Dirtying The Institution: Four Priorities for Decolonial Practice

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Reassessing positionality

Decolonial scholarship and writing often begins with declarations of positionality. 'As a white scholar…', 'as a cis-male', 'as a cis-woman', 'as an upper-caste scholar' – these declarations preface work that is often critical, feminist and decolonial. Such a confession is useful, but often a half-measure. Janet Mawhinney, a mental health professional, wrestled with this impasse, and in their 1998 Master's thesis, wrote of how white people reproduce white privilege in 'anti-racist' settings through storytelling and self-confession as "strategies to remove involvement in and culpability for systems of domination" (Mawhinney, 1998, 17).

Declarations of positionality, thus, function within a Catholic-esque ethic of confessing guilt as a mode of absolving sin, of reacquiring purity. Scholars who confess a position of privilege rarely accompany it with a declaration of action, reparation, or monetary contribution. In considering alternatives and solutions to the action-deprived confessional of social science academia, one arrives at a conclusion of incommensurability and irreconcilability – that there are questions to be answered, but no absolute answers (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel, 2014). Incommensurability is not conducive to action.

Decoloniality in academic institutions in the Global North is similarly caught between diversified reading lists, reduced institutional fees, the removal of colonial symbols, statues, and paintings, increased hiring of black/brown bodies, and the myth of the rigorous enterprise of institution-building (Albertus, 2019). A decolonial industrial complex has arisen through these efforts, with underpaid faculty manufacturing fresh reading materials and adopting pluralistic pedagogical practices. This offers a welcome revitalisation of writing, reading, teaching, and learning that has until now been dominated by a distinct cis-Anglo-Eurocentrism.

Yet, decolonial and anti-colonial institutional practices continue to be evaluated for their successes in the language of student satisfaction, higher-education rankings and indices, and quantifications of growth – by doing so, they replicate

colonial hierarchies and structures. The black/brown scholars[1] who are hired as a part of decolonial movements are required to be able to speak the language of oppressors, and are often from oppressor castes and religions, holding a class position that allowed them and their ancestors to participate and be complicit in oppressive practices. There are, of course, exceptions. But decoloniality and decolonisation in premier institutions have a few glaring absences.

To fill these voids and rectify these absences, in this article, I propose four additional steps of action for institutions and decolonial movements. Specifically, these are:

1. including non-academics in regular classroom and teaching practice,
2. hiring (un)qualified and alternatively qualified black/brown scholars,
3. overhauling exclusionary admissions processes, and
4 employing translators.

These actions have largely remained outside the mainstream concern of most elite institutions in the UK and the US, despite their obvious and immediate need for the project of decolonisation. Working towards them, there is a need for a concerted effort towards dirtying and sullying the institution, working towards the goal of "a programme of complete disorder" (Fanon, 2007 [1961], 36).

1. non-academics/ workers/ artists/ activists

Humanities and social science scholars, particularly with a feminist, queer, decolonial, and critical gaze, often neglect a question of aporia, aphasia, and absence: why are local activists and civil society organisations, environmentalist groups, workers, artists, and artisans excluded from the classroom? An immediate response often arrives in the form of a twisted representation of the ethics axiom 'do no harm'; that to include such parties and interlocutors would risk excessively politicising student 'safe-spaces' and lack academic (read: institutional) 'impartiality'.

If it is the political polarisation of students that institutions fear, that fear is too late. If it is the facade of preserving 'academic neutrality', there too we scholars fail – we constantly begin from an impartial position, negotiating and regulating our sight to those spaces and subjects we consider pure and whole enough to be included in the grand architecture of discourse (Pachirat, 2011). If it is that non-academic voices are not accessible, this is not true – they are often ready to work with (and within) the academy in unpaid, unaccounted for ways, and any remuneration significantly benefits and improves their work. It is important to

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[1] My use of black and brown here is intentional, meant to escape the generalisations of BIPOC and BAME categorisations, whilst referring to coalitionary solidarities between diverse racialised and oppressed communities.

note that remuneration here ought not to be optional, as it is an essential means of preventing the reproduction of power hierarchies and an unfair geopolitics of knowledge (Laing, 2021).

As the years progress with more virtual learning and an increased ease of including guest speakers and teachers from around the world, this question persists. It is screamed in a quiet room, lingers and rings, like a tinnitus hum, a very loud reminder of absence, loss, and deprivation. Why aren't more of the voices we study featured in our classrooms? Why are they, except in the smallest instances of exception, missing from regular pedagogical practice? For instance, in India, why don't many anti-caste scholars regularly invite and pay *parai* or *kuthu* performers, rappers, lower-caste poets, tribal artisans, artists, and intellectuals from these communities who have been deprived of the ability to access prestigious levels of scholarship to speak to students studying anti-caste movements? (Sherinian, Soneji and Selvan, 2021)

How often do Gender Studies curriculums fund and include transgender activists, artists, and poets, drag artists, and queer entrepreneurs and parents as participants in their discourses? Why is it so rare for African-American Studies courses to invite black activists, artists, and workers to teach students? Most of all, why haven't more students demanded this; what does their complicity say? We are not here to assume the lack of their agency, or presume paternalism, stewardship, or responsibility for them where there is none. But it seems, in truth, that students (much like their instructors and institutions) lack agency – at the very least, they lack collective will, as much as we researchers and teachers do. By including those we study as teachers and active discussants, we not only contribute to better pedagogical practice, but directly empower them.

