Rethinking Decolonizing the University

A More Nuanced Approach Toward Decolonization

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The call for decolonizing the university has been echoing loudly within academia in the last few years, starting in 2015 with students at the University of Cape Town demanding the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue from their campus. The hashtag #RhodesMustFall initiated an international movement demanding the decolonization of the university globally (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2020). But what does decolonization mean? In their writing on decolonial work, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) want to remind us that decolonization is 'unsettling'; to be precise, they state that decolonization is neither 'a metaphor nor a metonym for social justice' and that it does not have a synonym (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1–3, 21). Rather, it is about the 'repatriation of indigenous land and life' from settlers to indigenous people and not a 'generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes' (21). Their definition of decolonization is narrow. They resist the term's co-option as it occurs when it is used by institutions to mean 'liberating' academic institutions from the effects of colonialism (such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalism), as epitomized in phrases such as 'decolonizing the curriculum'; 'decolonizing the university'. Used in this way, the term 'decolonizing' poses a problem. The authors state:

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. (3)

In such a way, Tuck and Yang warn against turning 'decolonization' into an academic buzzword used in relation to other social struggles. Nonetheless, we are aware that there are scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2016) and Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (2020) who do use the term 'decolonizing the university'. These authors do not always share the same opinion about the university and its possibilities to cause effective change in the world. However, they have united around 'decolonizing the university' as a significant and strategic way of countering the co-option of the term by neoliberals that strive toward rebranding universities in order to diversify their student population and increase the monetization of the academy

(Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2020, 509, 511). Further, Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018) remark that the usage of 'decolonization/decolonize', has been growing exponentially as reference to 'various decolonial trajectories' which is a 'very good thing' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 108). They highlight how the use of the word 'decolonize' is a move toward a more 'liberalized' future, becoming increasingly unshackled by a colonial past that has historically excluded marginalized communities, and that this move brings optimism for a more inclusive society. The variations in how the term 'decolonized' is theoretically defined are important to highlight in order to situate how we define and utilize 'decolonizing', and it is precisely the application and definition of the term 'decolonize' that we critique in this paper.

We want to raise awareness on the co-option of the term, of its broadening to include all kinds of struggles which may distract from its narrower and uncomfortable meaning. Thus, we need to engage with the term critically before using it and ask ourselves what we are referring to. If decolonization is about repatriating land, giving back resources to the indigenous communities, what do we mean with 'decolonizing' in the university context? Are we really talking about dismantling power structures and working toward making room for indigeneity? If asked 'are we/the university involved in the repatriation of indigenous land and life?', what would we answer?

Against this background, Nayantara Appleton (2019) suggests alternatives to describe what we are currently doing while engaging with and critically reflecting upon 'a decolonized sovereign nation future'. For simplicity, she suggests using D-words and calls for concrete demands to change:

- Diversify your syllabus and curriculum

- Digress from the canon

- Decenter knowledge and knowledge production

- Devalue hierarchies

- Disinvest from citational power structures

- Diminish some voices and opinions in meetings, while magnifying others (Appleton 2019)

We further suggest expanding the D-word list to describe the process in a more nuanced way, in order to ensure the university is accountable toward its stakeholders such as students, faculty,

staff, researchers, and above all, marginalized communities, and in doing so sets an example for imitation by other Higher Education institutions. Further, we direct our list to a broader readership of academics, activists and allies. We include:

- Divest Eurocentrism in knowledge production

- Donate to anti-racist organizations such as Black Lives Matter

- Deliver your signature on petitions that critically reflect upon colonial histories in school syllabi in colonizer countries

- Drop the mic and let Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color (BIPOC) occupy your space to amplify multiple voices and experiences

- Debate and engage in solutions to colonial structures and ideologies still rampant in the university and society

- Dismantle colonial statues on university campuses as championed by the *Rhodes Must Fall* protest movement in 2015 that removed the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (Mbembe 2016)

- Dedicate your time to learn about decolonization from its BIPOC activists and scholars

