

# Decolonizing the Curriculum and the University

A Panel Discussion with Rolando Vasquez, Loyal Ftouni and Toni Pape, 31 March 2021

**aishwarya kumar**

*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

**AISHWARYA KUMAR:** Let us start with an overarching question. What does Decolonizing the University in the Dutch context mean to you?

**ROLANDO VASQUEZ:** Well, it is a long question. 13 years ago, we started the Decolonial Summer School<sup>1</sup> in Middelburg with Professor Walter Mignolo. That has been an important place for enacting the decolonization of the university, because we put into practice different pedagogies, a different curriculum, and brought together different people that were both teaching and learning at the university. We focused in particular on the connection to the local history of Middelburg and the interconnected colonial history of the Netherlands, such as the forgotten history of Dutch colonialism and slavery. That is one of the important sources for me, personally. But as the Decolonial Summer School was developing, so were the decolonial student movements at the University of Amsterdam. Some of these students came to the conference organized in Middleburg on the topic. At the time of the occupation of the Maagdenhuis, the movements in Amsterdam, particularly the University of Colour<sup>2</sup>, began advocating for more concrete changes. They proposed a diversity commission to substantiate the need to decolonize the university. This enabled the formation of the Diversity Committee with prof. dr. Gloria Wekker as its chair, and dr. Marieke Sloodman, dr. Rosalba Icaza, prof. dr. Hans Jansen, and myself. Together we wrote the *Let's Do Diversity* report<sup>3</sup>, which combined the intersectional approach of Black feminism that prof. dr. Wekker works with, with decoloniality as a methodology to produce a new framework of research. This combination to study diversity at a Western university was very effective. The report is a unique document that has given a more nuanced and complex understanding of the different levels of action needed to decolonize the university.

The first level is the 'what': what is the university teaching and researching? This pertains to the question of changing the curriculum. It examines the activist question: why is our curriculum white? It is a question that confronts us with the monoculture and the erasures that the university

produces. The second level is the ‘who’: who is at university and in which capacities? How do universities reproduce colonial hierarchies: white males are at the top, and other people—people of color, across gender, across race, across class—are in service in lower positions. This hierarchy has been normalized and naturalized as ‘the order of things’. We need to address who becomes a student at the university. In the case of the University of Amsterdam, there is a very big discrepancy between the diversity of youth in the city and the university that is not diverse at all. But also we need to address inclusivity in terms of institutional organization. The higher you move up in the hierarchy, the whiter and more masculine it becomes, a pattern that reproduces colonial structures of society. The third question, or level of intervention, after the ‘what’ and the ‘who’, is the ‘how’. We argued that the university needs to change the way it *operates*; its practices, its methodologies of research, and methodologies of teaching. This is because you can have a non-white curriculum, and even a non-white teacher, and still have methodologies that reproduce colonial violence, through epistemic coloniality, aesthetic coloniality. We need to also to transform the way things are practiced at the university.

In this way, the report combined consciousness of race and gender in its intersectional approach. We employed participatory methodologies to find silenced voices in the universities, with the decolonial awareness of the epistemic and aesthetic power that keep the colonial divides in place. With this framework, we worked towards very concrete proposals for transforming the university that have not been enacted yet. Well, it is already a great accomplishment to see that they are published and that they keep on being a reference point for student movements, and for the transformation of other institutions.

**AK:** Indeed. An intersectional approach to the work is something that is also touched upon by Toni and Layal in their own research. Could the two of you share how it unfolded for you?

**LAYAL FTOUNI:** The broader project of decolonization, as a movement of dismantling the dominant structures of colonialism and imperialism that persevere today, demands that we address the epistemological and institutional forms of coloniality that persist in the very infrastructures of the university. In the Netherlands, the decolonial impetus that propelled student activism on campus has been invaluable to rethinking questions of access to the university and the pedagogical and curricular formations of disciplines—the University of Color at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), amongst others, for example, brought these issues to the fore, and the Diversity Commission Report that Rolando mentioned was one of the outcomes of student pressures to advocate for institutional change around these questions. What I found very promising in this report is how it proposed a framework that can reshape the university at the

infrastructural level, in terms of modes of governance, representational level (who directs, who teaches, who is the student body) as well the epistemic level (what and how we teach, as well as the politics of knowledge production). The risk, however, as happened in this case, is that the neoliberal machinery is capable of containing such initiatives in its own image as a progressive educational space without initiating and maintaining an infrastructure of institutional accountability for the execution of such frameworks. And this is not exclusive to UvA, but is an issue to contend with as part and parcel of the neoliberal university and its capacity to turn such demands into a simulacrum, that is, to an image of itself as a progressive institution.

