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Decoding “decoloniality” in the academy: tensions and challenges in “decolonising” as a “new” language and praxis in British history and geography

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ABSTRACT

The academy in Britain has witnessed the rise of a “decolonial turn”, which ironically is set against the backdrop of persistent racial disparities amongst staff and students within higher education. Taking the cases of the disciplines of history and geography and drawing from qualitative interviews and focus groups among students and academics in these disciplines, this paper examines “decolonising” as– (a) a “new” language being articulated by various actors within the neoliberal university; and (b) an emergent praxis at the levels of learned societies, university departments and beyond, to address racialized inequalities and coloniality. This paper outlines some key tensions and challenges faced by “decoloniality” at both conceptual and practical levels, and overall suggests the need for an anti-racist collaborative effort to make meaningful “decolonial” changes within higher education in Britain.

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Introduction: the rise of “decolonial turn” in British higher education

The academy in Britain has arrived at a particular historical conjuncture that is witnessing a rise of a “decolonial turn” characterized by student- and staff-led activism, ranging in concerns from the removal of imperial–colonial monuments to transforming the existing curriculum. Some notable campaigns and interventions that emerged during the mid-2010s include “Why is my Curriculum White?” at UCL in 2014 and Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) in 2015, inspired by its antecedent and sister-movement at the University of Cape Town, South Africa (Morreira et al. 2020). Recently, the movement to decolonize universities was also inspired by wider anti-racist mobilizations like the

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Black Lives Matter protests of 2020/2021. At the same time, scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines have had a growing interest in intellectual decolonization, such that while the language of decolonizing has existed for decades, particularly among indigenous and Southern scholars, “decoloniality”¹ or “decolonising” has gained such a huge traction in the academy in Britain today, leading scholars like Moosavi (2020, 332) to argue that, “in the recent years, ‘intellectual decolonisation’ has become so popular in the Global North that we can now speak of there being a ‘decolonial bandwagon’”.

This impetus to decolonize the academy has not emerged in a socio-political vacuum but is set in the wider backdrop of a state of “crisis of race” (Arday and Mirza 2018, 4) within British higher education (HE), evidenced by the persistent marginalization, exclusion, discrimination and under-representation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) students and academics (Alexander and Arday 2015). This is reflected on various fronts. Whilst in 2019/2020, BME students made up 25.3% of all UK domiciled students, the gap in attainment of a “good degree”² between them and white students was 10.8 percentage points (Advance 2021, 126, 128). Furthermore, whilst we see higher representation of BME students among first degree undergraduates and taught postgraduates, it is markedly lower among postgraduate research students – 26.7%, 23.6% and 18.6%, respectively (Advance 2021, 127). Evidence suggests “this ‘broken pipeline’ is particularly stark for Black students” (Campion and Clark 2022, 2). From 2016/2017 to 2018/2019, of the 19, 868 PhD funded studentships awarded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) research councils collectively, just 245 (or 1.2%) were given to Black or Black Mixed students (Williams et al. 2019). Unequal outcomes for staff of colour in universities are also a concern for UK HE as they are more likely to leave the profession and are starkly underrepresented at the highest academic contract levels (Advance 2021).

While the “crisis of race” and “decolonial turn” transcends disciplinary boundaries, the disciplines of history and geography have become key sites for such “decolonising” debates and practices. This is partly because history and geography are considered to be two of the whitest disciplines within UK HE, and historically, they have both been central to the production of racialized knowledges (Said 1978). Today, they are also marked by very low overall intake of BME students compared with other disciplines, who then face significant awarding gaps compared to their white peers (Desai 2017; Geographers 2020). For BME academics within these disciplines, there exist significant barriers to career progression as they constitute a miniscule proportion of history and geography staff, and this number only diminishes as one moves up the ladder. In Geography, just 7 in every 1000 professors identify as Black (Geographers 2020), and comparatively, 93.7% of history academic staff are white (Atkinson et al. 2018). Alongside these statistical disparities, BME students and staff in the disciplines have also been found

