

# What to do With Eurocentric Curricula: An Example From 'Antigone in Ferguson'

David Chang

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Article abstract

*In their study of curriculum, teacher candidates often witness the pitfalls of Eurocentric curricula. This critical awareness of hidden biases is vital in a pluralistic society that is only now recognizing its colonial history. Indigenous communities are making bold strides in decolonizing their schools. Their notable efforts instantiate many forms of resistance to Eurocentrism in education. At the same time, there are examples in which marginalized groups seize the cultural goods of a dominant culture and assert their voice through the words of a canonized text. In this essay, I reflect on a modern interpretation of Sophocles' Antigone and consider its relevance to curriculum studies.*

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# What to do With Eurocentric Curricula: An Example From 'Antigone in Ferguson'

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DAVID CHANG

Simon Fraser University

*In their study of curriculum, teacher candidates often witness the pitfalls of Eurocentric curricula. This critical awareness of hidden biases is vital in a pluralistic society that is only now recognizing its colonial history. Indigenous communities are making bold strides in decolonizing their schools. Their notable efforts instantiate many forms of resistance to Eurocentrism in education. At the same time, there are examples in which marginalized groups seize the cultural goods of a dominant culture and assert their voice through the words of a canonized text. In this essay, I reflect on a modern interpretation of Sophocles' Antigone and consider its relevance to curriculum studies.*

## The Play

On a recent trip to New York City, I happened upon a musical production of *Antigone in Ferguson* performed at St. Ann's Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Brooklyn Heights, presented by Theatre of War productions. A modern adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the play begins with Antigone mourning her brother Polyneices' death after a brutal civil war. Her wish to bury his body is denied by King Creon, who pronounces death to anyone who opposes his order. Heeding a higher law, Antigone defies Creon and is sentenced to death. *Antigone in Ferguson* evokes the death of Michael Brown — a teenager killed by police and whose body was left uncovered on the street for four and half hours — and recapitulates the opposition between individual conscience and state power, personal conviction and systemic oppression. First presented in September of 2016, the production's interpretation of Creon as a tyrant impervious to reason also anticipated the election of Donald Trump, whose autocratic streak has proven the modern manifestation of Sophocles' ancient imagination. The cast of *Antigone in Ferguson*, including the choir, musicians, actors and facilitators, were almost all African American.

Dominic Dupont, community liaison and core member of Theater of War productions, facilitated a discussion with the audience after the performance. He argued that the state's power over a body continues today in the form of police surveillance and brutality. For an African American man, the likelihood of a violent encounter with law enforcement constitutes an ongoing assault to his dignity. Dupont pointed out the parallel between King Creon and the racist state, arguing that those who recognize the oppressiveness of current institutions must also confront their complicity in the implicate order.

Director Bryan Doerries has championed Greek tragedies and admired their poignant treatment of perennial themes<sup>1</sup>. In the playbill, he writes: “The production is not an adaptation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, set in Ferguson, Missouri, but rather a ritual of mourning and of hope that does not aim to fix a specific meaning to Sophocles’ play, but rather to inspire audience members to voice their truths and explore the infinite possibility of interpretation” (Brooklyn Public Library et. al., 2019, p. 2). The production is revealing on at least two fronts: it shows both the incisive power of a narrative that transcends time, and the transgressive potential of an interpretation that cuts across cultural and racial boundaries.

As a seminal work of ancient Greek culture, *Antigone* counts as part of the Western canon. Some people might be leery of a Eurocentric bias if *Antigone* was included as part of a school curriculum. In Canada and the United States, where students come from many cultural-ethnic backgrounds, a common curriculum does not affect everyone in the same way, for the impacts of Eurocentric curricula have much to do with the history of a minority group. Consider a recent immigrant from China, an Indigenous student, and a student of African descent, each studying Shakespeare in a high school English class. For each student, the text promotes Western culture by appointing the language, content, and manner of analysis sanctioned by school authorities. However, there is a distinct parallel between the Indigenous and the Black student due to the histories of colonization and slavery, the forceful erasure of culture and language, and the dispossession of land and sovereignty suffered by Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. For them, Western schooling can be an unremitting form of cultural incursion. In this commentary, I leave aside the effects of Eurocentric curricula on immigrant communities and focus on Indigenous peoples and African Americans. I will consider the problems associated with Eurocentric curricula, and the commendable efforts in language and cultural revitalization now underway in many Indigenous communities. I then examine how charges of Eurocentrism serve as a discursive move to signal resistance to cultural hegemony. Because decolonization implies a thorough overhaul of conventional schooling, teachers should be careful about equating greater textual representation with decolonization. Finally, I argue that curricular decisions should be based not solely on the geographic origins of a text, but also its pedagogical possibilities. With *Antigone in Ferguson* in mind, I consider how decolonizing pedagogies can use an artifact from the dominant culture to speak against oppressive power. In doing so, I present to teachers and teacher-educators some options for cultural resistance when facing curricular decisions.

