



12

On the Fallacy of Decolonisation in Our Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Nadia Mehdi and Maryam Jameela

Who is responsible for these interventions? Who is the impetus on to carry out this work? It is difficult to avoid the fact that concepts that are anti-racist in origin, when taken up by the “POC” community at large, but certainly by institutions, are dead by the time they take. (Yarimar Bonilla)

Introduction

This chapter deals with barriers to the project of decolonising the Western university that come from within, rather than without. We are not concerned with critic’s accusations of “cultural policing”, nor those who suggest calls for decolonisation merely demonstrate an inability or reluctance to grapple with intellectually difficult questions. Rather, we are concerned with the barriers that are thrown up by (mostly White) scholars and

N. Mehdi (✉) • M. Jameela
University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
e-mail: Nmehdi1@sheffield.ac.uk

practitioners who articulate a desire to decolonise that in no way chimes with their actions. Those who “diffuse the decolonising incursion with more palatable alternatives” whilst uncritically upholding White supremacy, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia through an inherited adherence to the status quo.

“Decolonisation” is becoming an exhausted term that we have become accustomed to seeing misappropriated, misapplied, and misused by White race scholars, White institutions, and White diversity initiatives. Scholars and activists of colour have long discussed the possibilities and applications of the term. It would be remiss to not mention Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang’s (2012) prescient and compelling work on the use of decolonisation. They argue that:

when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it re-centres whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. 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 (p. 3).

To put it another way, decolonisation does not have to be everything to everyone. Attempts to decolonise curriculums, reading lists, or spaces, are so often doomed because they do not begin from a robust encounter with what decolonisation is. Tuck and Yang’s argument warns against grafting decolonisation onto pre-existing frameworks because to do so is to move the focus away from critiquing, dismantling, and displacing settler colonialism. They argue that when this happens decolonisation is merely emptied out only to be filled back up with a centring of White supremacist logic (p. 1); a piecemeal strategy which carries a sheen of anti-racism with no substance or clarity. People of colour are already all too aware of this process being enacted by White institutions and White

allies on terms as wide-ranging as “BAME”, “diversity”, and “intersectionality”.

Tuck and Yang warn that the danger of the perpetuation of settler colonialism through decolonisation is itself very real. Yarimar Bonilla (2017) also shares Tuck and Yang’s reluctance to stand by the uses of decolonisation and argues that decentring settler colonialism from the decolonial project by definition cannot be decolonial—“I remain sceptical as to whether one could truly decolonize either sovereignty or anthropology, given that there is no pre-colonial status to which either could return” (p. 335). We shall return to the question of futurity for decolonisation at the end of the chapter, but for now we must consider the predicament both Bonilla and Tuck and Yang put forward for us: decolonisation without the impetus and organising principle of an engagement with dismantling settler colonialism is no kind of decolonisation. Indeed, Bonilla proposes the use of the term “unsettling” as “what is unsettled is not necessarily removed, toppled, or returned to a previous order but is fundamentally brought into question” (2017, p. 335). The linearity implicit in the word “decolonisation” heralds a reversal that may well be impossible.

We are all too aware that the critiques of decolonisation we outline above, and those that are to come below, can be taken as a sign of hopelessness or a lack of faith in liberation or justice in anti-racist work. Such a sign, however, would be mistaken. Our critiques are rooted in the need scholars of colour carry on our backs for anti-racist work as a requirement of living in worlds that often seek to shrink us. This is not an intellectual exercise for communities of colour that are committed to anti-racist work: it is the condition of not only our survival but our capacity to thrive. We have seen through generations the terms of anti-racism that come in and out of vogue, and, as Bonilla’s suggestion of “unsettling” indicates, terms are receptacles that do not have to provide for any and all situations. More accurately, they are vessels that can carry us to where we need to be for the moment.

