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To cite this article: Priyamvada Gopal (2021) On Decolonisation and the University, Textual Practice, 35:6, 873-899, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2021.1929561](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1929561)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1929561>



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Published online: 28 May 2021.



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On Decolonisation and the University

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ABSTRACT

Is ‘decolonisation’ relevant at all to the university situated in Britain and other former colonial centres? Answering broadly in the affirmative, this essay situates the project of ‘decolonising’ the metropolitan university within a wider historical and intellectual context while delineating some of the key questions such an endeavour might grapple with. It argues that ‘Western’ universities can lead the increasingly vital task of historical self-understanding in the constituent polities and societies of the geopolitical ‘West’. Decolonisation is reparative of the ‘European’ itself, seeking to understand and to extend knowledge about how cultures and communities outside it have shaped ‘Europe’. Reframing discussions of decolonisation in the light of anticolonial thought – as the theory and practice of anticolonialism – gives grounding, heft and direction to them, enabling rich questions to be posed and answered towards the wider horizon of making another world possible.

KEYWORDS Decolonisation; empire; knowledge; Europe; metropole; Rhodes Must Fall; anticolonialism; universities; higher education; Frantz Fanon; Aimé Césaire; Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang; reparations

It is not often that academic exercises draw members of the British royal family into their ambit. In February 2019, the *Times* newspaper announced to its readership that Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, ‘supported a campaign by black academics and students to ‘decolonise the curriculum’ in her first apparently ‘political’ intervention since joining the royal family.¹ In fact, visiting a British university in her capacity as patron of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, not exactly a decolonised entity, Meghan had merely listened to a presentation on an initiative to confront the legacies of empire in one institution’s curriculum. The Duchess had also expressed surprise at the very small number (under 10%) of ethnic minorities in the top ranks of the British professoriate. (The figures are even worse for black professors). Blandly enough, if unusually, for a member of a manifestly dated institution, Britain’s first known royal of colour suggested that it was good to ‘open a debate’ that might result in an ‘update’ of the curriculum.

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For a British media that had already been overwhelmingly engaged in racialized criticism of the new member of the royal family, these minimal comments were reason enough to launch another round of attacks, not just on Meghan herself but also, in a repeat fusillade, on students and academics of colour for ostensibly wanting to ‘replace’ work by white men in university curricula. Just a year or so before this particular attempt at stoking racial controversy, when students in my own department at Cambridge called on it to ‘decolonise the curriculum’, the *Telegraph* newspaper ran a frontpage story accompanied by a photograph of one of our black students, claiming, falsely, that they and other students wanted white men removed from reading lists. Meghan too, the *Times* headline shrieked, was ‘tak[ing] aim at stale, pale and male universities’.

The sensationalist and sensationalising national media attention given to what might ordinarily be regarded as rather modest academic discussions on revising curricula is an index, calibrated in heat rather than light, of the relatively high-profile that the ‘decolonise’ imperative has attained in a short space of time. Tailor-made for the heightened xenophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric of the Brexit era, a new set of culture wars was here. In Britain, notoriety had already accrued to the ‘Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford’ (RMFO) campaign spearheaded by black students at Oxford University in 2016. RMFO – not solely focused on the relocation of the statue of Cecil Rhodes that mars the frontage of Oriel College – had also called for curricular reform and criticised the under-representation of black people in British academe, noting that ‘the habits of mind and ways of relating that stoked colonialism continue to hang in Oxford’s hall and infuse its institutional cultures’.² This drew condemnation, not just from the tabloids which went into characteristic overdrive, but also from more liberal quarters. Student campaigners were accused, even by academics who might have been expected to know more, of refusing to face up to history when, in fact they were calling for a more demanding engagement with history than is usually the case in relation to the British Empire. Indeed, there is a certain irony in the fact that student campaigners were accused of wanting to be ‘mollycoddled’ and ‘safe’ at the very moment they were insisting that it was time for the British mainstream to acknowledge the less flattering and more dismaying sides of the empire story – contrary to the sanitised mythologies that prevail as common sense. Who, we might ask, was insisting on being protected from the full and frequently ugly story?

Rhodes Must Fall’s Oxford version had drawn its proximate inspiration from student protests at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. These had unfolded over several months from March 2015 on, after students threw faeces on the statue of the notorious colonialist and racist, Cecil Rhodes, with (successful) calls for its removal as marking not the end but

the beginning of the long overdue process of decolonising this university. Decolonisation operates at the political, epistemic and ideological heart of the university, with reformative implications for every facet of a university's operation. It involves the decentering of Eurocentric value systems and knowledge production, the overhaul of the hierarchy of European ideologies and the reappraisal of whitewashed history.³

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign at UCT found echoes in other South African universities including Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand and Rhodes. The South African student protests were not focused on a single issue. They brought into their ambit not only questions of economic access (which found specific articulation in the parallel #FeesMustFall movement) but also a living wage for campus workers and ending both corporatisation and outsourcing.

Since 2017, partly in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford (RMFO), campaign, the question of 'decolonising the university' has also been a significant organising theme for students and staff at several university campuses in Britain, Canada and Europe – and there are variants in the United States which has a longer history of student activism around diversifying, if not quite decolonising, curricula in the humanities. These efforts have, of course, been ideal fodder for culture wars stoked by influential right-wing pundits and media outlets in Britain and beyond. As Oxford academic Simukai Chigudu notes, where RMFO and other 'decolonisation' groups were calling for a critical engagement with history and historical consciousness, 'the movement's detractors stressed the role of western values in birthing ... liberalism and progress in the modern world'.⁴ Rabidly defensive cries emerged around those figures deemed founders of 'Western values' which were predictably declared to be in peril with, to take but one instance, sections of the British media accusing students at London's School of Oriental and African Studies of wanting Plato and Kant eliminated from the curriculum because they were white. As was manifestly clear in the responses to the slogan 'Black Lives Matter', which emerged in the face of the murderous devaluing of African-American existence in the USA, claims by people of colour to equality and inclusion in Western polities are frequently equated with the total annihilation and subordination of the white majority. (Even in the UK, the counter-slogan, White Lives Matter, found prominent airing in the summer of 2020). Having inherited advantages deriving from dispossession and genocide, when faced with the challenge to decolonise, it is as though the postcolonial imaginary in the geopolitical West can envision nothing less than revenge exacted against itself in the same coin.

