizing Methodologies,* she criticizes the role of colonialism in research as it is a reduction of different world systems. Western “theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race. Ideas about these things help determine what counts as real.” (44) This system of research has effectively dismissed other ideas and value systems as unacademic or having less value in academia. It also uses education as an excuse to exploit and appropriate these values in the name of understanding, but often only so much as we can fit them into our own systems as “issues of measurement [and] the focus of understanding becomes more concerned with procedural problems.” (42) It is important to try to counter our own instinctive need to fit things into our worldviews so that other culture’s ways of doing and researching may flourish, grow and be valued in their own context rather than how they fit into ours.

My research project is interesting to think about when taking into consideration colonialism in research as its basis is in a country whose economic success has come from a long history of colonialism and imperialism. However, there are three things that I think I should keep in mind when doing research: How I go about researching and the methods use; how I conceptualize the research; and the role of doing historical research. Despite the fact that my research topic is on Scottish mythology, I will be undertaking it in the research with Canadian resources. This could be an issue if I take these traditional myths and cosmologies and try to fit them into a Canadian worldview. It is natural for researchers to automatically make connections and comparisons to what they have learned through research about other cultures and what they know through their own experiences but it can also have negative connotations. When we measure other perspectives by our own we risk not seeing them for their own intrinsic value outside of ourselves and if we are creating something using this appropriated knowledge we are only strengthening the bonds of colonialism in research. Scottish mythology may have completely different connotations than my own upbringing of myth might be. Instead of trying to fully fit it into my own realm of understanding, it is better to reflect on the myths and try to appreciate how they fit or fitted into their environment. While it may be impossible for me to set my own experiences aside, it is important to use them to create further dialogue rather than juxtapose discourse based of it.

When doing any kind historical research, it is important to keep in mind that history can be subjective. One person’s history can widely vary from another person, even if they are from the same country, share the same values and economic standing. It is also important to understand that history has different meanings in itself. Smith states that “lineal views of both time and space are important when examining Western ideas about history” as they are retold in an order of events, usually surrounding key figures and “are social 'constructions' of time, society was said to be feudal, belief systems were based on dogma, monarchs ruled by divine authority, and literacy was confined to the very few.” It’s easy to see then the moments in history that are left out, and the people that are discluded due to their lack of perceived signifance due to a lack of economic standing. When studying mythology, this could be a barrier I might face as it is this group of people whose history is missing which whom would have richer experiences when dealing with mythology. However, there are other sources I can attempt to gather this information from: oral histories. These are songs, and poems passed down through generations that tell stories as the people of the past often “lived according to myths and stories which hid the 'truth' or were simply not truths. These stories were kept alive by memory.” These memories can sometimes be dismissed by institutions, courts and academics in the west because they are not recorded, fact-checked events but despite this they have value has living, breathing human histories.

Work Cited

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. “Research Through Imperial Eyes” *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Chapter 2, (1999): 42-57