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Decolonising Academic Spaces: Moving Beyond Diversity to Promote Racial Equity in Postsecondary Education

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There is no debating that many postsecondary institutions around the world have been grappling with the global imperative to be more responsive to the increasing diversity of students enrolling in their campuses. For example, a report by Universities Canada found that more than three-fourths of higher education institutions in Canada had equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) goals in their strategic plans and 70 per cent had in place or were developing specific EDI plans.[1] A recent report on European higher education noted that there is an increasing awareness of the significance of diversity as it relates to research and education, and as a result, many EDI initiatives exist within institutions.[2] Correspondingly, in the United States there are more Senior Diversity Officers than ever, leading EDI efforts on college campuses throughout the country.[3]

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Clearly, these institutions, with mixed results, have attempted to diversify their campuses with a range of programmes, policies and initiatives designed to promote increased access for historically underserved students. Consequently, we can now find increasing numbers of postsecondary institutions around the world espoused commitments to diversity in campus' mission statements, marketing materials, position titles as well as in conference themes of major national higher education associations.[4]

Unfortunately, despite their best efforts to advance diversity, postsecondary institutions around the world have found themselves in the midst of campus protests where minoritised[5] students and their allies have been speaking out in resistance to their daily encounters with micro aggressions, macro invalidations, and other not so subtle acts of discrimination and demanding for decolonisation in higher education. For example, students are protesting to decolonise the curriculum in South Africa and the United Kingdom and rallying in Brazil against the current president who opposes the teaching of any subjects related to sexual diversity, gender equality or racism.[6] Students in South Africa are protesting against discriminatory language policies prioritising English in South Africa and against college fees in South Africa.[7] Students in France are calling for their university to cancel a play they viewed as Afrophobic, colonialist and racist[8] and students in Rome are marching against the current government who they believe is fuelling a climate of hatred with racist practices targeting migrant families.[9] Collectively, these acts of resistance exemplify the glaring need to address racism and racial equity around the world.

Arguably, at the heart of increased activism on college campuses around the world is the failure of postsecondary institutions to create more decolonised spaces both in and out of the classroom where minoritised students can engage in learning that suggest their lives and their lived experiences really matter. The reality is that the manner in which postsecondary institutions have implemented their diversity initiatives have not resulted in substantial transformation of the day-to-day operations of campus business and instead focused more on how to assimilate minoritised students into the existing campus culture. Thus, the majority of diversity initiatives being implemented to support the increased diversity of students, rarely impact the colonial campus systems and structures because they are not

linked to institutional policies and practices which severely limit their ability to transform the higher education environment (Tuitt 2016a). Moreover, the implementation of diversity initiatives across college campuses throughout the world have neglected to include an intentional focus on race, ethnicity and other minoritised backgrounds as a central component of their inclusion efforts (Tuitt 2016a). Instead diversity and inclusion initiatives have opted for culture neutral policies and practices.

In return, minoritised students have become more and more suspicious of diversity initiatives that are divorced from or in conflict with racial equity and racial justice goals. Not surprisingly if you were to take a closer look at many of the student demands emerging out of recent campus protests, a clear theme around "race mattering" is evident. Consider for a moment, students in the United Kingdom have:

- protested to decolonise curriculum (took place under #WhyIsMyCurriculumWhite);
- called for more diversity in staff and faculty to reflect the diversity in students;
- demanded for resources such as more diverse counselling staff on campus who can better understand racial issues that BAME students face;
- rallied against fee hikes which further hinder students of colour and those from low socio-economic backgrounds;
- spoken out against colonial monuments;
- voiced concerns over a report that revealed BAME students are 21 times more likely; than White students to have their university applications flagged and investigated for fraudulent information (Tuitt 2019a).

These demands emerged in higher education context that has increasingly become racially hostile. According to a new report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, racial harassment is happening at "an alarmingly high rate across British Universities."[10] As we look across the student demands from different parts of the world, such as the United States,[11,12] Hong Kong,[13] South Africa[14] and the United Kingdom,[15] there is a clear sentiment that postsecondary institutions around the globe need to move away from the happy talk of diversity[16] and instead promote racial equity in postsecondary education by decolonising academic spaces.

