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Edited by Gurminder K. Bhambra,
Kerem Nişancıoğlu and Dalia Gebrial

Decolonising the University

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Contents

PART III   DECOLONIAL REFLECTIONS

Introduction:
Decolonising the University?

*Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial
and Kerem Nişancıoğlu*

The call to decolonise universities across the global North has gained particular traction in recent years, from Rhodes Must Fall Oxford's (RMFO) campaign for a public reckoning with its colonial legacies, to recent attempts by Georgetown University, Washington DC, to atone for its past ties with slavery.[1] The UK's National Union of Students (NUS) has been running 'Why is My Curriculum White?' and #LiberateMyDegree as two of their flagship campaigns since 2015. Both campaigns seek to challenge 'Eurocentric domination and lack of diversity' in curricula across UK universities.[2] These dissenting interventions take their inspiration from and build on similar campaigns in other parts of the world – for example, the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa and the campaigns against caste prejudice occurring in some Indian universities. They also build on earlier movements and protests organised under notions of social justice and addressing inequality. These include campaigns such as those led by the Black and Asian Studies Association concerning the representation of Black history within the UK National Curriculum and those in defence of the 'public university' organised by the Campaign for the Public University and Remaking the University, among others.[3] These movements, collectively, sought to transform the terms upon which the university (and education more broadly) exists, the purpose of the knowledge it imparts and produces, and its pedagogical operations. This collection aims to critically examine the recent calls to 'decolonise the university' within this wider context, giving a platform to otherwise silenced 'decolonial' work and offering a resource for students and academics looking to challenge and undo forms of coloniality in their classrooms, curricula and campuses.

I

Given the prominence of decolonisation as a framework in student- and teacher-led movements today, it is incumbent upon us to think more carefully about what this means – as both a theory, and a praxis. How is it distinct from other forms of anti-racist organising in institutions such as the university, and why has it gained particular purchase in the contemporary higher education context? What does it mean to apply a term that emerged from a specific historical, political and geographic context, to today's world? And what are the possibilities and dangers that come with calls to decolonise the university?

'Decolonising' involves a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies. To broadly situate its political and methodological coordinates, 'decolonising' has two key referents. First, it is a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view.[4] Second, it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis.[5] And yet, within these broad contours, 'decolonising' remains a contested term, consisting of a heterogeneity of viewpoints, approaches, political projects and normative concerns. This multiplicity of perspectives should not be surprising given the various historical and political sites of decolonisation that span both the globe and 500 years of history.

There are also important methodological and epistemological reasons to emphasise contestation over definitions of 'decolonising'. Indeed, one of the key challenges that decolonising approaches have presented to Eurocentric forms of knowledge is an insistence on positionality and plurality and, perhaps more importantly, the impact that taking 'difference' seriously would make to standard understandings.[6] The emphasis on reflexivity reminds us that representations and knowledge of the world we live in are situated historically and geographically. The point is not simply to deconstruct such understandings, but to transform them. As such, some decolonising approaches seek a plurality of perspectives, worldviews, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies in which scholarly enquiry and political praxis might take place.[7] And yet there also remain approaches situated squarely within the anti-colonial tradition that seek to eschew the particularity of Eurocentrism through

the construction of a new universality.[8] The contested and multiple character of 'decolonising' is reflected in the contributions to this volume.

This volume is written from the position and experience of academics and students working in universities primarily in the global North (although many contributors would perhaps insist they are 'of' neither). It seeks to question the epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production and to contribute to the broader project of decolonising through a discussion of strategies and interventions emanating from within the imperial metropoles. In this way, we hope it complements the work of scholars and activists elsewhere who have similarly engaged with such issues from across the global South and North.[9] In doing so, we hope, collectively, to contribute to practices which provincialise forms of European knowledge production from the centre.[10]

For example, there are rich and increasingly visible histories of how anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance in the imperial metropole were central to building connections across anti-colonial movements in the global South.[11] At the same time, numerous national liberation struggles in the colonies refracted back into struggles around racism and citizenship conducted in the imperial centre.[12] In some instances, anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles were articulated in, through, and against Western universities. Campus mobilisations, the formation of student societies, and the publication of student papers knitted higher education and anti-colonialism into a rich tapestry of radical activism in the colonial metropole.[13] Taken together, such histories of anti-racist struggle have always included concerns for research and education, in the form of alternative community schooling projects, political education in organisations or campaigns to reform existing educational institutions and policies.[14]

