

Pedagogy after the Decolonial Turn: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract:

What are the implications for our pedagogical practices of successive waves of postcolonial, anti-colonial, and decolonial critiques of “the canon” in particular and of Euro-American forms of knowledge production in general? What are the forces arrayed “for” and “against” decolonizing the liberal arts curriculum and what does this entail in practice? How do we proceed if we accept Toni Morrison’s contention that canon-building is empire building and that, by extension, all modern disciplinary formations and categories of analysis are imbricated in imperial epistemologies that continue to shape our present materially and ideologically? How have scholars in different disciplines and at distinct political moments negotiated the impasses and conundrums that invariably arise in the process of interrogating the canon? With these questions in mind, this introduction offers an overview of key debates and interventions in a constantly evolving intellectual landscape, as a way to contextualize the four essays included in this Special Issue of *Contingencies*.

Keywords: Western Canon; Decolonizing the Liberal Arts Curriculum; Decolonial Pedagogy; Anti-colonial Pedagogy; Post-coloniality

Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested. (Morrison 132)

Decolonizing Forms of Knowledge

The idea for the symposium on [Decolonizing the Liberal Arts Curriculum](#)¹ on which this Special Issue of *Contingencies* is based arose from a set of lively exchanges among New York University's Liberal Studies faculty on the implications for our pedagogical practices of successive waves of postcolonial, anti-colonial, and decolonial critiques of "the canon" in particular and Euro-American forms of knowledge production in general. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and Rhodes/Fees Must Fall provided the context and backdrop. Corresponding calls from a section of the student body to decolonize the existing LS curriculum signaled the emergence of a reconfigured version of the "culture wars" of the 1990s, one shaped by the specific conditions of 21st century late capitalism.

The intellectual project of decolonization – of challenges to imperial epistemologies and assumptions – can be traced to anti-imperialist struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries (see, for instance, Gopal and Elhalaby). Contemporary traditions of anti-colonial thought and related calls to decolonize the university/curricula have multiple genealogies and deeply contested meanings.

A comprehensive engagement with the vast and heterogeneous scholarship, including impassioned debates around terminology, is beyond the scope of this introduction; we hope,

¹ See <https://sites.google.com/nyu.edu/dlacsymposium/home>. The symposium was held at NYU London in June 2023. We would like to extend special thanks to Dean Emerita Julie Mostov for her unstinting intellectual and financial support, Associate Dean Adedamola Osinulu for obtaining a Global Opportunity Grant that made funding the symposium possible, and fellow members of the organizing committee: Jeannine Chandler, Ifeona Fulani, and Tilottama Tharoor. We are also deeply appreciative of those who presented at the symposium (for a full list of participants, please see the website).

instead, to give readers an overview of key debates and interventions in the existing intellectual landscape as a way to situate the four essays included in this Special Issue. This necessarily entails an understanding of claims and forces arrayed for and against “decolonizing.” For our purposes the work of Edward Said – often heralded as the founder of postcolonial studies – offers a generative site of departure for the discussion that follows.

In his groundbreaking 1978 book *Orientalism*, Said argued, *inter alia*, that Euro-American colonial extraction, political domination, and violent imperial expansion relied fundamentally on a vast apparatus of knowledge production about non-Euro-American Others (with his focus primarily on Islam and those who inhabited the “Middle East”). Imperial knowledge practices and the disciplines to which they were attached (or created) rested on a hierarchical and binary “civilizational” framing that necessarily produced an “Orient” that was not only inherently inferior but also in need of instruction. Put differently, imperial epistemologies provided critical intellectual scaffolding, or what we might call (manufacturing) popular consent, for the violence and depredations of empire. In tracking the intimate relationship between knowledge-making practices and circuits of power, Said pointed to the essential non-innocence of scholarship. Despite claims of “neutrality” and “objectivity,” the scholarship was shaped by, and shaped, a vast array of ideological, material, and imperial interests. The latter remains a controversial assertion, though the claim that imperial subjugation unfolds under the cover of civilizational discourses and ostensible Euro-American superiority is no longer as contentious within academia.

The provocative epigraph from Toni Morrison that opens this introduction was penned ten years after *Orientalism*’s publication. Morrison’s reflections on the *political* work of literary canons, on the exclusions and erasures needed to sustain the system of racial capitalism in the US,

powerfully echo Said's insights on the inextricable links between ideological and material domination. By this logic, canonical inclusions and erasures are not a function of the immanent qualities of any particular text; it is the act of canon-making that confers and distributes value. It follows that every selection or exclusion is an "interesting" one. By extension, no curriculum can ever be neutral or fully outside politics.