A scholar of critical international relations, Jasmine Gani, in a BISA 2022 panel on decolonial thinking, narrated the importance of academics working with one foot in each door for effective decolonial praxis. She stated the need to work towards decolonising the curriculum, the workforce, in reforming organisational structures and including underrepresented voices, whilst in parallel engaging with activist spaces, protests, and community-level fundraising and organising. Writing about the teaching of Middle East Studies, she also asks, "What gets excluded? Moreover, how does funding perpetuate the exploitations and extractions of academic research? And if we end up sitting on hiring committees one day or now, what are we going to do about disrupting that cycle?" (Gani, 2021)

The inclusion of workers, artisans, activists, organisers, and artists in the classroom, either as lecturers, guest speakers, or participants of discussions with students is one step in helping students acquire such a dual perspective that considers theory alongside its real-time consequences – not as a mode for vocational training or skill development, but to understand the living

consequences and manifestations of theory that is otherwise intangible. It is also a political statement that breaks down the divide between the academic and the non-academic.

2. (un)qualified black/brown scholars

In further toeing the heavily policed line of what constitutes 'academic' thought, decolonisation efforts have not effectively diversified or democratised hiring and firing processes. Employment for entry-level academic positions continue to mandate similar requirements (Chatterjee, 2022). Whilst there are more black/brown scholars hired, they are typically from Ivy League institutions or Oxbridge, elite private universities, and hold PhDs, MPhils, and MAs that are, for most black/brown people, out of reach. Decolonisation has not yet made a concerted call for institutions to reimagine qualifications, particularly those whose younger scholars must perform and exhibit a notion of entry-level and early-career 'qualification' which, in most instances, doubles as conveniently disguised exclusion and discrimination. In having the PhD, the MPhil, the MA, the black/brown body somehow becomes less black/brown, less sullied, less dirty, more civilised, and not as out-of-place in the academy as they otherwise are.

Conceptions of black/brown scholars as 'articulate', 'polished', and 'polite' are representative of institutional expectations from such scholars and their qualifications: as signposts to blackness and brownness that is palatable (Neal-Jackson, 2020). Truly decolonized institutions need to do away with academic degree qualifications as they currently stand as a crucial aspect of hiring and firing eligibility, particularly qualifications of doctoral expertise from universities in the US, UK, Australia, and Canada. Independent scholars, practitioners, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and precarious/casualised teaching staff who hold the skills and training required to be good teachers and researchers are passed around for a lack of qualifications that are structurally nearly impossible to afford and attain for most scholars (Madden, 2014).

Qualification requirements for doctoral, postdoctoral, and early career scholars are inconsiderate of indigenous and local knowledge practices and extra-institutional training, from mentors, friends, teachers, and family (Walton, 2018). Some disciplines such as that of Indigenous Studies in Australia have made attempts toward decolonial goals in knowledge production and reclamation and hire indigenous scholars. However, these indigenous scholars are still required to present advanced degree qualifications. An institution that does not actively disallow discrimination on the basis of a lack of degree qualification, whose hiring staff do not consider a whole-person and pluralistic, humanistic, and relational mode of evaluating applicants to teaching roles, is an institution that is by definition, exclusionary and colonial.

3. admissions

Whilst a large focus of decolonising institutions has been towards curriculums, faculty roles, and institutional responsibilities, a significant ignorance and practised apathy has been directed towards admissions processes. Discriminatory tests such as the TOEFL and the IELTS that inexplicably assume that one's understanding of the English language is valid for one year alone, and others such as the SAT, ACT, GRE, and GMAT which require the payment of exorbitant fees to attend, do not hide their function of excluding, filtering, and weeding out those who do not occupy the community and identity categories to access them (Camara, 2020; Newman et al, 2022). Studies have shown the content of such tests to be unfair to minorities (Fleming and Garcia, 1998; Prova, 2019; Grimmer, 2018).

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic saw a large number of institutions opting for being test-optional, most universities are not test-blind, such that individuals who take these tests and provide their scores during admissions to elite universities continue to have a marked advantage. The emphasis on standardised testing and evidence-based education stems from the "crisis of legitimation in educational research" (Pirrie, 2001: 124), and "accentuates rather than undermines existing social and political hierarchies" in education (Gorski, 2008: 516). There is a large silence in scholarship, with a handful of scholars writing about and working toward decolonising admissions processes (Curtis, Reid and Jones, 2014; Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu and Gebrial, 2020; Pimblott, 2020; Hall *et al.*, 2021). Even where admissions processes are oriented toward being inclusive of international students and applicants, these remain targeted – as the neoliberal institution does – toward upper-class, upper-caste, privileged communities from their region.