In short, the turn to decolonising as rubric for political organising in the global North is not rooted in a particular identity; rather, it emerges from shared historical trajectories of forms of colonialism. We hope that a discussion of decolonising from the imperial centre – of which this volume is only one part – might help to reveal something about the machinations of empire in general and the deeply understudied relationship between coloniality and pedagogy. In doing so, it also has the potential to open spaces for dialogue, alliances and solidarity with colonised and formerly colonised peoples, contributing to the making of 'a global infrastructure of anti-colonial connectivity'.[15]

II

Why decolonise *the university* specifically? Should decolonising projects even be concerned with the university as an institution? In an important article, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us that 'decolonization is not a metaphor'.[16] They argue that the language of decolonising has been adopted in ways which empty it of its specific political aims; namely the repatriation of dispossessed indigenous land. Such emptying might include educational practices that seek to move away from Eurocentric frames of reference or using the language of decolonisation while pursuing a politics distinct from indigenous struggles over land. They argue:

> The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.[17]

Such acts, Tuck and Yang argue, generate various settler 'moves to innocence', which attempt to contain or reconcile settler guilt and complicity. Using 'decolonization as a metaphor' thus 'recentres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future'.[18] In contrast, Tuck and Yang insist on decolonisation as a struggle over dispossession, the repatriation of indigenous land and the seizing of imperial wealth. Such a project is less about seeking reconciliation with settler pasts, presents and futures, but about pursuing what is 'irreconcilable within settler colonial relations and incommensurable between decolonising projects and other social justice projects'.[19] These are serious warnings which should give us all pause for reflection, not least because we have observed discourses around 'decolonising the university' which fall prey to precisely these problems. This volume is an attempt to go beyond such limitations, but will, necessarily, have its own such limitations. We think there is value in complicating the substantive claim made by Tuck and Yang (that decolonisation is exclusively about the repatriation of land to indigenous peoples) in order to extend and deepen their political warning (that decolonisation is not a metaphor).

We hope that the contributions to this volume demonstrate that colonialism (and hence decolonising) cannot be reduced to a historically specific and geographically particular articulation of the colonial project, namely settler-colonialism in the Americas. Nor can struggles against colonialism exclusively target a particular articulation of that project: the dispossession of land. To do so, would be to set aside colonial relations that did not rest on settler projects (such as, for example, commercial imperialism conducted across the Indian Ocean littoral, the mandate system in West Asia, the European trade in human beings, or financialised neo-colonialism today) or to turn away from discursive projects associated with these practices (such as liberalism and Orientalism). It would not only remove from our view these differentiated moments of a global project of colonialism, but also interactions and connections of these global but differentiated moments with settler-colonialism itself. Put differently, whereas dispossession might be the 'truth' of colonialism, it is not its entirety.

Taking colonialism as a global project as the starting point, it becomes difficult to turn away from the Western university as a key site through which colonialism – and colonial knowledge in particular – is produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalised.[20] It was in the university that colonial intellectuals developed theories of racism, popularised discourses that bolstered support for colonial endeavours and provided ethical and intellectual grounds for the dispossession, oppression and domination of colonised subjects.[21] In the colonial metropolis, universities provided would-be colonial administrators with knowledge of the peoples they would rule over, as well as lessons in techniques of domination and exploitation. The foundation of European higher education institutions in colonised territories itself became an infrastructure of empire, an institution and actor through which the totalising logic of domination could be extended; European forms of knowledge were spread, local indigenous knowledge suppressed, and native informants trained.[22] In both colony and metropole, universities were founded and financed through the spoils of colonial plunder, enslavement and dispossession.[23]

The fall of formal empires did little to change the logic of Western universities. Calls around 'decolonising the curriculum' have shown how the content of university knowledge remains principally governed by the West for the West.[24] Disciplinary divisions, theoretical models and Eurocentric histories continue to provide intellectual materials that

reproduce and justify colonial hierarchies.[25] Subjects of Western scholarship are enduringly pale, male (and often stale); where people of colour do appear, they are all too often tokenistically represented,[26] spoken on behalf of,[27] or reduced to objects of scholarship. Products of university research are still strategically deployed in the pursuit of imperial projects conducted by Western states and firms in former colonies.[28] These imperial projects – past and new – remain central to the financing of higher education in the West.[29] Postcolonial scholars and anti-racist activists have made significant strides in bringing these issues to the fore. However, as numerous activists as well as contributions in this volume argue, the foundations of universities remain unshakably colonial; there is, as ever, more work to be done.

III

The volume is organised in three parts, covering contexts, initiatives and reflections respectively. The first part 'Contexts: Historical and Disciplinary' situates contemporary calls to decolonise the university in contexts of institutional change, pedagogical reform and student activism.