Interventions such as Morrison's and Said's opened up a set of thorny and potentially debilitating debates on rethinking university curricula, especially on the merits of so-called cultural relativism versus universalism. Dangers of tokenism also loomed large in ensuing discussions. The inclusion of some "non-western" material into existing curricula – what we might call the "add and stir" approach – does nothing to disrupt the epistemic hierarchies and valuations as per the thrust of anti-colonial critique. Rather, such inclusion elides fundamental questions of power. In his interrogation of the perceived Orient/Occident divide, as Gurinder K. Bhambra underscores, Said

unsettled the terrain of any argument concerned with the "universal" by demonstrating how the idea of the universal was based on both an analytical bifurcation of the world and an elision of that bifurcation. This double displacement removed the "other" *from* the production of an effective history of modernity. History became the product of the West in its actions upon others. (Bhambra 116)

Bhambra offers an astute reading of Said above, drawing out the analytical moves through which the latter unsettles the East/West binary and related linear narratives of progress that feature Euro-Americans as protagonists. Building on this insight we can see a potential way out of the impasses in which demands for an "inclusive" curriculum can easily become mired. Attention to

the original “analytical bifurcation of the world,” one that is deeply hierarchized and racialized, moves us away from questions such as whether to jettison the “western canon” altogether,² or whether to replace the likes of Kant, Locke, and Marx with Asian, African, or Latin American theorists. Bhambra’s formulation prompts interrogation of the *authorizing power* involved in “sorting” the universal or the norm from the particular or culturally specific. In other words, who judges or draws the lines between what is considered essential (universal) and what can be set aside as supplemental (particular) readings? Under what conditions? What determinations go into assigning universal or global significance to some texts and not to others? What are the implications of knowledge as “interested” and with explicit “stakes”?

In light of these early critiques a number of scholars (not necessarily self-identified as postcolonial or decolonial) turned their analytical lens to close readings of the material and ideological conditions under which “canonical” authors wrote, and within which disciplines were forged. So, for instance, historian of political thought Barbara Arneil makes a compelling case for how John Locke’s views on property effectively constituted an economic defense of English colonial aims, including England’s later appropriation of indigenous land. In a similar vein, political theorist Uday Mehta persuasively argues that political exclusion – based on highly contextual and parochial conceptions of reason, industriousness, and civility – was built into the ostensibly universalist liberal theories of John Locke and John Stuart Mill (Mehta). Likewise, transnational feminists have long demonstrated the ways in which our worlds are connected through the inheritances of racialized capitalism, geopolitics, and imperialism (see Alexander and Mohanty; Grewal; and Lila Abu-Lughod 2013 for early interventions). Indeed, it has been argued that a form of feminist orientalism structures the foundational text of Euro-American

² The epistemic delinking that decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo supports can be read as a version of this line of thinking. See, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo (2007) and Walter D. Mignolo (2017).

liberal feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Various scholars note that arguments like Mary Wollstonecraft's rest fundamentally on the figure of the abject Muslim woman, imagined in opposition to the "civilized" Christian female; the effect is to "outsource" patriarchal oppression in Euro-American societies onto Islam and Muslim societies writ large (Zonana; Massad; Shehabuddin; Abu-Lughod et al. 2023). The ostensibly neutral and objective realm of law has also come under scrutiny. Antony Anghie, for instance, argues that colonialism was foundational, not incidental, to the construction of international law. Concepts such as sovereignty are not benign but "interested," constructed as tools of power under imperial relations of ruling; European powers determined who was "civilized" enough to exercise national sovereignty.

Thus far, we have shared a fairly "arbitrary" selection of works to illustrate the scope and breadth of issues involved in decolonizing forms of knowledge. The examples used throughout this introduction are taken from a body of otherwise disparate and scattered scholarship that nevertheless shares certain assumptions and throughlines. In different ways they point to the ways our present is the product of deeply entangled histories steeped in imperial epistemologies. The most significant is a recognition that "modernity" and its associated political categories – civilization, Man, freedom, and equality – were birthed under conditions of conquest, dispossession, and enslavement. By extension, disciplinary formation and categories of analysis are imbricated in unequal colonial relations that continue to shape our present.

What's in a Phrase? The Implications of Postcolonial and Decolonial Scholarship

Before going any further we should ask: What does the phrase "decolonizing the curriculum" actually mean? While this Special Issue of *Contingencies* has assembled a number of articles on

– and participants at the 2023 symposium in London grappled with – this very topic, it is in no way self-evident to symposium participants nor in the wider academic fields how to conclusively define the phrase and to advocate exactly what would be the process and results. On the one hand we might say that this lack of consensus is typical of any academic discussion, as we productively debate possible meanings and applications, on the other hand the term (and action of) “decolonizing” has a different valence than when we place it in the phrase “decolonizing the curriculum.” This latter phrase was and is the thrust of our 2023 symposium and this Special Issue of *Contingencies*, but it behooves us to place that discussion within the wider discussions and debates, thus reviewing some of the important scholarly literature on this topic – and some reactions to it – for our readers.

