



May 2023

Decolonizing History

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

Biko Agozino

I enjoyed reading David Christian's clear [elucidation](#) of the need for a universal pursuit of the knowledge of the origins or metaphysics of beings and things on Earth—and beyond, including the stars and the planets. No knowledge is a waste, and space exploration has benefited humanity by innovating satellite communications technologies that have bridged time and space to make the world a global village.

In this opening essay, Christian argued that Big History may help us to gain better perspectives on how little human history is compared to natural history so that we may overcome the race, class, and gender divisions that still plague the world. This hint suggests that Big History, and any history for that matter, will need to grapple with the problem of racist imperialist patriarchy in order for the world to overcome what is usually called the “Anthropocene” and the anthropogenic global warming that is its hallmark. But such a generalized treatment of humanity risks blaming the victims. Indeed, other authors have identified the real causes to be the “imperialismocene,” given that indigenous peoples went for millennia without wrecking the earth until Western modernity came with greed and authoritarian cruelty.¹

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, W.E.B. Du Bois challenged the ideological uses of History by writers who harped on failures while ignoring successes, especially in the winning of the demand for public funds to be used to fund public schools for all.² In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, prominent indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith warns that history has remained a tool for colonization.³ Big History, by ignoring the struggles to decolonize the methodologies of historiography, risks doing so as well. Indigenous peoples tell the same stories but without the greed for power to control the entire world and its resources, kill original

inhabitants and steal their land, and enslave millions of Africans to work the land for hundreds of years, before colonizing the rest, and continuing to control everyone through financial power or imperialism against the resistance in the ongoing struggles for decolonization. How come such a huge story is not part of Big History? Echoing Angela Davis's call, building on Du Bois, for "Abolition Democracy," we urgently need a "Decolonization Democracy."⁴

Edward Said challenged Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas on this question by inquiring why they never addressed colonial power and the resistance to it in their work.⁵ Foucault responded indirectly by stating that he was concerned with the history of modern Europe and not history with a big "H." Said retorted that there is no way anyone could write the history of modern Europe and omit the huge impacts of Europeans on the rest of the world and vice versa. According to Said, Frantz Fanon is a better historian for paying attention to the big history of white supremacy and imperialism from the perspective of those struggling to decolonize the world and regain their independence.

Big History will be an escapist pastime if the huge history of the devastation of the lives of millions of people is swept under the carpet by Western historians who are eager to study the history of stars and galaxies while evading the urgent demand by indigenous peoples for reparative justice in recognition of the historical crimes and harms caused by European imperialism, racism, and sexism. Big History is in need of decolonization, just like every academic discipline and every area of life today.

Endnotes

1. Jayati Ghosh, Shouvik Chakraborty, and Debamanyu Das, "Climate Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century," *Monthly Review* 74, no. 3 (2022), <https://monthlyreview.org/2022/07/01/climate-imperialism-in-the-twenty-first-century/>.
2. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1935).
3. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).
4. Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Books, 1935).
5. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

About the Author



Biko Agozino is Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at Virginia Tech and Professor Extraordinarius at the University of South Africa. His books include *Critical, Creative and Centered Scholar-Activism: The Fourth Dimensionalism of Agwuncha Arthur Nwankwo*, *ADAM: Africana Drug-Free Alternative Medicine*, *Counter-Colonial Criminology*, and *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System*. He is the co-editor of *Routledge Handbook on Africana Criminologists and African Issues in Crime and Justice*, as well as the director-producer of the award-winning short documentary “Shouters and the Control Freak Empire.” He is the Secretary of the Association of Black Sociologists. He holds a PhD in criminology from the University of Edinburgh.

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Cite as Biko Agozino, “Decolonizing History,” contribution to GTI Forum “Big History and Great Transition,” *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/big-history-agozino>.

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