Below we offer two instances of purported decolonisation in higher education, and their underlying logics which make for, at best, a rocky path. We end with an attempt to offer ways to look to the future amongst the fire now (Johnson et al. 2018).

Case Study 1: Arts and Humanities Decolonisation Task Force

In 2019, the authors, along with a small group of other non-White students, were invited by Arts and Humanities senior management to partake in a task force “focussed on decolonising the curriculum”. The initiative was a performative and ostentatious response to both student-led decolonisation projects in other departments and faculties, and the unveiling of a new university race equality strategy. Not an attempt to confront the colonial workings of the faculty, in spite of multiple structures of racism that privilege White (home) students, and denigrate students of colour.¹

The process was arduous and excruciating. From the start, there was a refusal to accept the enormity and the structural dimension of the problem. In the spirit of unsettling, our group proposed a vision of a decolonised curriculum that inevitably involved a radical shake-up of the organisation of the faculty and the content of its courses. If, as Bonilla (2017) argues, what is unsettled is not necessarily removed, but is fundamentally questioned, then we must begin by “refashion[ing] our intellectual commitments and collective purpose” (p. 335).

Yet, unsurprisingly, our vision was thwarted. The sole staff member on the task force agreed we were *of course* correct to question the aims of the university as a colonial institution, but only at this juncture shared that the task-force had a limited lifespan and its true purpose was to produce an event. She expressed that she had been hoping this might be in a university foyer and “make a lot of noise” to signify our discontent with the status quo. Upon stating concern regarding the optics and outputs involved in producing a one-off event given our initial goals, the staff member stated that she understood if we felt unable to continue on the task force.

We stayed—this, unlike many other decolonisation projects, was paid gig—but this all too easy dissolution from the one White, and most senior, person in the room sat uncomfortably. White people will often rush to agree and attempt to pre-empt the objections people of colour may have to situations that are asking too much of us. This rush to concession is

often prompted from a place of White guilt, or as Tuck and Yang argue, “from “settler moves to innocence”, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (2012, p. 1). We are positioned as “correct” in calling out what is “problematic” with no real engagement in the content of our speech. It would appear that it does not matter if the subaltern can speak, as long as the liberal can be seen to agree.

Decolonisation is not a metaphor for resisting oppression. And yet it lends itself so easily to being used as one in the hands of the wrong people who have heard the cries of the oppressed within their university and seized on this term, whose meaning they don't understand, as a catch-all save. Asking us to “decolonise the curriculum” without the opportunity to recommend any structural changes was predetermined to have to output. As Nayantara Sheoran Appleton (2019) puts it,

to take on decolonizing work without having ever engaged with the long tradition of scholars who have written on decolonizing is sloppy and opportunistic.

White supremacy requires the cooperation of White people and the social milieu hardwires them to enact their willing engagement in ensuring settler futurity through colonial environments. The requested event was never going to be “decolonial” given that it employed *Brown faces* for a tokenistic marketing event that served to position the university to appear as being committed to anti-race work.

Instead, what transpired was a small event for students of colour to share the ways in which the university had broken them. We recognised the need for a space for cathartic venting before a process of change and healing (although the money pot ran dry before the healing could begin). Therein, perhaps, lies the problem. Many students of colour simply cannot afford to heal from wounds that are written into us from generations previous. Materially, money is required to afford one the physical space to reckon with the increasingly knotty racist interactions that are part and parcel of university life. One must have enough money to pay rent, to eat, to access good healthcare, to be able to meet colleagues in social spaces, to recharge. The consideration of emotional spaces, of collectivity and

networks of support is a fantasy for many. Piecemeal events such as ours merely plaster over the cracks.

Case Study 2: Solidarity and UCU

A recent report released by Universities UK found that universities have been prioritising sexual harassment and gender-based violence without doing much to tackle racial violence on campuses. An article from *The Independent* (Busby 2019) quoted Universities minister Chris Skidmore promoting a “zero tolerance culture”, (Paragraph 3) and University and Colleges Union (UCU) General Secretary Jo Grady as stating:

universities should be safe spaces for all staff and students, free from harassment and discrimination, but there is still much work to be done to make this a reality (ibid, Paragraph 19).