Within Utrecht University, there's a lot of work to be done, obviously. And I think this panel has been initiated precisely because of that. But the two points I want to make are not exclusive to UU and they extend beyond the demands 'to decolonize' I mentioned just now. I think that decolonizing the university is a failed project if we do not fight against the growing tide of neoliberalism within the university. The restructuring and management of the university on business models and market economics has had grave effects on the function of the university and who gets access to it, as well as on critical knowledge production that recenters feminist, anti-imperialist and anti-racist epistemologies in the humanities today. In other words, the deepening of neoliberalism has ensured the end of the university as we aspire it to be, a public service institution that can potentially reconfigure society on the tenets of radical egalitarianism and social justice. What we have is a university in crisis, an institution that either serves the transnational elite class of students or produces the indebted graduate, reproducing social inequalities along the lines of gender, race and class. Of course, there are many urgent critical initiatives conducted by researchers, activists and students to think beyond dominant canons in the humanities and to critique their colonial legacies. But I am afraid initiatives that remain epistemic exercises in criticality can be easily appropriated by the neoliberal institution through adopting the diversity lingo. This often translates to the internationalization of the student body, diversity policies in hiring—as important as that is, action needs to remain veered towards longer-term structural transformation, in education and society at large.

The second point I want to make is that, to decolonize the university, it is crucial that we reclaim education as, to use Paulo Freire's and bell hooks' description, 'a practice of freedom'; in other words, to believe in and pursue education as crucial to long-term struggles for liberation, both in terms of education's capacity for self-actualization of students, and teachers as critical subjects committed to struggles for social and political justice. And so in the context of the Netherlands, this translates to nurturing discussions in the classroom that link the realities of social inequalities, racism, and islamophobia to the histories of colonialism and imperialism and their legacies today

in the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and the rise of the conservative right. In other words, decolonial praxis in the classroom is not only a project of dismantling the coloniality of knowledge and the university, but also a practice of consciousness raising for the transformation of the world we inhabit in the now. As teachers, students, precarious workers, working within the current ‘economy of exhaustion’, as Francoise Verges (2019) calls it, we cannot pursue such a project of decolonization without coming together in solidarity. There is a lot more to be said on this, but this is probably an initial and general response to your question.

**TONI PAPE:** I agree with everything that has been said. We have to fundamentally change the university. But that already daunting task is complicated by the fact that we work in an economy of exhaustion. So a question that is always in the back of my mind is: where do you even begin to do the work? Oftentimes, what I try to do is to transform how the classroom works. So that goes back to Rolando’s third question. Because even if one attempts to decolonize the reading list, one can still teach in a way that puts the teacher in the dominant speaking position. Additionally, students are also encouraged—and intimidated by the market requirements and debt—to consume knowledge. In my experience, this is stressful, demoralizing and exhausting for both teachers and students.

To resist those tendencies in the classroom, I like to follow, for example, bell hooks’ call that we *Teach to Transgress*<sup>4</sup>, that we teach for the purpose of liberation and self-actualization in relation with the world. Perhaps it sounds a bit prosaic, but I believe that education and going to university is about finding out who you are, who else you can be. You want to find out how the world works, how you can fit in it and, perhaps most importantly, how both the world and you can transform relationally to work toward maximal inclusion and freedom for all.

Of course, this is a broader social project that cannot be accomplished in classrooms alone. But university teachers can contribute by turning their classrooms into spaces that allow for unexpected things to happen, that allow for creativity in the classroom. And here I do not mean market-ready, extractable creativity, but the crafting and creation of ideas in relation to each other through speculative and experimental practices. My hope is that this creates an appetite for *study* as a fortunately endless and collective process of world-making at various scales. Here I’m thinking of the way that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten talk about study in the Undercommons. So this is what guides me a lot in how I try to design courses. Concretely, this means that you make the curriculum together so that you don’t decide as the teacher that ‘this is what you have to learn’. To create an appetite for study, we need to learn also from the students what it is that they have a desire for. That means that you don’t cram your curriculum full of things but leave

room for change, additions and surprises. It also means that you let go of control. I also try to design collective projects that are not ‘group work’ in the depressing sense that I think we’re all familiar with. In the past, I have tried to do that by adapting the idea of ‘affinity groups’ from practices of activist organizing into the classroom. I have found that this helps establish a temporary—sometimes short-lived—study collective or community where people with very different backgrounds and outlooks can come together and make those differences generative. At the moment, I’m thinking in terms of Ferreira de Silva’s concept of difference without separability to articulate this social dimension of teaching and learning.<sup>5</sup> What does it mean that we cannot separate ourselves out from one another, even though we are very different, but that we have to actually build across those differences and work with each other?

**AK:** In your position as an educator, what are some of the other strategies that dismantle the colonial structures within classrooms—such as student-teacher hierarchies?