Beginning with one of the most famous of phrases in postcolonial studies, many might agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s advocacy to “provincializing Europe” within the humanities. As a guiding statement, in the introduction to Chakrabarty’s famous work is the acknowledgement that

[Frantz] Fanon’s struggle to hold on to the Enlightenment idea of the human – even when he knew that European imperialism had reduced that idea to the figure of the settler-colonial white man – is now itself a part of the global heritage of all postcolonial thinkers. The struggle ensues because there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity. Without them there would be no social science that addresses issues of modern social justice.

...

[Yet] European thought has a contradictory relationship to such an instance of political modernity. It is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India. (Chakrabarty 2008, pp. 5-6)

No doubt anticipating a reactionary response from the academic establishment, Chakrabarty clarifies further that

As should be clear by now, provincializing Europe is not a project of rejecting or discarding European thought. Relating to a body of thought to which one largely owes one's intellectual existence cannot be a matter of exacting what Leela Gandhi has aptly called "postcolonial revenge." European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from and for the margins.

But, of course, the margins are as plural and diverse as the centers. Europe appears different when seen from within the experiences of colonization or inferiorization in specific parts of the world. Postcolonial scholars, speaking from their different geographies of colonialism, have spoken of different Europes.

...

My purpose is to explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European life-worlds. (Chakrabarty 16, 20)

Subsequently in the postcolonial studies scholarship this argument led to terms like “European peripherality” or “minoritizing” European literature, with an advocacy of using and teaching literature from around the world, not just exclusively that from Europe or the US.

In a more recent and even more provocative position on the term, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang famously reminded us in their article “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” during their critique of Paulo Freire that “Freire’s philosophies have encouraged educators to use ‘colonization’ as a metaphor for oppression. In such a paradigm, ‘internal colonization’ reduces to ‘mental colonization,’ logically leading to the solution of decolonizing one’s mind and the rest will follow. Such philosophy conveniently sidesteps the most unsettling questions...” They conclude quite definitively that “decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice” (Tuck and Yang 20-21).

Furthermore, inclusion of “minority literature” within the wider so-called “canonical” literature (in a fashion similar to Euro-American societies allowing greater participation and visibility to minorities in the sociopolitical spheres) means, they argue, that the “logical endpoint, the attainment of equal legal and cultural entitlements, is actually an investment in settler colonialism” (Tuck and Yang 18). That is, the society and systems, including pedagogical and epistemological, remain in the same form as when they were created in the colonial process or under Euro-American dominance, just augmented with new additions. Tuck and Yang ultimately note that their critique is that the political and pedagogical projects of social justice, inclusion, and reform ultimately do not align with the true and just goal of “decolonization,” thus they call this disparity an “ethic of incommensurability” (Tuck and Yang 28).

More than a decade before Tuck and Yang’s article, Leela Gandhi had acknowledged a similar worry regarding reforms and additions in the academic world, and she wondered (via her citation

of Simon During) if creating new subfields and integrating “world literature” in courses means “in this guise, postcolonialism may continue – although with the best intentions – to simply deliver old wine in new bottles” (Gandhi 175).

Earlier scholarship on postcolonial efforts at revising curriculum has articulated an agenda of dislodging Euro-US societies (broadly subsumed under the problematically monolithic label “the west”) as serving pedagogically, historically, politically, and otherwise, as the “reference,” “model,” or “default,” with Chakrabarty articulating “Europe remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on” (Chakrabarty 1992, p. 1). An easy example of this continuous problem in academia is to find titles of books, courses, and teaching units that define a particular time frame of history in this or that country as the so-called “medieval period.” In a similar fashion, Linda Tuhiwai Smith elucidates the still very common underpinning of pedagogy in the liberal arts curriculum:

The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of “civilized” knowledge. This form of global knowledge is generally referred to as “universal” knowledge, available to all and not really “owned” by anyone, that is, until non-Western scholars make claims to it. When claims like that are made[,] history is revised (again) so that the story of civilization remains the story of the West.

Thus academics who teach “canonical” works outside their historical context – as kinds of knowledge production that miraculously spring from individual genius

and which are universal for all time – naively or purposefully elide the epistemological process. (Smith 106)

Around the same period as the rise of postcolonial studies, scholars of/in what is now Latin America, many of whom write in Spanish rather than English, mapped out the equally influential field of decolonial scholarship. Concerned with the afterlives of Spanish and Portuguese empires, this body of scholarship effectively pushed back the time frame of “the colonial” from the 18th and 19th centuries to the much earlier moment of the conquest of the Americas. Anibal Quijano’s concept of modernity/coloniality, and the constitution of what he identifies as a new world order in the last 500 years, has been foundational to this field. Building on Quijano, Maria Lugones argues that not only did colonization invent “the colonized” but in its disruption and reconfiguration of existing cosmologies and forms of social organization it imposed a specifically racialized understanding of gender and sexuality based on the binary logic of colonial difference. Literary critic and philosopher Walter D. Mignolo’s call for epistemic decolonization or delinking has garnered both critique and approbation. For Mignolo, undoing colonial power structures and epistemic hierarchies requires absolute rupture with Euro-American epistemologies, and instead center “local” knowledge.