The opening chapter by Dalia Gebrial, 'Rhodes Must Fall: Oxford and Movements for Change', charts the emergence of calls among students to decolonise the University of Oxford under the banner 'Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford' (RMFO). Sketching a history of RMFO's emergence in the context of the anti-racist movement in the UK, Gebrial assesses its mistakes and successes, and evaluates what it means to bring the call to decolonisation back to the heart of empire. Gebrial sets and explores a series of questions that recur throughout this volume: What is decolonisation, and how does it differ from diversity work? How is the demand to decolonise the university related to the struggle for a public university? What are the challenges faced by those wishing to do decolonial work in the university and beyond?

John Holmwood's chapter, 'Race and the Neoliberal University: Lessons from the Public University', locates its concerns in the context of changes in US and English higher education policies that have seen the 'privatisation' of higher education and a shift from it being regarded as a social right to something that is seen as the personal responsibility of individuals. In this context, he argues, the call to decolonise the university can be seen as paradoxical to the extent that the neoliberal university claims to be race-blind and only interested in the differences

between individuals and not those between groups. However, this does not take into account the fact that universities in the UK and US 'were embedded in social structures that derive from histories of colonialism and empire' and, as such, the call to decolonise the university is a call for social justice more broadly. While social rights (and access to higher education) were racialised, the answer is not the market, but the deeper democratisation of the university and society more broadly.

In the chapter 'Black / Academia', Robbie Shilliam traces the genealogy of racism in higher education through the racialisation of public culture from the nineteenth century onward. This involved an institutionalisation of who can be said to be a competent 'knower' and who can only ever be considered incompetent to know – the 'known'. Shilliam argues that this racialisation of public culture has been 'institutionalised' in the hidden curriculum, the set of administrative and pedagogical practices that reproduce expectations about the competencies of the 'traditional' student. For Shilliam, it is not the institution of higher learning per se, but public culture, that is problematically racist. Therefore, to strike at this racism in the name of higher learning is to insist upon a cross-sectoral struggle against inequality, disenfranchisement and oppression.

The final chapter in this section is a multi-authored account of the 'decolonial' turn in philosophy. The chapter, 'Decolonising Philosophy', by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Rafael Vizcaíno, Jasmine Wallace and Jeong Eun Annabel We, starts from the fact that the discipline – in terms of its curricular design, content, and faculty and student demographic profile – remains 'a bastion of Eurocentrism' and whiteness more generally. They locate this situation as a consequence of the histories of imperialism, enslavement and colonisation that provided the context for its configuration. As such, they argue, simply diversifying the field is not sufficient, it requires a more thoroughgoing decolonisation of 'structural problems and deep-seated habits' across the 'various aspects of philosophy as a field and as a practice' – this is something that is manifestly visible in their co-authored and intergenerational practice in the writing of this chapter.

In the second part of this volume – 'Institutional Initiatives' – contributors offer experiences and suggestions for concrete practices they have undertaken. These include specific initiatives, movements and interventions, as well as predictions, strategies and frameworks for future action.

Kolar Aparna and Olivier Kramsch's chapter, 'Asylum University: Re-situating Knowledge-exchange along Cross-border Positionalities',

reflects on recent student struggles in Germany and the Netherlands which explored the intersection of university financialisation, managerialism and the demands of equal rights for and by newly arriving asylum-seekers. Developing what they call an 'asylum university lens' they argue that asylum serves as a symbolic and powerful metaphor for speaking from a space of refuge. From this lens, the university serves as a space of solidarity for knowledge-exchange, the everyday interactions of classroom debates and academic writing, both on campus and beyond. For Aparna and Kramsch, such a lens calls to our attention the instability and uncertainty of borders while acting and situating knowledge production from embodied relationalities that are nevertheless sensitive to differential privileges and conflicting ambitions.

Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vázquez's 'Diversity or Decolonisation? Researching Diversity at the University of Amsterdam', recounts the experience of the University of Amsterdam's 'Diversity Commission', which was established following demands by students of colour to decolonise the university. The Commission examined the knowledge being produced and how it is being taught by developing a research framework that would transform the epistemic practices of teaching and learning within the university. This chapter details these challenges and uses the theoretical frameworks of Black feminist intersectionality and decoloniality to think through the processes of decolonising the university. This has three core elements: the pedagogies of positionality, the pedagogies of participation and the pedagogies of transition. Icaza and Vázquez argue that this helps to disclose the decolonial deficit of the university and to understand how epistemic practices can be decolonised.

