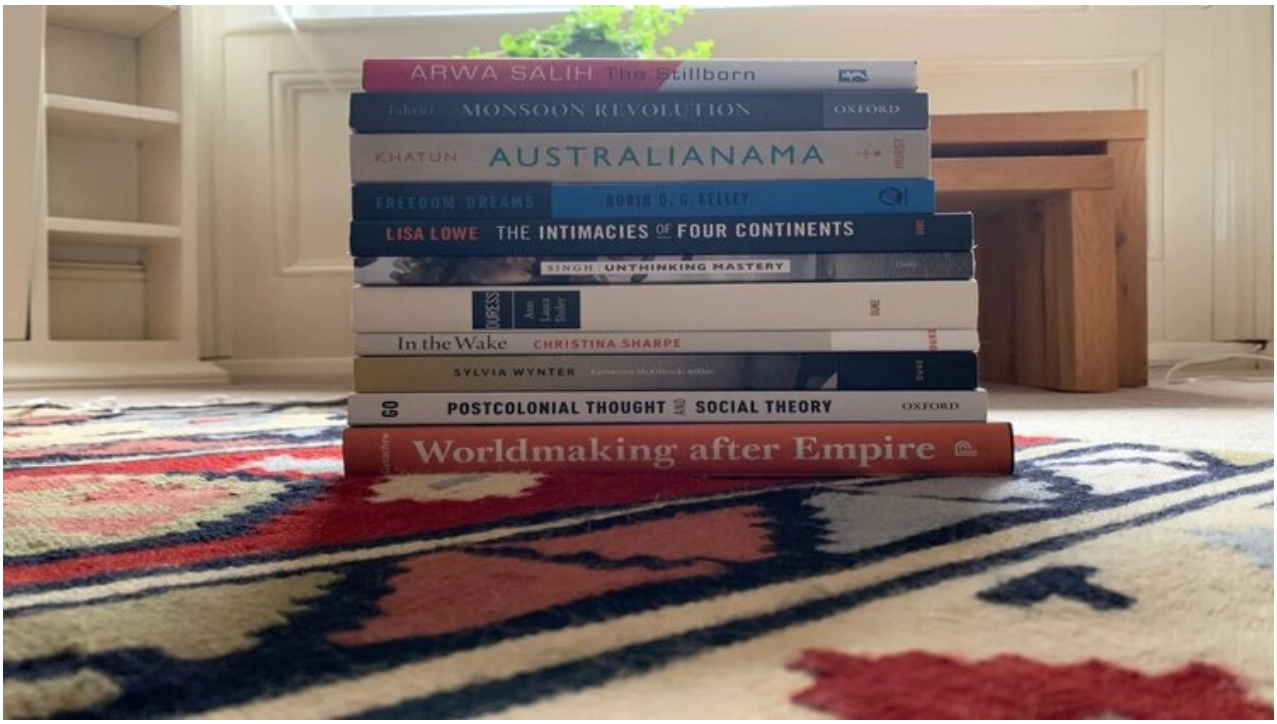
On teaching anticolonial archives

What does exploring decolonisation mean, look like and feel like In the classroom? And how does one think of this in relation to both the curriculum and pedagogy? ***Sara Salem*** *takes up these questions as she reflects on designing and delivering a course at LSE on anticolonial archives. She takes readers through the contents of the course, the questions and emotions that it generated and considers the role of the professor in creating a space where everyone can participate meaningfully. At the end of the course, it's not just the students who have changed, but the teacher, too.*

Last year was the first time I taught my course on anticolonial archives, *The Anticolonial Archive: The Sociology of Empire and its Afterlives.* It was an incredible eleven weeks, not least because of how inspiring the students were. The course felt like a journey, and because it was the first time I had taught it, everything was both new and open to change. The photograph below is a collection of some of the thinkers we talked about throughout this course as we explored colonial histories, anticolonial resistance, and decolonial futures. What does it mean to be free? And how can we practice freedom in the way we think, write and create? 'Freedom is an elsewhere' as Avery Gordon wrote – that elsewhere is also in our anticolonial pasts.