Accordingly, this chapter presents a conceptual framing for decolonised academic spaces that move beyond diversity to promote racial equity and inclusion. We address four guiding concepts of decolonisation in higher education: (1) decolonising the mind through ways of knowing and knowledge construction; (2) decolonising pedagogy; (3) decolonising structures, policies and practices; and (4) reimagining the academy from a decolonised lens. Thereafter, we discuss what these may look like in praxis and the implications they have for decolonising academic spaces.

Decolonising Academic Spaces to Promote Racial Equity and Inclusion: A Conceptual Framing

Even though decolonising the academy may be an unattainable goal within modern societies, we argue that creating anticolonial academic spaces may be possible considering the following principles for decolonisation in higher education. In this respect, Stein and Andreotti define decolonisation as a set of efforts or processes designed to:

> resist the distinct but intertwined processes of colonization and racialization, to enact transformation and redress in reference to the historical and ongoing effects of these processes, and to create and keep alive modes of knowing, being, and relating that these processes seek to eradicate. (p. 2)

More specifically, decolonisation in higher education has focused on the traditional onto-epistemological ways of knowing and knowledge construction (Thiong'o 1986; Small 2018), the intersections of pedagogy and praxis (McLaren 2015, 2016), the structures, policies and culture of the academy (Ferguson 2012; Stein and Andreotti 2016) and the futurities of imagining an entirely new *pluri*-versity (Boidin et al. 2012).

Decolonising knowledge within academia is not a new concept but one that has been heavily written about by early scholars in the field such as Fanon (1963), Rodney (1972), Said (1978) and Spivak (1988) to name a few. The scholars debate the proliferation of western knowledge

as an institutionalised mechanism to co-opt indigenous epistemologies for capitalist gain. In this regard, indigenous ways of knowing in the academy are simultaneously re-packaged and exploited as reformulated forms of western knowledge. As one aspect of decolonising academic spaces, the academy must value non-White/non-Western forms of curricula, ways of knowing, texts and knowledge that informs curricula content and styles of teaching. As such, pedagogy cannot be exempt from curriculum and how knowledge is taught is a form of either resistance or conformity to Western colonisation. Stewart (forthcoming) speaks about plantation pedagogies in higher education and specifically debates how the principles of plantation politics have influenced modern-day pedagogy in higher education classrooms. The author further suggests an emancipatory pedagogical matrix to disrupt these forms of pedagogical oppressions.

Similar to the effects of pedagogical oppressions, the weaponising of academic research in higher education has led to what Smith (1999) argues as one of the most dangerous legacies of Western colonisation; one that has rendered indigenous epistemologies as lesser than and incapable of generating knowledge. Smith's (1999) seminal book, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, interrogates and argues for the need to value and teach decolonising methodologies as a mechanism to deconstruct imperialism and decolonise institutions such as higher education. As such Smith (1999) argues that decolonising research

> involves the unmasking and deconstruction of imperialism, and its aspect of colonialism, in its old and new formations alongside a search for sovereignty; for reclamation of knowledge, language, and culture; and for the social transformation of the colonial relations between the native and the settler. (pp. 88–89)

However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) have stated, there is a need to constantly interrogate the concept of decolonisation as those who labour for this work can also be conditioned to further settler colonisation intentions. As such scholars such as Tuitt (2019b) call attention to the role of decolonising scholars needing to disrupt their own colonial gaze within

the very institutions that trained them to recreate the structure, policies and culture of the academy.

Most of today's scholars were trained to replicate the legacies of Western colonisation framed as institutional policies and practices. Squire, Williams and Tuitt et al. (2018) argue that contemporary US higher education institutions are designed on the premise of plantation politics which resembles a system of coloniality: a structured and complex bureaucratic network of exploitation, domination, expropriation and extermination. Stewart (forthcoming) describes the principles of plantation politics in higher education as:

> 1) the exploitation of Black labour, identity and emotions at the expense of the self but for the economic benefit of the institution; 2) institutionalized hierarchy and stratification of race, class and gender that inform the climate and structures of power within the institution; 3) policy guidelines and regulations designed for and to reinforce the structure of power and wealth of an institution; and 4) the practice and reward of plantation pedagogy to support the ideological subservience of the plantation (i.e., the institution). (p. forthcoming)