to encounter everyday and institutional forms of racism (Desai 2017; Esson 2020; Ono-George 2019; Pimblott 2020; Okoye 2021). Whilst the two disciplines appear to face unique challenges when it comes to “race” equality, there however also appears to be a motivation for making interventions in, and contributions towards “decolonial” debates and practices. This is particularly reflected in the role played by their respective learned societies – the Royal Historical Society (RHS) and Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers (RGS–IGB). Thus, history and geography provide a useful lens through which to view the wider discourse on “decolonising” UK HE today.

This paper explores how “decoloniality” or “decolonising” is currently being articulated both at conceptual and practical levels in the disciplines of history and geography within UK HE, and thereby examines some key tensions and challenges that are currently being played out in the “decolonising” movement. By decoding “decoloniality” in the academy through the cases of the disciplines of history and geography, this paper aims at providing implications towards making meaningful social-justice oriented changes within these disciplines under discussion, and both inside and outside HE. It begins with an overview of the emergence of decolonial debates in UK HE with a specific focus on history and geography as a way of setting the context, followed by an explanation of the methodology and research design. This is followed by a two-fold analytical section, which examines “decolonising” as (a) a “*new*” *language* being articulated by the neoliberal university, its diversification strategies as well as activism-oriented scholars; and (b) an *emergent praxis* at the levels of learned societies, university departments and collectives, to address racialized inequalities and coloniality within the disciplines and the academy. In doing so, this paper overall argues for the need to engage in an anti-racist collaborative effort to make meaningful “decolonial” changes within higher education in Britain.

Contextualizing “decolonial turn” in British history and geography

Decolonial thought emerged from the material conditions and struggles unleashed by European imperialism in the colonies of Africa, Asia and the Americas; and classically, it is associated with indigenous scholars and First Nations peoples, who were writing from their positions of experiencing settler colonialism and continued colonization (Noxolo 2017; Smith 1999). Early decolonial writings were also born out of anti-colonial struggles, wherein scholars like Fanon (1963) deployed the concept of decolonization as a way of confronting the European imperial-colonial project (Morreiret al. 2020). A new wave of decolonial scholarship emerged during the 1980s, pioneered by Latin American scholars, who set out to pose an

epistemological and political challenges to coloniality or the long-standing patterns of power derived since European colonialism that continue to structure the colonial-modern world (Dussell 2003; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 2007). The term “decolonising”, particularly in higher education contexts, became re-popularized more recently since the pioneering decolonial activism at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2015, which inspired similar movements to decolonize Global North universities including those in the UK such as Oxford, UCL, SOAS and Sussex among others (Morreira et al. 2020; Pimblott 2020). The (re)popularization of “decolonising” in Northern universities has however faced significant critiques, particularly in relation to the dangers of reducing “decolonising” to a metaphor, or even reproducing coloniality by re-westernizing/appropriating a Southern concept (Moosavi 2020; Tuck and Yang 2012). Despite differences in opinion, however, what distinguishes recent calls to “decolonise” Northern universities is that it problematizes “in here and within” as it aims to open up debates on the politics of knowledge and the analysis of power *within* academia itself (De Jong et al. 2017, 228). In this context, (Bhambra, Nişancioğlu, and Gebrial 2020, 512) state that the recent “decolonising” movement in the UK can be seen as a new way to say that “the university is ‘unfit for purpose’; the university is in need of reform and that decolonising is one way of doing it”.