In somewhat startling contrast to the peevish harrumphing of conservative pundits and media organs, the 'decolonise' mantra has swiftly buzzed its way into acceptable institutional jargon, with university administrations seemingly open to putting it down as an action point on the managerial

agenda.⁵ ‘Decolonising the curriculum’ has been the keynote theme at a many seminars, conferences, and workshops both within individual disciplines and across them. At times, references to ‘decolonising’ seems so capacious as to stand in for any form of critical engagement with race and representation, or indeed, the mildest of curricular reforms. Here it is worth noting that in its twenty-first century iteration in Britain and Europe, decolonisation as a cultural and educational imperative is a belated project, the line of influence, not for the first time, running from global South northwards. In Anglophone postcolonial contexts, the question of ‘decolonising’ universities, education, and indeed, ‘the mind’, was first raised in post-independence Africa. In relation to canon and curriculum, it was discussed most famously in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s classic volume, *Decolonising the Mind*, which argued that the annihilating ‘cultural’ and ‘psychological’ consequences of colonialism had to be taken as seriously as, though not separately from, its economic, political and military ones. For Ngũgĩ, the ‘struggle to seize back ... a real control of all the means of communal self-definition’ (p.4) was profoundly tied up with recovering the use of African languages which had been, often coercively, marginalised under colonial rule in favour of metropolitan tongues like French, English and Portuguese.⁶

Explicitly Marxist in tenor, Ngũgĩ’s call to radically democratise the study of literature also recounted the curricular ‘quest for relevance’ at the University of Nairobi in Kenya during which Ngũgĩ and his colleagues issued a famous call for the ‘Abolition of the English Department’. As Mahmood Mamdani has recounted in an important essay, other such debates also took place in the context of transforming the colonial university that various African states had inherited. Energetic discussions around the role of the intellectual in post-independence African polities saw Ali Mazrui advocating for ‘a university true to its classical vision, as the home of the scholar’ with a fascination for ideas and a commitment to ‘excellence’.⁷ On the other side, stressing relevance’ to wider society, Walter Rodney deemed the university ‘the home of the public intellectual, a committed intellectual located in his or her time and place’ (p.18). In many newly-independent African nations, the setting up of ‘western-type universities’ came to represent the ‘recovery of African initiative ... with a full commitment to the Africanization of learning’, such as teaching African rather than European history.⁸ As Mamdani notes in line with Ngũgĩ, much remains to be done, not least the ‘development of an intellectual tradition in the languages of the colonised’ which had been abrogated by the advent of the European colonial presence (p.24). Although the 2015 protests in South Africa, some twenty years after the formal end of apartheid, might be considered belated, in relation to their predecessors elsewhere in Africa, they can also be seen as articulating a sharp critique of the many failures of post-apartheid decolonisation.

The D-Word

What resonances are there in these debates, though, for the former metropole, the erstwhile mother countries dotted across the map of Western Europe? Why should universities in London and Paris, Rome and Lisbon, engage with the project of ‘decolonising’? One relatively simple, though apparently still controversial, answer might be found in the fact of the slow but increasing diversification of student bodies and the emergence of a generation of students willing to ask questions about the provenance of their curricula – ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ – and demanding that the more egregious absences of non-white voices and other lacunae in knowledge be redressed.⁹ Certainly, many university managers are alert to this fact even if, for some, the project at hand might be driven less by intellectual imperative than market segment satisfaction. As things stand, ‘decolonisation’ of the curriculum in Britain, as elsewhere, has largely translated to adding some works by non-European or non-white authors to reading lists, ‘tinkering with modules and courses in some humanities and social science disciplines without the deep interrogation of what counts as knowledge in the institutional curriculum’.¹⁰ It is worth stating at the outset that diversity is, in fact, important both for its own sake and for pedagogical and intellectual reasons – a largely white or largely male curriculum is not politically incorrect, as is often believed, but intellectually unsound. Monocultures do not produce good thinking and are in themselves a lethal form of unmarked narrow identity politics. An intellectually expansive curriculum that, taken as a whole, puts different ideas, texts and traditions in conversation is pedagogically sound. ‘Diversity’ in and of itself, however, is not the same as ‘decolonisation’ and can serve to militate against it if all it generates is a glib pluralism that allows the centre, and its attendant orthodoxies, to remain unchallenged and unchanged.

Where diversity might make a certain sense, is ‘decolonisation’ relevant at all to the university situated in Britain and other former colonial centres? (The term I use to refer to these former imperial polities is ‘metropolitan’, deriving from ‘metropole’ or ‘the parent state or mother city of a colony; a mother country’).¹¹ Can the erstwhile coloniser, the metropole, decolonise? Must they? Answering broadly in the affirmative, my aim in this essay is to situate the project of ‘decolonising’ the metropolitan university within a wider historical and intellectual context while delineating some of the key questions such an endeavour might grapple with. What does it mean to try to decolonise (the metropolitan university) in the full awareness that these are institutions that have benefited historically not just from the flow of resources and profits from colony to metropole but also allied advantages; they have been able to accumulate archives, specimens, objects and information afforded to them, even now, by the power of colonial knowledge-

gathering – ethnologising, museumising, mapping, anthropologising, narrating, cataloguing, dissecting and classifying peoples and lands outside what was deemed ‘Europe’. Indeed, the Western university form became a widely established colonial institution, flourishing into the post-independence present across Asia, Africa and Latin America. The origins of most modern universities lie in colonial Europe even if precolonial institutions of higher learning have historically existed in places like Morocco, Timbuktu, Egypt and India.

Arguably, it is precisely this well-documented relationship between the institutions of knowledge production in Europe and its colonial endeavours, outlined by Edward Said among others, that makes the question of decolonisation not only relevant but vital to the metropolitan university.¹² Any institution in the business of gathering, producing and disseminating knowledge is called upon to understand how it has constituted itself as well as the materials and methodologies it works with. Precisely because of their location, ‘Western’ universities can also lead the increasingly vital task of historical self-understanding in the constituent polities and societies of the geopolitical ‘West’, itself a creation of the colonial project and its imaginative geography. As Mamdani notes, the project of comparing the European and non-European worlds, indeed the task of comparison itself, exercised many eighteenth and nineteenth century minds. If, as Hamid Dabashi, V.Y. Mudimbe and others have observed, the European imperial endeavour ‘tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs’, that was also a project of self-constitution.¹³ Neither Europe nor whiteness as we now experience them ‘existed as such in 1492’, Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes. If the ‘West was created somewhere at the beginning of the sixteenth century’ as the ‘rulers and merchants of Western Christendom’ set out ‘to conquer Europe and the rest of the world, then the category of the ‘Western’ is ‘unthinkable’ without imperialist power and plunder.¹⁴ It is in the process of going into the world ‘beyond’ that ‘Europe’ itself came into being. European colonial projects explain so much in the postcolonial world – how could they not explain Europe to itself?

‘Decolonisation’ in the European context involves, then, Europe, first, reckoning with its own self-constitution in the crucible of empire and secondly, engaging with the legacies and afterlives of colonialism both ‘within’ and ‘without’ its shifting (and colonial) borders which ebb and flow in the Mediterranean and North seas. We might also work with Dabashi’s sense here of Europe’s ‘extended shadow’ which includes those national polities – such as the United States – that affiliate, contentiously, to ‘Europe’ as a progenitor: ‘Europe is the mother of the other towering metaphor of our time called “the West”’.¹⁵ Ngũgĩ suggested with regard to ‘decolonising the mind’ in Africa that it involved ‘the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to

other selves in the universe'.¹⁶ If for him cultural decolonisation begins at home (first in Kenya, going on to wider Africa) as the colonised recentred their own undermined, but varied, cultural resources, then perhaps 'Europe's' engagement with decolonisation must begin in the other direction, i.e. with the world, as it undertakes an unflinchingly truthful engagement with the pivotal role of empire and colonialism in its own making. This would encompass not just 'Europe's' own forays into and influence upon the world, a staple of imperial history, but a sustained study of how those forays and the world itself – made 'Europe' and, certainly, the 'West'. It is to say with Fanon that 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' in material terms, its wealth made from labour, resources and profits, and to offer a reckoning¹⁷; it is also to think about how Europe's cultural and intellectual riches also cannot be sutured from its encounters with that world. Europe's understanding of itself is inseparable from its material and discursive 'worldmaking' or how it interpreted and impacted the globe. We know about 'Third World Debt'. What about the debts accrued by the 'First World' in making itself this entity? What is the relationship between the two debts? Sartre, prefacing Fanon, would elaborate, addressing his fellow Europeans – denizens of a 'fat, pale continent' – to take cognisance of the material underpinnings of their self-fashioning: 'Crammed with riches, Europe accorded the human status *de jure* to its inhabitants. With us, to be a man is to be an accomplice of colonialism, since all of us without exception have profited by colonial exploitation'.¹⁸ 'Decolonisation' in the former metropole necessarily entails a full reckoning with the economics of empire, showing how institutions, including universities, in Britain and Europe have benefited from labour, profits and commodities from the colonised world. This has begun to happen in a small way with some British universities undertaking research into how they have benefitted from slavery, for example, but even such modest endeavours have become flashpoints for controversy. A properly 'decolonising' reckoning would be far more wide-ranging and reparative.