These principles do more than frame the concept of plantation politics but illustrate the capitalistic power structures of higher education. In this light, decolonising higher education's structures, policies and practices is more about disrupting economic inequities than delivering higher education's first intention as a public good. Arguably, higher education institutions designed from colonial and neo/colonial structures and policies were never intended to be for public good but for private gain to maintain White supremacy. Decolonisation in higher education problematises the racial hierarchy of higher education and calls for equitable representation at the individual and systems level. This will dismantle all colonial structures, policies and procedures inherently designed to reify the stratification of higher education institutions. This principle not only looks at representational quotas at the individual and systems level but equitable redistribution of resources to undo the capitalistic design of higher education. This would essentially treat higher education as a social good and not a capitalist gain.

The last principle tackles and stretches the imagination of what higher education could be: the futurities of higher education. Some scholars such as Boidin et al. (2012) have argued for a *pluri*versity looking at multiple standards and diverse understandings of its purpose. Where some scholars such as Stein and Andreotti note the possibilities of eco-versities or "hospicing" the university, there is still caution to not replicate the effects of coloniality when envisioning a decolonised future.

The linking of all four principles is critical to create decolonised academic spaces for the promotion of racial equity. Each principle addresses the individual and systemic levels of social violence such as colonialism, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and capitalism in higher education. Although not promised, the effects of decolonisation in higher education can promote social activism, critical consciousness, social and equitable academic spaces as an emancipatory re/imagination of higher education. In the next section, we offer some final considerations based in part from our own lived experiences as academics where we attempt to move from theory to praxis as we strive to decolonise the academic spaces we occupy to promote racial equity and inclusion.

Moving from Theory to Praxis: Practical Implications for Decolonising Academic Spaces

Recognising that the higher education institutions we work for were not designed to liberate racial and ethnic minorities but arguably to control the mind so that it could exploit the body for profit, we take the position that it would be virtually impossible to decolonise academic institutions in their entirety. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the privileged space we occupy as academics who get to engage in intellectual exercises where we write about what ought to be done in the name of promoting racial equity while simultaneously remaining complicit by participating in and benefiting from the very systems and structures we seek to dismantle. This irony is not lost on critical scholars such as Adele Thomas who reminds us that the minoritised people who have been and continue to engage in campus rebellions are to be applauded for their efforts to

disrupt the oppressive status quo. However, she like Tuck and Yang (2012) warns that we must also acknowledge that often embedded in our freedom fighter's demands are calls for increased access to the very colonialist systems and structures that have been central to their demise. Accordingly, we must remember that if we are not critically vigilant in our efforts to interrogate our emancipatory actions, our good intentions can result in oppressive outcomes. Therefore, scholar activists seeking to decolonise academic spaces to promote racial equity and inclusion will want to focus on decolonising aspects of the academic enterprise within their spheres of influence. Three of the four frames discussed in the previous section related to decolonising the mind (epistemological ways of knowing and knowledge construction), decolonising pedagogy (pedagogy and praxis), and decolonising academic programmes (the structures and policies of the academy) to promote racial equity are good places to start.

Decolonising the Mind

According to Stephen Small (2018), decolonising the mind is an extremely hard thing to do. He argues that the notion that academic knowledge is entirely objective and that all perspectives are considered is a myth and the reality is that the knowledge that has been central to our training is strongly shaped by Eurocentric values born out of colonialism. Take for example, critical scholar activists spend a great deal of time trying to figure out how we can use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house also known as the academy (Lorde 1984). Yet without failure, we have encounters that consistently remind us that we are in many ways an extension of our training and as such have embedded in us a colonial gaze that makes it difficult to break free of the scientific shackles (Lavia and Sikes 2010) that bound us to the Eurocentric modes of academic inquiry. Consequently, in an effort to decolonise the mind, educators will find it helpful to do the following:

- Draw on sources of knowledge outside of academia including the insights of activists and community organisations and cite scholars from minoritised communities
- Foreground the intersections of race/gender ideologies that have always been and remain predicated on domination and exploitation
- Use progressive language and terminology that reduces colonialist bias, and confront and reject deficit-based ideologies that portray minoritised communities as underdeveloped
- Draw upon the voices of indigenous groups and value the contribution they make to produce counter knowledge
- Recognise the primacy of race and racism in the creation of colonised communities
- Question language and terminology (concepts and frameworks) and the assumptions upon which they are based (Small 2018).