For the purpose of decolonizing curricula, and in light of a more capacious timeline of “the colonial,” some scholars note that approximately 500 years of Euro-American empire/colonial capitalism ushered in a new symbolic order, condensed under the sign of “the West,” that legitimated and authorized a global racialized system of domination. The erasures and elisions that determine not just who can be the subject of history but who or what counts as humanity (or “Man”) sits at the heart of this (now not so new) world order. In the words of anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot:

The West was created somewhere at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the midst of a global wave of material and symbolic transformations. The definitive expulsion of the Muslims from Europe, the so-called voyages of exploration, the first developments of merchant colonialism, and the maturation of the absolutist state set the stage for the rulers and merchants of Western Christendom to conquer Europe and the rest of the world....*These political developments paralleled the emergence of a new symbolic order.* (Trouillot 74; emphasis added)

Trouillot connects this symbolic order to the contradictions with which Enlightenment philosophers contended, steeped as they were in ontological discourses that sought answers to questions of what constituted equality, beauty, and “Man,” even as they were materially enmeshed in practices of enslavement, dispossession, and extraction.³ The reconciliation of this glaring contradiction required imagining into being what Trouillot calls degrees of humanity – the assumption that some humans were “more so than others,” thereby providing “the most potent impetus for the transformation of European ethnocentrism into scientific racism” (Trouillot 76-77). In a Saidian spirit, Trouillot denaturalizes “the West” and the universal values to which it is attached in relation to the rise of what is now called racial capitalism.

Writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter’s genealogy of “Man” provides a radical critique of the universalization of a parochial version of the human. White, male, bourgeois, and European, with assumed attributes of rationality, racial superiority, modern, and so on, this narrow Eurocentric identity was based on and worked to actively exclude the rest of the world – those deemed irrational, primitive, or underdeveloped. Anthropologist Talal Asad’s critique of the human as a self-evident and timeless category also points to the crucial work of civilizational difference.

³ In his words “the Age of the Enlightenment was an age in which the slave drivers of Nantes bought titles of nobility to better parade with philosophers, an age in which a freedom fighter such as Thomas Jefferson owned slaves without bursting under the weight of his intellectual and moral contradictions.” See page 78.

Asad contends that under contemporary conditions of modernity and the nation-state form, who counts as human and is therefore deserving of human rights rests on the logic of the civilization/barbarism binary.

We end this section with the opening passage of philosopher Charles W. Mills' *The Racial Contract*, which offers what is perhaps the most damning and provocative analysis of elisions and erasures in the making and teaching of the western canon:

White supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today. You will not find this term in introductory, or even advanced, texts in political theory. A standard undergraduate philosophy course will start off with Plato and Aristotle, perhaps say something about Augustine, Aquinas, and Machiavelli, move on to Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Marx, and then wind up with Rawls and Nozick. It will introduce you to notions of aristocracy, democracy, absolutism, liberalism, representative government, socialism, welfare capitalism, and libertarianism. But though it covers more than two thousand years of Western political thought and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years. And this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the fact that standard textbooks and courses have for the most part been written and designed by whites, who take their racial privilege so much for granted that they do not even see it as *political*, as a form of domination. (Mills 1)

Reactionary Responses as Self-Caricature

Of course conservatives have long responded to these theoretical and pedagogical innovations by lambasting them as a sinister “cultural relativism” that dethrones the “universality” of so-called western values and societies. Certainly Samuel P. Huntington’s provocative and influential argument about a so-called “clash of civilizations” was partly a reaction to these academic changes, though framed as policy advocacy. In any case, in his original essay he approvingly cited V. S. Naipaul’s claim that so-called western civilization is “the ‘universal civilization’ that ‘fits all men’” (Huntington 1993, p. 40). But, Huntington warned, “in the past, the elites of non-Western societies were usually the people who were most involved with the West, had been educated at Oxford, the Sorbonne or Sandhurst, and had absorbed Western attitudes and values...now, however...a de-Westernization and indigenization of elites is occurring in many non-Western countries” (Huntington 27). As a matter of fact, Huntington posited that

Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian [his term for East Asia, mainly China], Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox [Christian, that is, Russian] cultures. Western efforts to propagate such ideas produce instead a reaction against “human rights imperialism” and a reaffirmation of indigenous values...The very notion that there could be a “universal civilization” is a Western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies. (Huntington 40-41)

Among his conclusions, indeed as one of the main purposes of his thesis as well as the origin of its title – and what later enhanced his popularity among neoconservatives for what seemed a prescient statement – was that so-called western civilization would face its most bitter rivalry from the so-called Confucian and Islamic civilizations, and he approvingly cited the most famous orientalist of his time, Bernard Lewis: “we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historical reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the world-wide expansion of both” (Huntington 32).