While various disciplines have now begun to embrace this wider tide to “decolonise”, history and geography have come to occupy a more central position in the articulation of “decolonial debates” within the UK academy for various reasons. Firstly, history and geography have come under critical scrutiny for their colonial legacies as they are a product of the siloing of social scientific disciplines, which was central to the colonial endeavour of observation, measurement and control that maintained and reproduced the colonial knowledge-power nexus (Mamdani 2019; Smith 1999). Historically, both disciplines were co-constituted alongside anthropology, ethnography and other Orientalist traditions to function as “investigative modalities” (Cohn 1996, 5) or material and discursive procedures of colonial knowledge production that legitimized Europe’s colonial domination and power. Geography, and its tools and methods of cartography, exploration, survey, etc. have faced critiques as they played a material role in mapping and charting the physical terrains of colonization (Laing 2021). Similarly, history has been critiqued for narrating humanity’s past in a way that measured civilization and modernity in very European terms, in turn positioning non-European histories and peoples in the “uncivilized past”, thereby naturalizing Europe’s domination over its colonies (McClure 2020). Thus, both geography and history are now scrutinized for their Eurocentrism and for perpetuating epistemic colonization.

Secondly, history and geography in UK HE have also come under increased scrutiny for their persistent institutional whiteness and racialized disparities.

For history, these inequalities were recently addressed by the Royal Historical Society's (RHS) landmark 2018 "Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History" report, which highlights some key "race"-related issues within the discipline, including acute underrepresentation of BME students and staff; existence of racialized bias, degree awarding gaps, discrimination and narrow curriculum (Atkinson et al. 2018). The report shows that UK History departments have overwhelmingly white undergraduate cohorts (88.7%), with very few BME students (11.3% BME) compared to their overall undergraduate population, with Black students being most underrepresented (2.4% Black compared to 7% overall undergraduate Black students). The report also shows that these disparities sharpen in transition to postgraduate and early career levels, where BME researchers constitute only 8.6% at postgraduate research level, and BME academics constitute only 6.3%, where Black academics constitute as little as 0.1% of all history academic staff in UK HE. For geography, Desai's (2017) important article vividly highlights similar racial disparities within the discipline and its departments, such as significant awarding gaps and overwhelming whiteness with the proportion of BME undergraduate students being as low as 7%, albeit the proportion of BME UK geography students being slightly higher in Russell Group universities. In geography too, racialized disparities appear to heighten as one moves up the academic ladder, such that at the postgraduate level, the proportion of BME researchers drop to 4.4%. The situation for BME academics in geography is also equally bleak, whereby they constitute only 4.3% of UK national geography staff, with only 1.4% of BME UK academics at professorial levels (Desai 2017). Moreover, the picture for Black students and academics is even more stark. In the 2018/19 intake, "only 1.7% of all enrolling undergraduate geography students in the UK identified as Black", with just 10 Black geography professors across the UK (Geographers 2020, 2).

Additionally, the learned societies of both of these disciplines are making important interventions within the ongoing "decolonial debates". The RHS' 2018 report makes various recommendations on changes that can be made at the departmental and disciplinary levels, which include broadening the coverage of histories of "race" and ethnicity within history curriculum, addressing the absences of Black British history; as well as encouraging historians to engage in critical pedagogies within teaching and learning environments (Atkinson et al. 2018; Ono-George 2019). In geography too, calls to decolonize the discipline in relation to both production of knowledges and inclusion of scholars of underrepresented groups have gained momentum particularly since the Royal Geographic Society–Institute of British Geographers (RGS–IBG)'s 2017 annual conference on the topic, "Decolonizing geographical knowledges: opening geography out to the world", and the "decolonial debates" that followed, particularly in the special issues of *Area* (Esson et al. 2017), and *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*

(Radcliffe 2017). In the aftermath of the conference, many geographers put forth provocative arguments around the idea of “decolonising geographical knowledges” by highlighting the overwhelming whiteness of the discipline, its persistent racial inequality and coloniality in relation to its research practices and institutional norms (Esson 2020; Noxolo 2017; Tolia-Kelly 2017). These recent developments therefore highlight the historical and contemporary conditions of UK HE marked by neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist structures (Joseph-Salisbury and Connolly 2021) that have propelled the current “decolonial debates” in the two disciplines, thus providing a useful entry-point into examining the “decolonial turn” and its implications within the wider UK HE landscape.