**RV:** I fully agree that the classroom is a space of transformation and decolonial undertaking. We have developed approaches that I will now introduce as examples of some strategies. These are the pedagogies of positionality, of relationality, and of transition. It is included in the report of the diversity commission, in the 4th section on teaching and learning. The pedagogies of positionality are about positioning the curriculum and ourselves within the classroom. It is difficult to transform the whole curriculum immediately. It is a question that many teachers face in their disciplines. But you can always immediately position the curriculum. You can say for example that the ‘fathers’ of a discipline are male and are white and were located in this Imperial Europe, and that that is the context in which they were thinking, etc.

Let me open a parenthesis here, to reiterate that not every critique is a decolonial critique. And so, for example, thinkers like Foucault or Deleuze or Žižek are indeed wonderful critical thinkers, but they are not doing a decolonial critique, in the sense that given their positionality they are not concerned with the question of coloniality, and are not addressing the colonial wound that is at the center of decolonial scholarship. So I think when Layal is saying that people are just taking the lingo, that what we are seeing is a move of appropriating the vocabulary of decoloniality to continue with coloniality. For example, many people use decoloniality as a synonym of deconstruction or critique. That actually, is not just superficial, it is also performing an erasure of what decoloniality is about. Like the skin traders of Siberia—also from the colonial period—that were dressing up the elites of the metropolis by killing the animals. I say, well, this is what’s happening with decoloniality. People are taking the skin, the conceptual skin of decoloniality, but leaving its organs to rot. They are not engaging with decolonial ethics and politics. Conversely, it

is important to acknowledge that many people are doing decolonial activities and they don't need decolonial vocabulary for this. So when you look at the struggle for autonomy of First Nations, of Maroon communities, they don't need to say 'we are decolonizing'. They are enacting a politics and an ethics that we can clearly recognize as decolonial, but they don't need to have the vocabulary.

The pedagogies of positionality have to do with positioning the canon. Foucault is wonderful to some extent, Deleuze is wonderful to some extent, Judith Butler is wonderful to some extent, but they do not have the questions of the colonial wound, because they have not lived through that. Coloniality and the colonial wound are not their questions, right? It is not about not teaching their works but rather about teaching them in context, in position, de-universalizing them and also showing their limited capacity to address questions that are fundamental to the majority of the world population that has lived under coloniality. Decoloniality is not about de-universalizing towards relativism but rather about de-universalizing towards positioning. Where are these great thinkers located in the modern/colonial history?

Next to the positioning of the canon, the pedagogies of positionality speak about how students should be given the tools to position themselves along with the colonial difference. Here positionality is not about defining my identity or how I perform myself on social media, or how I define myself through my role in the institution—this major or that master. It is about our positions within modern/colonial history, your intersectional position, your historical position. It is a move towards more truthful knowledges, using the expression of Donna Haraway. But decoloniality is bringing positionality a bit beyond Haraway, saying that positionality has to be in relation to colonial difference. That is a decolonial position. We think that the classroom should be a space that enables students to recognize themselves in these complex, entangled, and differential histories. We need to contest that ignorant discourse and practice of being forced or lured into a position of abstraction where students and researchers are given the right and the authority to write about the world, as if they are on top of the world. For example, a university student can choose to write about the Philippines, or maybe Mexico, or maybe the Netherlands. This tends to be a position of abstraction, a sort of non-position, where there is no responsibility. To humble the disciplines and the methodologies is just to challenge the master narratives of universality. This coincides partly with European critical thought, but instead of going towards relativism and messiness, we are going towards positionality. So we're actually finding the grounds where we are speaking from, and where we can do things from.

Then we have two other pedagogies. The pedagogy of relationality that means practicing and learning in relation, so very close to bell hooks, very close to the classroom as a political space, not one for the appropriation of knowledge that you accumulate as described in Freire's critique of banking education<sup>6</sup>, but as a place of encounter, and of practice, especially in our thinking place. Can we think of the classroom as a space of listening to each other and listening as that space in between speaking and doing? Where you do not become that subject that has a power of enunciation, but you become a subject that is capable of receiving the difference of others?

Lastly, the pedagogies of transition, which have to do with how decoloniality is oriented to transformation, institutional transformation, but also transformation of the topics we are engaging with. This means that we are not just doing a critique for the sake of critique or for the sake of knowledge. Decoloniality is oriented towards social justice, towards healing the colonial wound, towards addressing climate collapse, the destruction of Earth—what I call Earthlessness and worldlessness, the loss of Earth and the loss of worlds, that is implied in modern civilization. There is an orientation and ethics that goes towards a transition of re-existence of all those realities that have been disabled or erased from the possibility of having an existence in the world or from being acknowledged and continue to be denigrated, discriminated, forgotten, erased, silenced. It has to be a coming to voice of what has been silenced. In a way, it is a practice of un-silencing that transforms the way we do things. We believe in the potential that the university can have in the classroom through decolonial awareness.

