

Theory: cracking open the gemstone

An alternative **educational resource** for University students studying History on the spectrum or with specific learning difficulties. Or anyone who finds understanding the **theory behind history** challenging.



Image Kate Abbosh ©

Do you feel stressed whenever you hear the word 'theory'?

If you are reading a journal article that starts with a discussion of historiography - do you run away in fear?

Does the thought of 'post Structuralism' give you a headache?

Then this is the resource for you!



NO OPEN DOOR FOR THE INDIAN!

MISS COLUMBIA—Regardez, regardez! ne voyez-vous pas ce billet? 'There's no place for such as you here!'
 FRANKY—Hé! Pourquoi j'ai mis ça sur la porte de ma maison indienne? (pointant sur la porte)
 MISS COLUMBIA—Je sais que vous ne pouvez pas entrer!

[VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, April 17.—It is reported that the Komagata Maru has sailed from Shanghai for Victoria with 399 Hindus on board, seeking entry into British Columbia. All will be refused landing under the Order in Council excluding Asiatic natives and laborers. The vessel is said to be under charter to a wealthy East India merchant.
 OTTAWA, April 17.—In the House of Commons yesterday Mr. Stevens, Member for Vancouver, interrogated the Government on the subject of the press despatch stating that 400 Hindus had left Shanghai for Vancouver. Mr. Ecker, Minister of the Interior, replied that instructions had been sent to the immigration officers to prevent the landing of the Hindus.]

हिंदी भाटे उधारे दरवाजे नहीं!

[यह भाटे उधारे नहीं आते।]

This is an image taken from the [Hindi Punch](#) publication. It was a periodical that ran from the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century in India.

This image is used by Renisa Mawani's in their article '[Spectres of Indigeneity](#) in British Indian Migration, 1914' as a visual tool.

Here is an extract from the article:

'Here, the image points to Canada's restrictive immigration policies, the undesirability of British Indians, and their outright exclusion from the Dominion in novel and unconventional ways. [The double standard of mobility...](#)' (Mawani, *Spectres of Indigeneity*, *Law and Society Review*, 2012, p.376.)

Look at this image

What Does it tell you?

Image from Hindi Punch, 3 May 1914,
 p.16, University of Wisconsin-Madison
 Library.

