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Why is My University White?: An Argument for the Decolonisation of the Neoliberal University

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The issue of decolonising educational institutions has been the topics of discussion for many scholars since the decolonisation movement started in the 20th century. Decolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon, argued in his 1961 work *The Wretched of the Earth* that decolonisation was a historical process implying "the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation" (Fanon, 2007, pp.49-50). The decolonisation of knowledge attempts to undo the intellectual and Eurocentric hierarchies formed by colonialism and imperialism. According to Sayyid, Eurocentrism is "a project to recentre the West, a project that is only possible when the West and the centre are no longer synonymous" (Sayyid, 2015, p.128). In the neoliberal university, there are various methods for decolonisation. In this essay I examine the ways in which universities can be decolonised, including the curriculum, the learners, and the teachers. I also discuss the hindrances of decolonising a neoliberal university. I will touch upon the issues surrounding epistemic decolonisation, student-led decolonisation movements, university admissions by ethnicity groups, (under)attainment of ethnic minorities in higher education, the racialised nature of the graduate labour market, ethnic disparities in higher education staff, whiteness in the academy, institutional racism and the questionable compatibility of decoloniality and neoliberalism in higher education.

The first way in which I shall describe decolonisation of a university is decolonising the Eurocentric curriculum. Demir (2018) argues that colonialism established sociocultural, political, and economic hierarchies at its core, as well as intellectual hierarchies that were significant in the justification of slavery (Demir, 2018, p.10). Demir perceives decoloniality as an intervention in epistemology, that argues "existing canons and curricula reproduce a world-view" in which Eurocentric ideas are viewed

as not only "morally but also as intellectually superior" (Demir, 2018, pp.10-11). These intellectual hierarchies enable Eurocentric structures of knowledge, especially in our institutions. It is necessary then to decolonise the content of study, or curricula, in order to achieve a fuller and non-Eurocentric education. Especially in sociology and the social sciences, there have been calls for decolonisation of its Eurocentric content. To understand the epistemological foundations of Eurocentrism and how it has affected the construction of knowledge globally, it is worth noting the work of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall. Hall (1992) depicts the ways in which discourse reproduces knowledge through language; he utilises the example of Western Europe being able to reproduce ideology or discursive formations through its colonial expansion. This discourse "continues to inflect the language of the West, its image of itself and 'others'… its practices and relations of power towards the Rest" (Hall, 1992, p.225). Edward Said (2003) elaborates on this ideological construction of 'the Rest' by Europe, by introducing the concept of 'Orientalism' as the way in which "European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively" (Said, 2003, p.3). As Hall and Said describe, it is through such mechanisms that the West manage to form epistemological structures that reproduce knowledge from a Eurocentric perspective. It is these structures that decolonial theorists wish to deconstruct, especially in reference to the university curricula. It is through these discourses as well that the West manage to maintain power relations over the non-western countries. Said (2003) argues Orientalism allows the West to dominate, restructure and have authority over the Orient or the Eastern world (Said, 2003, p.3).

It would only be right to discuss the area of epistemological decolonisation when covering the decolonisation of university curricula. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) uses W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of the colour line to illustrate their concept of the 'epistemic line'. To Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the epistemic line is an ontological line (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p.17). This epistemic line depends heavily on what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) refers to as abyssal thinking. Abyssal thinking "consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones" (Santos, 2007, p.45). These writers highlight the influence that Empire has on the construction of global knowledge, and the need for epistemological decolonisation. However, when discussing epistemological decolonisation, we encounter a moral divergence, whether we support diversity or decoloniality of the curriculum. Demir (2018) argues that "we must challenge epistemological biases and ignorance, not create a parallel canon" (Demir, 2018, p.12). The canonical focus should be on "oppression and injustice not the celebration of difference" and that we should "demand epistemic justice, not diversity managerialism for the curriculum" (Demir, 2018, p.12). Icaza and Vázquez (2018) advocate for a decolonial position that confronts the university with "its role in the reproduction of epistemic apparatuses that perpetuate the modern/colonial divide and its contribution to an unequal global political economy of knowledge" (Icaza and Vázquez, 2018, p.110). Hence, many writers agree that we must dismantle these knowledge structures that have their roots in colonialism and imperial history; we must seek epistemic freedom for decoloniality and not diversity as to be true to the canonical knowledge in our curricula. Le Grange (2016) argues there are 4 Rs central to an emergent Indigenous paradigm for decolonising the curriculum. These are "*relational accountability, respectful representation, reciprocal appropriation,* and *rights and regulation*" (Le Grange, 2016, p.9).

