Lisa Lowe: A Fetishism of Colonial Commodities

In this lecture, Lowe examines the relationships between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, exploring the links between settler colonialism, slavery, imperial trades, and Western liberalism. Reading across archives, canons, and continents, she connects the liberal narrative of freedom overcoming slavery to the expansion of Anglo-American empire, observing that abstract promises of freedom often obscure their embeddedness within colonial conditions. Race and social difference, Lowe contends, are enduring remainders of colonial processes through which “the human” is universalized and “freed” by liberal forms, while the peoples who created the conditions of possibility for that freedom are assimilated or forgotten.

Lisa Lowe is Professor of English and American Studies at Tufts University, and a member of the consortium of studies in Race, Colonialism, and Diaspora. Prior to joining Tufts in 2012, she taught in the UC San Diego Literature Department for more than two decades. She began as a scholar of comparative literature, and her work has focused on literatures and cultures of encounter that emerge from histories of colonialism, immigration, and globalization; she is known especially for her work on French and British colonialisms, race and immigration, Asian American studies, and comparative global humanities. Lowe studied European intellectual History at Stanford, and French literature and critical theory at UC Santa Cruz; she is the author of Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms (Cornell UP, 1991), Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics (Duke UP, 1996), and The Intimacies of Four Continents (Duke UP, 2015), and coeditor of The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital (Duke UP, 1997).