Close up and details of the image

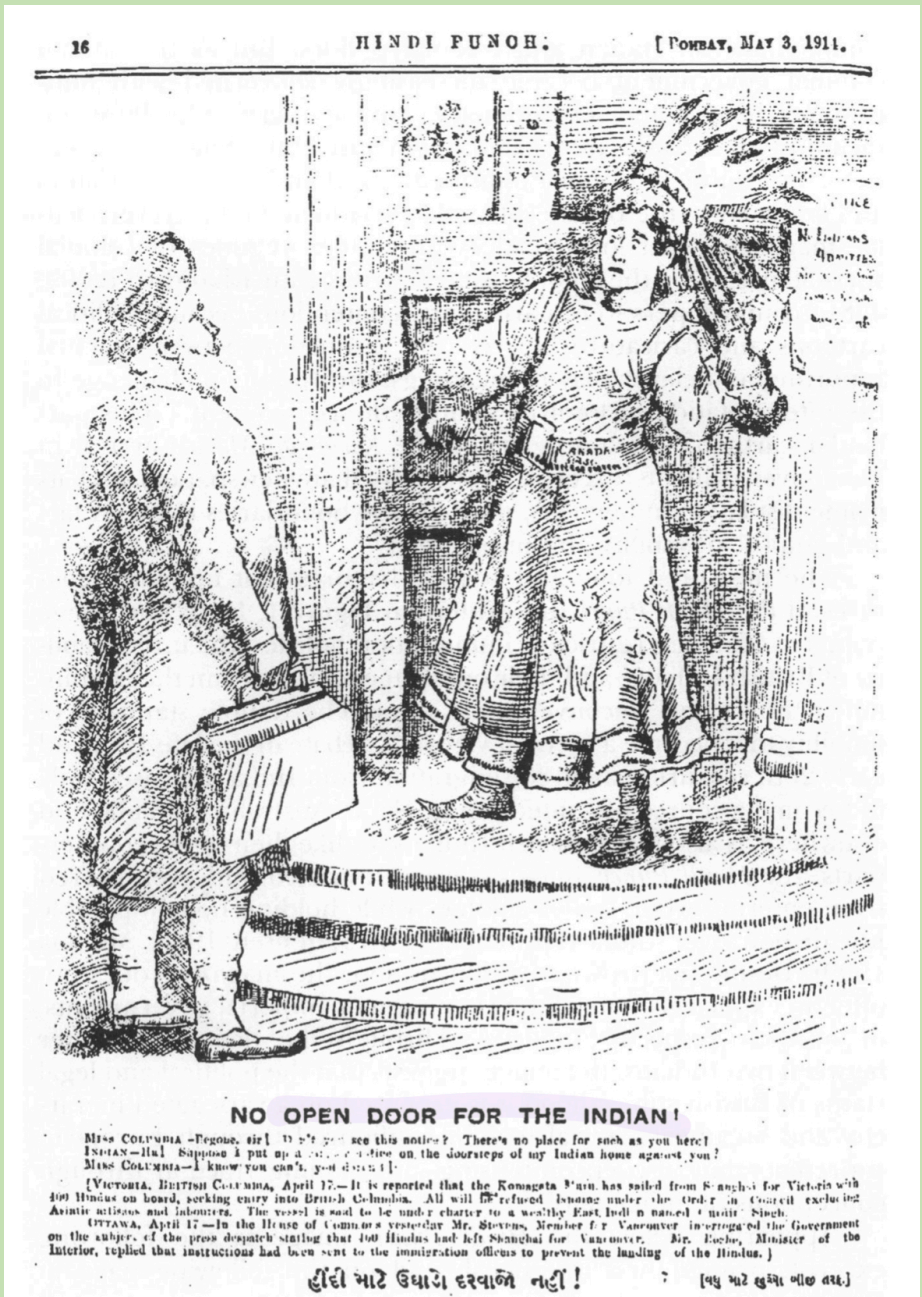
The text under the cartoon:

"No Open Door for the Indian!"

"Miss Columbia: Begone, sir! Don't you see this notice? There's no place for such as you here!"

Indian: Ha! Suppose I put up a similar notice on the doorsteps of my Indian home against you?

Miss Columbia: I know you can't, you daren't!"



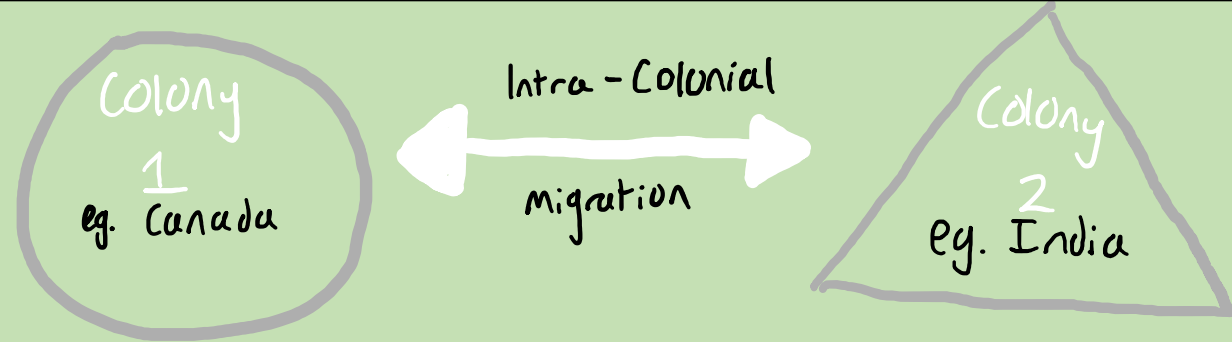
Text under the cartoon:

'It is reported that the Komagata Maru has sailed from Shanghai for Victoria with 400 Hindus on board, seeking entry into British Columbia.'