Dalia Gebrial (2018) outlines that decolonisation of education movements are not a new phenomenon. She describes that "for decades, teachers and students have been chipping away at the coloniality of the university, in an attempt to make it more critical, rigorous and democratic" (Gebrial, 2018, p.19). *Rhodes Must Fall* is a prime example of a decolonisation student movement that started at Cape Town University, South Africa in 2015. Students called for the removal of a statue of a colonial figure on their campus. This resulted in the *Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford* movement (RMFO), whose aims are outlined as "tackling the plague of colonial iconography…, reforming the Eurocentric curriculum…" and "addressing the underrepresentation and lack of welfare provision" for BAME (black and minority ethnic) staff and students (Peters, 2018, pp.265-266). Decolonisation movements such as the more recent "Why is My Curriculum White?" attempt to radically challenge the western and Eurocentric canon that constitute the curricula in their universities. It is through a radical rethinking of western disciplines that academics and universities can decolonise the curriculum (Le Grange, 2016, p.9). Kehinde Andrews (2018) speaks of the Black Studies course at Birmingham City University launched in 2016 and the long path it took to be established. Andrews argues that "by rooting Black Studies in the contributions, experiences and perspectives of Africa and its diaspora, the movement becomes part of a wider battle to decolonise the university" (Andrews, 2018, p.129). Andrews discusses that it is not surprising that a Black Studies course took so long to establish in the UK, as "curricula in higher education are so exclusionary that students have had to start a national campaign, 'Why is My Curriculum White?' to pressure universities to reflect on the role of coloniality in shaping the education that we have access to" (Andrews, 2018, p.129).

The second way of decolonising the university I shall delve into is the decolonisation of the learners. Throughout much sociological and social sciences-based literature about BAME (black and minority ethnic) student progress in education, there is a recurring theme; some BAME students make less progress than their white counterparts. An indicator of this lack of progress could be the numbers of applicants from some minority ethnic backgrounds that are accepted into Russell Group Universities. It is inaccurate to say all BAME students do not achieve well as literature suggests some minority ethnic groups achieve more than others, which I shall outline. Boliver (2015) found that students from Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds make up 0.5, 0.6 and 1.8% of all entrants to Russell Group Universities despite constituting 1.1, 1.6 and 2.5% of all 15 to 29 year olds in England and Wales respectively (Boliver, 2015, p.15). Students coming from Chinese, Indian and Mixed ethnic backgrounds however seem to be well-represented at these Universities, with all of these ethnic groups seeing a higher population at Russell Group Universities than their percentage of the population (Boliver, 2015, p.15). Thus, the way in which to decolonise the students would be to increase the number of BAME students admitted into prestigious or Russell Group Universities.

It is noteworthy that there are disparities in ethnic minority admissions based on courses. In a 2004 study carried out by Seyan et al., it was found that in UK medical schools ethnic minorities and women are no longer underrepresented but that lower socioeconomic groups were in comparison (Seyan et al., 2004, p.1545). Holmwood (2018) argues that "the diversity of higher education is secured by the recruitment of overseas students from elite social backgrounds (i.e. those able to pay high fees),

while domestic students from ethnic minorities remain disadvantaged" (Holmwood, 2018, p.47). This brings into debate the point that universities seem to be globalising but not decolonising their student admissions.

Unfortunately, it is not just the admission rates across ethnic groups that is a cause for concern. Many academics and organisations have addressed the issue of BAME students and their attainment at degree-level courses. Tatlow (2015) praises the fact that from the year 2000, BAME students comprised 16% of the undergraduate population while only comprising 9% of the working population in England (Tatlow, 2015, p.10). The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) identify an attainment gap between BAME and white students. The attainment gap was biggest between white and black students according to the ECU (2010), with the difference in attainment being at 28% (ECU, 2010, p.95). Richardson (2018) argues "differences in academic attainment between White students and ethnic minority students are ubiquitous and have persisted for many years" (Richardson, 2018, p.97). He suggests that ethnic differences in students' degree attainment result from the teaching and assessment practices that are accommodated for across different institutions and that ethnic differences in students' entry qualifications are not to blame (Richardson, 2018, p.97).

Smith (2017) explores the attainment gap at Leeds Beckett University, with 64% of white students and 49% of BAME students attaining a first or 2:1 classification from 2014-15 (Smith, 2017, p.49). Smith continues to identify six short term practical solutions from her findings which include "identifying staff with a special interest in inclusivity who will encourage and support inclusive approaches to teaching and learning in each School; establishing a pan-University working group to address improvements in more inclusive assessment practice and the generation of online,

accessible downloadable guidance for academic staff on inclusive practice; establishing a working group exploring BME student uptake of placement opportunities; "unconscious bias" training for all staff; establishing a project to review overly "white curricula"; working with the Students' Union to encourage more BME students to stand as student course representatives (Smith, 2017, p.52). It is in these ways that Smith addresses that we should decolonise the issue of students' (under)attainment of the neoliberal university.