In theory, applying these principles increase the likelihood that we can disrupt the colonial gaze embedded in all of us and move closer to decolonising the academic spaces we occupy to promote racial equity and inclusion. Decolonising the mind is the first step in breaking our bondage to the institutional regime of academic practices and discourses that shape our authorial subjectivities (Chun 2008). It is also a necessary step in decolonising our pedagogy and praxis.

Decolonising Pedagogy

Related to decolonising the mind, the manner in which we teach challenges those of us adhering to a decolonised ideology to constantly battle and wade through the colonial lecture style waves of disseminating knowledge. In this respect, some faculty teach as an extension of the self through a lens in which they refract and receive knowledge as a two-way reciprocal process not a one-directional strategy. Some decolonising pedagogues borrow from the philosophies of critical pedagogy (Freire 1993; Giroux 2010), inclusive pedagogy (Tuitt 2003, 2016a, b) and revolutionary pedagogy (McLaren 2015) to create more decolonised academic spaces for teaching and learning to occur. These learning environments

are inherently inclusive, dialogical and discursive. These spaces are able to centre peripheries of knowing and generate knowledge from non-White/non-Western scholars. Here, pedagogy is filled with passion, rage, fear, anger and love for the art of teaching. Those wishing to engage in decolonising pedagogy should consider the following:

- Teach with intentionality, making pedagogical decisions from the core of your authentic self, focusing on liberation and ultimate emancipation of the mind and the self.
- Leverage students as well as your own voice and lived experiences through indigenous ways of knowing to co-construct knowledge.
- Diversify course content based on each cohort of students. Review and assess who is privileged on the syllabus and those that are recommended for reading. Educators should prioritise a balanced portrayal of racially diverse groups of scholars.
- Constantly engage in the self-work needed to be an anti-oppressionist and equity-minded educator that uses decolonising practices and strategies to encourage students to reflect and act.
- Be courageous, resilient and embrace the emotional labour required for decolonising pedagogy (Tuitt et al. 2018).

These considerations are not exhaustive and should be challenged and enhanced based on the context, the learning environment and the students in the classroom. The constant reflexive process of engaging in decolonising pedagogy allows educators to develop as leaders and form communities of persons aspiring to decolonise academic programmes.

Decolonise the Academic Programmes You Lead

In *Do Not "Decolonise" … If You Are Not Decolonising: Progressive Language and Planning Beyond a Hollow Academic Rebranding*, Nayantara Sheoran Appleton (2019) states that until you are actually ready and capable of engaging in the work of decolonising the systems and structures that we benefit from we should think of better words to name what we are

actually doing. Moreover, it does a disservice to the scholar activists who have been on the frontlines fighting to dismantle power structures that continue to exclude and oppress indigenous and minoritised communities. Appleton's warning suggests that if we are not committed to radically transforming the academic spaces we lead then engaging in decolonising the mind and our teaching will be insufficient. Therefore, scholar activists seeking to move beyond diversity to promote racial equity and inclusion will need to engage in a decolonising campaign that interrogates all aspects of academic programmes you inhabit.

According to Small (2018), the academic spaces we belong to are designed to maintain and protect the vestiges of slavery, colonialism and imperialism that limit who access and succeed in the academy. Thus, moving beyond diversity to promote racial equity requires uncovering those hidden legacies of colonialism and identifying alternative solutions to them that expand access and opportunity. While there is an emerging body of literature on how to approach the decolonisation of the academic spaces we lead, we offer three pivotal areas to consider:

- Interrogate and change the systems and structures that determine who has access (admissions and hiring practices) to the academic spaces you lead so members from indigenous and racially minoritised communities can have an increased presence in your programme. This will require that move away from restrictive exclusive benchmarks of talent that privilege some communities over others
- Conduct an audit of the system and structures that influence knowledge construction (curriculum, assignments and assessments) which play a critical role in determining who succeeds and who fails. Asking questions related to *why are some subjects/content typically identified as the canon required (readings and courses) and others regulated to the margins? Why are some forms of scholarship encouraged and rewarded over others? Moreover, who frequently teaches the foundational courses* versus *the electives? Why are some forms of assessment prioritized over others?*
- Investigate how the reward structures such as tenure and promotion, merit, awards and distinction align with goals related to decolonising the academic spaces within your sphere of influence. Does research, teaching and service relate to indigenous and minoritised communities or from a decolonial perspective count? Is it valued?

