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Our Theories, Ourselves: Hierarchies of Place and Status in the U.S. Academy

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Introduction: Our Theories

Consider the following:

Karen served a few years ago as an outside search committee member for another department at her university. In discussing candidates, a colleague commented that the committee ought not to consider a particular candidate who had earned his PhD from a large southwestern “second-tier” school. The colleague’s reasoning was that, “anyone who is serious about [the subject] would not have attended” that university, and thus the department should not consider hiring him. Karen noted to the committee that people choose universities for all kinds of reasons – including location, cost, family obligations, as well as perceived quality and offerings of the institution and program of study – and argued moreover that none of these spoke directly to the specific candidate’s qualifications. But her argument failed to convince.



The logic of academic hierarchy, grounded or not, perpetuates itself in students' educational motivations. All other things being equal (especially financially), the education students are likely to receive often means less to them than the perceived benefits of getting into the most prestigious school possible. For example, a Bucknell undergraduate had been admitted to a graduate program in a city school offering dedicated faculty and a program tailor-made to his interests but which was considered of lesser quality than another institution that had accepted him – a school considered “top notch” but that would inevitably offer him very little in terms of his interests and faculty access. Ultimately the student opted for the latter school, banking on the school's status and name-cachet for future connections, contacts, jobs, and publishing networks. In essence, his actual education in geography was of secondary importance.

The perpetuation of institutional hierarchy within academia is not without its critics. The annual release of the *U.S. News and World Report's* college and university rankings is invariably followed by articles and op-ed pieces attacking the rankings and the process by which they are reached. Similarly, we have followed listserv discussions over the years criticizing the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) system of rating UK geography departments and their universities; critics call the system unfair and meaningless in judging the quality of students' education, and argue that it encourages neo-liberal corporatization of the university and exploitative practices of faculty labor. Yet who wants to cede the top if they can claim it? Recently, one well-known critic of this system sent Karen some literature advertising his department's graduate program, highlighting the fact that his department had the highest possible RAE ranking within the UK. Having previously rejected the basis for the RAE hierarchy, the letter writer now wanted to use that same instrument for opportunistic ends.

We are all probably familiar with similar scenarios. We offer these vignettes as a way to begin our commentary on the complicities and contradictions inherent in the elitism and privilege that many U.S. (and other) academics enjoy and seek in higher education, but which grate against the values espoused by their postcolonial theories. In this paper we want to examine some institutions that “postcolonialism forgot”: and by this we mean, those sites of higher education within the U.S. context that are (depending on one's measuring stick) “ordinary” schools excluded from the dominant geographical imaginary of privilege and elitism, and that also fit somewhere – again depending on one's measuring stick – in between global centers and peripheries, situated neither as metropole nor margin. We want to focus on their place in hierarchical relationships of academia, and suggest that the ways they are thus cast has a tendency to reproduce deeply problematic elitisms and to reinforce damaging cultural politics of academic knowledge production and practices that go along with them.

We do not want to suggest in what follows that there are not better and worse universities and faculty and students at them – although the questionable parameters by which these assessments are made are quite fundamental to the questions we raise. Nor are we attempting to offer an agenda per se for reforming higher education with a postcolonial critique, discussing teaching about postcolonialism, or evaluating the content, status, or agenda of higher education in formerly colonized places, as many others have done (e.g. Dimitriadis and McCarthy 2001, McClaren 1995, English 2005, Kong 1999). Rather, we want to focus on the complicity of many postcolonial critics – including ourselves – with the very hierarchies that we seek to challenge in our work, via an assessment of practices found in higher education throughout the United States. As Caesar asserts, the “questions of exclusion, power, and representation” with which we are concerned in our research and teaching also coalesce “around the issue of academic hierarchies” (2000, 3). Such hierarchies produce significant and troubling outcomes, including but not limited to uneven publishing opportunities; reduced access to resources demanded for research for those outside of elite institutions’ networks; and probably above all, job discrimination.