What is noteworthy when discussing the students from a minority ethnic background of a university is how they are affected in the graduate market. Without encroaching on a lengthy discussion about the racial discrimination of the job market, it is worth discussing about the racialised nature of the graduate market. Li (2015) shows that although unemployment rates are lower than they had been in the past, unemployment rates are overall much higher for ethnic minorities than the white population (Li, 2015, p.35). Li calls for enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation and a more positive social environment for ethnic minorities to fully integrate into British society (Li, 2015, p.37). Li (2018) discusses their data collected from a study on ethnic differences by labour market position. They found that "most ethnic minority groups are underrepresented in the salariat, with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis falling behind the majority group by a big margin" (Li, 2018, pp.115-116). Scholars name this disadvantaged position of BAME graduates in the labour market the 'ethnic penalty'. The term 'ethnic penalties' refers to disparity that exists in ethnic minorities' chances of securing employment or high-level jobs (Heath and Cheung, 2006, p.19). Lessard-Phillips et al. (2018) identify that despite the high aspirations ethnic minorities hold from going to university, they still are disadvantaged in the graduate job market in

comparison with their white peers. The findings of their research showed disparities between the various ethnic minority categories amongst Russell Group graduates six months after graduation. Graduates from Bangladeshi, Chinese and Other Asian backgrounds have lower rates of professional employment after graduating, however those from Chinese and Other Asian groups compensated for this by being in full-time study (Lessard-Phillips et al., 2018, p.502). To decolonise the graduate market, we must dismantle the racialised nature of the labour market that seeks to replicate the ideology of whiteness and racial discrimination amongst those searching for jobs. This may however sound an arduous task so what I call for is a plethora of equality policies to be implemented in the labour market that work to represent the general population in the working population, especially in regards to BAME graduates. To decolonise the learners in general, I posit that there is unconscious bias training for all university staff as well to help reduce institutional racism and create a better social environment in universities for BAME students to flourish in.

The third way of decolonising the university I shall discuss is of decolonising the teaching staff. For years, the issue of gender inequality in academia has taken centre-stage and it has not been until very recently that discussions of equality of academic staff based on ethnicity have entered mainstream debate. Kalwant Bhopal, who has written extensively about the experiences of BAME staff in higher education, discusses her research findings in the Runnymede report 'Aiming Higher' (2015). Bhopal (2015) found that BAME academics did not talk about overt experiences of exclusion and racial discrimination but instead disclosed that they had experienced subtle, covert exclusionary processes which resulted in differential treatment compared to their white counterparts (Bhopal, 2015, p.38). She found that BAME academic staff on the whole

felt like 'outsiders' in their own universities whilst not in the sector generally (Bhopal, 2015, p.38). Bhopal et al. (2018) elaborate on these findings in their study of British academics and their decision to move overseas to work in higher education elsewhere. They found that BAME academics are more likely (83.6%) than non-BAME academics (71.0%) to ever consider moving overseas to work (Bhopal et al., 2018, p.129). A key reason why BAME academics considered moving overseas was the cultural exclusion from the 'whiteness' of the academy, especially in senior levels (Bhopal et al., 2018, p.132). Bhopal (2018) discusses about how these instances of covert racist behaviour that lead to BAME academics feeling like 'outsiders' are protecting white privilege and that "whiteness is reinforced in a way that can fail to acknowledge racism" (Bhopal, 2018).

This brings us on to a discussion of structural whiteness in the academy, which seems to be reinforced through failure to acknowledge racism. Robin DiAngelo (2019) describes the ways in which whiteness permeates through society and culture. DiAngelo throughout her career has explored the ways in which white audiences feel uncomfortable and somewhat disturbed when talking about race and racism- she terms this inability to challenge our own racial worldviews as *white fragility*. (DiAngelo, 2019). DiAngelo documents several instances of how white fragility is replicated and what makes racism as a system difficult for white people to understand. Most notable of these patterns or instances are the constant reminders that white people are more valuable than people of colour. She describes how whiteness in our society is supported by white centrality in history, culture and media and that "while one may explicitly reject the notion that one is inherently better than another, one cannot avoid internalising the message of white superiority, as it is ubiquitous in mainstream culture"

(DiAngelo, 2019). This culture of whiteness in higher education is evident in the statistics of who constitute the academic staff at British universities. The Equality Challenge Unit (2014) recorded that only 7.8% of UK national higher education staff were BAME (ECU, 2014, p.126). Unfortunately, considering this statistic and the fact that BAME academic staff are subjected to covert forms of racial discrimination, it is no doubt that BAME students feel discouraged from pursuing a career in academia. Bhopal et al. (2018) suggest ways in which higher education institutions could improve the experience of BAME staff. These include "prioritisation of race equality; higher education institutions valuing diversity; developing inclusive curricula; addressing micro-aggressions, inequalities and subtle forms of racism; recruitment and promotion; coaching and mentoring; addressing workload and development issues and networking and addressing isolation issues" for BAME academics (Bhopal et al., 2018, p.138). All of these methods of helping BAME staff are symbolic also of how we should be able to decolonise the university's teachers.

