

Race & Genealogy

Assignment & Discussion Questions

Assigned readings:

Film: *Even the Rain* (2010)

Essay: Ian Baucom, "Spectres of the Atlantic"

part 1: Short Colonialism Reflection

Our second unit brings *historical* events together with the *contemporary* legacies of colonialism. One of our challenges, analytically but also existentially, is to discern how we ourselves are connected to these events.

The exercise is as follows: chart out your own "family tree," however that phrase translates for you, going back as many generations as you are able. (You can do this in very sketched-out terms). See how far you can trace it back, based on the stories and assumptions of your kin and community (include information, in other words, that *may* be true, even if you're not sure about the evidence).

Once your sketch is complete, add in whatever "colonial" details you're aware of: what nation-states are your family members from? did they immigrate/emigrate from one place to another? are there any boundary-crossings that *stand out* to you, in terms of colonial/colonized situations? Especially once we begin to track global movements, we might begin to discern contours of colonial dynamics that we haven't considered. The absences in your sketch will be as significant for our conversations as the names and details that you're aware of, but of course these absences will only start to become apparent through this genealogical reflection and our discussion.

Bring this sketch to class with you next week. We will discuss it in relation to the article, "Spectres of the Atlantic."

part 2: In class discussion

This discussion is about connecting the *wide sweep* of colonial history with where we find ourselves today. Part 1 of this assignment involved a short "family" reflection that prepared us for our in-class discussion, positioning ourselves (as thinkers, as individuals) in relation to that history. Part 2 involves looking to Ian Baucom's essay, "Spectres of the Atlantic," for cues into two competing logics of "temporality" and justice.

We'll start by looking at our own "colonialism" sketches. We're going to see what emerges once you start scrutinizing your own ancestral history in relation to global movements.

1. --first, just look at how far back in time you could go, in terms of your own family's history. One of the real points of this unit is to see what happens to time itself—to temporality, to how we count "historical time"—when we foreground colonialism itself.

Does anyone find that history actually feels suddenly a lot closer than it usually does? We tend to feel very far ahead, I think; there's something about our own era, perhaps—the neoliberal era—that contributes to this sense that we are already living *in the future*. But we're trying to do something a bit different in this unit, which is to really *feel* the past right now. Did this happen to anyone while sketching the genealogy?

2. --do you notice colonial movements among your ancestors?

I drafted part one of this exercise, assuming that this would be doable, but then I thought later: not everybody's family likes to talk about themselves. My mum and I are both pretty fascinated by family stories, so maybe this is something that is a bit easier for some of us to do than others, so let's notice the ways in which our family stories do and perhaps do not shape our sense of our own family histories.

Here's another kind of uncanny effect that might emerge from this reflection: we tend to feel like we're already in the future (time); some of us tend to feel very much like we *are where we are* in terms of *space*, and that feeling is so grounded that it's hard to notice it.

Others of us, I suspect, live with a much more attuned awareness of recent global movements. Perhaps there are very strong connections to other places—other homes, other languages, family that's elsewhere. And perhaps it's more clear, then, that there's a contingency to home. It's here but it is also there. Or it's here, but it could so easily also be there.

There's a word that tends to come up a lot in the literature and philosophy that is very focused on what we're focused on in this unit: the legacy of colonialism and the slave-trade. And that word is "mourning." We're going to think about how mourning is related to justice.

3.—so the last brief reflection is about the dead. It seems right that, in our more abstract conversations about mourning and history, that we remember that we ourselves come from kin, from people who moved or stayed, people who had to move or had to stay. I'd like us to notice how very close the past is.

But that's going to mean something different for each of us. Maybe there's a clear sense of *diaspora* in your sketch: people, once very closely connected in geography, who spread out. So our last reflection is looking at specific junctures in time. This is going to take us a lot farther back than your colonialism sketches.

We're going to watch a 2-minute video: it's an empirically based portrait of the Atlantic slave trade. The main thing I'd like you to notice is the point in time when your family sketch begins. So at what point does your own family history begin for you.

So we're locating ourselves in time (find the year or years when your own family story begins).

The other thing to do is to have a kind of brief but immersive experience of the history we're learning about and talking about. And so, as it's playing, we'll also notice the year of the Zong massacre, 1781, and the point in the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade when the massacre takes place (I'll pause the video at that point, and then let it continue).

--play 2-minute Atlantic slave trade video in class:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6KYQNXZwMI>

Discussion of the video: Let's notice everything that we *can't notice* with this kind of representation of the slave trade. It's an educational video, meant to provoke attention to questions of justice. But of course this is a highly particular framing of justice.

Let's read a quotation from our assigned reading, "Spectres of the Atlantic," and see how this video is actually an example of what Baucom is identifying as the tendency of our era: "One might, indeed, historicize a late-20th and early-21st century contemporaneity by suggesting that what demarcates this as a quasi-coherent, periodizable moment are not simply the varied triumphs of global capital but the struggle to find some way of doing justice **to this 'sort' of past** [like South Africa or Canada's TRC]." (Ian Baucom, "Spectres of the Atlantic," 72).

Can you see how this 2-minute "educational video" represents the slave trade as a series, rather than as an event?

Here's the key question that Baucom says we all are grappling with: what *logics* do we employ in order to render a gruesome event like the Zong massacre recognizable?

Is it a "sort of scene"?

If so:

Series
Generic
Typical
Substitutable

or is it an exceptional human scene of suffering?

if so:

event
singular
particular
exceptional

To seek to do justice, Baucom writes, our impulse "is frequently to include towards" seeing suffering as a sort of scene, "to substitute for the specific, qualitative" character of this 'event' a knowledge of its "universal character" or its *value* (73). Of course, this is what enabled the owners of the Zong to win their lawsuits and secure "recompense" for the loss of their cargo (the murders of over 130 human beings, thrown overboard from the Zong in the Atlantic ocean). This is why Baucom writes that "justice abominates the singular."

Let's return to your genealogical sketch.

Let's see how this inclination to generalize might be at odds with an exceptional person or a particular event that actually *resists* being turned into a "sort of scene."

That is the tension that we are especially interested in drawing out:

How to do justice to the singular, the exceptional? How to mourn. How to open up relations to memory *that do justice* to the singular. Are there *singular* moments or individuals in your family tree that help you to evade the temptation of seeing the past as "a sort of a scene"?

Ian Baucom is arguing that if we smooth out the unevenness of time—if we contain the past by representing it as a series of substitutable events—then we refuse to be haunted by the specters of the Atlantic (80). So what might it mean to *cultivate* haunting in our own lives? Is anyone convinced that we *should* inhabit time in ways that allow the singular to interrupt the flow of time?