Alongside a material gauging of debt, the university in the erstwhile metropole is well-placed to undertake a substantial portion of the intellectual and cultural work towards 'decolonising the (Western) mind'. The relevance of this task to the denizens of various former imperial polities does not need to be argued for. As CLR James trenchantly argued in relation to the British empire, the 'virulent poison' of imperial mythmaking harmed British people as much as it did colonial subjects. Even as they were ready in the post-independence era to develop new and human relations with former colonial subjects, Britons remained 'choked and stifled by the emanations from the myth'.¹⁹ One particularly damaging aspect of such narratives was the widespread sense in a culture that it was a 'giver' and a 'teacher' while others were 'takers' and 'taught'. A

consideration of metropolitan debt, material and cultural, to which I alluded above, troubles that basic mytheme instantly. One fundamental task of decolonisation then, is reparative of the 'European' itself, seeking to understand and to extend knowledge about how cultures and communities outside those which are racialized as white and European have also given and shaped 'Europe'. Much that is figured as exclusively 'European', even in the cultural sense, draws on resources and insights generated beyond its borders. The question that Ngũgĩ poses for decolonising the curriculum in African countries can be posed just as fruitfully within the metropole in terms of its self-understanding: 'What literature, what art, what culture, what values? For whom, for what?'.²⁰ Rather than wielded smugly as cultural certitudes which are frequently weaponised against those outside their borders, 'European values' or 'British values' need to become the subject of critical understanding, situated in the world.

A concomitant task for intellectual decolonisation is to take cognisance of the damage done to the cultural and epistemological resources of colonised regions through the imperial enterprise. Decolonisation in the university context should not be conceived of as a sop to ethnic minorities or a concession to pluralism but as fundamentally reparative of the institution and its constituent fields of inquiry. As several scholars have noted, it entails re-examining the definition of knowledge itself – including what and how we come to know – in very fundamental ways. 'Europe' in its colonial incarnation laid sole claim to sole epistemological authority; legitimate knowledge could only emerge from within its remit. The 'universal' was embodied by Europe leading the way, a horizon of aspiration for others whose own self-assertion could only be understood as parochial. It is, of course, a rare culture, whether European or non-European, that develops knowledge in a vacuum, independent of influence and engagement with others. Much like language, knowledge emerges through a series of intersecting ideas flowing in multiple directions. Rather than delink histories and cultures, our task is to identify these engagements and influences.

It is worth saying that decolonisation in universities, including though not only in the West, remains a difficult but nonetheless modest endeavour especially absent other more far-reaching changes in society and economy. It is not a panacea, and certainly not a substitute for material reparations, whether those be for land dispossession or slavery, nor an outlet for what is sometimes referred to, disparagingly, as 'postcolonial guilt'. It is not a soothing process and it can only always be process, an ongoing interrogation, not a finite or final state (pun intended). That is not in itself a reason to disparage or avoid the endeavour even as it is salutary to bear in mind the sheer global and historical heft of a concept like 'decolonisation'. Its meanings shift with historical context and there is no one-size-fits-all formula, no laundry list of action points for universities to table. Decolonisation in relation to

cultural and intellectual work is best posed as a series of questions to address, questions which vary significantly between contexts, say Humboldt and Cape Town Universities, or an ancient English institution with long historic ties to the British empire, and a city university with a large number of black and Asian students from working-class backgrounds. Posing the right questions for each context is itself part of the work of intellectual decolonisation.

What is 'decolonisation'?

In its most skeletal form, 'decolonisation' is the process which signifies the end of rule by a foreign power and the recuperation and/or formation of an 'independent' entity, usually a nation-state, through a process often referred to as a 'transfer of power'. Inasmuch as the second half of the twentieth century saw the substantial (though not complete) withdrawal of the last of the major European powers from colonial possessions in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, bringing to a near close the great age of European invasion and colonisation that could be said to have begun in 1492, 'decolonisation' qua transfer of power can be said to have commenced in the formal sense. (To whom was power transferred though? That question exercised the likes of Fanon and must inflect our considerations of decolonisation). In actuality, the terrain of decolonisation was a constitutively contested, even fractious one in which competing visions of post-colonial entities jostled for a hearing and for primacy. Despite the specific state-forms, vested interests and (frequently elite) actors that may have won the day in polities as distinct as India and Ghana, the contest over the meanings of decolonisation continues to play itself out variously across post-colonial (meaning, after the transfer of power) terrain whether in the form of bitter fights over borders and citizenship in former colonies, or migration and asylum in the former imperial metropole. In the case of settler colonies such as the United States, Canada or Australia, quite apart from disagreements over the meanings and parameters of decolonisation, a whole different set of questions arises as to which communities actually benefit from the formal end of colonial rule and which continue to endure it within the boundaries of formally independent sovereign nation-states.

A term which gained wider usage in the 1830s in the specific context of French military retreat from Algeria, 'decolonisation' has travelled extensively to cover a spectrum of historical processes from the military withdrawal of occupying powers to the 'transfer of power', nation-building and radical economic reforms. Picked up from colonial discourse in the mid twentieth century by the literature of *anticolonialism* – that is, of resistance to imperial rule – it came to describe, particularly in the later work of Frantz Fanon, not just the overthrow of colonialism and imperialism but a radically transformed future for denizens of both colony and metropole. Stuart Ward

suggests that this terminological appropriation entailed a 'radical reordering of its ideological content and rhetorical slant' which turned the table on European accounts of imperial decline.²¹ This is certainly true, and it is worth adding that this appropriation was not just a familiar case of 'the empire speaking back' whereby ideas taken from Europe – such as the concept of the nation-state or parliamentary democracy – were repurposed against it. In addition to launching what Ward terms a 'calculated assault' on gradualist and reformist imperial definitions of the term, Fanon and others invested upon it the experience and understanding of ongoing struggles against the combine of colonialism, capitalism and racism. Not only was decolonisation a potentially 'violent process' (as any undoing of a constitutively violent colonial order was bound to be), but it was one with an intellectual and political content that was not reducible to one set of elites handing the levers of state to another. As is evident from Fanon's own work, in this rendition of decolonisation, the targets of critique were often as much both native tyrannies and nationalist elites as they were colonial rulers, just as much indigenous capitalism as foreign firms; the collaboration between these parties was also of relevance. Wider considerations of 'decolonisation' today are obliged to keep this in mind.