A note on methodology

This research article is a part of an ESRC-funded research project that explores racial and ethnic inequalities in UK institutions, including in higher education. This strand of the research employed a qualitative approach based on a combination of face-to-face and online (via Zoom) interviews and focus groups among 19 participants between 2019 and 2020. The interviewees were academics/staff and students working/studying in the disciplines/departments of history and geography-based in universities across the UK. While 13 participants were drawn from research-intensive Russell Group universities, the remaining six were from non-Russell Group institutions. Out of the 19 participants, seven were affiliated to history and 12 to geography; and among them, 13 were from “Black and Minority Ethnic” (BME³) backgrounds, while six were from white ethnic backgrounds (not exclusively British for both). There were 15 women and four men in the sample. It should be noted that these individuals do not necessarily identify as “decolonial scholars/activists” but rather their work critically engages with “decolonising” debates in some way or other. The participants were at various stages of their academic careers. The final interviewee list included undergraduates, postgraduate researchers and Master’s students, early career researchers, lecturers, professors and heads of research centres. The participants were located in disparate spaces both within, and sometimes adjacent to, higher education institutions (HEIs), as members of the two learned societies, undergraduate collectives and non-profit organizations.

The two authors of this paper are early career academics working in UK HE, one of whom is an ethnic minority “Southern” scholar and the other is an ethnic minority British scholar. We are both trained in sociology and are therefore located “outside” of history and geography. This positionality meant there was a familiarity with the participants and the debates, but our external location to the disciplines meant that we entered the field as new learners without the pre-existing “internal” knowledge about the

everyday politics of working and studying in these areas. The participants were recruited through our professional networks followed by snowball sampling. They were initially contacted via email with a participant information sheet. After consent, audio-recorded interviews were arranged, and the interviews were conducted in the form of flowing conversation (Rubin and Rubin 2005). They were semi-structured, with each interview slightly tailored to suit the participant but connected through similar themes including – personal histories and “intellectual homes” in the disciplines; colonial legacies of the disciplines; perceptions about the progress/changes being made in relation to “race”/ethnicity/“decolonial” work, praxis, pedagogy and methods; conceptual interpretations of “decoloniality”/“decolonising”; and the role of learned societies in these debates/changes. Interviews tended to last 1 hour and were transcribed, coded (via NVivo), and thematically analysed. This involved identifying patterned meanings or narratives that spoke to the overarching research questions, which enabled the researchers to methodically examine the ways in which people interpret “decoloniality/decolonising” in their disciplines and the academy based on their personal and professional experiences. Thematic analysis eventually made way for two meta-themes that were theoretical/conceptual and practical/pedagogical in nature, which informed analysis as outlined and examined in the next sections of the paper. Since this study includes human participants, ethical approval was acquired through the University of Manchester’s Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Pseudonyms are used to ensure participants’ anonymity.

Tensions in “decolonising” as a “new” language in history and geography

Bhambra, Nişancioğlu, and Gebrial (2020) argue that it is now possible to observe three distinct currents or positions within the recently emerged movements to decolonize UK universities. The first current involves the adoption of “decolonising” by the neoliberal universities for a market-driven agenda; the second involves universities’ use of “decolonising” as an extension of their ongoing diversification strategies and representation politics; and the third includes a more radical-activist framing of “decolonising” put forth by critical scholars that involves creating a new or alternative vision of the university for public good. Following this framework, this section of the paper examines “decolonising” at a conceptual level as a “new”⁴ language that is currently being articulated through these currents, and identifies some key tensions and paradoxes involved, particularly within the disciplines of history and geography. We do not necessarily regard the paradoxes or tensions we identify as problems, but rather as useful modes of analysis, which according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), enables capturing of

contradictions within the same phenomenon as to make better sense of them and move forward in a positive direction.

