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# The Role of Education – Belize at 41 Public Talk – "Belize Finally Breaking the Chains of Colonial Thought at 41"

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**Belize at 41 Public Lecture -  
“Belize Finally Breaking the Chains of Colonial Thought at 41”  
September 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, 2pm  
University of Belize Jaguar Auditorium**

**Theme:** Role of Education

**Speaker:** Christopher De Shield

**Prompt:** How the new curriculum and other changes may break our children free from old ways of thinking.

**Abstract:**

Belize’s systematic exploitation under British colonialism has left a legacy of poverty and underdevelopment the country has yet to surmount. For Belize, decolonisation is an ongoing process. Education is routinely cited as a means for social and economic uplift and the key to emancipation from mental slavery. In this short talk, I argue simply that the Arts and Humanities are central to this emancipatory process.

Belize’s decolonisation agenda will only be served by encouraging greater empathetic, critical questioning, big thinking, historical awareness, skilful communication, and the ability to appreciate nuance and celebrate difference.

To the extent that the new curriculum fosters the type of thinking humanities subjects provide through the inclusion of arts competencies will it support efforts to articulate Belizean identity, take up the challenge of decolonisation, and engage learners in the life-affirming and future-friendly education we need to confront the debilitating legacies of colonialism and other looming global challenges.

## Public Lecture Decolonisation and the New Curriculum

Good Afternoon students & distinguished Guests...

I have assembled a few notes around the fact of the new curricular framework and the question of whether and how it might assist to 'break our children free from old ways of thinking'.

As to the premise, have we broken free of colonial thought at present? The answer is a boring 'no'.

But this is not meant to be a lament; the question is somewhat naive. You don't go through three hundred years of plunder and poverty, of squalor and neglect and then simply and righteously declare yourself free of all consequence and culpability...

Further—and this is hard for me, and a challenge to those who throw the word decolonisation about too facilely—our own cultural identities are so *bound up* with colonial history that I wonder if absolute decolonisation isn't a form of autoimmune disorder: our modern nation is born out of colonialism, to excise it *must* be painful.

In his book *How Britain Underdeveloped the Caribbean*, Sir Hillary Beckles reveals how the UK skilfully weaselled out of its responsibilities after it systematically exploited the region; it set up Caribbean leaders for failure at independence. I cite this work to make the broad claim that some of the social misery and poverty we have today is the result of *intentional colonial underdevelopment*. I just want to recognize that.<sup>1</sup>

So, no, just as those thinkers of postcolonialism and decolonisation insist, these legacies of colonisation persist to the present day; structures that enable exploitation remain.<sup>2</sup> They must be dismantled.

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<sup>1</sup> Beckles draws on George Beckford's *Persistent Poverty* argument, how "how economic structures historically designed by British facilitated maximum wealth extraction..." & that plantation modes of production were simply applied to newer (and non-agricultural) sectors. *How Britain Underdeveloped the Caribbean* (p. 11). In the section "Fuelling the Expansion" Dylan Vernon argues that the poverty brought over from the colonial period persists (*Political Clientelism and Democracy in Belize: From My Hand to Yours*, p. 111).

<sup>2</sup> As Dylan Vernon points out "Revenue leakages related to profit repatriation by foreign investors have also contributed to fiscal deficits in almost every year since the 1990s." (*Political Clientelism and Democracy in Belize* p. 112). See also Ferrell and Wainwright's argument around Belize's failure to 'discipline capital' In "The political economy of development in Belize under the People's United Party". *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 2022).

So the question is, how does our Education system provide learners with the tools to perform this dismantling? And how do we then rebuild and support attempts to re-imagine more life-affirming futures?

I take this to be a challenge for myself and my colleagues: to what extent, in our respective spheres of influence, are we achieving these goals?

My specific prompt asks how the new curriculum might break learners free from old ways of thinking. I don't take this to suggest an uncritical embrace of newness or a fetishization of youth culture. Instead, I think it points to the need for *continuous critical reflection*.

In the book *Something Torn and New* the great Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, describes colonialism as "cultural dismemberment" (he gives a gruesome literal example in the beheading of King Hintsa), to reveal the real cruelty and utter loss wrought by imperialism and its handmaiden colonialism, you can't simply ignore what has happened ... that loss is irrevocable.

Professor of Rhetoric, Pheng Cheah, builds on Ngũgĩ's work to offer a metaphor for understanding how we cope in the aftermath of colonial brutality and cultural dismemberment. Pheng Cheah argues that, for such nations, the postcolonial state functions as a kind of prosthesis.