The course focuses on a selection of 20th century anti-colonial movements in order to explore the postcolonial moment that emerged after the end of European empire. We trace conversations anti-colonial movements had around nationalism and post-nationalism; capitalism and geopolitics; resistance, subjectivity and modernity; and global patterns of inequality. The course investigates these topics through various "anticolonial archives," including theoretical texts by major anticolonial and postcolonial theorists, literature, archival data, posters, images, speeches, films, memoirs and private correspondence.

We thought about what it means to think and write through how we feel and through our memories, of how we might think of archives as expansive and slippery. We thought about the past through haunting, ghosts, memory, feelings, and the universe. We thought about archives through dust, soil, documents, stories, poems, songs, names, feelings, infrastructures, dreams, ancestors, science, technology, and more.

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> We thought about ourselves as anticolonial archives. Our bodies, feelings, life histories, and names.

We asked, what is an anticolonial archive? Where is it? What is it made up of? It's both nowhere – if we think of archives in a traditional sense – and everywhere, if we think of anticolonialism as memories that are always with us. We thought about ourselves as anticolonial archives. Our bodies, feelings, life histories, and names. In their essays, students reflected on an anticolonial object through which they could tell stories of violent histories and hopeful futures, and how this can be done through intimate forms of theorizing.

While I was conscious of creating a reading list that was both global and that spoke to fields such as postcolonial studies, Black studies, feminist studies, and a range of other critical fields, I was also conscious of the importance of pedagogy itself in creating open classroom spaces. bell hooks writes about creating a classroom space in which we all recognize each other's presence. What does it mean to become interested in one another, and for the professor to value everyone's presence? In my own case, what kind of work can I do to ensure that students whose own family histories are deeply connected to histories of empire and racism feel cared for in my classroom? This led me to think much more about pedagogy, rather than just teaching material, linking to debates around decolonizing the university.

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hooks goes on to write about the practice of *collective listening,* and I think this is especially important when the subjects being taught and discussed are so intimately connected to our everyday lives. It also breaks down the supposed binary between theory and experience, and encourages students to theorize what might seem like simply personal experiences, as well as to see everyday life as theoretical in its own right. This suggests that "decolonizing" the curriculum can never just be about reading lists or adding a few non-Western thinkers to a course. Pedagogy plays as big of a role in what we teach as the readings we choose to teach with. hooks' *collective listening* is thus an important form of pedagogy that brings all experiences into conversation with one another, opening up the possibility that students will feel cared for in the classroom space.

In my own teaching, I have tried to think of ways to bring in pedagogical practices that centre empire and its afterlives beyond a non-Eurocentric reading list. In another class I teach, I ask students to visit the British Museum and choose an object or exhibition to write about from the perspective of empire and race. What alternative stories could we tell about the British Museum and objects within it if we thought from the vantage point of Britain's imperial past and present? Importantly, I ask students to reflect on how they felt in that space, and what it means to see something we've seen before through a new lens. This exercise highlights the ways in which the city we teach and learn in is a postcolonial city, built on the afterlives of British empire.

> Classroom spaces like this are created collectively, not only through reading lists and lecture topics, but through how we think about the world and in trying to practice care towards each other, towards the thinkers we read, and towards the historical events we speak about.

Pedagogy and teaching more broadly can work to make visible histories that have been marginalized through the cultivation of classrooms as spaces of care and radical imagination. Coming back to the *Anticolonial Archive,* I'm grateful for how much of themselves and their knowledge and experience that everyone shared. Teaching can open things up, and open us up. We can bring together parts of ourselves that we might not have even know were disconnected from one another. We can connect with each other on multiple levels, and really think through what collective learning means. Open up the possibility of troubling binaries of intellect/emotion, us/them, past/present/future, North/South, and so many more, even if we don't break them down entirely. Classroom spaces like this are created collectively, not only through reading lists and lecture topics, but through how we think about the world and in trying to practice care towards each other, towards the thinkers we read, and towards the historical events we speak about.

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I'm so grateful for courses like this one, and always feel richer and more inspired than at the start of the journey. The best teaching experiences are those that leave you changed. I can't speak for everyone else in the classes I teach, but I have definitely changed immensely with each course that comes to an end.

Image credit: Author's own

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