In 'The Challenge for Black Studies in the Neoliberal University', Kehinde Andrews recounts the experience of creating the Black Studies undergraduate programme at Birmingham City University – the first of its kind in Europe. Andrews examines the impact of student and academic struggles against the institutional racism of the university and how these have informed the pedagogical intervention of the Black Studies programme. Andrews argues that the contributions, experiences and perspectives of Africa and the African Diaspora are central to the wider struggle to decolonise the university.

Pat Lockley's chapter, 'Open initiatives for Decolonising the Curriculum', critically examines the potential of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to improve access to higher education for students in the global South. Lockley argues that a pedagogical emphasis on 'open'

also includes, and is not limited to, many things – the Open University, Wikipedia, Open Educational Resources and creative commons licensing. For Lockley, each of these broadens, diversifies and obfuscates what 'open' could mean, and how openness as a concept can facilitate or hinder decolonising the university.

The final section of the volume, 'Decolonial Reflections', situates these specific examples in the broader theoretical question of what it means to decolonise in institutions in the global North.

In 'Meschachakanis, a Coyote Narrative: Decolonising Higher Education', Shauneen Pete explores the decolonisation of higher education through the practice of storytelling: a decolonising strategy. Pete argues that story as research methodology is a decolonising approach because it encourages a reclamation of (ab)original ways of transferring knowledges and troubles hegemonic systems of education. The chapter invites the reader to join with Coyote (a trickster figure) and the author as they engage in a reflexive conversation that explores ways of undertaking decolonising practices in higher education. The chapter begins with a critical view of how colonial institutions of higher education are; and how these colonial structures are experienced by the author. Then, the chapter explores some of the ways in which the author has led university reform towards decolonisation.

Through a personal account of positioning and positionality, Azumah Dennis's chapter, 'Decolonising Education: A Pedagogic Intervention', explores what it might mean to decolonise education. By problematising 'the space of the unmarked scholar' Dennis proposes a decolonised educational project that places counter-hegemonic curricula and pedagogy at its core, by recognising different forms of understanding, knowing, experiencing and explaining the world. Through an Ubuntu pedagogy, Dennis offers an alternative way of thinking about and being in the world, which challenges 'the hegemony and universality of capitalism and a Western civilisatory logic'.

Angela Last's chapter explores some of the dangers of institutional co-option and marketisation of radical demands. In 'Internationalisation and Interdisciplinarity: Sharing across Boundaries?', Last identifies two types of 'internationalisation' that have taken hold in British universities. The first relates to the sort of diversification of the curriculum that has been called for by students as part of attempts to decolonise the university. The second refers to attempts by universities to expand their market towards overseas and minority ethnic students and improve

their competitiveness in the global market. Last brings these two types of internationalisation into critical conversation by exploring their implications in practices of scholarly editing, teaching and curriculum design, collaborating with academics in the global South, and interdisciplinary research.

William Jamal Richardson's chapter, 'Understanding Eurocentrism as a Structural Problem of Undone Science', closes the volume by exploring the effects of Eurocentrism in the discipline of sociology and implications of this for both scholarship and university institutions more broadly. Richardson argues that, in disciplinary terms, Eurocentrism has largely rendered invisible the sociological perspectives and work of both scholars of colour and the societies they come from. In addition, Eurocentrism in the discipline also allows for intrinsically racist and colonial theory and findings to be developed and disseminated within academe and among the public. Richardson argues that the sum total of these processes is that in many spaces sociology, like the social sciences more generally, perpetuates systems of inequality and the social logics that justify them.

IV

The contributions to this volume contextualise and set out what is at stake in calls to decolonise the university. We hope it might also provoke further debates, provide strategic and tactical prompts, inform policy and clarify praxis. Decolonising the university is part of the broader projects of decolonisation and cannot be understood as separate from those projects for social and economic justice. Offering alternative ways of thinking, researching and teaching is necessary, but not exhaustive.

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PART I

CONTEXTS: HISTORICAL AND DISCIPLINARY

Rhodes Must Fall:
Oxford and Movements for Change

Dalia Gebrial

The call to decolonise the university is not a new one. In her essay 'Feminism and Fragility,' Sara Ahmed talks about the 'chipping away' of institutional change: 'Chip, chip, chip. Things splinter. Maybe we can turn that chip, chip, chip into a hammer: we might chip away at the old block.'[1] For decades, teachers and students have been chipping away at the coloniality of the university, in an attempt to make it more critical, rigorous and democratic.