A great deal of scholarship on rural-urban tension, on rurality itself, allows a measure of understanding about those institutions in “culturally degraded” places remote from cosmopolitan centers (e.g. Cloke and Little 1997), as their reputations become conflated with the broader ascriptions to place. However this tension only provides one platform for deconstructing networks of power in higher education, since many of the institutions “postcolonialism forgot” are physically located in large urban centers (such as New York’s Bronx Community College). For these we need other tools of analysis. In the discussion that follows we examine academic elitisms within the U.S. as both spatial-physical phenomena as well as reputational-relational ones. As we were inspired to these considerations by our personal experience we begin reflecting on our own various movements through academic hierarchies. We then widen the scope to consider examinations of academic status within the discipline of geography and in contemporary North American academia in general. The framework of postcolonial logic provides a vehicle for our examination of academic structures of status as well an approach toward undermining the prevailing and persistent configuration.

Ourselves

Our backgrounds and current positions allow a particular view from between the margins and center of higher education. Karen received her training from a place many academics, geographers, and especially U.S. East-Coast friends and colleagues consider something of a remote “farm school” (the University of Nebraska-Lincoln). And indeed, as if confirming the anxieties of her student who opted for the more prestigious university, she *has* had to work harder to create job, publishing, editorial, and professional networks for herself without extensive, built-

in networks and structures of support that those from other universities can take for granted. She now works at a “highly selective” liberal arts school in the U.S. East Coast (Bucknell University) that is a long cultural distance from her Midwestern universe. And of course Karen’s sense of outsidership or insidership obviously only makes sense within a U.S. or Anglophone context; relative to any number of the world’s academics, her Midwestern land-grant university might be considered the very heart of the dominant center, or conversely, completely peripheral or irrelevant to academic aspirations.

Tamar, on the other hand, has seen the curious benefits of having attended one of the so-called “best” colleges in the U.S. as an undergraduate (Wesleyan University). Graduates from her school easily sail into graduate schools and careers in publishing, film and banking, among other fields. Networking and reputation allow it to be so, as acceptance and then attendance at this or any other highly selective institution acts as a screener for employers and graduate schools; graduates are certifiably smart, creative thinkers and doers.

But try getting that kind of virtual certification from the place where Tamar now teaches. She herself would not give it, at least as a blanket statement. But neither should graduates of her institution, or the faculty members there, be uniformly saddled with a certificate of mediocrity-at-best. And where *does* she teach? To say the City University of New York would possibly frame your thoughts about where she is situated with a “large urban research university with a storied past and rejuvenated reputational present.” To be more specific and state the place where she actually teaches, Bronx Community College, risks the frame of marginality and academic irrelevancy. Like Tamar, many people with degrees from more prestigious universities work at less prestigious ones out of both choice and necessity. The glut in the market of PhD’s, a desire to live in a particular location, and extenuating family circumstances seem to be foremost among their reasons. But to bolster her academic reputation – or is it her institution’s – would it help if she told you that most of the faculty in her department have published and continue to publish scholarly work? Or maybe she should present another reality that for every CUNY community college student lauded on banner ads in the subways and buses for impressive scholarships and transfer schools, there are a hundred more that cannot and will not make it to their associate’s degree at all.

Hierarchies of Place and Status in Higher Education

Relationships of elitism are not original to higher education, or to postcolonialism, of course, although they are important to it: places and people are necessarily marginalized by the center to keep the center *as* the center. To Caesar (2000), hierarchy is not only common to the academic structure as we know it, but it is necessary for it as well. The putative center defines the value and values for the rest, and presents itself as the aspirational leader, which it does by perpetuating the hierarchical structure and status quo. For geographers, this uneven distribution of

reputation is particularly interesting, not only for its spatial theme but because the discipline itself is a casualty of this structure. As Smith argued (1987), the discipline in the United States lost its academic footing – and departments – when it lost its position as a program at Harvard, the pinnacle of the academic hierarchy, in 1948. While there were external as well as internal reasons for the Harvard program’s closure, the impact of its closing was disproportionately damaging to the profession in the U.S.