While not exhaustive addressing these three aspects of the academic space begins to unravel the often-cloaked vestiges of coloniality that are embedded in the fabric of our programmes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we make the claim that the surge in campus rebellions occurring around the world is in part a result of the failure of academic institutions to move beyond a superficial commitment to diversity which by its design and limitations never really had a chance to facilitate racial equity and inclusion for minoritised communities. Specifically, we attribute this failure to the reluctance of higher education institutions, in spite of their investments in EDI, to radically transform their systems and structures, leaving intact their vestiges of coloniality that continue to marginalise minoritised communities. As such, we hold that it is unlikely that any group of committed scholar activists will be successful in the efforts to transform in its entirety higher education institutions that are cemented in coloniality. However, we do remain hopeful that academic spaces within our spheres of influence can be decolonised in a manner that facilitates movement beyond diversity to racial equity and inclusion. To that end, scholar activists will want to engage in the hard work of decolonising the mind, questioning the epistemological assumptions (ways of knowing) that privileges some forms of knowledge over others and reinforces traditional western/Eurocentric values. They will want to examine departmental objectives, courses, programmes, activities and outcomes for presence/absence of anticolonial approaches. Moreover, it is important for scholar activists to avoid working in isolation and instead seek out opportunities to engage in dialogue with other faculty and administrators in departments and across disciplines for best approaches for decolonising the academic spaces they inhabit. Additionally, those of us who have taken on the challenge of being programme leaders should explore how we can design capacity-building infrastructures that provide opportunities for the development of the competencies necessary for decolonising academic spaces while incentivising, recognising and rewarding those efforts. Finally, scholar activists seeking to help their

institutions move beyond diversity to promote racial equity and inclusion will need to keep in mind that this work must be a labour of love (Tuitt 2016b) requiring grace, self-care and resiliency. The academic spaces we are seeking to decolonise have been routed in their coloniality for some time now and will not change overnight. While we agree with the late great Dr. Vincent Harding that to become intimately involved in the concrete active struggle for freedom with all its risk, is an honourable aspect of the vocation of the scholar activist, to allow it to lead to your demise is too high a price to pay.

Notes

1. See https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/most-universities-report-having-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-plans-but-challenges-remain/
2. See https://eua.eu/resources/publications/890:diversity,-equity-and-inclusion-in-european-higher-education-institutions-results-from-the-invited-project.html
3. See https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/11/15/new-research-diversity-officers-campus-climate
4. For a few examples, see: https://www.miragenews.com/international-conference-shines-a-light-on-equity-in-higher-education/, https://www.aacu.org/conferences/dess/2019, https://eua.eu/issues/12:diversity-and-inclusion.html, https://www.eiseverywhere.com/ehome/iau2019/825625/, https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/conferences/EDIConf20
5. According to Chase et al. (2014), the term *minoritised* refers to both the objective outcomes resulting from the historical and contemporary practices of racial-ethnic exclusion and the continued social, political and economic existence of marginality and discrimination, though compositional racial-ethnic parity may have been achieved in particular contexts.
6. See http://theconversation.com/brazilian-universities-fear-bolsonaro-plan-to-eliminate-humanities-and-slash-public-education-budgets-117530
7. See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47001468
8. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/28/sorbonne-at-centre-of-racism-row-after-alleged-blackface-in-theatre-show

9. See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/thousands-march-rome-protest-climate-hatred-181110185924306.html
10. See https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2019102424212737297
11. See https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Speaking-Truth-and-Acting-with-Integrity.pdf
12. See http://www.blackliberationcollective.org/our-demands
13. See https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/hong-kong/article/2171096/hong-kong-must-show-it-home-all-races
14. https://www.okayafrica.com/from-feesmustfall-to-blueforsudan-okayafricas-guide-to-a-decade-of-african-hashtag-activism/
15. See http://gal-dem.com/what-can-we-learn-from-the-goldsmiths-occupation/
16. See Ahmed, S. (2012). On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life.

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