Decoloniality vs. neoliberal university system

The neoliberalization of higher education in the UK since the late twentieth century has been a topic of sustained critique (Hall 2020). Many scholars argue that British universities now function as corporate bodies characterized by marketization and internationalization of education for profit, consumerization of students, proletarianization of academics, where “excellence” is measured through standardized metrics such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) (Dawson 2020). This has also heightened existing ethnic inequalities, whereby students and academics of colour are further disadvantaged within a highly competitive and unequal environment (Begum and Saini 2019). Nevertheless, with the recent political mobilizations such as BLM and decolonizing movements, various universities have increasingly begun to adopt the language of “decolonising”, reflected mainly in the inclusion/creation of new courses on topics relating to “race”, ethnicity, migration and colonialism. However, this new agenda reveals tensions between decoloniality and the neoliberal university.

In the context of history, this tension translates most vividly in relation to the creation of Black history courses and positions. As Chloe, a historian of BME background explained,

In the last few years [...] more Black history positions are sprouting up, particularly at research intensive Russell Group universities [...] I think that, it's kind of a chicken and an egg conversation, because you don't want to shut down the idea of new positions and opportunities being created around a field, which also brings in accountability politics. But, but how do you reckon with the fact that, the historical profession, particularly in the UK academy, has not trained a generation of people to actually take up these positions.

This statement is useful in examining the tensions involved when neoliberal universities adopt the language of “decolonising”. It shows the nuances and complexities around questions of legitimacy and accountability politics involved in their neoliberal institutionalization, which may create opportunities for minority students and academics, but at the same time involves dangers of co-option and subsequent depoliticization of critical traditions like Black history (Andrews 2018). Chloe further stated that,

It's not just enough to put out a position if you're not thinking about how you're responding to larger, structural under-representation.

This further highlights the wider structural inequalities that such neoliberal version of “decolonising” fails to address, which reflects Esson's (2020) argument in geography's case that the creation of more “race”-related courses

without training relevant taskforce and divorced from institutional structures of the discipline may only serve to objectify such issues rather than dismantle them.

Given that geography is a fieldwork-centric discipline, the tensions between decoloniality and neoliberal university in geography further reveal itself in its funding structure. This is illustrated by Michelle, who is a geographer of BME background, who stated,

Geography as a subject in Britain is completely saturated with coloniality, from its assumptions, to who gets to talk, who gets to write [...] And, geography is perfectly capable of jumping on the neoliberal bandwagon particularly when funding is involved.

This statement reveals the persistent problems of coloniality and whiteness within the discipline of geography intensified by neoliberal funding structures (Esson et al. 2017). Michelle further elaborated,

If you look at the GCRF, who gets the money and who does the research [...] it's quite problematic. Because when it comes to funding, it's not just the physical geographers who say, 'well why is this relevant anyway?', but even social and cultural geographers are themselves defensive, because if you are going to have those significant changes that decolonising brings, they're all going to be affected by that change.

By using the example of Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), this statement highlights the continued coloniality in the discipline's methodological foundations and reiterates Noxolo's (2017) argument that the GCRF research fund (disbursed by the UK government to its academic community to conduct innovative and development-centric research in the Global South), which is one of geography's primary funding sources, reproduces colonial relations of power, of which geographers in the UK are a beneficiary. Too often these research practices go against the decolonial agenda, reproducing existing inequalities within the global academic landscape whereby funds, resources, publishing standards and epistemic authority continue to centre in few rich, Northern/Western universities based on white structures, largely divorced from Black, brown and indigenous bodies and places from which such knowledges are extracted (Smith 1999). Therefore, the use of the language of "decolonising" within the highly neoliberalized higher education system can further reinscribe coloniality itself (Craggs 2019; Esson et al. 2017; Moosavi 2020; Noxolo 2017).