Although the term 'decolonisation' found its way to policy documents and political debates in the Anglosphere by the middle of the twentieth century, both its initial and much of its subsequent theorisation has largely taken place in academic contexts, specifically in Britain and Europe, although it found a new life – and set of meanings – in the work of anticolonial writers like Fanon. As Ward notes in a valuable essay on its European spatial provenance, in the 1932 theorisation of the German Jewish economist, Moritz Bonn, then based at the London School of Economics, 'decolonisation' was a term equivalent to the counter-colonisation or 'gegenkolonisation', a concept which he had developed to describe opposition in Germany to the country's bitter and punitive post-Versailles experience. Over time Bonn would drop this term in favour of 'decolonisation,' writing accurately in 1938, despite any lack of references to ongoing anticolonial resistance movements: 'A decolonization movement is sweeping over the continents. The age of empire-breaking is following an age of empire-making'. Bonn's idea was picked up by the likes of the historian, EH Carr, who saw nationalism as the motive-force for 'an age of "decolonisation"' (Ward, pp.240, 245) understood largely as the handing over of the reigns of state from British Crown to, in almost all cases, nationalist leaders.

The sheer range of contending historical accounts of the formal end of empire as well as a vast and variegated literature of anticolonialism threatens to overwhelm 'decolonisation's' current academic currency as shorthand for reforms. For relatively privileged academic institutions located in the geopolitical West to claim to want to 'decolonise' might seem like over-reach at

best and bad faith at worst, an aspiration better abandoned for fear of self-parody. Yet, without overlooking the manifest constraints of ‘decolonise’ exercises in late capitalist societies, it is important to not repudiate the possibilities inherent in bringing questions of decolonisation to universities in the West not least because it reminds us that the West too, perhaps even especially, needs to reckon with the shaping force of the imperial centuries. The university cannot be decolonised independently of society and economy, but it can be a site where these questions are frontally addressed towards wider change, not least in habits of mind. If we take the production of knowledge seriously as a vital contributor to systemic transformation, then it would be equally perverse, indeed, harmful to leave the university out of endeavours to ‘decolonise’. It may well be possible to practice a contrapuntal engagement with ‘decolonisation’ somewhere between impossible dream and tick-box exercise.

Guilt, innocence and the matter of metaphor

In an influential and important piece, ‘Decolonization is Not a Metaphor’, Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang have offered a series of clear-sighted observations on the academic uses to which the term has been put. The essay examines what it describes as ‘moves to white innocence’ in academic discourse and articulates some important insights for discussions of ‘decolonisation’ in metropolitan academic contexts. The authors’ first point is that the language of decolonisation has been far too easily adopted into the language of education and the social sciences, and too easily conflated with projects of social justice in general ‘with no regard for how decolonization wants something other than those forms of justice’.²² The language of ‘decolonizing schools’ or ‘decolonizing thinking’, they argue, is a form of appropriation which turns it into a metaphor: ‘Decolonization is a not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools’ (p.3). The context for their argument is the settler colonial nation, specifically in North America, where, Tuck and Yang contend, talk about decolonisation turns into easy, indeed facile, moves towards reconciliation, gliding over very deep fissures. They wish to remind their reader that decolonisation is, in fact, difficult, demanding and, most importantly, material in its implications. In the context of settler colonialism, it is fundamentally about relationships to land. Settlement as colonisation ‘inters’ existing epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land, renders them ‘savage’, in favour of a structure in which ‘land is remade into property’ and human relationship to land, one of ‘ownership’. This is a process in which indigenous peoples – and their very different relationship to the land – are erased. Tuck and Yang are justifiably concerned that the language of decolonising minds is in danger of enacting a second erasure in which the

land question is elided in favour of the ‘cultivation of critical consciousness’, allowing it to ‘stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land’ (p.19). Until this question is settled, the task of developing a critical consciousness simply fails to translate into materially significant decolonising action.

Tuck and Yang’s unyielding essay is a necessary corrective to versions of decolonisation that content themselves with the discursive and the cultural. It reminds an academy too easily disposed to rely on culture, that colonisation was lethally material in aim and purview, dispossessing, extracting, enslaving and accumulating at the barrel of a gun and that its afterlife (including its continuation by other means) remains consequential in material terms. Decolonisation is rendered a meaningless piety without an extensive enactment of material reparations – indeed restitution – to people, communities, and countries that still struggle with the consequences of very material losses. In the case of settler colonialism, the repatriation of land, and not just in symbolic ways, is a *sine qua non* of decolonisation. Decolonisation is, above all, a difficult process and no academic engagement with it should be soothing or, worse, imagine itself adequately reparative. To bolster their point, Tuck and Yang underscore Fanon’s observation that ‘no phraseology can be a substitute for reality’ (p.2) and that decolonisation is a process which is profoundly unsettling (pun intended). In educational contexts where there is an unmistakably redemptive aspiration to efforts around diversifying the curriculum or anti-racist initiatives, theirs is a salutary reminder that decolonisation cannot take place just in the classroom, and that a singular focus on ‘decolonising the mind’ runs the risk of standing in for decolonisation itself.

A revolutionary anticolonial thinker, Fanon – to whose authority Tuck and Yang repeatedly appeal – was clear that decolonisation required the complete annihilation of the colonial order. This seems to be the reason Tuck and Yang feel able to enlist him to the cause of an ‘ethic of incommensurability’ which they equate to ‘an acknowledgement that decolonization will require a change in the order of the world’ (p.31). It is, however, a dubious interpretation of Fanon who indeed spoke clearly of decolonisation as revolutionary reordering but not, in the end, of incommensurability, being far too invested in dialectics to have done so. In a dialectical frame, struggles for human and civil rights cannot be *conflated* with decolonisation but that does not make them *incommensurable*. Tuck’s and Yang’s definition of anticolonial critique as ‘[celebrating] empowered postcolonial subjects who seize denied privileges from the metropole’ (p.19) is misleading. For Fanon, it is, in fact, in the context of settler-colonialism that ‘the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler... of substituting himself for the settler’. The use of the loaded word ‘privileges’ to describe diverse anticolonial aspirations is odd, given Tuck’s and Yang’s own

acknowledgement of 'stolen resources' (when arguing that Asian migrants to former settler colonies are 'following the trail' of that which has been stolen from the colonies). The anticolonial project manifests in the present, they argue somewhat tendentiously, in 'the postcolonial pursuit of resources' which is a 'fundamentally anthropocentric model' since 'land, water, air, animals, and plants are never able to become postcolonial; they remain objects to be exploited by the empowered postcolonial subject' (p.19). We are not told which anti- or post-colonial projects might be quite so simplistically formulated; the critique of bourgeois nationalism-as-capitalism (and as seeking simply to take over colonial advantages) is as old as anticolonialism itself. Indeed, even M.K. Gandhi's highly canonical brand of anticolonial nationalism repudiated both the extraction of resources in the name of modernity and the replacement of white tyranny by brown tyranny. Equally, Fanon's vision of decolonisation was ineluctably modernist, even developmentalist, envisioning the democratic and public command of resources towards industrialisation. The demand for equal rights by migrants (and presumably, descendants of slaves) in white settler societies is certainly at risk of an 'investment in settler colonialism' (p.18) but it can hardly stand in for the entirety of anticolonialism. It is also improbable that ethnic minorities and migrants in settler societies forswearing their right to equality would further the cause of decolonisation in any way. Those descended from African slaves in North American settler colonies also experience high levels of disenfranchisement in white-majority settler societies; they are as much legatee-victims of foundational crimes in these national polities as those descended from indigenous inhabitants.