**LF:** Thanks Rolando. I would like to respond to some of the points you made. But first, in response to your question, aishwarya, when it comes to curriculum decisions in the humanities (and specifically gender studies and critical theory), whiteness here is not the primary criterium that determines who and what I teach. Whilst I completely support student-led movements such as 'why is my curriculum white?', the term 'whiteness' has often been misleadingly understood along the color line, and sometimes through a narrow understanding of identity politics that discredits certain thinkers and scholars on the basis of their racial positioning. We need to be very wary of conflating the critique of the 'whiteness of canons', that is, the critique of the abstract universality and Eurocentricity of certain western categories of knowledge, with whiteness as a marker of identity often used to castigate certain thinkers and by extension their work. This therefore places the positionality of the author as the primary arbiter of their access or lack thereof to certain knowledges, histories, and contexts. Of course, positionality as experience and situatedness is important, but positionality as such is not enough. Positionality is also tied to one's political convictions, social critique, and commitment to liberation struggles or lack thereof—not a biographical note on one's individual privilege or place in relation to the colonial wound.

The importance of teaching Sartre, Marx, De Beauvoir, amongst others cannot be underestimated, but we can do so through an affirmatively critical engagement with their work. For example, I have encountered a hasty dismissal of reference to Marx in scholarship but also common academic parlance in the classroom because he was deemed Eurocentric and even an Orientalist. Such a dismissal completely disregards the centrality of Marxism to, for example, Fanon's anti-colonial thought and his notion of 'stretching Marxism', a concept he proposed to understand the workings of capital and capitalism in the colonial and postcolonial world; or even to Angela Davis's Black feminist politics and her analysis of the entanglement of gender and racial oppression with economic exploitation; or to Cedric Robinson's development of the concept of racial capitalism, et cetera. I see my approach to decoloniality as not just one of delinking from the modern/colonial matrix of knowledge, but also as a process of stretching, of transforming and dismantling these categories of thought and using them precisely for the purposes of understanding the workings of colonialism and capitalism. Broadly speaking, I tend to choose the material for courses on the bases of three main tenets. First, by taking education as a necessary site for connecting and mobilizing students to engage in struggles against oppression on the basis of class, gender, race. Second, by engaging with scholarship that traces the colonial and capitalist legacies of existing social relations and social divisions, as well as certain epistemologies and systems of knowledge. Third, by insisting on the urgency and necessity of translating and learning knowledges about lifeworlds that have been excluded from the purview of the colonial/capitalist matrix of power.

In response to the question of the positionality of the student researcher that Rolando just mentioned, who feels entitled to choose any location of interest on the map to write about. You mention, Rolando, the importance of providing students with tools to reflect on their position in relation to colonial differences. I agree with you completely, some students might feel entitled to access certain contexts and perform what Donna Haraway called the 'god trick' position—and therefore assume and internalize the position of a disembodied scientist producing objective knowledges about the world. That is a position that many feminist scholars, decolonial scholars and postcolonial have questioned and critiqued. But I would also encourage students not to translate this concern over positionality to self-censorship, or to a moralizing argument as to who can speak and who not. Of course, I do encourage students to reflect on their positionality, but more importantly, I encourage them to center the critique of Empire, of racism, colonialism in the history and the present realities of the nation-states and contexts they are writing about. I encourage them to be committed to the production of scholarship and knowledge that can contribute to a critique of power, to the emancipatory potential of the tradition of the oppressed,

and to the recognition that our liberatory struggles are longstanding, internationalist, and coalitional.

**TP:** I have the same sort of ambivalence that you have laid out. I tend to think of positionality in terms of the incompleteness of knowledge. Incompleteness in at least two senses, namely that knowledge is always both partial, i.e. positioned, and unfinished. Colonial epistemology has traditionally denied the constitutive partiality of knowledge and still does. And there is also a discomfort with the fact that knowledge is always incomplete, especially given the university's push toward the extraction of positivist knowledge and other ready-made deliverables. These admissions of incompleteness are difficult to make for an institution that carries the claim to universality in its name. But from the perspective of relational positionality, the pragmatic question is: What do we need to read next in order to fill in those gaps that we still have? What else do we need to study to build a relationally consistent outlook on the world? So then positioning oneself and thinking relationally are never two separate things.

**RV:** Maybe I can complement the conversation. I think temporality is one of the key issues to consider with relational positionality. A relational positionality means not to define yourself in terms of individuality in the present. Rather, it is about positioning yourself in this knot of relations that we are all in, a relational fabric that exceeds the limits of the present and of immanence. A relational positionality is one that connects us to what precedes us and those trajectories that are brought to being expressed through our own existence. This understanding signals also a move from dualist ontologies to relational ontologies, also with the work of Escobar. The words of Loyal are very important, precisely because we are not moving towards to dualistic attitudes. It is not about the dismissal, I can see that some people use the decolonial as a structure of dismissal. But it is about valuing all knowledges in their own measure. Of course, Marx is fundamental to understand the workings of capital and to bring it in connection to race. Thus, relationality is a fundamental term for us.