- Detect over-researched communities and refrain from investigating them further, or conduct research about them in a different way that goes against the mainstream studies and is beneficial to those communities

- Demonstrate that knowledge is produced in many locations, also beyond the academy

- Demystify the process of knowledge production

- Declare that academia is not a separate space from activism

- Discredit the marketisation of universities as companies

- Demand from the university its acknowledgement of colonial history and the crucial role it plays in fostering systems of exclusion of BIPOC epistemes, staff, students, methods and methodologies

- Devote yourself to the struggle of marginalized communities

Using this non-exhaustive list and the steps described in it, allows the university to be specific in its commitment. It ensures the university is a space with multifarious objectives and processes that concern marginalized communities and their exclusion from the Higher Education landscape, the epistemic exclusion of marginalized voices, and the prevalence of Eurocentrism in knowledge production. It Demands that institutions Dedicate time to learn about marginalized communities and Digress from a narrow, one-sided history to achieve justice for all and combat Eurocentrism.

The list can be expanded into a manifesto, objectives to which *all* staff and students must adhere to, and upon which universities will be evaluated in relation to other universities. The manifesto would be Displayed openly on the website to reflect the university's ethos so that the university's ambitions toward change become more transparent. This may ultimately generate pressure that stimulates the university to be a place for *everyone*. However, universalizing the list carries its own danger of being co-opted by leadership and policy makers within the university and of losing its specificity. As such, it is imperative that we practice self-reflexivity and pay attention to the specificity of the institution, its history, and where it is located. The list will function as a benchmark that cannot be turned into unique selling points (USPs) that pay lip-service to change. This is achievable and is how the university must move forward.

There is much work to be done as we move forward in the process of decolonizing Higher Education institutions. Recent incidents at European institutions exemplify the exclusionary nature of the university. The incident that happened closest to us took place within our Gender Studies program at Utrecht University. Gender Studies is a discipline in critical thinking based on analyzing the relationship between knowledge and power, a feminist discipline aimed at eliminating social discrimination to achieve social justice. This made it even more disturbing when a friend and peer was targeted on the grounds of their ethnicity by another student within our program. Instead of our friend being addressed by name or being spoken to in a direct, mature manner by the perpetrator, they were the victim of racial hatred. The incident was reported, and the teachers involved did what they could within the confines of their institutional job description and by their duty of care. However, the bureaucratic process to achieve justice seemed complex and our friend decided to not walk this path as a result of 'racial battle fatigue', which manifests within educational institutions because of the effects of racism (Smith, Allen and Danley 2007). Addressing the concept of 'racial battle fatigue' demonstrates the urgency of applying the D-list within Higher Education institutions before even talking about 'decolonization'. The term was coined by William Smith in 2003 to describe the psychological and physiological symptoms that African-American male students experienced at university and the race-related experiences these students encountered within the university that perpetuated institutional racism and affected the

students' psychosocial well-being. The concept of 'racial battle fatigue' is important because it illustrates the subliminal effect of discriminatory behavior that goes inconsequentially punished. In our case, it shows the systemic effects of oppression and ongoing injustices, and therefore the urgency to address the behavior of students, the reactions and capabilities of staff and teachers to respond sufficiently, and the institutional protocols that are in place to safeguard student welfare. We need to take steps toward creating an educational space in which we all feel safe and can express ourselves freely.

Looking for ways to <u>Deal</u> with this incident is not straightforward, as the policies and procedures in place are not easily <u>Detectable</u>. We <u>Demand</u> that procedures are <u>Displayed</u> in places where everyone can find them. <u>Drafting</u> a code of conduct for every staff member and student to commit to, a document that everybody will be familiarized with and that will mark a set standard , is a must vis-à-vis a document to which staff and students are bound by virtue of their appointment/registration within the university. It will <u>Declare</u> that the institution is putting the well-being of staff and students first. It takes the need to acknowledge systemic injustice within education seriously, and makes such statements accessible to those within and outside of the university. It takes steps toward eliminating the inaccessibility of the university for historically marginalized communities and makes the adoption of inclusive practices a public, concrete commitment that displays an open pledge of allyship and responsibility toward tackling social injustice. It makes clear the expectations of behavior within the university and demonstrates in a transparent way the procedures that are adhered to properly within a given time frame, when issues arise.