Beyond the salutary act of reminding immigrants of colour to white settler societies that uncritical discourses of ethnic minority empowerment participate willy-nilly in the original settler act of dispossession, Tuck and Yang are culpable of what they themselves call 'a vague equating of colonialisms' (p.19). This militates against their own correct observation that in discussing colonialism, the particularities of context matter. Their understanding of the challenges posed by decolonisation is most acute in relation to the North American context of white settler colonies which are also major immigrant destinations; it falters when taken as a generalisable formula for decolonisation. In insisting that 'an anticolonial critique is not the same as a decolonising framework', Tuck and Yang also elide vast swathes of the history and theory of decolonisation globally which are illegible without an understanding of, precisely, anticolonialism. Certainly, for Fanon, anticolonialism and decolonisation were profoundly connected. If decolonisation is to be thought through in all its particularities, as Tuck and Yang rightly insist, then it is vital not to generalise either decolonisation or anticolonialism and not to overlook the generative relationship between the two. Far from valorising incommensurability, many great theorists of decolonisation

have called, precisely, for a making commensurable of human lives globally, 'a humanism made to the measure of the world', in Aimé Césaire's resonant phrase. We shall return to this point.

Whatever happened to anticolonialism?

Contra Tuck and Yang, a serious engagement with 'decolonisation' today requires us precisely to think through the resonances of *anticolonialism*, the conceptual and historical, though not etymological, source of projects of decolonisation. Between colonialism and decolonisation, comes the anticolonial. If colonialism might be broadly understood – in all its variety – as a project of expansionist racialised capitalism (there is no context to which this definition would not be applicable in some way) – then anticolonialism emerges as the different kinds of resistance to this project. The forms such resistance took naturally varied according to historical exigencies and they cannot be contained under the rubric of movements for national independence or sovereignty. Nationalism may have drawn on the energies released by anticolonialism but these were never restricted to nationalism. Anticolonial activity ranged from non-violent resistance to armed struggle, and from strikes, sabotage, boycotts, demonstrations and civil disobedience to pitched battles, guerrilla warfare, military mutinies and bloody insurrections. In engaging with decolonisation today, we do not necessarily seek to replicate or imitate such anticolonial moments or imagine the imperatives of our various times and places to be identical to those, even as many remain strikingly relevant. Instead, we develop an understanding of what was at stake in the colonial encounter, what made it so globally consequential, and what kinds of aspirations those who resisted empire had. A cursory glance at the kinds of issues that preoccupied anticolonial movements gives us a sense of their resonances for the present: from land claims and land use to working conditions, labour rights, trading terms, market regulation, agricultural policies, anti-racism, educational practices, disarmament, women's rights, resource management and ecological protections. 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.

Anticolonialism also has a metropolitan life and history which is often forgotten. I have suggested elsewhere that the many great movements of resistance across the colonial centuries and across geographical contexts, had a determinate effect on British dissident thought and progressive

campaigning within Britain on the question of colonialism from the nineteenth century on.²³ Campaigners for ending British rule in the colonies repeatedly drew on anticolonial ideas in order to make their case, frequently arguing that the ordinary people of Britain and the colonised had much in common, including exploitation at the hands of those who profited from empire. In discussions of decolonisation in the British or even the Western university more generally, there may be something to be gleaned from earlier instances of a process I termed ‘reverse tutelage’ in which it was white metropolitan figures who found themselves learning from rebellion and insurgency in the colonies and from black and Asian anticolonial thinkers. Decolonisation in Western academe might broadly be conceived of as a process of learning from anticolonialism – and the contexts in which it emerged – just as previous generations of dissidents in metropolitan contexts undertook to do in developing their own engagements with empire. Indeed, it might be argued that no call to ‘decolonise’ can really be fleshed out meaningfully without reference to the great movements of resistance, rebellion and opposition to empire which played a key role in initiating decolonisation (even if a substantial chunk of imperial history has been invested in minimising this or denying it to be the case).

Decolonisation is not a metaphor for social justice, but social justice is integral to decolonisation. This is of particular importance when we reflect not only on the persistence of the colonial presence in settler colonies but also the ‘recolonisation’ of postcolonial nations by native tyrannies, both old and new, as well as global capitalism, a possibility anticipated by Fanon, among others. Indeed, ‘social justice’ was very much the stuff of common cause forged by dissidents and oppositional figures across racial and geographical lines. This is not to say that sovereignty and material questions of land possession and restitution are not relevant or must be rendered purely symbolic but that they are precisely *not* de facto incommensurate with other forms of social justice. Questions of reparations for slavery – as posed by Caricom, the Caribbean Reparations Commission, for instance – have been rightly tied up to broader questions of redistributive social justice and a reparative education which can address both illiteracy as well as cultural losses.²⁴ There is also a clear acknowledgement here that the genocidal cleansing of indigenous people, and a call for survivors’ material conditions, including landlessness, must be addressed.

Thought about as the inheritor of a rich legacy of anticolonial thought and action, decolonisation emerges as both multifaceted and historically specific, inflected for context and particularity, while necessarily universal in its aspirations to equality. The land question was, of course, central to anticolonial struggles in settler colonies from South Africa and New Zealand to East Africa and North America. So too were workers’ rights – many anticolonial struggles took the form of labour unrest, such as

those which famously rocked the West Indies in the 1930s and India in the 1920s. Jamaica's 'Morant Bay Rebellion' in 1865 was about both land use and the right to withdraw black labour from plantation economies, indeed to provide a whole new vision of political economy. Self-reliance was key both to that rebellion and to the Swadeshi movement in British India in the early 1900s; in later years, 'self-determination' would become a central plank of anticolonial struggles, drawing on both Vladimir Lenin's and Woodrow Wilson's versions of the idea. Anti-racism and claims to equality across racial and religious lines was manifest in much anticolonial resistance as was, frequently, the right to cultural and religious freedoms and other civil liberties. Decolonisation, while not a metaphor, can certainly be a metonym, situated at the heart of and signifying a range of interlinked emancipatory projects that are, in fact, commensurable without flattening. Decolonisation is meaningless without a set of principles – anticolonialism – that enables it to emerge as a practice that is sensitive to the present and to context while yet steeped in historical awareness. Where it might make the land question central in Canada, the United States, Australia and Israel-Palestine, for instance, it would foreground questions of resource extraction (past and ongoing) in swathes of Africa and the exploitation of sweated labour a focal point in relation to, say, Bangladesh, Vietnam or Haiti. It cannot be emphasised enough that decolonisation is a fundamentally material process, requiring radical structural changes, including wide-ranging economic redistribution, not just between nation-states but within them.

The anticolonial university?

