

Decolonisation: A Local or Global Phenomenon?

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During my time as a master's student in Gender Studies at Utrecht University, the theme of 'decolonising the university' appeared in a call for papers by the student-led graduate Humanities journal, *Junctions*. As a BA History student, having studied colonial India, empirical China and twentieth-century Britain, I questioned what it meant to use the term 'decolonial' in postmodern society. I was taking the course 'Postcolonial Transitions and Transnational Justice', reading Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, Eve Tuck, Gurminder Bhambra, Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, Maria Lugones and more. I entered the field of postcolonial theory and decolonial thought, I co-wrote a position paper on decolonising the university and conducted an interview with the chair of the UU Graduate Gender Studies program, Rosemarie Buikema, both to be published in *Junctions* in the next month.¹ During my internship with RINGS, I delved deeper into this term 'decolonising', trying to understand what higher education institutions do to 'decolonise' and how a historically-rooted term is situated in today's context. As this research project evolved, it became clear that the fundamental element to understand how to use the term 'decolonising' lay explicitly in its politics of location. So if a term like 'decolonising' is so tightly bound by its context, what does it mean for an international association, such as RINGS, to use the term 'decolonise'? This article first aims to show the difference in international calls to decolonise the university by outlining some of the protest movements demanding change. Second, I analyse how definitions of theories decolonisation change meaning across the world, bringing forth a common thread in how the term is used which is useful to the RINGS framework. Third, I reveal what doing 'decolonial' work means in praxis at higher education institutions. Last, I argue for continued self-reflexivity and critical analysis in research by inviting my reader to consider questions around decoloniality and RINGS.

Calls to Decolonise the University

¹ The position paper will be published in the Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities call for papers. Exact publication date is unknown but expected in May 2021: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/ubiquity-partner-network/up/journal/junction/call%20for%20position%20papers.pdf> Last accessed: 6th April 2021; The academic interview titled 'Negotiating, Navigating and the Neoliberal University: Talking with Rosemarie Buikema' is under review and will be a part of Junction's issue on 'Decolonizing the University'. Exact publication date unknown but expected in May 2021.

Across the world, calls for the university space to ‘decolonise’ have gained ground in recent years. In 2015, student-led protests erupted in Cape Town with the #RhodesMustFall movement, beginning a procession of protests to remove Cecil Rhodes’ statue across the globe.² In the UK at Oxford University, students protested for the removal of Rhodes’ statue and triumphed. However, as much of a success as this was, a government survey conducted in 2016 showed that 59% of the British public felt the statue should remain and a staggering 44% of this number stated that we should be proud of British colonialism. A pitifully small number of participants, 11%, argued it should be taken down whilst 29% participants stated ‘don’t know’.³ The UK’s National Union of Students ran ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ and #LiberateMyDegree, whilst across the Atlantic, students at Harvard Law School in the USA fought for the removal of the Harvard Law School shield that included an emblem of Isaac Royall Jr., a member of a renowned slave owning family.⁴ In April 2015 in the Netherlands, students from Nieuw Universiteit (New University) in Amsterdam protested and occupied an administrative building, opposed to the neoliberal university, resulting in the birth of the University of Colour (UoC). The primary aim of UoC is, according to their website, to ‘decolonize the university’ by aspiring ‘to create a more balanced university at both curricular and demographic level that includes non-Eurocentric perspectives and ideas’.⁵

Furthermore, calls to decolonise the university to prevent it from being a private institution embedded within the neoliberal, capitalist market have broken out internationally. In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street protests in the USA fought for economic equality and called for better access to education, much like the Los Indignados protests in Spain of the same year. In 2017, an article written by Karen Gabriel and P.K. Vijayan, shows us that colleges in India are becoming increasingly privatised in the name of ‘autonomy’ leading to decreased access for students from poorer backgrounds. They state that ‘colleges that were once considered ‘elite’ because of the quality of their education and their high academic performances, will now become ‘elite’ because of whom they cater to and how much they cost’.⁶ At the end of 2019, the

² DW News. [‘South Africa University Removes Cecil Rhodes Statue’](#). Original source: Reuters. 9th April 2015; and for a more detailed account, Eve Fairbanks. [‘The birth of Rhodes Must Fall’](#). The Guardian. 18th November 2015.

³ Will Dahlgreen. [‘Rhodes must not fall’](#). YouGov. 18th January 2016.

⁴ Anemona Hartocollis. [‘Harvard Law to Abandon Crest Linked to Slavery’](#). 4th March 2016.