This is the metaphor. When the state responds to people's needs, then it is an enabling and appropriate prosthesis, if it works in service of outside entities, then it is an oppressive and alienating one.<sup>3</sup>

The danger of neocolonialism, or the continuation of colonial logic after independence is that a "foreign prosthesis is attached onto the nation, one that is inappropriate and fails to respond to the people's needs". In Cheah's words, the prosthesis then "[harnesses & bends] the state towards multinational capital's *inhuman* interests" (*Spectral Nationality*, p. 355).

When we look at such proposed projects in the country today as massive cruise ports, extractive mining, logging operations, dams... we ought to ask:

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In their *Economic History of Belize* (Cubola), the Bulmer-Thomases argue that Belize is under-taxed, that the outdated growth model is flawed, based as it is on GDP solving everything, and that the system is rigged for failure in any case by the weighty and numerous tax concessions in play. They cite Michael Ashcroft's team of lawyers' and politicians' dogged fight for extraordinary concessions as a case in point. (Chapter 6, "The Belize Economy Since Independence": "macroeconomic policy", p. 166)

<sup>3</sup> See Pheng Cheah's *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*. Columbia University Press, 2003.

do these projects have the development and well-being of communities, people and environment *at their core*? Or are these projects primarily designed to efficiently extract the greatest possible wealth from the region and move it outside?

There are forces out there, not designed to alleviate social miseries or improve our human lives, but to firstly, maximally, extract financial profit for the few. And, in my mind, the connection is clear... such was the model in colonial times. *Extractivism*. Get the wealth and get it out. Antonio Benitez-Rojo writes in his book *The Repeating Island* about the “medieval vacuum cleaner” imperialists installed in the Caribbean ... the tube sucking wealth that birthed modern-day exploitative capitalism from a Caribbean womb, with the painful clamps of plantation slavery and the *encomienda* system... what a legacy!<sup>4</sup>

But if there is something that our education system *can* inculcate, it would be to employ emancipatory and liberatory methods that *empower* and *enable* learners of all ages to develop discernment, resilience, twenty-first century skills, uncommon discipline, and the ability to maintain extended skilful focus in an age of shrinking attention spans!

A tall order?

My humble contribution here is a simple and twofold claim:

1. First, that decolonisation is a perpetual process & *not* an arrived at destination.
2. Second, that the Arts and Humanities are *essential* for the project of decolonisation, in fact, it is really on this latter conviction that I agreed to speak here today.

There is a damaging attitude to Education currently ranging the world, that tries to convince us that education is nothing more than a product, that universities are factories competing in the global educational market. The managerial language is already here, when professors are reduced to mere content-creators; place-holders, without attending to their essential role of creating a community of inquiry within the local context from which we emerge.

This view sees education *instrumentally*—that you just go to school to get a job to work for the Man, nothing more, and certainly not for any fluffy or

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<sup>4</sup> See Introduction to Antonio Benitez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* p.5

romantic notion of cultivating qualities that might distinguish yourself as a person.

This idea is memorably reflected in the meme where a young person is asked:

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

they answer "An honest, brave, compassionate human being..."

Wrong answer. The questioner, obviously irritated by the idealistic response, interjects,

"No no no... I mean, how do you want to sell your labor?"

Is that the end-all, be-all of your education?

So my first prescriptive observation, is that while we must be practical in charting our future, we ought still to discard the attitude that views Education *only* in instrumental terms.

If we are not being taught and encouraged *how* to question, *how* to research  
If we do not provide learners opportunities to craft, create, articulate, & explore ... in a safe environment of open inquiry ...  
then we impoverish our learners.

So, to answer the question, insofar as the new curriculum promotes the development of research skills, of knowledge *discernment*, of building competencies instead of rote learning alone, as the framework sets out to do, does it aid in our decolonisation.

**The other prescription is to focus on building 21<sup>st</sup> Century *skills*:**

It is one thing to teach children to read the labels of corn beef tins to determine which one is the cheaper.

It is yet another to teach *Materials Awareness* so that they ask: "Look at this packaging... is this wasteful?"

"How complex is the production system? How are fossil fuels being used to get it me?"

"Which of these products uses local ingredients?"

Or *advertising awareness*, how does this product target me? What messaging does it exploit?

*Deeper grounded economic awareness*... This seems cheap here, but will I get a massive hospital bill 10 years from now?

All sorts of skills are needed... And, in an age of looming ecological catastrophe, our education must be able to provide *psychical survival gear for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

*The Handbook for Sustainability Literacy*<sup>5</sup> identifies needed skills: Futures Thinking, Emotional Well-Being, Optimisation, Finding Meaning without Consuming, Social Conscience, Appropriate Technology and Appropriate Design.