Where then does so modest an entity as the university, especially in the former metropole, enter this daunting picture? Can it do more than tinker with its curriculum and broaden its hiring practices? Caught up in the structures of late capitalism, increasingly dependent in its public as well as private versions, on corporate funding and private philanthropy, how can the contemporary university hope to engage with anything resembling 'decolonisation'? Even where there is a degree of (declining) state funding, as in Britain, the imperatives of job 'markets' run by corporate entities and the related concerns of students taking on lifelong debt burdens mean that the university cannot be insulated from the workings of capitalism. Links between universities and corporations have become familiar across the industrialised world, and these also put pressure on research agendas even as the higher education sector becomes increasingly vulnerable to privatisation. Without averting our gaze from these realities, we could note with Chandra Talpade Mohanty that at least in the present, universities are still that 'contradictory space where knowledges are colonized but also contested'.²⁵ Across the

globe, many still function as ‘one of the few remaining spaces in a rapidly privatized world that offers some semblance of a public area for dialogue, engagement, and visioning of democracy and justice’. In Britain and beyond, universities have been sites for youth organising not just on issues to do with democratic access to higher education (including public funding and the abolition of fees) but also for racial and climate justice, and against militarism. Two recent domestic successes after protracted student campaigns in Britain include ending the outsourcing of cleaner contracts at the University of London and ensuring divestment from fossil fuels at the University of Cambridge. Such work is essential to the project of decolonisation and suggests that there is still something to be said for universities as sites where intellectual and transformative work can intersect.

What if we conceptualised an *anticolonial* university that pushed towards the horizon of decolonisation rather than a ‘decolonised’ one? Anticolonialism may be defined in this specific context of intellectual labour and knowledge generation as the *practice* of thought and action towards the goals of decolonisation. With the prefix signifying the senses of ‘disputing’ and ‘contradicting’ colonialism, ‘anti’-colonial practice invokes a critical and radical spirit of enquiry and action rather than a singular state to be feasibly arrived at within the modest – and inevitably compromised – parameters of the university. Anticolonialism harnesses oppositional and interrogative energies, not only enabling contestations and challenges but also the imagining and elaboration of alternatives that are not ‘returns’ to prior states. For the present, the university, even in former colonial centres, remains a site where such contestations and re-visioning are not only possible, but given depth and heft through research, teaching and learning. From the late fifteenth-century onwards, the anticolonial spirit animated struggles against colonialism, racial capitalism and endemic oppressions across Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. It also shaped dissent, opposition and criticism on imperial questions within imperial centres in Britain and Europe. The anticolonial university makes no claims to being a singular site of decolonisation and does not treat education as a metaphor for a process of much greater reach and heft. Rather, it commits to recognising the centrality of European colonialism in shaping the globe as we experience it today; to assessing its consequences for communities and cultures; to interrogating and dismantling harmful mythologies and falsehoods on which the colonial project relied as well as those that underpin its afterlife today; and to repairing the great gaps in our knowledge and understanding that have emerged consequently. This is work that is necessarily critical and interrogative while also, as such, *reparative*, both in the sense of fleshing out that which is partial, and of transforming harmful conditions. The structures of the university itself, of course, are not exempt from criticism, repair and transformation.

The antinomies of reparation

What does decolonisation want? In his classic polemic, *Discourse on Colonialism*, originally published in the French, Aimé Césaire's definition of a paradigmatic colonialism invokes 'societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out'.²⁶ Césaire's poignant emphasis on 'possibilities' is useful for our engagement with decolonisation where one driving question is this: what cultural and social potential might have come to fruition had the European empires not so decisively and brutally changed the shape of the world into what it is today? What other futures might have emerged? These questions are not about a recuperation of lost worlds (in any case impossible), but speak to other trajectories, ways of existing and relating that have been either mutilated or entirely obscured by the triumphalism of racialized capitalism, colonialism's primary purpose and most entrenched legacy. This task of reconstructing lost trajectories – and recovering valuable ideas, insights, and knowledge – is one that anticolonial inquiry in the university is well-suited to undertaking. Since this must be a critical process that eschews the romanticisation familiar from colonial discourse, how do we hold in the same frame, Césaire's 'systematic defense of the non-European civilizations', and his insistence that there is no call here for 'a *return* of any kind'?

They were communal societies, never societies of the many for the few.

They were societies that were not only ante-capitalist, as has been said, but also *anti-capitalist*.

They were democratic societies, always.

They were cooperative societies, fraternal societies. (p.44)

Despite his protestations – he insists he is no 'prophet of the return to the pre-European past' – we are entitled to ask whether Césaire is culpable of positing a lost utopia against all the evidence of history. Why does he dare his reader to take him hostage to patently unprovable, indeed, disprovable, assertions? In part he is positing this excess against the mighty falsehoods of colonialism; against the despoliation, ruination, and expropriation of that which deems itself 'civilization', Césaire sets up the precolonial as an *imaginative* counterweight to the colonial, speculating on the potential of societies before they were colonised, proletarianised and 'thingified'. Societies before colonialism are, by definition, societies before *capitalism* and in that capacity, contain resources for alternatives: the ante carries within it the potential of the *anti*.

That Césaire is not suggesting a simple-minded 'recuperation' of a romanticised past is evident from two crucial points that I think we need to pay

particular attention to in our own considerations of what decolonising might mean today. Far from being an antidote to precolonial ills, colonialism sets up a system of abuses and, moreover, in doing so, takes the help of those who are already oppressors in pre-colonial societies: 'colonialist Europe has grafted modern abuse onto ancient injustice, hateful racism onto old inequality' (p.45). The 'old tyrants', Césaire notes damningly, got on very well with the new ones', having set up between them a process which was fundamental to colonialism, 'a circuit of mutual services and complicity'. This collaboration, of course, was also at the predicted heart of what came to be called neo-colonialism and it is explanatory of many present-day geopolitical realities. Decolonisation now, as then, necessarily involves identifying these complicities and putting pressure on old tyrannies in postcolonial vessels covering themselves in the garb of nationalism, indigeneity and decolonisation. To give one salient example: Hindu ethnonationalism in present-day India, or 'Hindutva', routinely presents itself as a 'decolonial' force, returning India to an idyllic Hindu state before colonial disruption while acting as colonial force upon racialised others from Muslims and Dalits to adivasis (first peoples) and Kashmiris. Decolonising requires that we remain vigilant about its misuse as an alibi for renewed subjugation. Césaire notes correctly that is not the anticolonialist who desires a simple return to a precolonial past, but colonialism itself which 'has actually tended to prolong artificially the survival of local pasts in their most pernicious aspects'. This means a 'return' to any state of what existed before colonialism, stripping away the colonial to achieve a recuperation of the precolonial (or even the 'decolonial') and to segregate cultures and knowledges is a self-defeating project.

It is also worth interrogating the temptation to advocate for a seemingly expansive but potentially misleading model of equal and separate 'alternative' or 'plural' knowledges. The critic and translator, A.K Ramanujan makes this point in a different context:

No culture is immune to other cultures. No idea, invention, or technological device, whether in art, society, or science, is made by a single person or produced by a single sealed-off culture. The printing press, gunpowder, the alphabet, not to speak of stories or poems or languages themselves - not one of these is the unaided invention or property of a single person or culture, though we often choose to think so. Each is a result of long and continuous interplays, cross-cultural exchanges and transformations.²⁷

Where the global influence of the West in knowledge production is widely taken as given, Ramanujan's comments point to the need to acknowledge reverse influence from 'so-called non-Western regions and their cultures'. As Edward Said noted trenchantly, what is most important about cultures is 'not their essence or purity, but their combinations and diversity, their

countercurrents, the way they have had of conducting a compelling dialogue with other civilizations'.²⁸ Part of the work of decolonisation is to excavate these lines of influence and dialogue, often obscured by cultural triumphalism or exceptionalism. This would mean, for instance, not repudiating all ideas marked as 'European' or even 'Enlightenment' but treating them as 'texts that need a new deciphering within a much wider context than has hitherto been given them' (p.55). Is all that is claimed for Europe really strictly 'European'? Should we not interrogate this claim of ownership itself? Césaire writes that 'the great good fortune of Europe was to have been a crossroads' and therefore 'the receptacle of all philosophies, the meeting place of all sentiments'. What do they know of Europe, then, who only Europe know?