A more recent example of a scholar in the Lewis school of thought, and motivated by a desire to resist curricular changes and the growing body of scholarship encompassing postcolonial studies, is Martin Kramer, whose 2001 book *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* also included an entire chapter dedicated to his attempted refutation of Edward Said and scholars like him. In chapter 2, “Said’s Splash,” Kramer actually doesn’t directly address most of the arguments made by Said but instead asserts that the field of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies specifically, and postcolonial studies more broadly, was becoming a Saidian brainwashed cadre “armed with their well-thumbed copies of *Orientalism*” (Kramer 40). Indeed, Kramer had earlier explained who he meant: “*Orientalism* appeared at a time when new minorities were seeking equitable if not preferential access to academe. Among them were Arabs and Muslims” (Kramer 33). If his point wasn’t clear enough, Kramer further explains that “*Orientalism* not only overturned bookshelves, it overturned chairs. It became a manifesto of affirmative action for Arab and Muslims scholars and established a negative

predisposition toward American (and imported European) scholars.” As a matter of fact, later on the same page he laments what he calls the “massive shift in the ethnic composition of Middle Eastern studies” (Kramer 39). Evidently, there are too many brown people in academia. Finally, his usage of the word “armed” in the above quote was not only metaphoric; Kramer’s characterization of Said and other postcolonial studies scholars and the scholarship they produce includes a litany of familiar buzzwords, including “radical,” “angry,” “incompetent,” “confused,” “superficial,” “lazy,” a result of “subjectivity,” “prejudice,” “confusion and guilt,” and “ignorance.”⁴

Kramer, a student of Bernard Lewis whose work and claims had featured heavily in postcolonial studies critiques, was certainly attempting to defend his orientalist mentor but was also pursuing the larger agenda of reaffirming the utility of scholarship for policy guidance in the US and to promote Israel, which includes framing Israeli policies within the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict as part of the larger struggle of western civilization. Notice again the phrasing in Lewis’ aforementioned claim, “far transcending the level of issues and policies,” by which he is attempting to convince us to think that differences or debates or clashes are not due to a specific policy, event, government, law, war, or resources but are instead a result of inherent, inescapable, genetic qualities of these “others” against the western “us.” This kind of formulation is a reiteration of a claim made by many Israeli leaders, perhaps none more effective than Benjamin Netanyahu, who had earlier articulated this formula in the introduction to his 1986 book *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*, and who, to this day, regularly promotes this view in speeches as prime minister of Israel (and see, for example, Netanyahu 1986, pp. 203-04).

⁴ As just select examples, see Kramer, 28, 30-31, 33-35, 37.

In conclusion, ironically Kramer's attempt to criticize Said and the emerging fields and curricular attempts of postcolonial studies actually demonstrates the exact argument that those scholars make. If the above examples of Kramer's binaristic and racist terms are not enough evidence, we can add that Kramer working at and publishing through the Israeli lobby-originated think tank of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, his promotion of various US military interventions, and his scholarly and political advocacy attempts in the decades since he wrote his book to alter, monitor, and/or defund universities (including even arguing for the elimination of Title VI) for what he claimed was its "anti-American" and "anti-Israeli" curriculum, are all further proof. Citing these same reasons, Kramer later led a reactionary rebellion within the preeminent scholarly association of MESA (Middle East Studies Association) and broke off to create the rival ASMEA (Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa).

The resistance to reform of curriculum by old guard orientalist, or the efforts of the Krameresque reactionaries and neoconservatives of the George W. Bush era, might today be subsumed under the less articulate but no less powerful so-called "anti-woke" movement. In many cases, without knowing much about the relevant scholarly fields or curriculum other than a lumping together of much of it under a putative label of "critical race theory," clearly the advocacy efforts of Kramer and others like him have borne fruit. Fighting a revanchist battle over academia, the past years have seen major curricular successes at the university as well as primary and secondary levels by these conservative activists. Again, without reference to the phrase "decolonizing curriculum," these culture warriors in the US and globally have trumpeted their victories as "saving America" and/or "saving the West." We can detect such reactions in the exclamations of the former French Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer as well as US President Donald J. Trump, whose most recent (of many) "anti-woke" tirades has been aimed at

the educational components of US museums, including the National Museum of American History, National Museum of the American Latino, National Museum of Natural History, National Museum of African Art, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and National Museum of Asian Art. As Trump exclaimed in a recent August 2025 statement on Truth Social, “the Smithsonian is OUT OF CONTROL, where everything discussed is how horrible our Country is, how bad Slavery was, and how unaccomplished the downtrodden have been.” His White House announced that “President Trump will explore all options and avenues to get the Woke out of the Smithsonian and hold them accountable...” (cited in Gedeon 2025). Popular culture has taken cues from conservative academics and culture war advocates and expanded the debate into the social media realm (see Constantinou and Theofanid for a recent quantitative analysis of “anti-woke” rhetoric and memes).