Now I shall turn my attention to the issue of neoliberalism and whether the neoliberal university is in fact compatible with decolonialisation. Scholars have pointed their attention to the state of rapid change in higher education in England and the US following the application of neoliberal public policy (Holmwood, 2018, p.37). The introduction of neoliberal policies into higher education can be traced to the 2008 financial crisis, which has integrated the marketisation of education into UK universities. This marketisation has called on universities to act as businesses in the global economy. Jones (2019) discusses the 'seven deadly sins of marketisation' in British higher education in the wake of the 2019 UCU strikes that occurred across many universities. He argues that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition

Government of 2010 established UK higher education as a competitive marketplace, with universities competing against each other for students (Jones, 2019). David Theo Goldberg (2009) discusses the interactions between race, racism, and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism to Goldberg, is a response to "concern about the impending impotence of whiteness" (Goldberg, 2009, p.337). Tilley and Shilliam (2018) further expand on these ideas of race and neoliberalism by using the example of the Grenfell Tower, which sadly burned down in 2017, killing seventy-one victims. To them the residential conditions of Grenfell Tower are indicative of a global reality "in which the racialised 'Others of Europe' remain largely impoverished" and "spatially marginalised" as a result of neoliberalism (Tilley and Shilliam, 2018, pp.534-535).

Given the racialised nature of the labour market and of neoliberalism, I will now address whether decolonisation of the neoliberal university is possible. While decolonisation of the curricula, learners and teachers is feasible to a certain extent, with a transformation from a public university to a private one, and the application of neoliberal and marketisation policies to higher education, it seems that decoloniality under the influence of neoliberalism will be difficult to achieve. I say this only because of the racialised nature of neoliberal policies as we have explored previously. In their analysis of neoliberal policies on the Ghanaian higher education system, Gyamera and Burke (2018) assessed how neoliberal capitalism advances neo-colonial interests (Gyamera and Burke, 2018, p.462). It seems feasible to argue that neoliberalism and (neo-)colonialism are entangled as systems of influence. Therefore, I propose that to introduce decolonial change into higher education institutions, I would call for a socioeconomic restructuring of the neoliberal policies and attitudes in higher education. It is only with a reshuffling of neoliberal policies such as marketisation and

competition within universities that we can then begin to truly decolonise the learners and teachers as well as the labour market.

In summary, I have laid out plans in this essay on how to decolonise the university and why of course decolonising the university is not only necessary but crucial. I have outlined why we need to decolonise our epistemologies that are tied to Eurocentric knowledge production and to colonialism and imperialism, in order to achieve a more accurate and diverse education. We must deconstruct the social sciences' and other disciplines' curricula from their westernised roots, especially by radically rethinking western disciplines.

I have also explained why we need to decolonise the students at the academy, specifically tackling BAME exclusion from selective higher education institutions such as Russell Group Universities and as well BAME under attainment of first class and 2:1 degree classifications. Also, the need to decolonise the graduate labour markets through implementation of diversity policies to be more inclusive of BAME graduates, and to reduce BAME unemployment statistics. To help decolonise BAME under attainment in higher education, I advocate for unconscious bias training for all staff, which would help to create an accommodating environment for BAME students.

Thirdly I have discussed why we need to decolonise the teaching staff at higher education institutions, and the need to disrupt the institutional whiteness of the academy. We need to decolonise the university staff by breaking the institutional racism and structural whiteness that impacts so many BAME academics. Also by addressing exclusionary and isolation issues for BAME academics and addressing

micro-aggressions, BAME academics may feel more comfortable and less of 'outsiders' within their own higher education institutions.

Finally, I described how heavily racialised the doctrine of neoliberal policies are, especially with reference to the labour market. I have suggested that although neoliberalism and decoloniality may seem incompatible, a restructuring of neoliberal policies in higher education institutions is needed to assist with the decolonisation of the neoliberal university.

It is clear from my essay that decolonisation of higher education is a debate for many scholars. As Demir (2018) suggests, "in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, the issue of diversity and the battle of epistemology will not go away anywhere soon" (Demir, 2018, p.15). Demir is correct, as many student-led movements have shown that the battle for de-centralisation of Europe in our epistemology and our institutions and peoples has only just started, and that we shall expect to see more efforts for decolonisation in the coming decades. As weaved throughout my essay, the ways in which we must decolonise often overlap and intertwine, therefore we must seek to decolonise every aspect of the university or higher education institutions as a whole.

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