There are people that take a position that says 'I will not use those authors, because they are European'. That is not my way of working and I do not think that it is the most productive way to go about it. For me, some of the European authors are fundamental to understanding the dominant logics of the system. To understand how modernity works internally, you need Foucault, you need Marx, right, because they have done the internal critique of modernity. But they don't include the question of the colonial difference. They lead us to some extent into understanding the inner failures of Modernity, but they do not go to understand what is outside the system. Critical thought has systematically refused the idea that there is an outside to its forms

of thinking. That there are other ways of thinking that are also critical and capable of interventions of thinking about the world. Those authors refuse the possibility that there are other ontologies that can inform our critical thought. This is where they have very clear limits for us.

But for example, in my own work, I actively use authors such as Benjamin, Arendt, Heidegger, and Marx. For me, they are fundamental authors to understand the logics of Modernity, but they are not asking the questions that bell hooks or Maria Lugones are asking, for example. So that's what we mean when we speak of positioning 'canonical' texts and authors. It is to value them in what they are good for, but not to universalize them as if they have already written about everything, you know? Because they haven't. And in particular they are not addressing the decolonial question, the question of the colonial wound.

Similarly we need to address the entitlement that students in metropolitan universities have to research the life of others. Many students assume that doing research gives them the right to have access to the lives of First Nations populations, for example. In Professor Wekker's *White Innocence*<sup>7</sup>, we suddenly see the tools of ethnography being used to study whiteness. This is important to understand the order of power from the marginalized perspective. There is a very big difference between rejecting that entitlement and positioning oneself. For example, to write about other histories of the world, students importantly write about who they are in that story, and what that story tells them about our own condition. So the anthropological task does not lie in understanding the other and appropriating the life of others. Instead, it is concerned with the decolonial task of transforming one's own forms of understanding by relating and listening to other knowledge and other histories. Decoloniality is not about closing down, it is not about not reading European Western critical thinking, it is not about rejecting others. If that were the case it would be a complete failure.

Decoloniality should lead us to a pluriversality. Engaging with the life and knowledge of others, but in a positioned and respectful way, not in this God-gaze, or with the arrogant ignorance of Eurocentrism. That is Eurocentrism that assumes in its arrogance, that it knows the world, but is arrogantly ignorant because it actually does not know. We need to guard against decoloniality being a new type of censorship and closure of understanding. I think decolonization should act in a relational way by including Eurocentric knowledge and humbling it. We need to always be conscious of the Eurocentrism these knowledges carry, as Toni is saying, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos has said repeatedly—every knowledge is partial, you know, and we need to move towards the pluriversal and not the universal.

**LF:** I see what both Rolando and Toni are saying here. I completely agree that one of the tasks of decolonial critique is to relate to and listen to histories and knowledges that have been excluded from the epistemological purview of modernity and/or coloniality. But I also see this sometimes translating into a desire to unearth or excavate ontologies and epistemologies untouched by the legacies of colonialism (and its constitutive capitalist structures). I worry that this desire can misleadingly assume a position of nativist authenticity where the problematic elements of the colonial encounter and its effects on the lifeworlds of others get replaced by some fantasy of authenticity delinked from the legacies of coloniality and its effects on social relations and systems of knowledge. I wonder where the question of relationality lies here? When talking about pluriversality, to respond to you, Rolando, should we be talking about relational pluriversality? And if the praxis of decolonial critique comprises of reclaiming indigeneity and indigenous knowledges, where would we, for example, locate creolization and Créolité, as in the culture, language, literary movement, that is located precisely at the relational node of the colonial/anti-colonial encounter?

**TP:** I think that the outside is created through practices of exclusion. The outside is what is not allowed to participate. An example that comes to mind is how Indigenous cultures manage forest fires by selectively and carefully burning of trees in order to maintain the forest. This is an old and sustainable practice, but it has been criminalized and thus excluded by Western epistemologies. And that's one reason among many, to put it very briefly, why we are now dealing with catastrophic wildfires. Of course, this knowledge is there, and there is a relation between these knowledges; we can discover them, but there is also still this colonial attitude within institutions that excludes them. The task then is to acknowledge these forcefully constructed inside/outside distinctions because they block relationality. And the task of decolonizing our mindsets would be to encounter these knowledges at eye level, to turn the imposed inside/outside distinctions into what Layal calls 'nodes' of encounter.