One respondent to Smith’s article noted that while the Harvard program was small and relatively weak at the time of its dissolution, the department at Clark University, just an hour away, was strong and dynamic (Cohen 1988). And while it is true that Clark has been a consistent leader in geographic scholarship and education, its perceived “B-list” position in American academic hierarchies could not overcome the disappearance of an ostensibly mediocre department at the nation’s top school. It is important thus to recognize that the hierarchies within individual disciplines do not necessarily map onto their institutions more generally: today a geography degree from Clark University may confer a high value within the discipline, while eliciting blank stares from non-geographers outside the northeastern U.S. (From that perspective, a more generous reading of Karen’s colleagues’ actions above might be that they perceived the candidate’s specialization or department as lacking in credentials, rather than the school as whole.)

As U.S. geographers know, geography faculty jobs today are rare at major research universities and even rarer at “elite” universities. And while many criticize the rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*, let us note that their ranking of U.S. graduate schools does not even include geography. It may be acknowledged that the lack of geography programs at Harvard or Yale reflects the lesser status of geography within the U.S. today – and vice versa – but who is stepping in to trouble this accepted academic hierarchy in the first place?

In his analysis of the hierarchical American academic system, Caesar refers to the decision to work at a particular school as *locating* ambition (2000, 2). This locating of ambition is both a physical-spatial process and a reputational-relational one, and we note, the two are oftentimes closely linked. Many places on the lower end of the reputational scale disproportionately reside in smaller towns or remote areas away from the coastal cosmopolitan centers. Others, though, cater to minority or working-class student populations in metropolitan centers; their cities have recognition even if the schools themselves do not. The power of the academy – by which Caesar locates in national conferences, academic publishing, funding agencies, as well as in the nitty-gritty of departmental hires – silences “degraded cultural locations” such as these more peripheral schools (2000, 35). At the same time it is important to recognize that the power conferred by elite institutions resiliently transcends markers of social difference that might otherwise transmit

social exclusions or barriers: witness for instance Barack Obama's Ivy League administration comprised to a degree of a "new elite" of ethnic minorities who have the same educational backgrounds that most elites in positions of power and authority in the U.S. have always had (Cooper 2009). Same structure, different people.

Some recent postings on the listserv of the Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group of the AAG highlight the tension and resonances between physical and reputational location. With respect to publishing, one individual remarked that: "It has ... been my experience, and I have certainly heard this from others, that the top tier journals won't even consider publications from those of us affiliated with small teaching institutions.... I know that my colleagues at institutions like [names withheld] and should I even dare mention the community colleges ... are never published in the *Annals* and *Professional Geographer*" (February 2009). Debatable as this writer's views are, they are, nonetheless, the individual's views and reflect a particular real experience on the ground. Caesar would likely agree with the writer in his assessment of the "politics of institutional affiliation" (2000, 55-70), arguing that persistent hierarchies of inclusion and power networks effectively exclude most voices from being heard – at conferences, via publications, funding opportunities, and so on. And it is *silence* around these issues that keeps such hierarchies functioning.

A Postcolonial Approach?

For a postcolonial analysis of the American higher education landscape we would first note that the structures, relationships, and hierarchies embedded within it are similar to those of colonialism and imperialism. The hierarchical logic according to which universities and colleges are ordered in the U.S. is *like* the logic that European colonialism used to order its world (Butz 2009), and thus the postcolonial logic used to dismantle colonial structures of power and privilege could be useful in dismantling those of institutions of higher education.

One observation we would make about this relationship is that institutions of higher education considered within the imaginary of the colonized – especially in the global South – have been, discursively and in many cases, materially, recognized as now "valuable" by many U.S. postcolonial critics. Subsequently, a new place for such institutions has been created within the U.S. academy, and in a sense their position has been "raised" within these reorganized hierarchies. Certainly the emergence of the subaltern theory groups at Indian universities is a case in point. As another example, Kong (1999) notes that the National University of Singapore has tried to remake its image as the "Harvard of the East" partially by plugging Singaporean academics into networks "at the centre" – through student scholarships, conferences, and editorial boards.

