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## Editorial: Decolonising the University

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## Editorial

### *Decolonising the university*

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The point of departure of this special issue is the University of Amsterdam's student occupation in the spring of 2015, and the banner hanging from the front of its main administrative building – 'het Maagdenhuis' – stating: 'No Democratisation without Decolonisation'. In Belgium, the issue of decolonisation is gaining more attention among students and activists, although organised student protests are as yet lacking.

These calls for decolonising education, the curriculum, and the university system connect contemporary voices and struggles in the Netherlands and Belgium to other voices in the margins of academic institutions, both in the Global South and in the Global North, asking: 'Why is my curriculum white? Why isn't my professor black?' These powerful questions bring renewed attention to the long-term socio-political struggles and intellectual traditions within and outside the Dutch university, including those by black feminists, which have been critically engaging with racism, discrimination, and exclusion (Loewenthal, 1984; Essed, 1991; Essed & Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2015). They further encourage reflection on the invisible norms shaping universities as institutional spaces that assume certain bodies (white/male) as the norm, making the 'others' into 'space invaders', bodies out of place (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004).

The contributions to this special issue take inspiration from these movements and ask what knowledge is, how it is produced and taught at universities, and for whose benefit. On the one hand, they offer a diagnosis of the gendered colonial legacies that remain constitutive of the modern university, and, on the other hand, they provide practical examples, novel methodologies, and often courageous interventions in curricula and the academy to creatively engage with this task.

Decades and even centuries of struggle by social movements, in parti-

cular of indigenous peoples and anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, constitute a fruitful precedent and often offer inspiration to current calls for decolonisation: from Zapatista autonomy in Chiapas and Water Defendants in Standing Rock, to #BlackLivesMatter and #RhodesMustFall mobilisations. What distinguishes recent calls for decolonising the university is that they speak about an 'in here and within', aiming to open debates and conduct research on the politics of knowledge and the analysis of power relations *within* academia (De Oliveira Andreotti, 2015; Vázquez, 2015; Weker, Slootman, Icaza, Jansen, & Vázquez, 2016).

As the UCT Rhodes Must Fall University of Cape Town mission statement recognises, 'experiences of oppression on [...] campus are intersectional' (2015, p. 6). Black, Chicana, 'First nations'/Indigenous/communitarian, and decolonial feminisms have been at the forefront of the struggle to decolonise the university and the knowledge structures that remain complicit with intersectional forms of domination (Leyva et al., 2017; Smith, 1999; Simpson, 2011). To decolonise a modern/colonial institution such as the university and its curricula requires a politics of coalition building (Lugones, 2003; 2008), and a praxis of intersectionality (Bilge & Collins, 2016). While decolonial thought acknowledges gender as a key analytical category, it has also engaged with the colonality of gender itself and the need to develop new ways of embodied thought and praxis (Lugones, 2003; 2008; Icaza & Vázquez, 2016). The decolonisation of gender thereby becomes an axial reflection for the transformation not only of women's studies, but of our practices of knowledge and the university as a whole. This means to

acknowledge the complex and violent effects that gender as a mainstream category in different feminisms has in the co-production of ways of being and sense one's relation to different worlds (human and non-human) as non-existent together with the subsequent concealment of such operation. (Icaza, in press).

Therefore, in its variety, the contributions in this special issue share theorisations, auto-ethnographic reflections, and pedagogical experiments of decolonisation, politics of knowledge, and activism informed by Feminist, Gender, and Queer studies but also by non-Eurocentred epistemic genealogies grounded in embodied experiences of racialisation, discrimination, and resistance in the academia. Inserting what are inevitably profoundly political contributions, which question the foundations and limitations of hegemonic knowledge creation, into the mould of an academic

peer-reviewed special issue is a complex and, at times, seemingly impossible exercise. As the guest editors and editorial board negotiated the process of this issue's production, we ourselves were challenged to engage with tensions around what constitutes a 'proper' scientific contribution, by which and whose standards. As a reader of this special issue, and perhaps a student, teacher, researcher, activist, or a combination thereof, it is likely that you also find yourself addressed and challenged by some of the critiques and proposals articulated in the articles and essays that follow.

For example, 'Being an Indonesian Feminist in the North: An Autoethnography' by Vina Adriany, Desy Ayu Pirmasari, and Nur Latifah Umi Satiti, which discusses their sense of alienation and efforts to build connections as Indonesian feminists studying in the UK, could take you back to your own student time or encourage you to interrogate your own teaching practices. Sruti Bala's essay, 'Decolonising Theatre and Performance Studies: Tales From the Classroom', which uses a personal anecdotic approach to reflect on the meaning of decolonisation in the discipline of Theatre Studies, offers to the teachers amongst our readers inspiring examples for challenging the established canon and bringing civic engagement (back) into the classroom. Patricia S. Parker, Sarah H. Smith, and Jean Dennison, in 'Decolonising the Classroom: Creating and Sustaining Revolutionary Spaces Inside the Academy', provide a rich analysis of the possibilities of decolonising the classroom while recognising the university as complicit with the modern/colonial order. Decolonising knowledge production, understood as an on-going process, calls for transforming the relation between teachers and students, bringing to question research norms and moving towards forms of knowledge co-production. In Louise Autar's article '*Decolonising the Classroom: Credibility-based Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms*', the focus is on credibility and epistemic trust as a way to opening up questions about decoloniality and to understanding shifts to an inclusive classroom. She elaborates on a theoretical, nonetheless empirically grounded, convergence between feminist theorists and decolonial thinkers to reflect on this task.

All authors share the lessons they learned as well as the questions they continue to have, underlining that decolonising universities is an ongoing, complex process. The contributions are also testimony to the ways in which decolonial critiques operate alongside creativity and careful optimism. Alisha M.B. Heinemann and María do Mar Castro Varela, in 'Contesting the Imperial Agenda. Respelling Hopelessness: Some Thoughts on the Dereliction of the University', give us a rich analysis on how the university is deeply embedded in the epistemic violence necessary of empire.

Their perspective goes beyond diversity policies by calling for deconstructing the university. At the same time, they argue for the respelling of hope – a learned hope to counter the hopelessness of the teaching machine. Caroline Suransky, Froukje Pitstra, and Lihlumelo Toyana have, in the visual essay *'Decolonising Universities: Learning in Tension'*, documented South and South-North exchanges in the international summer school on Pluralism and Social Change in South Africa. There they witnessed the sowing of seeds of post-dialogue transformative action.

This issue also presents two interviews with Gloria Wekker and Philomena Essed (interviewed respectively by Rosalba Icaza and Sophie Withaecx). Based on their personal trajectories as women of colour in the academy and their work in anti-racist movements, they reflect on the impact of the decolonial movements in the university, the relevance of intersectional feminisms, and intergenerational shifts in activism. Gloria Wekker's book *White Innocence* is not only discussed in the interview, but also in the book review by Amal Miri. Finally, Max and Chris van der Ploeg, who were both part of the University of Colour that prepared the banner stating 'No Democratisation without Decolonisation', which we referred to in the opening of this editorial, bring us a direct testimony of the intense and challenging experiences of the student movement in Amsterdam. Their contribution shows the difficult path they treaded when inserting the demands to decolonise the university within mainstream student movements and a society that has been amnesic to its colonial past, while also providing a glimpse of creative strategies and personal political transformations.

## Note

1. Names are in alphabetical order and not indicative of different levels of contribution.

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