'All will be refused landing under the Order in Council excluding Asiatic artisans and labourers. The vessel is said to be under charter to a wealthy East Indian named Gurdit Singh.'

From Mawani, Spectres of Indigeneity, Law and Society Review, 2012, p376,377.

Image from Hindi Punch, 3 May 1914, p.16, University of Wisconsin-Madison Library.



The image and short text accompanying it gives you a brief insight into intra-colonial migration during the 20th century.

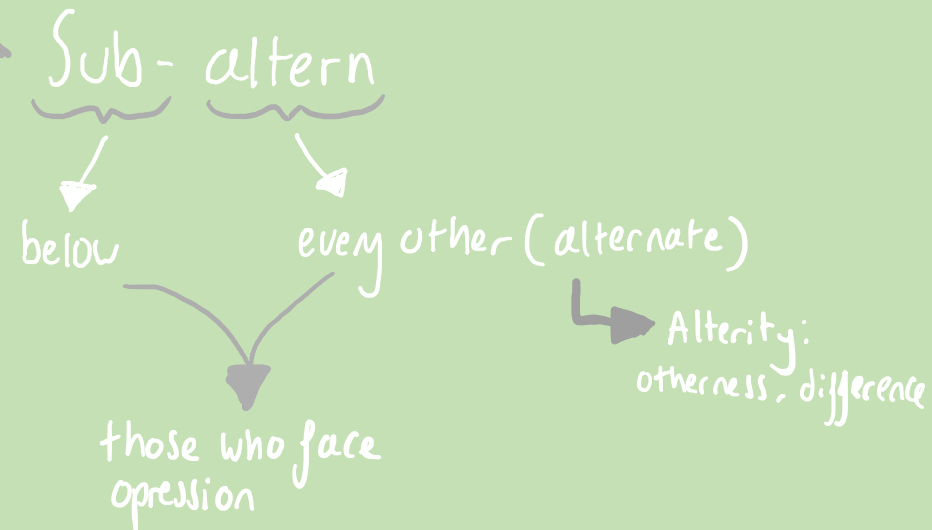
The refusal of entry of the passengers on the **Komagata Maru** into Canada is an interesting case study, in a social and legal history context. Mawani's article discusses both these aspects in detail. Following the aftermath of the refusal of entry and Gurdit Singh who chartered the ship and Munshi Singh who represented those on the ship in court to try to challenge the refusal of entry.

Whilst fascinating, this is not the focus of this resource, but rather using Mawani's article and the Hindi Punch cartoon as an example of the use of theory within historical works and to make **historiography more accessible**.

So what were your thoughts about the Hindi Punch cartoon? What ideas did you have, maybe about the context, and the figure of 'Miss Colombia'?

Note them down so you can refer to them later

Mawani's article is rooted in a subaltern approach to understanding the history of British Imperialism. It explores the lateral relations between Canada and India, both British colonies. Rather than the simplistic linear understanding of relations only between Britain and its colonies.



However, the usefulness and core meaning of Mawani's work can be lost if you are not already familiar with Jacques Derrida. It is his concept of 'spectres' on which the argument of this work is based.

This creates a theoretical barrier to engaging with the legal and social history focused parts of the text.

We will be breaking this barrier and cracking open the rock to reveal the gemstone inside - understanding Mawani's argument and the Hindi Punch image.