Both the report itself and these two responses are par for the course for liberal and White stakeholders in race-related encounters, in that they seek to use the often bland and well-meaning language that does not tie itself explicitly to robust challenges to White supremacist and colonial institutions.

UCU, in particular, has been criticised by staff and students of colour for their approach, or rather lack of approach, to racial harassment. Whilst UCU will occasionally provide comments on race-related incidents or reports, it cannot reasonably be argued that a core part of UCU’s strategy is a commitment to anti-racist work that aims to provide sustained support for staff of colour. For example, UCU’s general election manifesto involves a 6-point plan that sets out commitments for the incoming government to prioritise funding and investment for post-16 education, “make international staff and students welcome in the UK”, (UCU, 2019, p. 3), resisting the increased managerialism in higher education, tackling unfairness in university admissions, promoting sustainability and climate change targets at universities, and investing in the education workforce. Viewed in isolation, UCU’s statement of tackling the hostile environment is one which is necessary for university life in the

UK, but viewed within the context of UCU policies, operations and strategies is altogether murkier and unconvincing.

It is difficult, however, to imagine a situation where UCU staff or membership would make challenging the hostile environment or engaging more broadly in anti-racist work as a policy can be taken seriously and trusted to function effectively. UCU have demonstrated little understanding, or willingness, to incorporate anti-racism as a core strategy; when would there be strike action concerning the rampant and structural racism that is built into UK universities? What have White UCU staff and members done to develop their own understanding of an intersectional approach to racial violence? The problems faced by staff and students with anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, intersections with ableism, transphobia, homophobia are complex and wide-ranging. They are also problems which have been painstakingly articulated by scholars of colour and activists and our reticence at the effectiveness of UCU in this area comes from the understanding that without reckoning with the hostile environment, with racial capitalism, with structural racism as a White supremacist manifestation, UCU cannot reckon effectively with precarity, barriers for international students and staff, climate change, or any of their other commitments outlined in their general election strategy.

We find it difficult to swallow affirmations of how universities “should” be safe spaces, when we have seen how racist colleagues, indifferent management, and ineffective unions move through these spaces, often at the cost of people like us. To paraphrase James Baldwin (1998), “how can I believe what you say, when I see what you do?” (p. 738).

The silence we are faced with when UCU is critiqued as selling members of colour down the river is rooted in an unwillingness and a practiced inability to reckon with colonial and White supremacist institutions under the veneer of solidarity. Asking precarious workers of colour, who are already multiply marginalised, for their solidarity and unity on picket lines and in strike action fails to recognise that these same picket lines involve standing with people who have racially abused and targeted us. Instead, as is often the case for scholars of colour we are left to make our own networks and to carry out our own union work in support of one another; who else will?

What Next Then?

What will it take then to decolonise the White Western university? Is it even possible?

This book section poses the question: equality, diversity, inclusivity, or decolonisation. Which of these is viable? Which of these is desirable? We answer that diversity is unavoidable (try as people might to avoid admitting students of colour from the UK into “top tier” universities). Equality is impossible, because equality doesn’t entail equity or justice, and an inclusivity without equality is unpalatable. Similarly, internationalisation doesn’t mean to those in power what it means to us; a university which rinses overseas students for their money (whilst not providing them with any material support) versus a vision of a university that holds a pluriverse of epistemologies and lifeworlds within itself, and we have outlined the pitfalls of an allied attempt at decolonisation.

As Tuck and Yang (2012) said:

decolonization as metaphor allows people to equivocate these contradictory decolonial desires because it turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation. In reality, the tracks walk all over land/people in settler contexts” (p. 7).