Meanwhile such sites of higher education now seem to carry more academic cachet or cultural capital in U.S. academic circles than do a host of other types of marginalized institutions of higher education within the U.S. that continue to be excluded from the theoretical imaginary of metropolitan thought and education – all of those second- or third-tier provincial, oftentimes rural, un-elite universities or community colleges that dot the American landscape. Although we want to avoid an essentialist notion of “a U.S. perspective” (since all kinds of people are moving in and around all kinds of places), we do want to argue that while the U.S.-based postcolonial academia institutionally has embraced and in some sense re-centered new formerly “peripheral” places, it has at the same time perpetuated the marginalizing of other places within its own putative center. Thus although the U.S. postcolonial academy has internationalized its work in many ways, in defining its new hierarchies it has done little to address the marginalization of other sites of higher education *as such*. That said, we acknowledge that it might be only a small number of universities in the formerly colonized South (for example) that have attained the level of recognition or cultural capital that we assert; as (Butz 2009) notes,

“Pakistan doesn’t have *any*, for example, and even in India the vast majority of universities remain denigrated backwaters. Only a few universities in specific “model” countries have become nationally elite places producing internationally valued scholarship; these have joined a group of elite universities in the West to form a global intellectual metropolis, and their hierarchical differentiation from other educational institutions in the global south, and within their own countries, is even more pronounced than the hierarchical differentiation of institutions in the USA.”

Moreover many or perhaps most global institutions would not fit into this American- or Anglo-centric framework at all, nor would they wish to (Berg and Kearns 1998). We recognize that there are all sort of academic hierarchies in the world; those relevant to our present discussion center on U.S postcolonial critics, *as* postcolonial critics, who have been at the forefront of influencing powerful shifts in international hierarchies. And again, our concern here is that the contradictions inherent in the elitism and privilege that these critics (and we ourselves) enjoy and seek in higher education grate against the values that they (and we) espouse. Certainly there are a number of other critical theorizations of dichotomous hierarchical logic that might apply to our study; we are pinpointing postcolonial theory both because it offers a particular spatializing logic that is helpful when considering institutions of higher education, and also because it would seem that some of postcolonialism’s own practitioners seem to have missed its lessons.

A number of postcolonial critics, such as Chakrabarty (2000) and Robinson (2006), offer useful ways to rethink the resilient hierarchies evident in higher

education. Chakrabarty (2000) inspires us to reconsider the terms of what has been constituted as “valuable” and “the best” in higher education upon which academic hierarchies and privilege rest. Among other things he engages tensions between provincialism and cosmopolitanism; the former referring to that which is parochial, narrow and partial; and the latter, that which draws upon elements and sources from diverse locations, if not “everywhere.” Cosmopolitanism evokes diverse trajectories of people, resources and ideas. Employing Ranajit Guta’s notions about historicism and the political, Chakrabarty (2000, 12-13) challenges notions of what is defined as “modern” and “progressive” – and by contrast, that considered “backward,” “incomplete,” and “lacking.” (Guta had compared the European experience to Indian peasants’ different path to political consciousness and modernity. In India, modernity was not tied, for example, to literacy and secularity.)

Robinson, in her *Ordinary Cities* (2006), further argues that in much of urban studies, dynamism and innovation – modernity itself – has been considered the preserve of only a few privileged world cities, while poorer and marginal cities have been “profoundly excluded from the theoretical imaginary of urban modernity” (2006, x). She argues that *all* cities have contributed to modernity, and thus all cities are best understood as “ordinary” (2006, 1): she proposes “that we think about a world of ordinary cities, which are all dynamic and diverse, if conflicted, arenas for social and economic life.” Cities to her should be theorized in cosmopolitan terms, resourced and understood by a greater diversity of urban experiences. Her claim is to be “gathering difference as diversity rather than as hierarchical division” (2006, 6).