**RV:** I agree with both of you. I think you are very to the point, Toni, when you say the inside/outside comes from the practices of exclusion, right. If we accept that there is a modern/colonial system that imposes structures of knowledge, of aesthetics, of economy, where some will be considered human and others will be considered less than human, where some lives will matter and some will not, where some will be marked and racialized and some not, there you have the order of academic structures, there you have the inside/outside as a functioning of power. Modernity/coloniality, or the colonial difference, is establishing an inside that is modernity and an outside that is not spoken about. That is a condition of the structure of power in the last 500

years, developing itself in a dichotomic way. So in that sense, we need dichotomies to understand how power functions. If we stop using these dichotomies, we stop seeing these radical differences that have sustained oppression against the earth and against others.

And, there is really a genealogical outside that has been excluded or silenced, because it was considered not compatible with the epistemology and aesthetics of the West. So, what we are saying when we are recognizing the outside of modernity is precisely that those other roots of knowledge and experience of life that are not derivative of the West, are in conversation with—and therefore not actually existing outside of—the West. Experiences like Creolization, for example, but also in movements of autonomy, like Marronage or the autonomy of Indigenous communities all across Latin America. Here, for example, we can recognize the possibility of overcoming deep-seated Western principles like the principle of anthropocentrism, the separation of the human from nature, that has been a grounding tenet of Western civilization.

For instance, for Indigenous philosophers and activists today, it is completely absurd that the development of humanity is sustained on the destruction of Earth. The more the West can exploit Earth, the more developed they think they are. There are ways of thinking that have a different source, that come from different genealogies of thought, from non-anthropocentric ontologies and philosophies. The West needs to recognize that there are other sources of thinking and sensing and feeling and existence and relating to Earth and practices that are not derivative of Western ontology. Part of the decolonial task is to acknowledge those very deep knowledges, and with them decolonize the epistemology and the aesthetics of the West. This is precisely why I think creolization, a movement that is not necessarily performed by coloniality but rather by the people living it, and the way they are enacting it could be a good example.

**LF:** I guess this is where we differ, Rolando. I think the endeavor to trace the source of a Creole text (be it writing or music to which you referred) is impossible precisely because of the syncretic nature of Creole cultures. Tracing the original source of the Creole text is a constitutive impossibility; what we can trace is a colonial/anti-colonial encounter that, yes, as you mentioned, Rolando, refuses the dichotomous logic of the colonial difference.

But I also wanted to add one more thing with respect to your question, aishwarya, regarding strategies to dismantle the colonial structure of the university and of knowledge. We seem to be limited in our discourse on decolonization to epistemological concerns (a critique of western categories of knowledges and to reclaiming Indigeneity and Indigenous knowledges and lifeworlds) and infrastructural concerns (modes of governance and pedagogies within and outside of the boundaries of the university). But I think decolonial epistemologies should also be driven

by new questions, such as Islamophobia, the current epoch of racial Capitalocene and settler-colonial violence, such as what is going on in Palestine, for example.

I want to zoom in a bit more here with regards to the question of Palestine. As academics and students invested in the project of decolonization, we cannot not talk about Palestine; we cannot not critique, expose, and contest the settler-colonial structure and violence (both material and symbolic) of the Israeli state. Palestine is a living example of a region and a peoples devastated by settler-colonial occupation in real time, and yet there is so much silence and hesitancy to vocally and outrightly support the Palestinian struggle by many academics, especially in the West, including those to spearheading the discourse on decolonizing the university and decolonizing knowledge. The witch hunt that critics of Israel are subjected to and the increased adoption or endorsement of policies that silence academics and students by instrumentalising the charge of anti-Semitism are evident reasons, amongst others. The adoption of IHRA, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, a non-legally binding definition of anti-Semitism, by many universities including in the UK, Germany, and the US is a good case in point.. The IHRA definition explicitly forbids any criticism of the state of Israel on the basis of its analysis as a racist or colonial state, claiming that this critique is anti-Semitic. So it is a definition that conflates anti-Zionism and the critique of a violent settler colonial occupation with anti-Semitism. The pressure imposed by Zionist and pro-Israeli groups to endorse IHRA is really alarming.

In the UK, the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson last year instructed that universities adopt IHRA or they will face financial cuts. Yes, this was phrased like a threat. In Germany, the academic council of German universities has passed the motion to endorse IHRA. I think the implications of the endorsement of such measures will have grave effects in terms of their capacity to suppress decolonial political discourse within the university. In other words, decolonizing struggle within the university is also a struggle against the suppression of legitimate anticolonial speech in teaching and research but also of organized opposition to present settler colonial realities. I worry the Netherlands is following in those footsteps. I do hope as students and academics, we will work together to fight against this..