Decolonizing vs. diversifying

The second tension that has emerged within the decolonial movement in UK HE is that between diversification and politics of representation that is currently being labelled as "decolonising" work, vis-à-vis ethnic and racial

inequalities based on institutional whiteness and historical coloniality that continue to structure the academy, including the disciplines of history and geography. In this current, the language of “decolonising” is being used to frame issues around marginalization and exclusion of people racialized as non-white within universities, articulated primarily around their “inclusion” that is, adding more non-white/BME people in reading lists, curriculum, teaching and research practices, boardrooms and university admissions (Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu, and Gebrial 2020). However, such top-down articulation of “decolonising” as diversifying was problematized by many historians and geographers. This is explained by Aisha, a historian of BME background, who stated,

Decolonising must be about structural change and eradicating structural inequalities to begin with, and that means really considering whether structures and institutions should even exist, rather than simply tinkering with their function. So, I think a lot of what gets called ‘decolonising’ simply can’t be decolonising because it doesn’t ever think about these issues structurally.

This statement reiterates the view that while decolonizing in its radical-political sense necessitates a complete upending of historical and contemporary colonial relations and structures of power (Fanon 1963), the current rhetoric of “decolonising” as diversification strategy only adds more non-white names and faces in the existing institutional frameworks, without necessarily penetrating into coloniality and institutionally white structures of the university system (Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas 2021; Ono-George 2019). Aisha further illustrated this through an example,

If we have a situation where there is a large awarding gap in an institution and if the institution simply goes out to decolonise by creating a recruitment programme that aims to bolster the number of students it has that are racially marginalised, that will increase representation but it will do nothing to make sure that those students are in a welcoming environment where they can be respected for who they are and treated with dignity. So, it’s the failure to see that better representation is diversity work, and that better representation isn’t necessarily liberation.

This further highlights the tension between “decolonising” and “diversifying”, showing that decolonizing in the guise of diversification does not challenge racialized structural inequalities. This resonates with the critique against the current diversity approach to “decolonising” as being merely “tokenistic decolonisation” (Moosavi 2020, 349), “gestural-superficial” decolonisation (Moncrieffe 2020, 4) or “decolonisation lite” (Dawson 2020, 82).

Furthermore, in both history and geography as in most other disciplines, such diversity approach to “decolonising” has most visibly coalesced around the narrow arena of curriculum (Schucan Bird and Pitman 2020). While “decolonising curriculum” can be useful in making knowledge within

university spaces more inclusive, it was found that it nonetheless follows the existing diversity-oriented approach that continues to centre whiteness, which informs university policies, campus culture, pedagogies and research and methodological practices. This is captured in the following statement made by Shanice, an undergraduate geography student of BME background,

I think decolonising the curriculum is a good step to take, but until you're changing the institution that's teaching the curriculum, including having people from different ethnic backgrounds coming in and teaching these subjects from a different perspective, it's not gonna dig in as deep as you need it to. Because you can study about loads of different people and places as much as you want, but if I'm always learning it from a white lecturer, at some level I'm always still learning it from a white point of view. So, there's still that blanket of whiteness over whatever we're studying, which kind of prevents you moving forward.

This statement shows that despite efforts to “decolonise” curriculum or incorporate “race”, ethnicity and anti-colonial perspectives into classrooms, the foundational basis of the discipline still reproduces “white geographies” through their teaching, writing or researching (Esson 2020, 709). This stands true also for history, whereby scholars like Ono-George (2019) and Moncrieffe (2020) have similarly argued that the current diversity approach to “decolonising” in the arena of history curriculum without addressing structural inequalities is a reflection of wider institutional whiteness. Furthermore, many also expressed that “decolonising” as diversifying adds the burden of decolonization on to the shoulders of an already overburdened racially marginalized staff, most of who are casualized and in precarious contracts and lack any institutional support. This therefore shows that the prospect of decolonizing the disciplines and the academy must move beyond the curriculum by rethinking and re-doing ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, pedagogies and political commitments (Barker and Pickerill 2020).