⁵ University of Colour website. Last accessed: 8th April 2021. <https://universityofcolour.com/>

⁶ Karen Gabriel and P.K. Vijayan. [‘With Colleges Fighting for Autonomy, Higher Education Has a Lot to Lose’](#). The Wire. 30th April 2017.

Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi increased student accommodation fees by as much as 150% leading to student protests and a police crackdown.⁷ A higher education fee increase is also echoed in the UK's 2012 reforms, the year I began my bachelor's degree, where fees were tripled from £3,290 per annum to £9,000.⁸ Similarly, in South Africa following #RhodesMustFall came #FeesMustFall in 2015, dubbed the 'the largest student protests since the end of apartheid in 1994'.⁹ Students demanded reduced university fees which generated a different discourse that, instead of focusing on ideological and symbolic coloniality, attended to demands around class and poverty. This movement paved the way for the larger Fallist movement in South Africa that actively fights against remaining traces of colonialism. As I consider the state of the university and student protest movements across the world attempting to decolonise the university space, it is clear that the term 'decolonise' aims to achieve different goals dependent upon geopolitical location. The context in which the term is used means we need to understand the nuances of discriminatory policies and procedures in place at universities across the world. We need to continue learning how the term is utilised by different protest movements, to understand the varied ways that 'decolonise' is situated within institutions and continue our self-reflexive research that constantly questions our situatedness.



⁷ Bilal Kuchay. [‘As India’s JNU protests fee hike, poor students fear for future’](#). AlJazeera. 20th November 2019.

⁸ Sean Coughlan. [‘Students face tuition fees rising to £9,000’](#). BBC News. 3rd November 2010.

⁹ Pumza Fihlani. [‘We are students thanks to South Africa’s #FeesMustFall protests’](#). BBC News. 30th April 2019.

A student demands reduced fees at Jawaharlal Nehru University in India during protests. Cited on Aljazeera. '[As India's JNU protests fee hike, poor students fear for future](#)'. Photo credit: Danish Siddiqui/Reuters.



A banner held by students protesting against the neoliberal university in Amsterdam that led to the creation of the University of Colour in the Netherlands. Cited on Change.org: '[Petition · University of Colour - Diversify and Decolonize the University · Change.org](#)'.



Students protest for the removal of Cecil Rhodes' statue in Cape Town, South Africa on 9th April 2021. Photograph: Rodger Bosch/AFP/Getty Images. Cited on The Guardian: '[The birth of Rhodes Must Fall | South Africa](#)'.

Theoretical Understandings of Decolonial

Whilst universities may have attended to the calls for decolonising from student protests, it is not new to scholars in feminist theory, gender studies and critical thinking, that the term ‘decolonise’ is in danger of being used by institutions superficially. In an attempt to overtly tackle discriminatory practices and behaviours, the term ‘decolonise’, alongside ‘diversity’; ‘inclusivity’; and ‘equality’, has gained traction because it sells well. Higher education institutions are very much at risk of using overusing and misunderstanding ‘decolonising’ and emptying it of any meaning that it carries. Tuck and Yang (2012) warn us that decolonising is not a metaphor and show us that to decolonise, we need to repatriate land and resources to indigenous communities. To misappropriate ‘decolonise’ and use it as a metaphor, ‘recentres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future’.¹⁰ If we are to use ‘decolonise’ as a word and avoid, what Tuck and Yang call, a ‘settler move to innocence’, we need to go beyond the framework of potentially co-opting the term. In concurrence with Bhabra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu (2018), I believe it is valuable to work beyond the limitations of Tuck and Yang’s definition of decolonise ‘in order to extend and deepen their political warning’¹¹ that decolonisation is not a metaphor and understand how else it has been applied. Moving beyond this definition, we are able to see what unites localised movements that name themselves ‘decolonial’. We are able to understand the nuances of oppression and the intricacies of power relations in what social movements direct themselves against with more precision.

However, before we move beyond Tuck and Yang’s application of decolonisation, I must merit their work as their definition has been particularly useful because of how they situate the term. The authors insist that ‘decolonise’ must be understood within the context of settler colonialism, particularly in the Americas and Australia. It is not a term that can be employed in any other context. Mbembe, in contrast, says of South African society that ‘today the consensus is that

¹⁰ Eve Tuck and Wayne K. Yang. 2012. ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor.’ *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 3.

