

Review – Decolonising the University

Written by Siobhan O'Neill

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SIOBHAN O'NEILL, MAY 7 2020

Decolonising the University

**Edited by Gurminder K Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancioğlu
Pluto, 2018**

Backgrounded by the intensifying and increasing visibility of the call to decolonise the university, Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu offer an in-depth and wide-ranging account of the discourse and dialogue on what it means to decolonise Higher Education (HE). The book is a particularly important one at a time when universities are beginning to pay more attention to the call to decolonise. This often becomes a co-optation by institutions who turn this radical call into a sanitised, superficial project of 'diversification' and the bolstering of the university's global, multicultural identity without grappling with, critiquing and transforming the gendered and racialized, colonial structures underpinning higher education (Gebrial 2018, p. 31; Prinsloo 2016, p. 165; Saini & Begum 2020, p. 1; Tuck & Yang 2012, p. 2). *Decolonising the University* is an essential and accessible read for students, academics and activists across the HE sector, especially those interested in challenging and undoing forms of coloniality in HE. The chapters in this collection address some of the key challenges, (im)possibilities and barriers to the decolonisation of the university and offer approaches to making sense of and overcoming these.

The book platforms a variety of approaches and differing perspectives on decolonising the university. It does not (nor claim to) provide an exhaustive account or offer a single, simple answer to decolonising the university (e.g. there is no concluding chapter). This is consistent with decolonial thinking and leaves room for the reader to engage with the arguments and ideas in the book and put these in conversation with other works (such as Arday and Mirza's (2018) *Dismantling Race in Higher Education*) and also with the reader's own thinking.

The editors organise the collected works in three parts: Part I establishes the historical and disciplinary context of calls to decolonise the university; Part II focusses on specific initiatives like the establishment of the Black Studies course at Birmingham City University (see Chapter 8 by Kehinde Andrews) through which the discourse of decolonising is put into practice; and Part III is made up of chapters that reflect more theoretically on what it means to decolonise the university in the 'Global North' – the home of the 'colonisers'. In this review I focus on three chapters – one from each part – but use these, in conversation with others, to draw out some of the key threads running throughout the book. The review is structured around the following themes: (1) connecting (de)coloniality in the university beyond and outside the university; (2) to decolonise or colonise the university?; and (3) barriers to and defensiveness against decolonisation in the university.

The authors I focus on represent the diversity of decolonial thinkers included in the book. Gebrial, a PhD student from the London School of Economics; Andrews a Professor of Black Studies at Birmingham City University, and Pete, a "Cree/Salteaux/Dakota woman, scholar and university administrator" (p.174) "from Little Pine first Nation in Treaty 6 Territory" (p. 250). These authors, like the others in the collection, all draw from and contribute to decolonial thought from a wide range of perspectives, social locations and positions within academia. I would add, however, that the book (and/or future works that build from it) would benefit from, and would be able to fulfil its *decolonial* intention more effectively by, going further in pushing the boundaries of academic knowledge production by including an even greater diversity of contributions from activists, citizens, artists and other producers of knowledge whose work may be 'non-academic' but is equally as valuable in the field.

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Connecting the (De)Coloniality of the University Beyond the University

In her chapter, '*Rhodes Must Fall: Oxford and Movements for Change*', Gebrial uses the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) movement to explore the coloniality of the university space and the urgent need to address this – through decolonisation. Here, she establishes a context for the chapters that follow and identifies one of the key recurrent themes that runs throughout the book: that the project to decolonise the university is, and must be, connected beyond and outside of the university to the project to decolonise society more broadly. As Gebrial states, the university is “just one node in a network of spaces”, so when we talk about decolonising this space we must “connect what is happening inside the institution to the outside” (pp. 33-34).