### Critique of Eurocentrism

Working as a teacher-educator, I have noticed a concerted effort from faculty to address the ongoing consequences of colonization, the hegemony of Western world-views and the ramifications of Eurocentric curricula that exclude many other perspectives. This critique of Eurocentrism has become even more trenchant in the era of reconciliation, as Canadians grapple with their settler histories. In an educational context, the critique of the Western canon reveals the biases that shape educational projects, the perspectives that exclude other cultural orientations, and the parochial assumptions that lead to distorted views of other traditions. More importantly, the conduct of educational activities in a sanctioned

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Doerries co-founded Theater of War Productions with Phyllis Kaufman in 2009 (“Theater of War - About Us” n.d.). The production company works with local communities to address pressing issues such as domestic violence, police/community relations, gun violence (“Theater of War – About Us”, n.d.).

colonial language invariably precludes vast stores of understanding, since language underwrites the ideas and metaphors that give shape to thought and experience. Among the most egregious examples in recent history are the residential schools that prohibited Indigenous students from speaking their native languages. The imposition of English as the exclusive language thus severed a vital connection to Indigenous views and values.

The loss of language at the hands of Western schools engenders the loss of traditional wisdom and experience. In response to this assault on culture, many Indigenous educators have committed their efforts to the revitalization of language and traditions via curricula and school structures designed solely around Indigenous principles of learning. Public schools in Nunavut, for example, are designed to be responsive to the Inuit population, with an aim to preserve language and land-based knowledge (McGregor 2013; Oudshoorn 2015). Some Indigenous scholars such as Leanne Simpson are establishing places of learning that refuse to abide the terms set by the Western academy:

the academy has refused to recognize and support the validity, legitimacy, rigor, and ethical principles of [Indigenous] intelligence. . . so we must stop begging for recognition and do this work for ourselves. This colonial refusal should be met with Indigenous refusal – refusal to struggle simply for better or more inclusion and recognition within the academic industrial complex (Simpson, 2017, p. 171).

These cases instantiate forms of decolonization in defiance of current models of schooling. These Indigenous educators do not negotiate the terms stipulated within a Western system, but have withdrawn themselves from Western systems altogether. This is Indigenous education *by* and *for* Indigenous peoples.

For Leanne Simpson, language revitalization and reconnection with land lies at the heart of decolonization. On the other hand, educators working with diverse student populations in urban centers are also considering how to decolonize their practice. A critical awareness of the consequences of Eurocentric curricula is a vital part of teacher education. The movement toward reconciliation and support for Indigenous peoples calls for solidarity and advocacy for Indigenous sovereignty and cultural revitalization. This social and political movement aims to resist colonial power, with its lingering legacy in state policy, law, corporate influence, and, more generally, cultural and linguistic dominance. Resistance to European hegemony creates a culture of discourse that animates many academic classrooms and educational programs. Although there is ongoing debate over what scholars mean by *decolonization* (Donald 2009; Lowman Battell and Barker 2015; Tuck and Yang 2012), the evolution of conversations in university classrooms has led to discursive solidarities that conflate many complex histories, resulting in the use of “colonization” (and its associates “European”, “Western”, and “White”) as a code for that which must be opposed. Among teacher candidates who are new to the discussion, there is a risk of seeing Eurocentrism solely as problematic, not as a result of careful consideration of its legacy, but simply through passive adoption of tacit norms in decolonial discourse.

This view of Eurocentrism can inadvertently promote a simplistic view of the Western canon. When *Eurocentrism* is only used censoriously, the term becomes a short-hand for that which is pedagogically dubious. To say “this is a Eurocentric text” is enough to cast aspersions on a source. Instead, we should use “Eurocentrism” only to refer to a bias in the choice of curricular materials, not a flaw inherent in a text itself. *Hamlet* is written by a European and depicts European characters in a story set in Denmark; these facts *per se* do not make *Hamlet* any more Euro-centric than Luo Guangzhong’s *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* Sino-centric. That Joyce’s *Ulysses* depicts the lives of Dubliners is not a fault of the book, just as Murasaki Shikibu’s preoccupation with the Japanese court in *The Tale of Genji* poses no detriment

to her work. Literary texts are ethnocentric in so far as they present stories particular to a time and place. However, a curriculum as a collection of sources can be deemed Eurocentric when a preponderance of texts come from the Western canon, when dominant perspectives and values spring from a narrow history, and when a suite of expositions is presented to the exclusion of other perspectives and experiences. A Shakespearean play by itself does not pose the problem of Eurocentrism, but a Language Arts curriculum that presents only Western stories may be deemed Eurocentric.