¹¹ Gurinder K. Bhabra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (eds.) 2018. ‘Introduction’ in *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto Press, 4.

part of what is wrong with our institutions of higher learning is that they are “Westernized”.¹² He further adds that to decolonise the institution means for some, that we should to replace Eurocentrism with a process of Africanization in education. However, he rightly reminds us of Frantz Fanon’s warning that ‘Africanization’ is to continue racial thinking.¹³ Having replaced the position of the colonisers, the national bourgeoisie’s policies have the effect of disillusioning the masses leading to a ‘falling back toward old tribal attitudes’ where Africanization is to ‘replace the foreigner’. Fanon describes feeling ‘furious and sick at heart’ upon seeing fellow Africans attacking fellow Africans in the name of Africanization. In other words, the decolonising project in South Africa, may have been equivocated with ‘Africanization’ showing us another way decolonisation is interpreted.

These are only two theoretical stand-points of how the term decolonise has been utilised, but they demonstrate how varied and contextualised the definition of ‘decolonising’ is. Many other decolonial scholars (Andrews 2018; Icaza and Vázquez 2018; Lugones 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2011; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Smith 1988) have published work that contextualises their experience and shows us further the shades of meaning that ‘decolonial’ carries. It is especially notable that in the last few years, a growth in scholarship around decolonising the university has emerged and continues to flourish. *Decolonising the University* (2018) by Bhabra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu and *The University and Social Justice. Struggles Across The Globe* (2020) by Chowdry and Vally are two excellent examples of edited books that include a wide range of topics on decolonising the university from a number of geopolitical locations. With the ever-expanding field of decolonial theory, it is inevitable that more variegated understandings of what it means to ‘decolonise the university’ are imagined and put into practice to generate transformative change.

Decolonial theory is important to us all as academics because of the way that it intersects with feminist theory, queer theory, posthumanist thinking, new materialism, critical race theory and others. As a theory fit for interdisciplinary use, we can make use of decolonial thinking in light of our different disciplines, fields and areas of expertise. As Omarjee (2018) reflects in the introduction of her book, decolonial theory, for her, has come from a desire to do things differently. She says that ‘the more I learn the more I realise that nuance is the best way to blur

¹² Achille J. Mbembe. 2016. ‘Decolonizing the University: New Directions’. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, Vol. 15 (1). 32.

¹³ Frantz Fanon. 1961. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

the lines of supremacies by making us understand our own vulnerabilities and strengths.¹⁴ As scholars, with a desire to do things differently, we can incorporate decolonial theory into our research due to its irrevocable intertwinedness in all that we do.

Decolonising the University in Praxis

To dismantle the power structures that have been handed down to us from colonialism and move towards a 'decolonial' future, we need to re-invent tools that will liberate knowledge production from the confines of colonial definitions and move past oppressive ways of being. It is true that some institutions may be in danger of emptying 'decolonisation' of its meaning by employing superficial and cosmetic changes to the institution without generating any real, structural change. However, it is important that institutions are making steps towards giving individuals from marginalised communities space within higher education, whether it is to teach or to learn, in order to create institutions that are more inclusive.

One of Utrecht University's main policies and key buzzwords is 'diversity'. They pride themselves on being an 'International Research University' with a diverse student population and a relatively new Diversity Dean. After interviewing Rosemarie Buikema in March 2021, it confirmed for me that there is a general understanding amongst those in positions of power at UU of the need to have a diverse group of staff and students. We know that simply "adding" more faculty and hiring a Diversity Dean does not necessarily generate the structural change we demand. Appleton (2019) is all too aware of this fact and argues that employing the language of 'diversity' and 'decolonisation' does not achieve enough. It is not specific to a European context and instead, she argues we should use more specific and direct terminology if we are to achieve any change. She suggests that we 'diversify...[our] syllabus and curriculum', 'digress from the canon', 'decentre knowledge and knowledge production', 'devalue hierarchies', 'disinvest from citational power structures' and 'diminish some voices and opinions in meetings, while magnifying others'.¹⁵ To heed Appleton's advice would be a move away from Eurocentric canons and a white-washed curriculum to include histories of coloniality, Black Studies, Disability Studies, and more. It is also important to celebrate the importance of local languages

¹⁴ Nadira Omarjee. 2018. *Reimagining the Dream: Decolonising Academia by Putting the Last First*. African Studies Centre Leiden: African Studies Collection, vol. 72. 14.

¹⁵ Nayantara S. Appleton. ['Do Not 'Decolonize' . . . If You Are Not Decolonizing: Progressive Language and Planning Beyond a Hollow Academic Rebranding.'](#) Critical Ethnic Studies Journal. University of Minnesota Press. Posted: 4th February 2019.

in academia instead of allowing English to prevail as the primary way to speak in the field of research. We must move away from traditional ways of knowing to explore and honour epistemologies from marginalised communities. By employing a more definitive, specific list of goals as Appleton suggests, we may become more successful in our primary goal of decolonising the university.