Critiques from Within: Anti-Colonialism as Missing Term?

Decolonial theory came under fire for neglecting issues of land, indigeneity, and settler colonialism, aptly captured in Tuck and Yang’s aforementioned article “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.” In the decade since the publication of this piece it has both been celebrated and subjected to considerable criticism from sympathetic readers. Black Studies scholars argue that the authors downplay the specific material reality of Black enslavement in settler colonial contexts, and rely on a material/ideological binary to make their argument (Garba and Sorentino). The absolute division between the material and symbolic on which the authors rely not only forecloses an analysis of slavery but leaves unquestioned the place of inequalities generated by contemporary global capitalism (Kapoor). Sympathetic critics also note that delinking strategies that attribute coloniality exclusively to the “West” risk generalizing and de-historicizing the “local,” however defined. Notably, such delinking strategies cannot

adequately address the complexities of *contemporary* global inequalities stemming from imperialism and geopolitics (Bishara; al-Bulushi et al.; Naicker). They also risk promoting “ethno-essentialism” or the valorization of exclusionary nativist thought that can so easily be folded into right-wing authoritarianism and neo-liberal agendas, especially in higher education (Lewis and Lall; Shah; Zembylas).

The charge of essentializing the “local” has not escaped the field of postcolonial scholarship either. So, for instance, Patrick Wolfe, the founder of settler colonial studies, takes to task leading Indian postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for reinscribing a “global narrative of Muslim effacement in which Hindu nationalism and British colonialism were mutually complicit” (Wolfe 378). This narrative framing contributes directly and dangerously to the continued and intensified production of Muslim Indians as Outsiders to the nation (Ahmad). How might we dislodge the implicit tension between epistemic and material decolonizing to which such critiques allude? Priyamvada Gopal – keynote speaker at the DLAC London symposium – offers a generative reading of Tuck and Yang. She calls for renewed attention to the material stakes in colonial encounters, to what made these encounters “so globally consequential,” and so to the aspirations of those who actively resisted the empire. These aspirations range from land claims and land use to working conditions, labor rights, women’s rights and educational policies to agricultural politics, disarmament, trading terms and ecological protection. In Gopal’s words:

Anticolonialism is the missing term, a pivotal absence, in academic discussions of decolonisation today. Reframing discussions of decolonisation in the light of anticolonial thought – as the theory and practice of anticolonialism rather than as a mere theoretical variant of the postcolonial –

gives grounding and historical heft to them. It also enables a discussion of *decolonisation as necessarily dialogical, and as a process with a horizon of aspiration*. In this regard, the posing of questions is as important as finding answers. (Gopal 2021, p. 886; italics added)

Somewhat along the same lines, a new generation of scholars are tracking connections across settler colonial contexts that transcend material-ideological binaries (see, for instance, Kauanui and Zia).

Decolonizing the Science Curriculum

While theoretical debates about epistemology, methodology, and pedagogy have been lively in the humanities and social sciences, the so-called “hard sciences” have been more resistant to change or even awareness of these curricular debates. Part of the problem is inherent in the very structure of academia itself; that is, we know that if we teach a literature course, it is less likely to have large numbers of chemistry students enroll (unless it is a requirement). The inverse is equally true – comparative literature students are less likely to enroll in an entomology course. Yet despite the supposed tension between humanities and so-called hard sciences, which Gandhi reviews, there has always been an interrelationship between fields even as they jealously and zealously erected disciplinary boundaries to discipline its practitioners (Gandhi 46-47).

In other words, as a number of scholars have noted – whether specifically identifying hard sciences or not – boundaries of disciplines and fields often “silo” knowledge. As Smith outlines

while disciplines are implicated in each other, particularly in their shared philosophical foundations, they are insulated from each other through the

maintenance of what are known as disciplinary boundaries....Insularity protects a discipline from the “outside,” enabling communities of scholars to distance themselves from others and, in the more extreme forms, to absolve themselves of responsibility for what occurs in other branches of their discipline, in the academy and in the world. (Smith 70-71)

Thus, those in the so-called “hard” sciences are least likely to come across the work of someone like Bruno Latour, who argues that scientific “objectivity” does not exist independently of social and material networks of authorizing communities and institutions. Latour’s contention that social facts are both real *and* constructed tends to leave scientists either perplexed or alarmed (O’Brien). Indeed, many scientists presumably still adhere to outdated beliefs in the absolute “neutrality” and “objectivity” of the hard sciences; within this view it seems that data collected “empirically” on, say, insects, would not have anything to do with race, gender, sexuality, empire, or larger issues of history and social justice.