It is not only that coloniality of the knowledge produced in the university is a problem here in terms of epistemological ignorance and skewing what students can know about the world, but Gebrial also emphasises that the university is a key shaping force of a 'common sense' idea of what counts as worthy, legitimate knowledge and subsequently who counts as worthy and knowing subjects (p. 19). Here, she identifies that decolonising the university is important because the knowledge produced and power relations – namely Eurocentric knowledge and a structure of power that privileges whiteness and disadvantages 'others' – at work here simultaneously reflect, are reflected in and *create* racialized inequalities beyond the university (see Shilliam 2016). In this way, Gebrial effectively explains that the decolonising project is 'much bigger' than HE, but that HE is one vital node for the decolonial struggle. This is a theme that is sustained throughout the book.

Decolonise or Colonise the University?

In line with Gebrial's claim, in '*The Challenge for Black Studies in the Neoliberal University*', Andrews similarly argues that we “must always focus on the struggles that take place outside the academy” (p. 140). This is because, he says, it is impossible to truly decolonise the university – it is impossible to decolonise the “master's house”. From this position, he suggests that it is helpful to think instead in terms of *colonising* the master's house (pp. 139-140). Borrowing Audre Lorde's terms, the metaphor of the master's house is a particularly provocative and helpful one. Not only does this allow him to emphasise the university's tightly woven interconnection with slavery and colonialism, it also allows us to see past the seemingly impossible task of decolonising the university by pointing to an alternative where the decolonial struggle is about infiltrating the institution and making use of its resources in the interest of Black (and other racially minoritised) communities and people.

Whilst the claim that it is impossible to decolonise the university may seem to be a rather radical one that is seemingly at odds with the purpose of the book and with the other contributors who outline strategies *for* decolonisation; the idea that we can utilise the university's resources in the interest of social justice – a kind of subversive reappropriation (Matthews 2018, pp. 57-58) – is a critical one that is shared by others even if they do not explicitly agree that the university cannot be decolonised (e.g. Gebrial p. 34). Andrews' notion of colonising the university is a strength of the book as it allows readers to come to terms with just how mammoth, or perhaps impossible, the task of decolonising the university is – a theme that is recurrent throughout 'decolonising HE' literature – whilst still leaving room to take action regardless of the constraints, barriers and limitations.

Barriers to and Defensiveness against Decolonisation in the University

One example of decolonial action within the university is producing and communicating knowledge in 'alternative' non-traditional ways. Pete's contribution is a fantastic example of this. In *Meschachakanis, a Coyote Narrative: Decolonising Higher Education* she effectively and eloquently utilises a decolonial strategy – that of storytelling – to challenge the ways we know, write and express knowledge within academia, and, in so doing, she successfully executes her intention to 'reclaim (ab)original ways of transferring knowledge' (p. 173) and “subvert dominant Western traditional norms of scholarship” (p. 177). Her writing style is engaging and refreshing, her narration has the reader follow Pete, in conversation with her old friend the Coyote (or Meschachakanis), exploring the ways she has undertaken decolonisation in HE and the barriers she has faced.

With specific reference to her attempts to *indigenise* her teaching, one of the barriers Pete describes facing is the

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defence of coloniality or what others have called ‘white defensive moves’ (see Murray & Brooks-Immel 2019). She warns the reader that teachers who attempt to decolonise their pedagogy may face resistance in the form of ‘white guilt’ from learners but she urges teachers to push through and build resilience in the face of these strategies aimed at sustaining coloniality in HE (pp. 185-186). This is a key point to take away from the book. She is honest about the difficulty and tiresome nature of the task of decolonising HE – the Coyote asks her “don’t you ever get tired?” to which she says “I do get tired; I am tired” (p. 186) – but encourages readers not to give up, but to continue to persist and resist to create a new narrative in HE.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise the value of this book for students, academics and activists, especially those interested in and working to challenge coloniality in HE (and beyond). Whilst the book would have benefitted from an even wider range of perspectives and authors with differing positionalities from within and outside of the academy, the contributions in this book come together to form a great introduction to some of the core discourses, themes and ideas related to the call to decolonise the university. By offering the reader an insight into a range of approaches to decolonising the university it prompts the reader to explore the themes further and to think critically about what it means to decolonise the university.

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