Decolonizing vs. anti-racism

Tensions within “decolonising” as a “new” language not only manifests in the neoliberal university's top-down usage of the concept but also in relation to the older language of anti-racism that has existed in the UK since the 1960s. This usage of “decolonising” can be understood in the Spivakian sense as a strategic resource that is currently being deployed by activism-oriented scholars and students to transform teaching and research practices in ways that critically interrogate coloniality that inflects higher education (Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu, and Gebrial 2020). However, “decolonising” as a “new” slogan for change often stands face-to-face, sometimes overlapping with, and other times diverging from, but surely in an awkward and confused relation with the older political language of anti-racism. Such tension between

“decolonising” and anti-racism has also been identified by Meghji (2020), who argues that in British HE today, there seems to be a confusion and slippage between the approaches of decoloniality and anti-racism, which requires clarification and a meaningful synergism. This was expressed by many participants and is clearly articulated in the following statement made by Andrea, a geographer of white background,

I think, the way that geographers [...] are talking about decolonising at the moment, is that it's less tied specifically to different theoretical or intellectual traditions, and it's more of a political imperative, around what we're teaching and what we're researching, and how we're teaching and researching [...] 'So, what I'm interested in is how the approach to decolonising geographical knowledge intersects with, and connects with, but isn't necessarily the same as, anti-racist teaching and learning [...] And I wonder [...] whether the 'decolonising' is that wider imperative that then shapes what you're teaching, and [...] whether the actual teaching and research in practice is anti-racist.

The statement reveals the tension and connection between “decolonising” and anti-racism. It shows that this strand of “decolonising” in UK HE is more of a political imperative aimed at contesting racialized inequality and coloniality than an intellectual or theoretical tradition (although it must recognize and acknowledge existing decolonial thought), which highlights the need to constructively chart the links between the two.

Similarly, speaking of the links between “decolonising” and anti-racism, Gemma, another historian of white background also stated,

It's not enough just to be diverse, but to make structural change and intellectual pedagogic transformation, one of the places that decolonisation has to go is anti-racism.

This statement also highlights the tensions as well as potential for linkages between the theoretical and political languages of “decolonising” and “anti-racism” and echoes Ono-George's (2019) argument that to move beyond the diversity approach and focus on decolonizing, one must be willing to adopt critical and engaged anti-racist pedagogical practices. Additionally, some also expressed that, faced with the dangers of co-option and depoliticization of “decolonising” by the neoliberal university system and its institutions, anti-racism should be a central aspect of the “decolonising” impetus as it provides a useful anchor to ground the movement to social-justice imperative. This is concisely encapsulated in the following statement made by Ishaan, a geographer of BME background,

Decolonising has got a few strands. The first one is to have a consciousness of colonisation, to then start thinking about decolonisation. Secondly, have a worldly aspect of knowledge, i.e., moving away from Anglo-American based writers, thinkers and ideas, to engaging with other repertoires of knowledge. A third thing would be decentring of whiteness—recognising that whiteness

is not the norm. And then there is a fourth strand, that is the political anti-racist element of actually putting those things into some kind of meaningful action.

This statement therefore reveals that a political commitment to anti-racism must be a prerequisite to embarking on “decolonial” moves within the disciplines and the academy in order to make effective changes (Esson et al. 2017).

Challenges in doing “decolonising” as praxis in history and geography

Given that “decolonising” in UK HE is not simply a conceptual language or a discourse but is also being articulated as a practical imperative or *praxis* aimed at addressing racialized inequalities and coloniality, this section examines some of the practical and pedagogical ways in which “decolonising”⁵ is currently being *done* within the disciplines of history and geography. In particular, it identifies some key challenges in doing “decoloniality” at the levels of learned societies, university departments, and student/staff-led collectives as a way of exploring social-justice oriented pedagogical transformations within the disciplines, and beyond.