The insight that 'Europe cannot be Europe without non-Europe' (Dabashi, p. 26) has particular resonances for the primary task of the university in the metropole which is the expansion and dissemination of knowledge. Intellectual decolonisation in this context requires at least four preliminary undertakings:

- (a) Acknowledging that much of what we take for granted – methodologies, practices, disciplines – in university contexts in the West and beyond are still structured by the imperatives of the European imperial enterprise (also racial capitalism) and its attendant activities of extraction and ownership. The university was not, and is not, separable from endeavours of 'discovery' and control.
- (b) Acknowledging the loss, mutilation and marginalisation of bodies of knowledge and ideas as 'Europe' became (and, in many ways, remains) the primary arbiter of what was worth knowing and how it is known.
- (c) Excavating and recognising lines of influence that run from 'non-Europe' to 'Europe'. This includes undoing what Trouillot calls 'bundles of silences' such that the history of the West is 'retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world'.
- (d) Opening pathways to dialogue – and mutually transformative engagement – between different cultures, traditions, and approaches to knowledge, bearing in mind structural disadvantages and historic power differentials. We might even call this process 'relinking'.

In relation to the last point and in the face of the temptation to simply pluralise as a 'decolonial' endeavour, it is worth saying, along with both Fanon and Césaire, that 'exchange is oxygen' and that systems and civilisations which withdraw into themselves atrophy. Universities cannot decolonise by just hosting a relativised series of culturally specific, separate and potentially

incommensurable ‘knowledge systems’ or epistemes. To do so is easy but it is to overlook fundamentally porous nature of knowledge which everywhere relies on the flow of ideas and insights. For Fanon, the violence of colonisation arrested the natural dynamic of cultures which retreated into custom – ‘a deterioration of culture’ rather than what Said called ‘a continuous process of self-understanding and self-realization’ (p.26).

While the focus remains on the consequential afterlife of various European imperial projects given the continuing world-making force of their twin legacies of capitalism and racism, discussions of decolonisation cannot exclude the question of other legacies and structures of oppression. Césaire, as we have already seen, is clear on the ways in which European colonisers collaborated with domestic tyrants. Here it is worth noting that the use of epistemology and authority as a weapon of subjugation is not restricted to Europe’s colonial project: in the case of India, for instance, Brahminism’s domination was based on claims to epistemic authority, a fact which colonial rule made use of rather than resorting to ‘epistemicide’. Feudalism and the structures of regional and community power also did not disappear entirely with the advent of either colonialism or modernity but mutated to take account of and work with the new dispensations – French, Portuguese, and British colonialism on the subcontinent. This means that decolonisation cannot be simply presented as a cultural face-off between two nations or civilisations but has to, precisely, encompass wider social transformation in both former colony and metropole.

This necessity is addressed explicitly in Fanon’s powerful and controversial essay, ‘Concerning Violence’, often read a principally a justification for the use of violence in anticolonial struggles. In fact, this first essay in his posthumously published collection, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is an unsparing exposition of the relationship between anticolonialism and decolonisation, and the multiple compromises and betrayals that inhere in both colonial and nationalist visions of what happens after ‘independence’, or the period when decolonisation is meant to take place. Unfulfilled merely by ‘the rise of a new nation’, decolonisation ought to entail ‘a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up’.²⁹ Since it is ‘a complete calling into question of the colonial system’, all those caught up in its purview, whether native or settler, coloniser or colonised, are fundamentally transformed: ‘Decolonization is the creation of new men’ (pp.36-7). This is important because Fanon identifies incommensurability, as a feature of the *colonial* condition rather than the postcolonial one. It is under colonialism that the zone of the native is sharply separated from that of the settler, ‘opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity’, following the ‘principle of reciprocal exclusivity’.

For all that he is severely uncompromising about the revolutionary anticolonial imperative to turn the colonial world upside down, Fanon was always

attuned to tensions and counterpoints, and to the living necessity of the dialectical. The complete but unfortunate repudiation of anything associated with Europe (a temptation in certain variants of decolonisation) is explained by the Manicheanism that colonialism itself puts into place.

The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity ... On the logical plain, the Manicheism of the settler produces a Manicheanism of the native. (p.61)

Therefore, in the period of decolonisation the very mention of Western culture elicits a violently aversive reaction as 'the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up' (p.43): 'The native replies to the living lie of the colonial situation by an equal falsehood' (p.50). And so, even as he decries the extent to which the native intellectual is in hock to Western cultural supremacism, Fanon points to a contrapuntal danger, 'that of becoming the uncritical mouthpiece of the masses; he becomes a kind of yes-man who nods assent at every word coming from the people, which he interprets as considered judgements' (p.49). Decolonisation is the annihilation of colonialism but it cannot be an uncritical embrace of all that is 'native'; indeed both the 'settler' and the 'native' are subject categories that need to be dismantled.

Fanon's severe critique of the contortions of native intellectuals – a running theme through *The Wretched of the Earth* – and their complicity in the cosy arrangements made around a 'green baize table' whereby the coloniser withdraws without ceding much – is a critique that is worth bearing in mind in the context of academia's interpretation of 'decolonisation'. At the same time, a complete refusal to engage with other cultures and influences, even the erstwhile coloniser's, is, ironically, a consequence of colonialism itself:

The appearance of the settler has meant in the terms of syncretism the death of the aboriginal society, cultural lethargy, and the petrification of individuals ... By its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces and separates them. (pp.93-4)

In another essay, 'Medicine and Colonialism', included in *A Dying Colonialism*, the France-trained medic would be more explicit about the 'tragic lie' imposed by the colonial situation, primarily the asphyxiation of lines of contact and communication that allow cultures to engage dialectically.³⁰ In the context of colonisation, the colonised are reluctant to 'qualify opposition' to the European presence because of the Manichean nature of the colonial condition, and the way in which every qualification is used to justify and perpetuate colonialism. The rejection of Europe – and modernity in its entirety because of its association with the Europe – therefore becomes absolute in

ways that rebound harmfully on the native as, in an instance close to Fanon's heart, with the absolute rejection of 'Western' medicine because of the ways in which it is tied up with colonial oppression. It is only after colonialism ends, that cultural contact and reciprocal learning can take place as it should, not as the 'successful integration' sought by the coloniser, but as a vital social dynamic. It is perhaps in this spirit that Fanon's sometimes convoluted and digressive reflections on decolonisation in 'Concerning Violence' end not on a note of incommensurability but reparation and reconstitution. It is no less radical in envisioning and urging engagement:

The fundamental duel which seemed to be that between colonialism and anticolonialism, and indeed between capitalism and socialism, is already losing some of its importance. What counts today, the question which is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question, or be shaken to pieces by it. (p.98)

Decolonisation, the act of 'rehabilitating' the world will be carried out 'with the indispensable help of the European peoples' (p.106).