Yet, as Rohan Deb Roy’s study of research on mosquitoes and malaria in South Asia over the *longue durée* reveals, it is important to redress historical elisions and demotions from the scientific record, the “invisible labor” of collaborators within science, which thus necessitates:

highlighting and explaining the invisibility of colonized south Asians – the unsung assistants, menial employees, prisoners and hospitalized patients – who were implicated in the production of this knowledge. The critique of “invisibility” here does not imply that references to colonized south Asians are totally absent from archives of imperial entomology and tropical medicine. Rather, invisibility was a condition that was produced

by British colonial officials in their effort to understate the fundamental and indispensable contributions of the skills and bodies of colonized south Asians, and to project them as incidental and fleeting, ephemeral and forgettable. (Roy 2024, p. 102).

In an earlier publication, Roy noted that it was precisely the assumed absolute objectivity and supremacy of science to answer all questions (Sigmund Freud once proclaimed in his 1918 essay “Civilization and *die Weltanschauung*” that “our best hope for the future is that intellect—the scientific spirit—*reason*—should in time establish a dictatorship over the human mind”) that was seen as both the gift of the west to the world but also was an important prop and justification for western imperialism. In a similar fashion, while also paying attention to the agency of nonhuman actors, Timothy Mitchell has written evocatively about this very point as well when he once asked “can the mosquito speak?” (Mitchell 2002, Chapter 1). These imperial origins, precedents, and protocols (indeed, the actual shaping of scientific disciplines and their data) continue today; Roy reviews a number of studies, including

A 2009 study showed that about 80% of Central Africa’s research papers were produced with collaborators based outside the region. With the exception of Rwanda, each of the African countries principally collaborated with its former coloniser. As a result, these dominant collaborators shaped scientific work in the region. They prioritised research on immediate local health-related issues, particularly infectious and tropical diseases, rather than encouraging local scientists to also pursue the fuller range of topics pursued in the West.

In the case of Cameroon, local scientists’ most common role was in collecting data and fieldwork while foreign collaborators shouldered a significant amount of

the analytical science. This echoed a 2003 study of international collaborations in at least 48 developing countries that suggested local scientists too often carried out “fieldwork in their own country for the foreign researchers.”

In the same study, 60% to 70% of the scientists based in developed countries did not acknowledge their collaborators in poorer countries as co-authors in their papers. This is despite the fact they later claimed in the survey that the papers were the result of close collaborations. (Roy 2018)

These points are similar to those made by Megan Raby, who has published a number of works on so-called field stations for botanists, ecologists, zoologists, and other scientists. Raby’s focus on important research stations in the Caribbean reveals the production of scientific knowledge within very real geostrategic and neocolonial processes (in this case, of the US); the location of one such field station in the Panama Canal Zone is in and of itself very telling. As Raby argues,

the relationship between applied science and the expansion of US political and economic power is conspicuous in these cases...[Including] scientists from the New York Botanical Garden, the Smithsonian Institution, and several US universities came together to establish at Cinchona, Jamaica, the first field station in the Western Hemisphere devoted to the study of tropical ecology. They chose a site that had access to a diverse montane rainforest, and an already well-developed colonial infrastructure. (Raby 2017, pp. 217-218)

Beyond questions of visibility and recognition, practices of classification have increasingly come under scrutiny in the hard sciences, challenging the very foundations

of disciplines and the knowledges they produce. In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Kathryn Yusoff shows how the historical classification of the earth and its mineral resources was used to establish extractive economies that were foundational to structuring racial inequality and violence. Racialized colonial practices on which the discipline of geology was built, Yusoff contends, continues to disproportionately harm black and brown bodies. Similarly, feminist scholar of science Banu Subramaniam argues that foundational theories and practices of botany were shaped and fortified in the service of colonial rule and its extractive ambitions. In *Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism*, Subramaniam tracks the shaping of the discipline through colonial epistemologies. She maps the damaging effects of dividing up the world of botany into what was valuable and what was not through colonial logic. As she argues, the resulting destruction of diverse plant worlds and indigenous knowledge to make way for so-called “modern” classifications and practices led to ecocide and epistemicide. Reaching a more just and equitable future, Subramaniam suggests, requires a reckoning with the colonial foundations of knowledge production.

The examples above are taken from a body of otherwise disparate and scattered scholarship that nevertheless shares certain assumptions and throughlines. The first is a recognition that “modernity” and its associated political categories – freedom, equality, Man – were birthed under conditions of conquest, dispossession and enslavement. By extension, disciplinary formation and categories of analysis are imbricated in unequal colonial relations.

What Is to Be Done? Connected Histories and the Way Forward

It is important to acknowledge that as scholars and teachers our reach and influence is necessarily circumscribed. Our place in the academy sets limits on the extent to which we can actualize concrete sociopolitical agenda. We are neither politicians nor policymakers empowered with evaluating land-back policies. Nor are we CEOs with the power to redirect corporations' activities. Gandhi notes tongue-in-cheek that "the intellectual's armchair is, indeed, a considerably less hazardous – and possibly less effective – political location than the revolutionary battleground" (Gandhi 63). Yet, the lines between the so-called "ivory tower" and the "real world" are in practice fuzzy and porous. Within the realm of academia broadly, and the classroom specifically, we have a direct impact in terms of the curriculum we design, possibly in the form of a Foucauldian "insurrection of knowledges." If we take the foregoing analysis seriously, then every choice of text matters.