Image Kate Abbosh ©

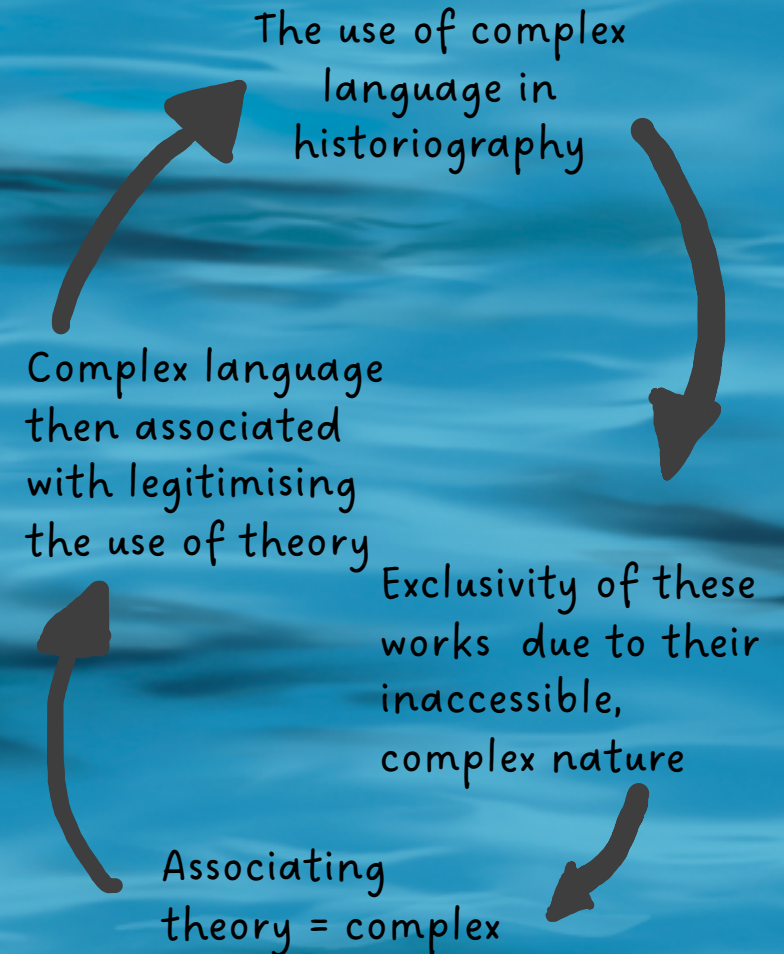


Before we dive in, quite literally, to understanding the theory behind Mawani's use of the 'Spectre'....**why** should we even learn about theory and historiography?

The common association with historiography, is that it is boring and extremely complex, often resulting in it feeling **inaccessible**.

Accessing theory can be difficult when there are few options for a 'smooth entry' into understanding it. Many of the works contain complex language and phrases, automatically assuming the readers will understand. Like the background on this page, theory can seem like the ocean, covered in waves and you are unable to see what is beneath - it can be intimidating.

This is a vicious cycle in many historiographical works, as seen on the right.