What would it mean to take an “ordinary cities” approach to institutions of higher education? Undeniably, universities exist within a world of power-laden connections and circulations, but “deploying a cosmopolitan analytic dispel[s] any sense that some [universities] are originators or exemplars and others imitating, or backward” (after Robinson, 2006, 169-170). Thus we must first of all question how we draw our dominant ideas of “the best” universities. What are the terms of evaluation and measurement, and to whom do they belong? If we de-center the reference points from which such understandings are drawn and infiltrated through cultural life, and meanwhile dispense with the language of “lack,” might not all universities and colleges “become ordinary” in their offering a range of diverse opportunities, modes of knowledge and so on, for diverse ranges of academics and students?

A postcolonial approach would certainly not recommend that supposed second- or third-tier colleges and universities need to mimic and aspire to be Harvard (a la Kong 1999)—that doesn’t get us very far—but rather that the Harvards of the world learn from these others. As Robinson notes, “in the corner of geopolitical relations which is the production of academic scholarship, the

opportunities for reconfiguring relations of power have to be more possible” (2003, 274). We not only fail to heed the lessons of postcolonialist critique by continuing to dismiss or ignore the work of scholars in “culturally degraded” places, but we limit our own thinking by shutting out those voices.

Robinson aptly turns Chakrabarty’s device of provincializing the hegemonic center to the practice of academic geography. She argues that geography – the global discipline – needs to reclaim and remain open to the practice of regional geography. In the Anglo-American tradition, at least, regional geography has been characterized as outdated and dismissed for its minimally theoretical nature. But as Robinson demonstrates, regional geography also provides opportunities for western geographers to learn about and from non-western locations and non-western scholars. Regional geography offers an existent framework in which to critique and de-center, or “provincialize” universalizing knowledge: a postcolonial approach. Gilmartin and Berg make a similar argument. They question the re-inscription of colonial hierarchies in which “‘authorities’ in the Anglo core define the important debates and central positions of ‘Geography’” (2007, 121). We want to be careful here to not reinforce an association of a particular point of view with a particular location which regional geography threatens to do – particularly with respect to theoretical elitisms that are oftentimes assumed to map onto the academic hierarchies we see in the U.S. – as this ignores the kind of mobility that we ourselves have been part of in our own career trajectories. However an appreciation for regional geography is one way that could allow for decentering of academic hierarchy at a conceptual level. Of course, we are interested in how this could be practiced materially, and that comes out in hiring practices, publishing practices, and conference practices. The well-attended annual AAG meetings (at one of which we first presented this paper) provide a good point of analysis.

Many would agree that the AAG meetings are too big, too long, and too expensive. What kinds of institutions can afford to compensate their faculty – much less their graduate students – for attending? Plus, many non-research-driven universities carry heavy course loads for faculty; it is not that easy to skip out on four or five classes for a week. Unlike the national conferences of many other disciplines, however, the AAG is open to anyone who wants to present. So while the conference certainly carries its own internal hierarchies of power/knowledge, Geography has the structure for potentially allowing and even encouraging a certain “equality” among all the voices in the discipline. Still, the access issue is an important one. Thus one upside to the openness of our national conference – and its roving location – is that it allows us some possibility of developing it as a site for active decolonization of thought (and again, at least in comparison to the likes of the MLA, ASA, etc.).

Final Thoughts

At issue for us is not just the need for a reevaluation of the quality of education across different types of universities, but a recognition of the value of different perspectives from different lived experiences. This is important in hiring considerations, and committee members need to be vocal in questioning automatic assumptions about places and their perceived academic hierarchies. Geographers, it would seem, would be particularly well suited to being sensitive to such spatial dynamics. And who knows what we are missing if we do not challenge those taken-for-granted hierarchies? The University of Nebraska, to take one example, offers instruction in the Lakota Sioux language, and extensive curricular and research advancements in Native American history, literature, and geography. (And not incidentally, many participants in these and other scholarly activities probably could not care less about the academic hierarchies that we discuss in this paper.) Bronx Community College students include a diverse group of international students and immigrant strivers who bring enormous alternative insights to the classroom.

We cannot know everything about everywhere, and neither should we cease to critically evaluate research and research approaches; but neither should we forget, as Robinson says, “the provincial nature of hegemonic knowledges” (2003, 282). As teachers, journal editors, hiring-committee members, as critical thinkers, can we practice what we preach?

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