While Cornel West has long reminded us that intellectuals operating within academic institutions are subject to market forces and cooptation (West 94), and Tuck and Yang are critical about decolonization as being a form of (only) changing minds, as educators our *raison d'être* is premised on the hope and aspiration that what we teach and enable will have wider impacts in the society, that we are shaping the future electorate and activists, and maybe politicians, who could make some of the concrete changes we wish to see. Thus, this Special Issue of *Contingencies* encourages a thorough and unflinching reassessment of how and why we teach what we do, and what can be done to augment or change it. These quick remarks perfectly illustrate part of the impetus behind the long-term resistance to decolonizing the curriculum by reactionary – and some-times self-proclaimed liberal – forces in society, and under its latest incarnation in this historical moment (in the US as elsewhere) as the so-called anti-woke

movement. Recent efforts to ban critical race theory in many US states, or university suppression of free speech protests against genocidal violence, alert us to the political stakes of what transpires in the so-called ivory tower. Undermining the ability of educators to teach critical thinking, restricting or ending research in a wide array of fields, discouraging universities and important institutions (such as museums) to reassess disciplines and integrate interdisciplinary approaches, and promoting anti-intellectual populist and conspiratorial beliefs are all part and parcel of refusing to (re)consider these very old questions.

What are the implications for pedagogical practice if we accept that our present is the product of histories connected through colonial and racial capitalism steeped in imperial epistemologies? The articles in this Special Issue shed light on this question through concrete examples in and out of the classroom. Eugenia Naro-Maciel's contribution "Decolonizing Higher Education through Ecocentrism: Exercises in Environmental Justice" presents important and innovative curriculum and activities for courses in ecology or environmental studies. It is also a fruitful result of utilizing an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum and integrating questions of social justice and decolonization, drawing on resources in the city. Tilottama Tharoor's "Different Brushstrokes: Amending Colonial Cultural Legacies in Arts & Cultures Curriculum" proposes ways to decolonize the teaching of art history. Tharoor brings to light a literal elision in the visual arts canon, and provides a model of literary and artistic works that actively undermine the colonial narrative embedded in (teaching of) artwork. Tharoor proposes using literature and artwork that not only points to the various ways of understanding the world (whether through epistemologies, mythologies, or otherwise) but also dislodges the claimed centrality of western narratives about art, culture, and thus value, by tracing long cultural networks prior to European dominance.

In another attempt to dislodge the assumed and proclaimed “universality” and “neutrality” of the western canon, in their article “Dreamtime and the Common Law,” Jeremy Pilcher and Serene Richards focus on teaching common law, which is famously manifested in the British and American legal traditions and influentially globally through the impositions of the colonial period. They argue that studies of such law should not “leav[e] unexamined and disavow the assumptions on which the processes are based and by which the law develops in response to a constantly changing and uncertain world.” In so doing they propose teaching about an Indigenous land rights case in Australia which can open a space for questioning “universalizing claims of the law [that] foreclose the possibility of other modes of social organisation” and thus point towards a recognition of “relational” approaches in legal studies.

Finally, in their article “Rewriting Learning Narratives: How to Promote Student Embrace of Language Varieties,” Brett Wells and Ida Chavoshan warn that pedagogues need to be aware of the imperial origins of the “prestige languages” commonly studied in academia – typically labeled “English,” “French,” “Spanish” – which are assumed and taught as “Standards.” There are far more Englishes and Frenches available than are taught and acknowledged, and, if taught anything, students are commonly told about the “incorrectness” or inferior “dialect” status of these other language varieties. This “universalizing” process of the imperial language not only makes students – language learners in general – unprepared to handle global linguistic realities but further falsely promotes a vision of linguistic conformity when in reality “variation is, in fact, the norm in all linguistic communities.”

We live in perilous times. Increasingly rightward shifts in politics and a corresponding corporatization of education have eviscerated much of the impulse behind crafting a meaningful liberal arts curriculum. Arguably, we are at an inflection point, with the “tension between the

university's self-image as a nurturing alma mater and its role as a colonial, capitalist apparatus that polices the boundaries of critical thought...at the heart of higher education in the United States" impossible to ignore (Demar and Meyerhoff). The task of "decolonization" has been rendered ever more fraught. Refusing the universalizing and imperializing imperatives of past curricula and pedagogy, while also struggling against right-wing forces that demand erasure of non-Euro-American/white political subjecthood is a daunting prospect. In these circumstances, modest undertakings like this Special Issue and the DLAC Symposium on which it is based are essential to keep the conversation going.

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