**TP:** I strongly agree with Layal on this. And it seems to me that to conflate the critique of Israel's state politics with anti-Semitism is to refuse to think relationally-positionally, not least because this conflation follows a political agenda that results in polarization by suppressing legitimate political discourse in the middle of society as Layal indicates. We have to make sure that the important decolonial fight against anti-Semitism does not become complicit with new and

ongoing colonial projects. For this purpose, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism<sup>8</sup> may be more helpful.

**LF:** I mean, there's unwavering Euro-American support of Israel, that has been constant since before the Nakba in 1948, that is the violent dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to establish an Israeli state. There is a certain displaced guilt that mobilizes such support and for which Palestinians are paying the price. Displaced because it is a guilt that arose as a result of the atrocious historical events of the Holocaust but that is today mobilized to disavow and justify the settler-colonial state of Israel and its human rights violations. This displaced guilt is symptomatic of Israel's and the Zionist groups' constant instrumentalization of the Jewish plight and the violent history of Jewish persecution to justify occupation and brutal violence against Palestinians as 'self-defense'. This instrumentalization is anti-Semitic because it uses religion and the suffering of a people to cover up state crimes.

In such a political climate, the imposition of IHRA is another measure to silence academics from exposing Israel's human rights violations. I believe an internationalist unified front of academics with a clear political stance against the Israeli state and its occupation of Palestine is urgent, but in the Netherlands, I believe there is still a lot to be done. The least we can do in such a climate is to mobilize for boycotting Israel, academically, culturally and economically and abide by the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) guidelines<sup>9</sup> until Israel ends its occupation.

**RV:** Coalition building is an important decolonial principle coming from the work of Maria Lugones. It implies that oppression cannot be liberated against another oppression. Right? So just to say that, of course, it is unacceptable to play oppression against another and it goes against the decolonial principle of coalitions. Experiences of oppression should help each other and not play one against the other.

**AK:** To build on what has been said until now, we would like to discuss coalition building and other decolonial strategies in relation to the technological condition. A phenomenon that not only disrupts the classroom space—as students are always already connected to the outside world in social movements—but also learning in classrooms. So the ideologies and discourses that are being introduced to them, and those they are also contributing to, do not have a controlled and contained operation. With that condition, as a scholar, as a researcher, and as a facilitator, how do you see the production of knowledge in current times in relation to the decolonial frameworks mentioned above?

**RV:** I think you are pointing to something that we will need to study. But I am quite sure that this has really moved forward to Decolonizing the University. Students are no longer constrained by the curriculum. They are demanding to Decolonize the University precisely because they have been reading and learning from spaces outside the university. The university has never had a full monopoly of knowledge, but in the current technological condition, it has lost its monopoly over the spaces of learning. And so the movements are asking *Why is my Curriculum White?*, because they are already conscious that there are many other knowledges out there that are not included in the university. I think these balances got tilted precisely because there are other spaces of learning outside the university, which of course have always been there since 1492, though never recognized in the colonial universities. But in the confined institutional life, let's say of the student as a citizen, that is supposed to be in university, suddenly they are getting access to knowledge that the university is not providing.

In a way, the Decolonial Summer School is such a formation because it provided a curriculum that the university would only allow as an extracurricular program at that stage. It was a combination of topics that brought together students from all over the world in an incredibly meaningful way. It is something that the university was incapable of doing or is still incapable of doing. I think you're really pointing to something that is very important and that is why decolonization is coming from the ground up. Decolonial scholars have been about for a very long time. In Latin America, for 30 years or so, they were never taken seriously within the structures. Now, through programs like the Summer School, which is a de-hierarchizing collaboration, students, writing their theses and doing research on decolonial topics, are asking the teachers why all the authors are male, why all the authors are white. And this is really creating a transformation from the inside out. This is slowly but surely happening. I mean, in the last 10 years, I have witnessed it. The awareness of decoloniality and diversity is very different from 10 years ago.

The other question is about the space of transformation. And it has to do with moving from expert knowledge to meaningful knowledge. So it is about examining knowledge that is just about accumulation and about gaining expertise in whatever it is, without asking the question 'Why?' or 'Why am I learning this?'. Is it to further this extractive industry, to further the destruction of Earth, to further social inequality through the economy? Or is it to undo the colonial difference? The question of the why, and the meaning of knowledge, is very important in all disciplines. I am learning medicine, I am learning mathematics, I am learning humanities, but I need to know why. Why am I learning this? What is its meaning in relation to Earth, and in relation to others? And I think this is the big transformation we are pushing for, and students are asking, why am I learning

this? The university should respond to this question, instead of just producing professionals, experts, that are isolated. And with that bringing to use of Western critical thought, people like Zygmunt Bauman and Hannah Arendt showed that big disasters have happened because people were incapable of asking why.