The removal of settler contexts and the centrality of land to theories of decolonisation speaks to the weighty currency of empty signifiers which in this case equip institutions with the tools necessary to blunt the force of attempts to upheave the status quo, or things as they have always been. This process is itself driven by settler preoccupation with individual innocence and guilt at the cost of reckoning with the morality of coloniality, and the structures and institutions it has spawned.

Where this is the case, or rather, given that this is the case, the mollified suggestions we hear so often linked to calls for decolonisation (and other appropriated buzzwords du’jour) are in reality calls for personal career advancement. For instance, the following list is a fairly standard manifesto of decolonisation:

- Hire people from multiply marginalised backgrounds on salaried contracts, given them the resources they need to do the work, don't expect them to conform. They will say things that make you uncomfortable and you will need to find a way to sit with that.
- Make universities safe for students of colour and students from other marginalised backgrounds
- Rethink what knowledges are and understand why they are important
- Democratise curriculum formation, down with stale pale males. Question the canon as it is. Tear down disciplinary boundaries.

We are not suggesting that no good can come from these kinds of guidelines. We are suggesting that they do little to unsettle the status quo. As Tuck and Yang (2012) have pointed out, this kind of work allows settler scholars to gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware. Yet settler moves to innocence are hollow, they only serve the settler (p. 10).

The institutionalisation of these suggestions requires people of colour to be seen to agree with this kind of work whilst acknowledging or knowing that it is not liberatory work. This isn't decolonisation. Decolonisation requires resistance, upheaval and the end of the university as we know it.

We must land on the side of liberation then. We cannot help but feel that this liberation must lie in the collectivity and network of support we mentioned earlier. It is, however, a collectivity that does not have its place alongside settler Whiteness. We can't keep developing terms that encapsulate global manifestations of White supremacy in disparate disciplines and areas only to have these terms co-opted by White institutions who seek to dull their sharpness in service of allowing people of colour a seat at the table. Too often, participation in White supremacist logics is couched as liberatory, when resistance and overthrowal is the only remedy. We need to move away from the idea that blanket solidarity is the only way to achieve liberation and towards an attention to difference that is invested in difference as a path to justice.

Ultimately, decolonisation is the latest liberatory framework to have been swept up in the university's cyclical machinery, where funding isn't provided for frameworks to develop themselves, where short-term projects proliferate without achieving material changes. Critique of the

academy from the margins mirrors this process. We inadvertently forget or misplace the fact that many scholars of colour have come before us and have said and thought the same things. We need to reframe what we consider to be progress. We need to acknowledge that where progress is achieved, nothing will look even vaguely similar.

Note

1. We could detail these instances but we have no desire to retraumatise ourselves and we trust in the heart-breaking fact that fellow students and staff of colour know the environment we wish to convey all too well.

References

- Baldwin, J. (1998). *Baldwin: Collected essays*, T. Morrison, Ed. New York: Library of America.
- Bonilla, Y. (2017). Unsettling sovereignty. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(3), 330–339.
- Busby, E. (2019, October). Universities must do more to tackle racial harassment on campus, report says. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/university-racism-harassment-hate-crime-students-campus-abuse-a9147591.html>
- Johnson, A., Joseph-Salisbury, R., & Kamunge, B. (2018). *The fire now*. London: Zed Books.
- Sheoran Appleton, N. (2019). *Do not 'decolonize' ... if you are not decolonizing: Progressive language and planning beyond a hollow academic rebranding*. Retrieved February 10, 2020, From critical ethnic studies website: <http://www.criticaletnicstudiesjournal.org/blog/2019/1/21/do-not-decolonize-if-you-are-not-decolonizing-alternate-language-to-navigate-desires-for-progressive-academia-6y5sg>
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonisation is not a metaphor. *Decolonization*, 1(1), 1–40.
- UCU. (2019). *Transforming post-16 education: A progressive manifesto from the university and college union*. Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10603/UCU-manifesto-2019/pdf/UCU_Manifesto_Nov19.pdf