Beyond standardised testing, most admissions processes – from the online forms to requirements for professional and academic references, as well as the application methods and writing requirements – are starkly out of reach for disabled scholars and practitioners (Ndlovu, 2019). A simple example lies in that most application forms for undergraduate and postgraduate applications, as well as entry-level jobs, do not have a read-aloud function, or on-call support staff.

The persistence of restrictive, colonial, ableist, and racist admissions policies raise further questions to be asked regarding this tendency of academics to prioritise the decolonisation of knowledge over the decolonisation of sites of knowledge production and dissemination.

4. translators

An essential element of improving access to knowledge production and dissemination structures in academia is translation. Besides the inherent ableism, racism, and sexism of admissions processes that gatekeep academic degree

qualifications as well as jobs, a large majority of institutions make little to no effort to include alternative language options for applicants, or to translate their teaching, curriculums, and research outputs to other languages.

There are two directions of translation to be considered, due to the prevalence of English in academic thought and practice. Firstly, there is an (arguably) greater need for translating English research and teaching outputs to multiple languages for greater dissemination worldwide. Amidst the longstanding agreement among scholars for the need for inclusivity and diversity of scholarship, the pertinent need to disseminate scholarship for wide and accessible readership has gone amiss. Institutions seldom devote funding toward translation from English to other languages, and where they do, these remain limited to languages of past and present colonisers – French, Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, Chinese, and German, for instance. The choice of language for translation is a deeply political act.

Secondly, translators are essential for translating scholarship in other regional languages to English, to improve access to scholars from across the world. English, in this context, can be emancipatory for many scholars from marginalised backgrounds and from past colonies. For me, as a Tamil scholar, it has meant freedom from the political imposition of Hindi by fundamental nationalist parties in India, alongside the ability to work on an equal footing with scholars from the Global North. Translating scholarship from regional languages to English thus grants access to and mainstreams knowledge otherwise excluded or left at the periphery from dominant social science and humanities discourse.

There is thus a marked need for increased and universal hiring of translators by universities and higher-education institutions, as full-time staff whose role is to translate to and from English and other regional languages. This must include otherwise underrepresented languages. This, again, acts both as a manner of directly empowering and encouraging the preservation of languages (and cultures, and cultural memories) of underrepresented and exploited peoples, but also returning capital to these communities that has until now been taken from them, whether directly or indirectly, by colonial practices. Translators are also valuable resources for students and researchers who are engaging in research with speakers of other languages, to provide them with regionalised and linguistically-appropriate ethics training – from recruiting participants to acquiring and engaging consent, and disseminating knowledge (Eaton, 2020). They will also be useful for training researchers who wish to learn languages for the purpose of research or fieldwork (Kramsch, 2019). All untranslated research is unethical in its inaccessibility and parochialism.

From institution-building to emancipation

Ultimately, the call for including more non- and extra-academic voices in teaching, learning, and research, to reimagine academic and entry-level qualifications, to overhaul archaic admissions practices, and to actively hire permanent translators in institutions are all calls to move away from decolonisation as a mode of institution-building, to one of individual and community empowerment, as emancipation.

Adom Getachew argues for understanding anticolonial nationalism as worldmaking against the dominant understanding of "decolonisation as a moment of nation-building" (Getachew, 2019, 2). We can draw a similar distinction for repurposing the purpose of the university: shifting from building knowledge and institutions for the colonial purpose of acquiring, collecting resources, and expanding borders – to more imaginative worldmaking, broadening and removing existing boundaries and exclusionary practices (Getachew, 2019).

In calling for these measures, I am asking for the academy to sully itself, to divert funds and associate itself to all whom it has, until present, considered unfit for academic professions – the angry, the uncomfortable, the paranoid, the disruptive, precarious, and the dirty, to include them as crucial parts of study and scholarship. In contesting institutions' creative erasure of marginalised voices through the years, we propound pedagogy rooted in relational thinking that contends with, as per Ananya Roy, "the relationship between place, knowledge and power", envisioning an "alternative form of spatiality" articulated through anticolonial connectivity (Roy, 2016, 207).

Alongside this, scholars must support relational thinking in our institutional processes and structures of access – and I firmly believe that decolonising access to institutions must take precedence over the task of decolonising knowledge, to begin our attempts toward a global anticolonial vision by first, and foremost, making space for more people to participate in it. As Paulo Freire says, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (2000 [1970], 72). Scholars tend to elide the last part of this sentence – the "with each other".

As the days, months, and years pass, each seemingly quicker than the last, to stop, reckon with our own complicity, and participate in petitioning, strikes, protests, and direct action to demand these changes is essential, ethical, and critical. To not do so, is to wait for a spectacle of death and suffering, another dead scholar, another moment of discrimination and harassment, another stark exclusion, another exodus from the academy, so that action can occur, and can become more convenient – a sentiment exceedingly unscholarly, immoral, and uncaring. We could care better.

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