

**Josie Gill, “Decolonizing Literature and Science.” *Configurations*, 26:3  
(2018): 283-288.**

Not long ago the cultural historian Mary Poovey visited my campus and delivered a fascinating lecture entitled “Regimes of Factuality: Living in a Post-Fact World”. While her previous scholarship had focused on the rise of the modern fact, this particular talk speculated on its exact opposite, namely the widespread erosion of facticity in contemporary society. According to Poovey, one of the most disturbing trends of the last decade or so has been a burgeoning social suspicion – even hostility – to scientific logic that was once accepted as authoritative and true. Central to this decline was the diminished power of knowledge institutions like the university, the academic society, and the prestige newspaper, all of which can now be summarily dismissed by single tweet of “Fake News!” After her presentation, I asked Poovey if our post-fact present was merely a blip of current politics or a more fundamental shift in the way we process information. “I really don’t know”, she grimly answered, “We’ll have to see”. For her, returning to a fact-based reality as soon as possible is an epistemic imperative as well as a moral one; indeed, it is only by rededicating ourselves toward post-Enlightenment institutions and the scientific frameworks which have historically defined modernity that we can liberate ourselves from the inherent dangers of “alternative facts”.

And yet, as Josie Gill contends in her recent essay for *Configurations*, the ongoing task of contemporary science studies is to question the very institutional structures and orders of knowledge that define modern science (287). As a dominant episteme enmeshed in capitalism, colonialism, and Eurocentrism, Western science is long overdue for critique. Gill’s piece resonated with me because she skillfully delineates the precarious terrain in which twenty-first century science and technology studies (STS) now finds itself, navigating between deafening public calls to “Expose the lies of science!” and “Defend science at all costs!” Do we as STS scholars have the collective will to probe the ideological and internalist foundations of modern science when it already faces external threats from the ever-multiplying merchants of doubt? And even though the questions the conservative mass media aims at science are completely different from the ones the academy tends to raise, both groups play a role in the shifting sands that is contemporary science. As a discipline, science studies must consequently shift with it.

Like Gill, I ultimately believe our field must remain committed to decolonizing science and literature. While remaining cognizant of the dangerous anti-science rhetoric of the political right, STS scholars should continue striving for epistemic diversity in our research, pedagogy, and outlook. What I would like to do in this short essay is offer a few theoretical and practical thoughts on how we can accomplish this. To begin, science studies ought to further the globalist approaches generally known as “epistemological equality” and “epistemic modernization”. Over the last two decades, Sandra Harding has called on critics to decenter the West from scientific discourse. Epistemological equality is an active attempt to recognize the history and authority of scientific traditions from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Global South even if they do not align to Enlightenment conceptions of positivistic science (Harding, *Is Science Multicultural?* 1998, 34-35). David Hess similarly embraces the multicultural future of a twenty-first century science that hybridizes knowledge from around the world. He defines epistemic modernization as “the process by which the agendas, concepts, and

methods of scientific research are opened up to the scrutiny, influence, and participation of users, patients, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, ethnic minority groups, women, and other social groups that represent perspectives on knowledge that may be different from those of economic and political elites and those of mainstream scientists” (“Science in an Era of Globalization: Alternative Pathways”. *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*. 2011: 420). By calling for contemporary science to allow for new voices and worldviews that have been typically excluded from the production of knowledge, Hess argues for a new space for the marginalized, the dispossessed, and the silenced within science. That he defines this approach as a “process” strikes me as exactly right because the decolonization of science can neither happen overnight nor without the active, conscious participation of researchers and STS scholars. It is, and should be, a continual movement forwards, an ongoing agenda for our discipline. What I admire about Harding and Hess’s thinking is their “expansionist” view that does not simply condemn modern science for its imperialist past so much as encourage us towards an increasingly heterogenous and multi-paradigmatic future. Such an approach does not mean attacking science studies scholarship or programs for Eurocentric bias since modern science does, after all, belong to the larger totality of science. Rather, it means acknowledging the limitations of a top-down, Western-only study of nature. This is the crux of Gill’s essay, which views the science decolonization movement as a vital process for reconsidering how “knowledge – and the methodologies adopted for acquiring it – might be exclusionary, exclusive, and indifferent to inequality and injustice” (284). It also means exploring the forgotten histories of fringe and non-Western scientific traditions with the same vigor by which STS has previously studied areas like physics, biology, psychoanalysis, and medicine. It is in this robust amplification of epistemological inquiry that I believe resides the future of science studies.

We might say, then, that twenty-first century science studies ought to embrace a more “carnavalesque” ethic. By this I mean STS scholars should embrace a Bakhtinian multivocality in which Western, non-Western, modern, premodern, physical, and metaphysical approaches to nature can all fall under the purview of scientific inquiry. Not only does this augmented mindset align with current calls for decolonization, but it also reaffirms the collective vision of Paul Feyerabend, Michel Serres, and Bruno Latour to see the intrinsic hybridity of scientific knowledge. For some, this may be a step too far. If all these different frameworks can be considered science, then nothing is science, and what have we truly accomplished? This is a valid concern. Science, however, is not an artifact to keep behind a museum display but a dynamic body of knowledge that should evolve with us. By expanding who is authorized to speak and what scientific fields we are permitted to study, a carnivalesque science studies aligns our discipline with the broader path of inclusivity now unfolding across the humanities.

In terms of practice, what might such a decolonized science studies look like at institutional and individual levels? For organizations like the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, History of Science Association, and the Philosophy of Science Association, it could mean focusing more attention on non-Western and nonmodern scientific traditions in conferences and calls for papers. The same goes for university presses and academic journals, who can increasingly turn to indigenous, esoteric, and heterodox sciences as rich sources for cultural history and analysis. Fortunately, such changes are already taking place, but an accelerated and expanded receptivity to those working in marginalized sciences would certainly be welcome. In our teaching, decolonized STS could mean asking ourselves if we should teach *Brave New World* in that interdisciplinary literature and science seminar for the umpteenth time, or if we

might consider carving out space for something new. For instance, what can the Meso-American circular time of *Rag Doll Plagues* reveal to us about different cultural models of chronology? Is time cyclical, linear, relative, or something else? Who gets to determine the flow of time anyway? These are questions I often pose to my own students and they usually generate terrific conversations. Similarly, how does telepathy manifest in *Of One Blood* and *Ubik*, and what does it say about the enduring power of pseudoscience in our hyper-scientific age? If we expand the epistemic traditions from which we draw our texts and critical readings, we can encourage our students (and even ourselves) to reflect ever deeply on the nature of scientific logic, power, and history.

Questions like these are beneficial because they do not berate science so much as broaden our conception of it. This is the decolonized science studies that Josie Gill hopes to see. More voices. More perspectives. More inclusion. Interrogating science and science studies in a post-fact world does not necessitate tearing them down. On the contrary, such questions can make our field stronger than ever.

Derek Lee  
Pennsylvania State University