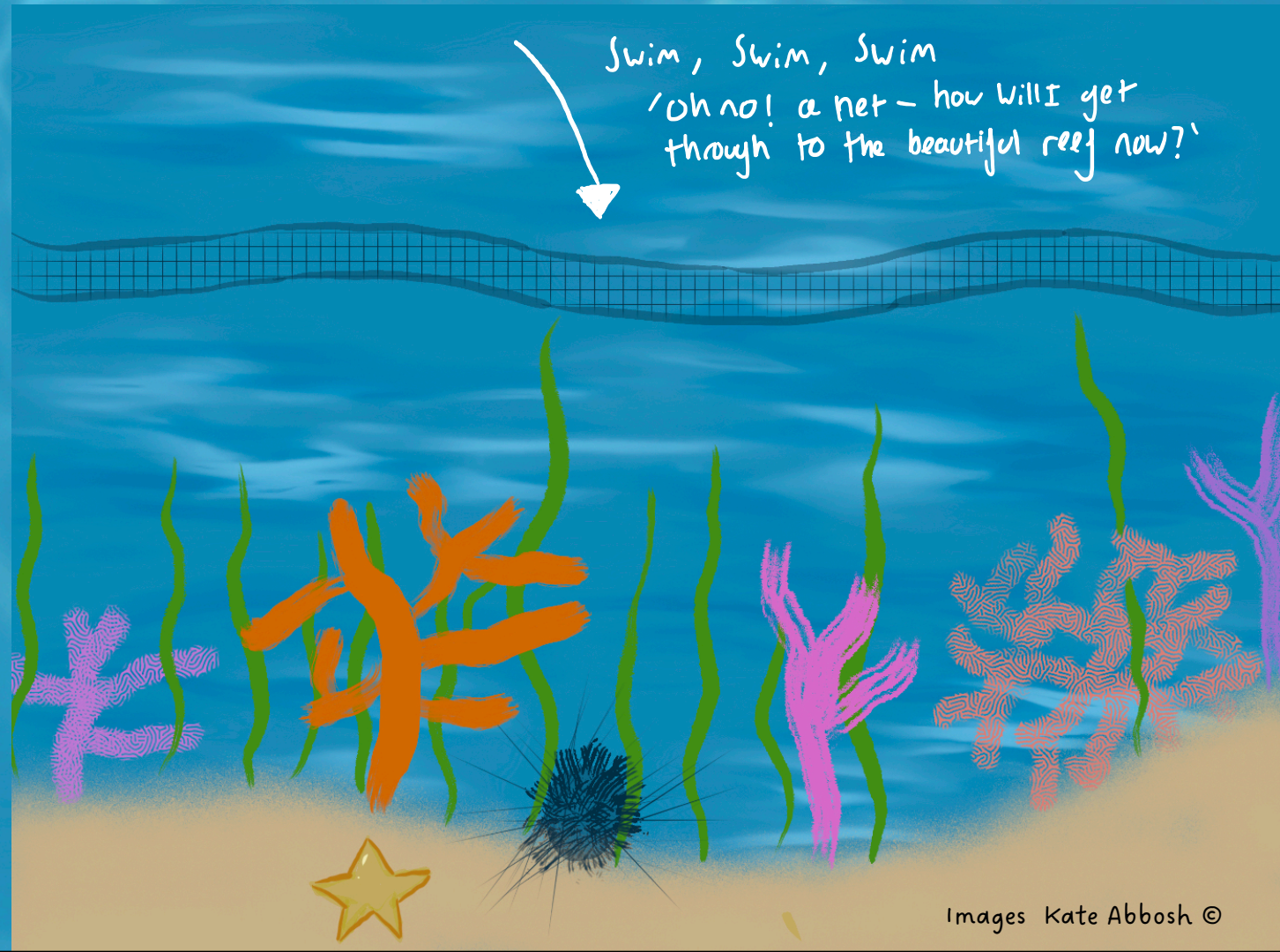


Imagine you are going scuba diving and can see the beautiful coral reef below you, but there is a net blocking you. Unless you had a knife to cut through the net then you would be unable to reach it.

The knife is an understanding of the theory, but even then unless you enjoy the entanglement with the net it can be off putting, despite how stunning and colourful the reef is below.

This may be an abstract analogy, but this resource will be full of them as it is one of the most accessible and at the same time engaging ways to promote an understanding of these theories.

So that next time you are trapped in a net you can find your way out and reach the coral reef, and maybe enjoy the challenge of it in the process.



So, what is a 'spectre'?

When you first think of a spectre, I'm sure the immediate image in your head looks something like this, right?

The idea of the 'spectre' comes from Derrida's book 'Spectres of Marx', in which Marxism takes on a ghostly form and haunts the west even after the supposed victory of western democracy over Communism in the Cold War.

At the end of the 20th century Francis Fukuyama wrote a book called 'The End of History', proclaiming that since Communism had been defeated, this marked the 'end of history'. The final, and 'superior' form of political organisation, liberal democracy, had been achieved. It essentially claimed that the evolutionary process of mankind had been completed.

Quite a statement right?

So, what motivated Fukuyama to write this book? It was the spectre of Marx(ism), without this perceived 'threat' to the status quo that had been 'defeated' there would have been no need to proclaim the 'end of history'.

In order for there to be a victor there also had to be a perceived loser - in Fukuyama's case western liberal democracy was the victor, over communism.

