

Introduction: Decolonizing the University

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In January of 2022 Sirma Bilge, professor of Sociology at the University of Montreal, tweeted: ‘now let’s talk about how ‘decolonize’ has been turned into hot sauce you can put on everything.’ Bilge is referring to the mainstreaming of the verb ‘to decolonize’ both within and outside critical academic discourse, which is inextricably linked to the ‘decolonize the university’ movement. The latter was brought back into public consciousness with the Rhodes Must Fall protests at the University of West Cape Town, South Africa in 2015, where students protested against a statue of 19th Century Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, Cecil Rhodes, on their campus. These protests received worldwide coverage, and helped propel the discussion of what ‘decolonizing the university’ entails back into public discourse. As part of these protests student movements called for, among others, the diversification of curricula; divestment from corporations and institutions tied to oppression practices, settler colonialism, and the climate crisis; and, broadly, the democratization of higher education institutions.¹

Universities have responded to the ever-growing call to decolonize with varying degrees of commitment and enthusiasm. In 2021, the University of Leicester dropped some of its English language and medieval literature modules in the name of ‘decolonizing the curriculum’, professing to, instead, focus on ‘ethnicity, sexuality, and diversity’.² This would simultaneously reflect the drop in demand for the scrapped modules, and create an environment that was ‘more inclusive and [that] reflect[s] emerging developments’. The University of Amsterdam commissioned a group of feminist and decolonial scholars to investigate students’ disenchantment with the university’s diversity strategy, following a sit-in action at the university’s Maagdenhuis building in 2015.³ The Commission’s report, ‘Let’s do diversity’, was met with further criticism – counter-protests were organized in response, and the university was accused of window dressing politics, and simply not doing ‘enough’.⁴ What the movement has indubitably effected, however, is an ongoing debate between student populations and university administrations, regardless of whether this has resulted in institutional and academic change or not.

Some of the more prominent voices in the academic discussions surrounding ‘decolonizing’ institutions point to the various dimensions at the core of decolonizing the university; that is, the epistemic, institutional, and material elements of decolonization. Mignolo and Walsh, in their introduction to *On Decoloniality* (2018), refer to the centrality of ‘relationality’ in their approach, writing that their book focuses on ‘the ways that different local histories and embodied conceptions and practices of decoloniality [...] can enter into conversation and build understandings that both cross geopolitical locations and colonial differences and contest the totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity’ (1). In response to the Rhodes Must Fall movement, Achille Mbembe (2016) lists six essential elements to the decolonial project, broadly delineated into institutional and epistemic issues, such as the neoliberalization and bureaucratization of universities; epistemic coloniality; as well as the idea of the ‘pluriversity’. A pluriversity, in this sense, is a process of knowledge production that embraces epistemic diversity and engages epistemic traditions in continuous dialogue (37). To that end, Mbembe contends that, ‘if we do not develop a complex understanding of the nature of what we are actually facing, we will end up with the same old techno-bureaucratic fixes that have led us, in the first place, to the current cul-de-sac’ (2016, 31–32). Indeed, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) criticize the superficial co-optation of decolonization in the social sciences, warning of the danger of turning the concept into a metaphor: ‘[w]hen metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future’ (3). Emphasizing the origins of the term in the Indigenous struggle against land grabbing, Tuck and Yang view ‘the easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization [a]s yet another form of settler appropriation’ (ibid). Perhaps universities *have* made of decolonization merely ‘hot sauce’, sprinkling it into curricula and across policy decisions without thoroughly interrogating its implications for the operation of their institutions.

It appears to the editors of this issue that decolonizing the university is, above all, a praxis – one that requires ongoing critical reflection and a commitment to academic and epistemic humility. It is a conviction that our knowledge is never complete, which should reflect in our approach to the university classroom; the organization of the university; as well as the role we each take in (institutional) knowledge production. Says Otto Maduro, ‘The dangerous ideal of a universal, eternal, and singular true knowledge—a delusion that is habitually part of imperial designs of forced unification, subjection, and homogenization of a variety of ways of being human—is all too often one of the most intractable hurdles to the peaceful resolution of human conflicts, to the respect and flourishing of human diversity, and to the possibility of learning from such conflicts and diversity a few new and better ways of coexisting with one another.’ (2012, 102–3).

This celebratory issue of *Junctions* centers the very question of knowledge production and our part in it; even with these justice-oriented ideals of decolonization in mind, how *do* we escape the ‘hegemonic notion of knowledge production [that] has generated discursive scientific practices and has set up interpretative frames that make it difficult to think outside of these frames’ (Mbembe 2016, 33)? What role does the university play in this project of great (un)learning and (re)doing? What is the relationship between academia and activism? What, for instance, is the function and importance of Utrecht University’s Graduate Gender Programme and the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies (NOG) releasing a ‘Palestine Solidarity Statement’ in the spring of 2021? How can the (inter)relation of theory and praxis in practice be envisioned? Finally, and crucially, (how) do we rebuild institutions rooted in coloniality?