We need Ecological Intelligence, New Media Literacy, Transition Skills, Cultural Literacy, Citizen Engagement, Commons Thinking, a whole learning society.

So the lesson is that curricular review, like decolonisation, is a continual work in progress. It must be on-going.

### **Need for STEAM**

I am glad to see that the Curriculum framework employs the STEAM acronym (p.4), that the Arts are recognised as a crucial component, because the Arts and Humanities provide life-long, transferable skills and are inherently critical of instrumentalism.

As an adjunct lecturer at UB, I once attended a conference on photovoltaics where a literal rocket scientist shared his CV.

The complexity of his work was fascinating; you might argue that there is beauty and elegance inherent in the equation for projectile trajectory over the surface of the earth, how so many variables are involved in targeting a point a few metres in diameter a thousand miles away...

But he was eventually disillusioned. In the end, he realised that he was creating bombs that would destroy black and brown bodies in struggling nations under false pretences.

The Arts and Humanities are essential here, just as we seek material uplift and technological advancement this needs to run lockstep with the cultivation of empathy, cultural literacy, identity and soul.

### **Mental Slavery, Extractivist Culture**

There is no mere technological escape from the mental slavery Marcus Garvey challenged us to free our minds from.

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<sup>5</sup> See the *Handbook of Sustainability Literacy* edited by Arran Stibbe, Green Books, 2009.

I am inspired by the work of Belizeans who model research ethics, that practice decolonisation at the academic and pedagogical level.

I am inspired by the work of my colleagues' here on the stage. and those abroad who critique extractivist models of research where knowledge is harvested in regions like ours to further the careers of outsiders without attendant capacity building or results-sharing or national depositing.<sup>6</sup>

I'll conclude with this thought: So much of colonial history is based on *misapprehensions*, *misnaming*, and intellectual arrogance. Belize's own history is no exception.

The other day, in one of my classes, we were considering Matthew Restall's re-evaluation of competing theories on the origins of the name Belize.<sup>7</sup> His paper presents a remarkable *speculative* scene where he *imagines* colonial explorers encountering indigenous Maya at the Tipu river and asking them "que es el nombre de este rio?"

And the imagined response, of these colonial-era Mayas? They answered "bel itza", meaning, "this is the way to Itza". The ignorant colonial explorers thought the Maya were sharing the name of the river, which became the name of the place, and eventually, the country.

On one level, this scene is so quintessentially colonial. Like Columbus's *West Indies*, yet another geographical malapropism, a whole territory *misnamed*. Our whole nation named after some colonial mistake. How embarrassing, like so many other colonial legacies.

But on another view, there is something recuperable or salvageable about that legacy. Belize is not a place-name, it is a way, a journey. And that is the lesson, we are not there, we must always be going.

Thank you.

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<sup>6</sup> See Nicté Fuller Medina "[Data is patrimony: on developing a decolonial model for access and repatriation of sociolinguistic data](#)" *archipelagos: a journal of Caribbean digital praxis*. Issue 6 (May 2022) for an exemplary Belizean decolonial approach to academic practice.

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew Restall (2019) Creating "Belize": The Mapping and Naming History of a Liminal Locale, *Terrae Incognitae*, 51:1, 5-35, DOI: [10.1080/00822884.2019.1573962](https://doi.org/10.1080/00822884.2019.1573962)

## Short Bio:

Christopher De Shield is assistant professor of Literature in the Faculty of Education & Arts at the University of Belize. He holds a Ph.D. in Literature (University of Malaya), an MSc. in Literature and Transatlanticism (University of Edinburgh), and a BA in English & Biology (Goshen College).

His research interests lie in the intersection of postcolonial theory, literature, and the environment. He regularly presents research at international fora (including ISCR/NICH conferences and HENB's KULCHA symposium). Christopher is a member of the *Postcolonial Studies Association* (PSA) and the *Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment* (ASLE); he peer reviews for the Oxford journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (ISLE), *Postcolonial Text*, and *Caribbean Studies* (UPR). Current projects include [archival research on the poet James S. Martinez](#).

### Selected Publications:

- '[Succouring an Ixtabai: Zee Edgell's Deployment of Belizean Folklore in The Festival of San Joaquin \(1997\)](#)', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 44.1 (2019), 23–42
- '[The Cosmopolitan Amaranth: A Postcolonial Ecology](#)', *Postcolonial Text*, 10.1 (2015)
- 'Literary Isomorphism of the Caribbean and Malayan Archipelagoes', in [Ecocriticism of the Global South](#), eds. Slovic et al. (Lexington Books, 2015)

Outside academia, Christopher plays double bass in classical and jazz ensembles. With his wife, Miriam Loh, he enjoys working a village smallholding.