However, to talk about Eurocentrism in this way is to deal only with the problem of representation, as opposed to the more deeply ingrained elements of schooling. Some might argue that a typical science curriculum instills a view of the world as inert objects with properties intelligible to a rational mind. This is a curriculum that favours the abstract over the concrete, the material over the relational, the part over the whole. Likewise, the tendency for teachers to present stories of protagonists overcoming great odds can often reinforce an individualist outlook as opposed to collectivist values that support co-operation and social harmony. Further, some may charge that Western schools, by issuing credentials and qualifications, reproduce the current social order through channels of hierarchical power. Pupils not only submit to the dictates of the system, but also emerge from schools convinced of their earned merit, and of the power of schools to confer valuable social goods. These critiques target the pervasive and foundational principles of schooling, the ways schools perpetuate the social establishment. If Eurocentrism is so ingrained in current educational systems, then perhaps the deliberation over curricular content should give way to the larger task of transforming education, which requires a thorough re-imagining of schools and their foundational design. Critical scrutiny of the curriculum is integral to this project of reform, but cannot be undertaken on its own without the willingness to reinvent schools altogether. Because the discourse of decolonization brings with it a call to action, teacher candidates should understand that the extent of their critiques also imply the ambition of their reform. Broadening the curricula to include a range of texts is part of a larger undertaking of decolonizing schools. However, to the extent that teachers are willing to select a wider range of text but unable to question the underlying attitudes toward narrative, the pedagogical possibilities offered by a text, and the structures that perpetuate hegemony, attempts at decolonization suffer. Curricular reform is part of a larger project of decolonization, but it should not be equated with it. At the very least, teachers should be cautious about using “decolonization” as a code to legitimize every curricular decision that appears to oppose Eurocentrism in schools.

### **What do we do With a Eurocentric Text When we Find one?**

Our approach to decolonizing curriculum depends much on how we view decolonization. If educators see European epistemology pervasively embedded throughout the school system, from bell-schedules to the segmentation of knowledge into discrete subjects, effective redress calls for an overhaul of conventional schooling. In this case, bold moves toward Indigenous, land-based pedagogies (exemplified by the likes of Leanne Simpson) prove a salient example of decolonization. For teachers working within existing school systems, Eurocentrism often appears as part of an antiquated curriculum that presents a parochial perspective to the exclusion of others. In this case, we need educators to pursue educational ends outside the Western canon, selecting sources that better represent a diverse student body. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and teachers need not discard anything on principle. Among the options of decolonizing practices available, educators can also deconstruct a text and highlight

its implicit biases. They can draw on students' experiences in dialogue with the views presented by a European text; they can enact practices that subvert and challenge Western institutional norms. Further, teachers can also cultivate an artistic boldness that asserts a dissident voice using the cultural capital of the reigning establishment.

Admittedly, certain works by European authors espouse an unabashed colonial sentiment. Rudyard Kipling's imperialist call in *The White Man's Burden* is undeniably condescending to other nations and races. No feat of interpretation is apt to redeem its errors. However, in the eyes of a skilled educator, a text so blatant in its offence can be an invitation to pedagogical invention. Because irony renders absurd what is meant in earnest, teachers can have students write parodies of Kipling's verses. Thus, there is a resourcefulness that works against colonialism *through* the very artifacts of colonialization. The pedagogical and curricular question is not only *who wrote this text*, and *what does the text mean*, but also *what can we do with it?*

Interpretative and pedagogical considerations also come into play when designing a curriculum that better represents diverse cultures and perspectives. A curriculum can affirm and sustain cultural identities when they reflect the stories and ways of thinking that students bring to the classroom. The study of texts and stories from Indigenous perspectives are important steps toward a more inclusive society. However, other considerations apply: the text should be age-appropriate, should convey a worth-while message, and lend itself to lively learning experiences.

Given the finite hours of a school day and the limited resources teachers have at their disposal, no curriculum can do justice to the goal of decolonization. Further, there are schools in which teachers have little control over curricular decisions. This sobering recognition need not disempower teachers. Inventive pedagogy can help compensate for the lack of textual choices. If a curriculum falls short in textual representation, decolonization need not come to a halt; teachers can devise subversive strategies for tackling Eurocentrism.

Decolonizing efforts in both K-12 and post-secondary institutions are vital in the era of reconciliation, especially as Indigenous languages remain invaluable vessels of traditional knowledge and wisdom. And yet, amongst the range of possible responses to European cultural hegemony, I think of *Antigone in Ferguson*, in which a marginalized people struggling against the weight of systemic oppression find a confident voice within the words of a Western text. Theirs is a message not imposed from without but rather emanating from within. A Black community performing a Greek Tragedy is not a case of subservience to a dominant culture, but rather of mastery in the face of oppression. The words were penned by Sophocles, but the message is African American.

During his many years of imprisonment under a racist regime, Nelson Mandela found comfort and inspiration in *Invictus*, a poem written by the English poet William Ernest Henley. That Mandela treasured a European poem while imprisoned by a racist White government speaks to the complexity of culture and the ambiguous legacies it leaves behind. Incidentally, I find *Invictus* published alongside poems by Rudyard Kipling in my copy of the Norton Anthology of English Literature (Abrams, 1993): a Eurocentric collection if ever there was one. Europe has hosted racism and colonization; it has also produced enduring wisdom and insight. The ability to discern the difference is among the gifts that a good education imparts. Among these gifts, perhaps the most striking is the ability to seize the stories told by an elite to convey a bold insurgency, using the ruler's words to condemn the ruler. To this end, *Antigone in Ferguson* provides much inspiration.

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## About the Author

**David Chang** is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. He can be contacted at [dchangh@sfu.ca](mailto:dchangh@sfu.ca)