CONTRIBUTIONS

To reflect the diversity in approaches to the multiple dimensions of the decolonial project within the university, rather than a selection of manuscripts, this issue of *Junctions* contains a collection of position papers, interviews, and a panel discussion, alongside a manuscript and book review.

In ‘Getting by with my *Yaars*: Analyzing Decoloniality and the University through *Yaariyan*, *Gupshup* and *Baithak*’, Syeda Rabeea Ahmad discusses how to navigate the Dutch gender studies classroom from a decolonial, queer, and feminist perspective. In this position paper, Ahmad grapples with the question: ‘what step do I take, as a student, to engage with gender studies and the larger space of the university through the lens of decoloniality, and in what way is (de)coloniality made (in)visible or (re)produced’?

In the position paper ‘Language Policies and Decolonization: The case of #AfrikaansMustFall’, Antonela Soledad Vaccaro discusses the student protests that took place in South Africa as part of #RhodesMustFall, and specifically focuses on the demand to change language policies at universities. Vaccaro discusses the (re)production of colonial epistemic violence, power dynamics and (in)accessibility through, for example, the choice of the language of instruction, and advocates for a move to decolonize on the level of institutional language policies.

Bethany Gum and Stella Saliari respond to Tuck and Yang’s warning of the metaphorization of decolonization in ‘Rethinking Decolonizing the University’. This position paper expands Appleton’s (2019) list of ‘D-words’ that they argue are more effective in demanding policy change than the unspecific ‘to decolonize’. The authors address university staff and students, as well as ‘activists and allies’ in their treatise. Reflecting on their own experiences in the gender studies classroom, which typically aims to make explicit the relationship between knowledge and

power, Gum and Saliari create a list of demands that seek to serve the political project and praxis of decolonization more directly and effectively.

The panel discussion, ‘Decolonizing the University’, emerged from a collaboration between the managing editors of Issue 6.1 and Aishwarya Kumar as part of her internship at *Transmission in Motion*. Kumar goes into conversation with scholars Layal Ftouni (Utrecht University), Rolando Vasquez Melken (Utrecht University) and Toni Pape (University of Amsterdam) to discuss what is at stake when we think about decolonizing the university. The discussion links processes of knowledge production, pedagogies, and institutional norms to colonial orderings in the past and present; and it offers different perspectives on what is important in the move to ‘decolonize’ Dutch universities both epistemologically and institutionally.

In, ‘Negotiating, Navigating and the Neoliberal University’, Bethany Gum enters into conversation with Professor of Art, Culture and Diversity at Utrecht University, Rosemarie Buikema. Reflecting on the many hats she dons as director of UU’s Graduate Gender Programme, scientific director of the Netherlands Research School for Gender Studies (NOG), and as a professor, Buikema discusses her experience with how ‘diversity sells well at the moment.’ The pair address ‘navigating’ one’s (feminist, activist) politics within the university; the balancing act ‘being the killjoy and the one who is aware of and respects conventions’ entails; and the defensiveness with which institutions often meet demands for change. This hopeful exchange sheds light on the different roles educators and students take up in effecting and practicing their decolonial motivations.

In addition to these contributions, we present a book review of Catherine Manathunga and Dorothy Bottrell’s *Resisting Neo-Liberalism in Higher Education Volume II: Prising Open the Cracks* by Prithvik Sen Choudhary. Evaluating their presentation of the impact of neoliberalism on academic spaces, which spans unfair working conditions, white privilege, networks of support between scholars across various axes of oppression, and the treatment of Indigenous and Aboriginal history, Choudhary praises the authors’ efforts to offer means by which to reclaim the university from the inherently colonial nature of neoliberal policy.

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¹ See for example: Decolonising Music, Cambridge, 'Open Letter - BLM', https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfWdyJ0iui_gbClkfmsBCvPjwNsilZzdYJyfEEZGz2Ruqy5bQ/viewform?fbclid=IwAR1CZ_q3yr4cJDVpNu19QLHVgiYu2zNGmw7tNUMQOdi3WvCAv5CK-Tn8Bfo

² Regan, Alex. 'Anger at University of Leicester's 'decolonised curriculum' plans'. BBC. February 4, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leicestershire-55860810>

³ Diversity Commission. 'Let's do diversity: Report of the University of Amsterdam Diversity Commission'. 2016. <https://www.uva.nl/binaries/content/assets/uva/nl/over-de-uva/democratisering/commissie-diversiteit/1.-diversity-commission-report-2016-12-10.pdf>

⁴ See for example: Hira, Sandew. 'Divergent research methodologies: Diversity and Decolonization at the University of Amsterdam'. DIN. November 4, 2016. <https://din.today/divergent-research-methodologies-diversity-and-decolonization-at-the-university-of-amsterdam/>