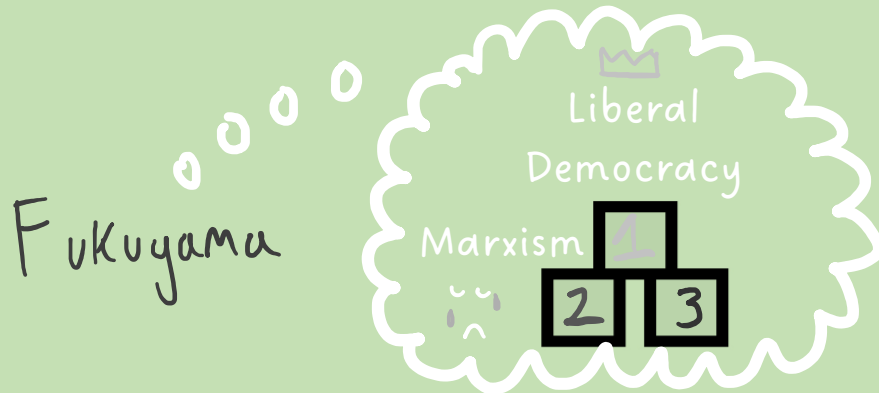


Image Kate Abbosh ©

Communism

↳ A system of governance based on Marxist ideology

More on Marxism here:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/>

Mawani uses the idea of the 'spectre' in a similar sense, however the spectre is not haunting Mawani but legislation and understandings of identity.

'Nothing exists out of context' - This quote by Derrida is a core tenant of his theory. The Spectre of Indigeneity, can be understood as the designation of the indigenous as 'Other'. It was created in reference to european attempts to universalise what was 'normal'. The spectre was created by imperialist imaginations as a **distorted** reflection of self.

What the spectre really is - the creation of 'the Other' in contrast to the normative value, in this case **Eurocentric** values and identity.



This is **Eurocentrism**- The idea of Europe as the centre of civilisation.

Since this has never actually been true, the image of the normative, and therefore Eurocentric values that define the alterity of indigeneity, is a **façade** in itself.

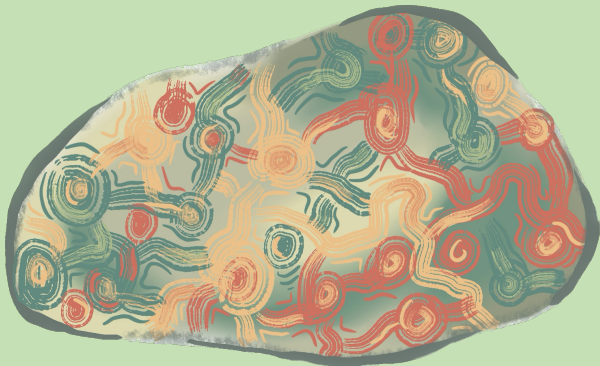
So where does the idea of the 'spectre' fit into historiography?

The idea of **spirits** was **not unique** to Derrida, the most famous example being **Hegel's geists** - in simplified terms this was Hegel's attempt to create a philosophy of history that created a linear construction of history as propelled by the spirit of the people.

However, Derrida was a **Post-structuralist**, although at times himself and others rejected this label for his theories.

What is post-structuralism?

Post-Structuralist theory of history



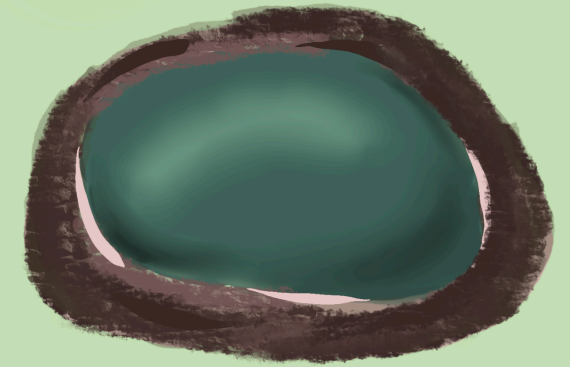
Using the gemstones - you can see that Hegel's theory of history is **linear** and rigid. However, Post-structuralism is like a **matrix** of intertwined ideas, focusing on **agency** of individuals but also the roles of structures and rejecting the existence of objective truth or knowledge.