Another insightful example for understanding the current situation was the problematic statement by Professor Adam Habib, the Director of the School of Oriental and Africa Studies (SOAS) in London. He expressed his opinion on the N-word in a public video call with students, as a discussion was being held about lecturers historically using the word without consequences, despite complaints from black students. Habib, who is of Indian descent, answered during the webinar, 'The issue around that... firstly, on the n*****, somebody making that allegation, then bring it to me. I don't know the case, this is the first I've heard of it.' One of the students interrupted saying that it was unacceptable to express the word. Another student stepped in and expressed his offence at Habib, who replied, 'You do? Well, I don't actually. I come from a part of the world [South Africa] where we actually do use the word... The context matters.' Another student remarked, 'You're not a black man, you cannot use that word. You have not faced the trauma and oppression of black bodies, what we go through 24/7 for the last 500 years.' Habib's statement about the South African context has been denounced by many South Africans on social

media. Habib apologized in the meeting and said he was willing to work with the students to learn. Later, on Twitter, he offered an apology considered unempathetic by many as he mostly attempted to justify his behavior. Many Demanded that he step down (Saunt 2021), leading to his initial suspension (Harris 2021). However, he was cleared as an independent external investigation determined that using the N-word in that context did not make him a racist. Some recommendations such as a restorative justice approach were put forward (Etheridge and Chabalala 2021). This example shows how deeply ingrained certain discourses are regardless of someone's position, background, education, location within structural hierarchies. The N-word is a racial slur that carries a horrible history whose effects are still felt today. It is not just a word and by saying it (regardless of the context) the person who utters it causes trauma, offence and pain to a large number of people. There is no circumstance where this word can be used and someone in Habib's position should have known that and not even argue about it. Thus, there is lots of work to do before we can even speak about 'decolonization'.

Debates over race and education have also erupted outside of the university. The British Parliament discussed in October 2020 whether critical race theory should be taught in schools (Trilling 2020). The conservative Minister of Women and Equalities stated that 'we do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt' and argued that history in schools 'is not colonized.' If schools were to teach about white privilege, they would be 'breaking the law' (Murray 2020).

The above examples show that having specific D-words instead of using 'decolonizing the university' as a buzzword removed from its narrow definition hold the university as an institution fully accountable without luring a 'new' market of 'woke' students into a demand system that is focused on customer satisfaction, high productivity, and competition. Using the expression 'decolonizing the university' might sell well, but it obscures more than it reveals and is most often used in a different way than Tuck and Yang put forward. *Decolonizing is not a metaphor!* It is uncomfortable. It is a disruption. It is political. It is repatriation of forcefully ceded land and resources back to indigenous people. We instead strive toward a process that restructures Higher Education institutions around a more 'liberal' framework that welcomes and supports marginalized communities. We have hope that the university, as one of the few spaces left where critical debates are still taking place and activism is being fostered, will be imagined as a space of change, solidarity, inclusion, and community. We situate ourselves within this debate, questioning and challenging Higher Education institutions to take a stronger stance against oppression and injustice within the Higher Education realm. Our 'decolonial' work, we hope, does not and will not claim 'decolonization as project' (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2020,

514), but instead contributes to a process that has been murmuring across the globe. The understandings among academics of what 'decolonial' is, as Gebrial says, are 'contradictory', however we must all agree that the higher education landscape is not an exempted space when it comes to oppression and injustices. Thus, it is an important step to recognize that there are gaps, that the existence of structures, that uphold practices and discourses of exclusion and ostracism is a reality that must be acknowledged and dismantled. Higher education will be more meaningful if we offer an inclusive environment for students, staff, faculty, researchers and everybody else involved. So let us claim this space before it is too late.

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