**TP:** The University usually answers the question of why in terms of the market value of degrees and I guess we have to find different answers to that and reject those answers. Thinking in terms of technology, I was thinking along the lines of what Rolando said, that it has been great also for community building. And here, I am thinking about disability and neurodiversity movements, where people were able to communicate and congregate online and through digital technology in ways that were not [made] possible before, and therefore were also able to gain political purchase. But then on the other hand, when you ask that question, I was thinking along with Wendy Chun's work on the homophily of digital technology, in which it is built into digital technology that like attracts like, and that we end up in filter bubbles and echo chambers. And to me that also poses a challenge to the decolonial work of coalition-building. And in that sense, it links back to what Loyal brought up earlier about the Israel-Palestine conflict: in a way we are more polarized also because of the technologies that we use. So thinking about decolonizing our minds in relation to technology also requires us to really challenge the social dynamics built into that technology.

**LF:** I think that student-led movements to decolonize the university have unquestionably put a lot of pressure on universities in terms of asking 'what knowledges are we exposed to', 'what do we teach', and 'what tools can we offer students to question the premise of canonical knowledge, to learn and unlearn certain categories of thought', et cetera. As Rolando mentioned, the Decolonial Summer School that they started over a decade ago sought to bring those questions to the fore by engaging in decolonial thought and critique that existing curricula failed to accommodate. Still, the question remains: who has access to the Summer School and the institution itself? So the question of access is central to the work we do to decolonize the university, that is if we wish to recalibrate the university as a public space of radical critique and of nurturing forms of critical citizenship that can confront and dismantle coloniality both within and outside of the university. As well as access, we also need to address the political economy of knowledge production and circulation. Much of the decolonial scholarship is published in English and predominantly circulates in English-speaking countries. The concerns over who gets access to, as well as the political economy of, knowledge, are not new, of course. But today they confront us with new sets of questions: whether the university is worth salvaging, or whether we should invent alternative, self-sustaining spaces of decolonial and anti-capitalist critique that can take education in the humanities to new and emancipatory horizons.

**AK:** Although we couldn't further discuss many of the nuances that were highlighted in this conversation, it has been a pleasure to listen to the ways in which the three of you work for the decolonial task. We would definitely like to continue this conversation another time. For now, I would like to thank you all for taking the time to have this discussion and participating in a conversation that requires a lot of mental and emotional labor.

## REFERENCES

- Freire, Paulo, Donaldo P Macedo, and Ira Shor. [1970] 2018. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. 50th anniversary ed. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.' *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–599.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Verges, Françoise. 'Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender.' *e-flux* 100. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/>
- Wekker, Gloria. 2016. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Decolonial Summer School (now called the Maria Lugones Decolonial Summer School) is an annual summer course hosted in Middelburg, the Netherlands. The course is a collaboration between University College Roosevelt (University of Utrecht) and the Centre for Global Studies and the Humanities (Duke University). The initiative was started in 2010 by Rolando Vazquez and Walter Mignolo, bringing together students, activists, scholars and artists in an academic setting. The course aims to address 'the danger of the single story in the Modern/Colonial order', and 'invites to learn about the decolonial option'. See:

<https://utrechtsummerschool.nl/courses/social-sciences/learning-to-unlearn-decolonially-disobeying-delinking-and-relinking>

<sup>2</sup> University of Colour is a non-profit organization started with the aim to decolonize and diversify the university. Read more: <https://www.facebook.com/universityofcolour/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uva.nl/binaries/content/assets/uva/nl/over-de-uva/democratisering/commissie-diversiteit/1.-diversity-commission-report-2016-12-10.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks, writes on her beliefs about the profound values of education, the spiritual role of teachers, racism and sexism in the classroom, and the part played by education in personal freedom. *Teaching to Transgress*, beyond its insights related to the above topics, decidedly interrogates epistemologies of knowledge, intentionalities of learning and the criticality of recentring movement in spaces of learning.

<sup>5</sup> *On Difference Without Separability* (2016) is a text and way of thinking introduced by Denise Ferreira da Silva for the catalogue of the 32a São Paulo Art Biennial, 'Incerteza viva' (Living Uncertainty). This text explores how to reconsider sociality outside of certainties, and rather imagine and construct them on the situated entanglements. With this, the text offers, while aligning with various New Materialist and Decolonial Thinkers, a way to recentre entangled productions that disrupt the formation of cognitive and social monocultures.

<sup>6</sup> In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1970] 2018), Paulo Freire introduces the term 'banking' of education, which is a 'concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system' (72).

<sup>7</sup> *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016) examines paradoxes of racism and colonialism in contemporary Dutch culture. Through an exploration of 400 years of what Wekker terms the 'cultural archive', she looks at the coexistence of 'aggressive racism' and xenophobia alongside the denial or obscuration of the violent Dutch colonial past and racial discrimination that runs through society.

<sup>8</sup> <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://bdsmovement.net/>