When considering curriculum changes, diverse faculty and student population, diverse citational practices, and so on, I am reminded of Audre Lorde when she told us ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’.¹⁶ To achieve the above criteria and make steps towards a curriculum that is not Eurocentric and white-washed is important, but we are still working within the same institutional framework. We need to be more imaginative to fully decolonise the university which means we must turn to alternative epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies. Toward an environment that nurtures different perspectives outside of the claustrophobic confines of academic guidelines and expectations. In discussing dismantling the master’s house, during an interview, a scholar asked me what might come next if decolonising is about removing. To discuss removal, meant to discuss abolition, and to discuss abolition, meant to discuss replacement. So if we are to decolonise universities, what comes next? If we succeed in decolonising the university, assuming that it is possible, how do we re-create a space that does not maintain or reestablish the same inequalities, the same logics of pedagogical or research practices, but reincarnates our society one step further towards a Utopian university/society? Perhaps I am being unrealistic, too far-fetched, a Utopian society is too abstract and impossible, but it is precisely beyond our current scope of understanding that we must strive to be, think and know if we want to decolonise the institution. Reinventing tools will not come from reproduced epistemologies, constricted methodologies, it will come from being creative, different, fresh.

But, as we know, merely ‘adding’ staff and students is not enough, we cannot only include students from diverse backgrounds, ‘edit’ the curriculum or create positions for Deans to monitor and foster inclusion. Creating these changes as simple add-ons to a current way of being is not transforming or restructuring, but a continuation of building onto the very structure that we desire to change. What an overwhelming task this is. So whilst we are working on re-imagining and re-inventing ways of restructuring the university so it is an inclusive space, these steps are a way to fill terminology like ‘equality’, ‘diversity’, ‘decolonial’ with some practical meaning and

¹⁶ Audre Lorde. 1984. *Sister Outsider*. New York: Random House. 123.

explicitly visible change. If every academic invested in one step, for example their citation tactics, the process would, as Clare Hemmings tells us, 'be one that...open[s] up and foreground[s] absence, provide[s] a break in the monotony of the repeated, and suggest[s] other historiographies that are politically and theoretically transparent'.¹⁷ By working as a collective to change the ways that we produce and create knowledge by following Appleton's list as a guideline, as academics and as political subjects in our own right, we are working towards the drive to 'decolonise the university'.

An Invitation to Answer: RINGS and Decolonisation

I have shown the ways that the term 'decolonial' is used in protests around the world that are demanding 'decolonise the university'. Although each protest movement is defined by its specific context, what is inherently shared is the anger and discontent from activists and representational authorities that show us how the university is built on exclusion. Some institutions and governments have begun introducing policies that attempt to make the university more inclusive, but is it enough? Again, decolonial theorists define decolonisation in ways that are specific to their own politics of location making it more difficult, not impossible, to have a universal, shared understanding of decolonisation. What is inherent to protest movements, theories of decolonisation and decolonisation in praxis is the fundamental desire to change the university as an institution built on exclusionary power structures embedded in colonial thinking that has not yet been dismantled. We must continue critiquing our own positionality and insist on practicing self-reflexivity so that fundamental differences are understood and nuances in decolonial thought are visibly present. So, with this in mind, I invite my reader to ponder the following questions:

- ❖ How can RINGS as a transnational feminist association of higher education institutions decolonise?
- ❖ What does it mean for an international association to decolonise if 'to decolonise' is so contextually specific?
- ❖ As academics in critical thinking, how do we be *in* the university space without being *of* the university space?

¹⁷ Clare Hemmings. 2011. 'Citation Tactics' in *Why Stories Matter. The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. London: Duke University Press. 190.

- ❖ What can we do to re-create a university space that does not re-establish or re-enforce exclusion? Is this even possible?
- ❖ How do we dissolve boundaries so that those that are excluded are allowed 'in'?
- ❖ In what ways can RINGS be decolonial in praxis and theory?
- ❖ How can we foster self-reflexivity and critical analysis in more than our own discipline and field of expertise? How can we further disperse feminist methodologies?
- ❖ Finally, a quote from Angela Last (2018) to reflect upon: 'While we may not be able to change practices during our career, we can at least embed these queries into our work.'¹⁸

¹⁸ Angela Last. 2018. 'Internationalisation and Interdisciplinarity: Sharing across Boundaries?' in *Decolonising the University*. Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (eds.) London: Pluto Press. 208-230.

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