A

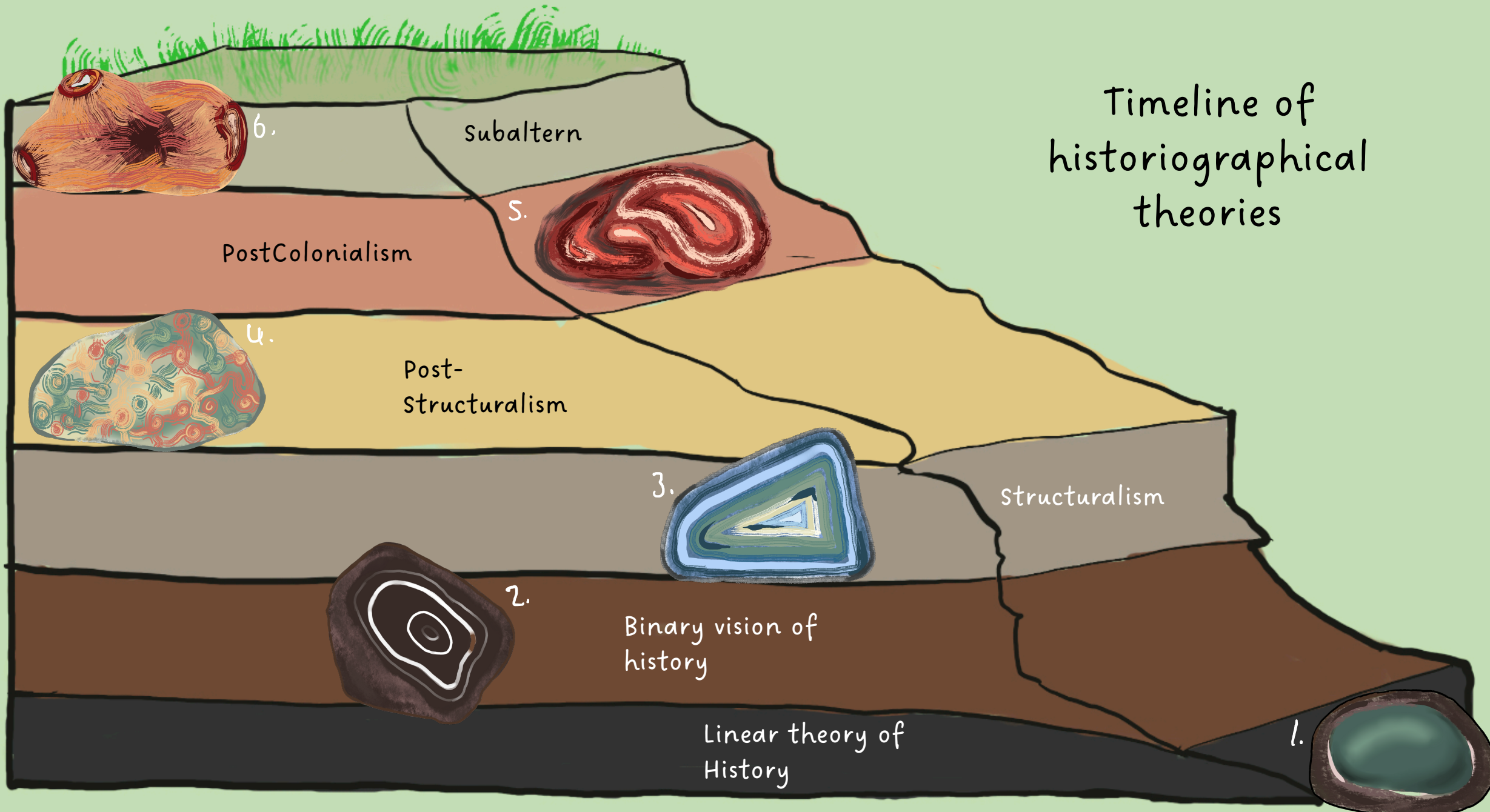


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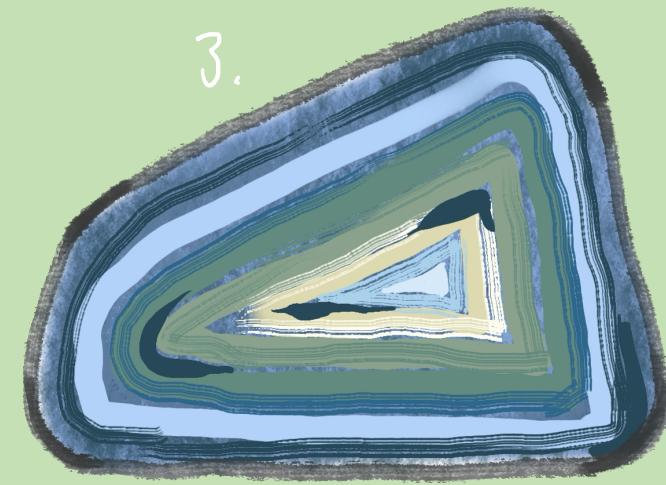
Hegel's theory of history



Timeline of historiographical theories



The advent of Post-structuralism in the 1970s fostered a historiographical movement that valued flexible forms of analysis. A more **dynamic** approach to understanding **structures** and **agency** than pure structuralism (gemstone 3).



Back to Mawani and the Hindi Punch cartoon:

The ridged layers of Structuralism
versus the intertwined threads of
Post-structuralism

Images Kate Abbosh ©

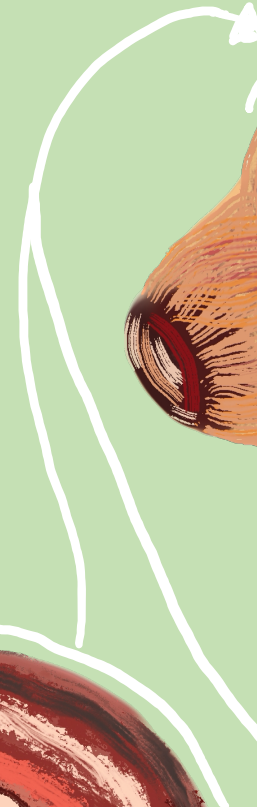
Mawani's subaltern approach is born out of a Post-structuralist legacy which enabled the initial flexibility to question the foundations of seemingly 'common sense' understandings. **No knowledge is completely objective.**

Post-colonialism used this approach to expose that our **structures of knowledge** are built by Eurocentric preconceived ideas of universality (think Hegel's linear line of history based only on Europe). Subaltern theory was built off of Post-colonialism, but its focus is more on the **agency** of individuals oppressed under imperialism.

Developing from a **binary** understanding of colonised and coloniser to a more **nuanced** understanding of the legacy of imperialism.



Subaltern theory has the **core** of postcolonial theory, but extending out using aspects of Post-structuralist **skepticism**, with a an **agency-centric** focus.