A difficult practice

Thinking through the possibility (or otherwise) of 'decolonisation' in the metropolitan university involves a set of challenges. The first is to think about the constitution of 'Europe' in the crucible of its imperial projects which necessarily involves reckoning with the ways in which the 'well-being and the progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians, and the yellow races' (Fanon, p.96). The second is to undertake an intellectual audit of what is often presented as 'European' or 'Western' knowledge and to assess the multiple lines of influence in its making. A related task is to assess what valuable insights and perspectives have been occluded or marginalised by dominant disciplinary formations in universities. Taking cognisance of obscured or overlooked insights that emerge from a variety of sites, decolonisation is not a matter of relativising these alongside received knowledge but of putting them in dialogue. The substantial challenge here is to identify and undo the ways in which forms of knowledge have been undermined, marginalised, dismissed or appropriated without segregating epistemological resources into a series of alternatives in the name of epistemic diversity. As Fanon notes, colonialism is structurally 'separatist and regionalist', reinforcing borders. In academic terms, the task is to undo these just as much as undoing political ones is part of the wider project of decolonisation. It is equally necessary to rescue that which has been levelled or rendered invisible by the homogenising sweep of the colonial without entrenching the radical 'othering' that was also constitutive of colonial typologies.

While 'Europe' must be interrogated very fully as part of the project of decolonisation, it is worth being attentive to the dangers of 'time flattening', to use Frederick Cooper's term, whereby 'Europe' itself is homogenised and temporally levelled, shorn of tensions and contradictions.³¹ Decolonisation also calls for attention to the role of cultural and racial minorities in transforming Europe through their contestations of race and empire. As Cooper also notes, liberal ideas associated with whiteness and Europe 'reflected the labors not only of a Frederick Douglass but of unnamed ex-slaves, independent laborers, and colonized peasants who revealed the limits of colonial power and defined alternative modes of living and working in the crevices of authority' (p.80). The enslaved and the colonised, like the working-classes, were not just victims but also agents in the making of another contradictory formation – modernity. Decolonisation cannot be reduced, therefore, to 'delinking' from modernity by flattening it into pure oppression.³² That is too easy, an airy conceptual gesture that bears little relevance to the lived experience of millions who experience modernity in conflicting and conflicted ways.

'Ideas run, like rivers, from the south to the north and are transformed into tributaries in major waves of thought', writes Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui.³³ Cusicanqui proposes, instead of a 'geopolitics of knowledge', a 'political economy of knowledge', one which takes into account the economic and material mechanisms behind discourses, which render Western, North American universities in particular, able to certify and hierarchise intellectual authority while appropriating and repackaging ideas sourced from the erstwhile periphery. This includes discourses of decolonisation which are selectively re-presented, 'regurgitated and jumbled' as part of a 'limited and illusory discussion regarding modernity and decolonization' (p.104). While her target is specifically the 'decolonial' school of thought now most associated with Walter Dignolo and his associates, Cusicanqui's wider point speaks to the need for a profound rehaul of intellectual hierarchies in which geopolitical global South and West, emerge as interlocutors in the production knowledge and 'have discussions as equals'. Rather than incommensurability, Cusicanqui envisions for mestizos and Indians in Bolivia 'legitimate modes of coexistence based in reciprocity, redistribution, and authority as a service' (p.106). Her vision for decolonisation in Bolivia allows for both drawing on existing cultural resources *and* admitting 'new forms of community and mixed identities or *ch'ixi*'; it looks forward to 'a creative dialogue in a process of exchanging knowledges, aesthetics, and ethics'. In this scenario, where non-colonizing South-South dialogues are also important, modernity is not handed over to the West but emerges organically from 'motley relations and complex and mixed languages' (p.107).

This horizon of decolonisation requires the hard work of examining both the moment and the afterlife of empire, unflinchingly, both in former colony

and metropole. It is to return to history, ‘so that we understand what exactly happened, why it happened, and who we are’.³⁴ To me this seemingly unexceptional, but challenging, observation, from Edward Said, is at the heart of ‘decolonisation’ as critical practice. Said speaks of a *return*, at once real and metaphorical. In part he is speaking, of course, of the exile’s own physical journey to a point of origin, to literally lost, that is, expropriated, land. That is not metaphorical. But a return to history is also to take to understand our own historical formation. Decolonisation – whether in former colonies or in the erstwhile metropole – requires that understanding. It is also a difficult and demanding practice, as Jamaica Kincaid suggests:

And might not knowing why they are the way they are, why they do the things they do, why they live the way they live, why the things happened to them happened, lead these people to a different relationship with the world, a more demanding relationship ... ?³⁵

A more demanding relationship with history and with the world. The metropolitan university could do worse than adopt this slogan if, and as, it sets out to decolonise.

Notes

1. Sian Griffiths, “‘Oh, my God’—Meghan Takes Aim at Pale, Male and Stale Universities’, *Sunday Times*, February 17, 2019. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/oh-my-god-meghan-takes-aim-at-male-pale-and-stale-universities-p8znzs5gl>.
2. ‘Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford Founding Statement’, in Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall: the Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: Zed Books, 2018), p. 4.
3. Emma Whitford, ‘Rhodes Must Fall’, *Inside Higher Ed*, September 20, 2018. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/09/20/editors-discuss-new-book-rhodes-must-fall-movement-oxford>.
4. Simukai Chigudu, ‘Codrington Conference’: ‘What is to be Done?’ in *Rhodes Must Fall: the Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, p. 57.
5. Akwugo Emejelu ‘Decolonising SOAS: Another University is Possible’, *Rhodes Must Fall: : the Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, p.170.
6. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1981), p. 4.
7. Mahmood Mamdani, ‘Decolonising Universities’, in Jonathan D. Jansen (ed.), *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), p.18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.18772/22019083351>
8. E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, ‘Reintroducing the ‘People Without History’: African Historiographies,’ in Stephen Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial Histories Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 394.
9. This is the title of a National Union of Students campaign in Britain demanding curricular diversity. A similar campaign called *Fill in the Blanks*, asking for the teaching of British empire history to be made compulsory has been launched by school students.

10. Jonathan D. Jansen, 'Introduction and Overview: Making Sense of Decolonisation in Universities', in *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*, p.4.
11. Oxford English Dictionary. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117701>.
12. Most famously in Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
13. Mudimbe cited in Hamid Dabashi, *Europe and its Shadows: Coloniality after Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), p.188.
14. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 74.
15. Dabashi, *Europe and its Shadows*, p.11.
16. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'The Quest for Relevance', in *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, p.87.
17. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), p.102.
18. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), p. 25.
19. CLR James, *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), p 35.
20. Ngūgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, p. 106.
21. Stuart Ward, 'The European Provenance of Decolonization', *Past & Present*, 230.1 (February 2016), p.253. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtv044>.
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24. The Caricom Reparations Commission, 'Ten-Point Reparation Plan'. <https://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan/>
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26. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review/NYU Press, 2001).
27. A.K. Ramanujan, 'Some Thoughts on "Non-Western" Classics, with Indian Examples,' *World Literature Today*, 68.2 (Spring, 1994), p. 331.
28. Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP), pp. 27–28.
29. Frantz Fanon, 'Concerning Violence', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 35.
30. Frantz Fanon, 'Medicine and Colonialism', in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965).
31. Frederick Cooper, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History', in Howe (ed.), *New Imperial Histories Reader*, p. 79.
32. See, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo 'DELINKING: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality,' *Cultural Studies*, 21.2–3 (2007), pp. 449–514.
33. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 'Ch'ixinakaz utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization', *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Winter 2012).
34. 'Edward Said talks to Jacqueline Rose', in Paul A. Bové (ed.), *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 22.

35. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998), p. 56.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).