The metaphor of 'chipping away at the old block' is particularly apt, because it is important to look at the role the university plays in the broader decolonisation call with sober perspective; to understand the possibilities and limitations of trying to effect change from within the academy. Of course, the university is a site of knowledge production and, most crucially, consecration; it has the power to decide which histories, knowledges and intellectual contributions are considered valuable and worthy of further critical attention and dissemination. This has knock-on effects: public discourse might seem far from the academy's sphere of influence, but 'common sense' ideas of worthy knowledge do not come out of the blue, or removed from the context of power – and the university is a key shaping force in this discursive flux.

Within decolonial movements, the centrality of knowledge production to colonialism as it existed historically and as its legacies appear today are clearly known and understood. It is within this context that decolonial workers in the academy have for years sought to bring the marginalised to the centre-stage of scholarly labour; to memorialise and elevate their perspectives, histories and struggles, which would otherwise be lost in the throes of oppression; conceiving this as one part of the broader struggle to decolonise the interlocking social, economic and political systems in which we find ourselves. Indeed, this is the central, unresolved contra-

diction of the call to decolonise the academy: how to use the resources and position of the institution, while recognising, accounting for and undoing its inherent exclusivity.

While this chapter cannot address this with the comprehension and directness it needs, it will use the Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) campaign as a case study to do three things: (1) explicate the role of formalised education in the process of knowledge production, and its importance; (2) confront how the British Empire and its legacy is both normalised and trivialised in education; and (3) call for a reorientation in the anti-racist framework from diversity to decolonisation, and explore what this might look like.

Erasing history, creating 'safety'

The RMFO campaign brought the urge to decolonise from the nooks and crannies of academic departments to sensationalised newspaper headlines and heated arguments at family dinner tables. The campaign had three broad areas in which it committed to work towards decolonisation within the University of Oxford: iconography, curriculum and representation. By making these interventions in an institution that holds such unique capital as a centre of knowledge production, the campaign aimed to bring about a knock-on effect at other institutions. It was also anticipated that Oxford University's centrality to Britain's intellectual and cultural identity would enable these interventions to ripple through the public consciousness. The demand that captured the British public's imagination, however, was one inspired by the movement's namesake in South Africa: the removal of a statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes – widely considered to have laid the legislative groundwork for South African apartheid – from the front of Oriel College's main building.

From the outset, the campaign's most well-known demand fell victim to the problem of narrative control. Indeed, the call came at a critical juncture in student politics; campus organising had been growing globally – from Jawaharlal Nehru University in India to Amherst College in the US. However, the counter-reaction was also growing, and had a louder, wealthier voice; newspaper columns across the political spectrum – particularly in the US and the UK – bemoaned the death of free speech and academic enquiry on campuses at the hands of over-sensitive, easily triggered student activists. This phenomenon was not limited to one or

two articles; it became a meme that garnered unprecedented traction throughout the commentariat.

The need to repeat and sustain this narrative of student activists as incurious, navel-gazing millennials pampered by 1990s soft parenting – rather than an energised, highly informed generation that know they deserve better than the future of precarity and debt awaiting them upon graduation – led journalists down a 'fake news' rabbit hole. Consider this example from the tail end of 2016: reports that a leaflet produced by Oxford University Students Union (OUSU) told students to refrain from using gendered pronouns 'he' and 'she' in favour of the gender-neutral 'ze' picked up pace across the British broadsheet and tabloid media.[2] Seemingly plucked out of thin air, the union categorically denied having ever mandated against the use of gendered pronouns, or the existence of such a leaflet – stating that such a move would in fact be 'counterproductive'[3] to their initiative against misgendering.

However, the intended work of the article had already been done; a delicious anecdote to further satiate the rabid hunger of confirmation bias, racking up clicks and shares at the expense of an authentic portrayal of reality. A *Telegraph* article published the day after OUSU publicly refuted the claims said as much: 'the fact that Oxford has possibly been a victim of incorrect reporting isn't the biggest worry', it argued, because 'fact or fiction', the (categorically fictional) story was symptomatic of a 'student bubble culture of safe spacing, no-platforming and the generally surreal atmosphere of mollycoddling'.[4] The desire for evidence – the desire to strengthen and legitimise particular assumptions about students campaigning around particular things – became more important than the existence of actual evidence. Indeed, the feeling that such a culture existed universally among student activists – and that it deserved wholesale dismissal because it reflected anti-intellectual childishness – became more credible than what the students actually had to say for themselves, and what they were actually doing.

Student-led decolonisation movements have faced similar reporting tactics. To name just one example, an early 2017 *Daily Mail* article expressed panic and anger at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) student union's declared commitment to decolonisation and 'confronting the white institution'. 'Students at a University of London college', it bemoaned, 'are demanding that such seminal figures as Plato, Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Bertrand Russell' – without whose work, 'understanding philosophy' is 'all but inconceivable' – be 'dropped from