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MISS COLUMBIA—Excuse, sir! Do you see this notice? There's no place for such as you here!
 INDIAN—Hal! Sappoo! I put up a notice on the doorsteps of my Indian home against you!
 MISS COLUMBIA—I know you can't, you durrat!

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हिंदी भाटे उधारे दरवाजे नही!

[सुधु भाटे सुधु भाटे अथ.]

Mawani's use of the spectre promotes thinking **beyond binaries**, and exposes European legacies within our knowledge.

What was your thoughts about the figure 'Miss Columbia'?

This is a **satirical** take on the European colonisers of Canada trying to pass themselves off as 'indigenous' through wearing a headdress similar to those of the Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

The spectre presents the category of 'indigenous' in legal and political terms, used as a **legitimising** force in the case of 'Miss Columbia' wearing the headdress. The term was simultaneously used to oppress the actual Indigenous population who were seen as subordinate within **Imperial imaginations**. These connotations still inform understandings of the term 'Indigenous' today, especially in legislation regarding Aboriginal Australians.

(see more about this: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13200968.2010.10854445>)

The Spectre of Indigeneity haunted perceptions of self, **legitimising** 'Miss Columbia' as 'indigenous' and the control of Canada's borders. The spectre also informed the rejection of the Indian passengers, as despite being **British Subjects**, they did not conform with Eurocentric 'standards'.