Learned societies vs. colonial legacies

Scientific and learned societies, emergent since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, have been central to the organization and distribution of specialized knowledge, and have historically been key to the formation of social-scientific disciplines (Smith 1999). Today, learned societies of the two disciplines, namely the Royal Historical Society (RHS) and the Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers (RGS–IBG) are playing an active role in addressing racialized inequalities within their individual disciplines and the academy. This is elaborated by Chloe who stated,

I think it’s important to know that the Royal Historical Society’s work wasn’t just producing the report, but to think about naming and identifying some of the issues in the profession, and to leverage the kind of capital of an organisation like the RHS to be at the front and centre on some of those issues.

This statement shows that learned societies like the RHS and RGS–IBG are currently working towards facilitating “decolonising” work by identifying key “race” equality related issues concerning history and geography as disciplines and professions, including institutional whiteness, racial disparities and pipeline problems (Ono-George 2019; Pimblott 2020; Jazeel 2017; Radcliffe 2017). Given their status as hegemonic institutions of knowledge, learned societies can not only legitimise these issues but also leverage capital and resources towards addressing them and furthering the “decolonial” agenda within their disciplines. Moreover, Chloe also expressed that,

The RHS were and will continue to be gatekeepers of history in the UK, and, I think they definitely do have a role to play, and particularly because, they are mapped into things like REF, peer review, etc., and being a part of that can potentially interrupt some of these processes that have historically created barriers of entry and exclusion, and have shut down certain kinds of conversations about the realities of racial inequalities within the discipline.

This further suggests that learned societies like the RHS and RGS–IBG also have the potential of re-constituting and re-constructing historical and geographical knowledges by inclusion of marginalized perspectives and centring racial equality at the forefront of their respective disciplines. The RHS and RGS–IBG, particularly through the efforts of their race working groups, are also engaging in various interventive measures, both internal to the universities as well as externally. For instance, they are working in close relationship with schools, museums, heritage institutions and communities; as well as with departments across various HEIs through workshops and seminars with students and staff, and meetings with Head of Departments as a step towards bringing about wider “decolonial” changes. As such, Chloe, like many others, signalled the importance of a collaborative effort across disciplines in making such “decolonial” changes, which is reflected in the following statement,

I also think that there should be some conversations between organisations like the BSA, RGS, etc. because this is going to require a joint effort across disciplines to discuss about what does it mean to be an academic in the British landscape, about what is the wider academic environment that we’re trying to make an intervention in.

This shows that while the RHS in particular is acknowledged for being ahead of other learned societies, as its report often acts as a blueprint for a number of other disciplines who are increasingly aiming to “decolonise” themselves, ultimately, a collaborative effort with other learned societies like the British Sociological Association (BSA), as well as national organizations like the British Academy (BA) is required to bring about academy-wide changes.

However, as Smith (1999, 86) argues, learned societies are linked to colonial modes of knowledge production, since they have defined, produced and reproduced not just a scientific/disciplinary culture but also a “culture of knowledge” that was historically colonial and patriarchal. Thus, despite the efforts of learned societies like the RHS and RGS–IBG, doing “decolonising” work from within such hegemonic institutions involves further contradictions and challenges. This is explained in a statement made by Shahid, a geographer of BME background,

The Royal Geographical Society are pushing to open the discipline and think progressively about its future. However, these are institutions that by their

very birth and history, are mired in all those historical dimensions of the discipline that we want to move away from [...] The academic community are only one part of the RGS fellowship, there's a whole other part that comprise of modern explorers and businesspeople. So, the RGS is an institution that must negotiate with a lot of different kinds of stakeholders so, to an extent, it kind of has one hand tied behind its back when it's trying to push towards change.

This statement reveals that alongside their colonial legacies, doing “decolonising” work from within learned societies faces practical challenges, which may involve difficulties in navigating through the wider relations and structures of power within which learned societies themselves are embedded. Thus, “doing decoloniality” from within the institutional frameworks of learned societies eventually involves a political dilemma, which has been articulated by Shahid in the following statement,

And one of the questions that we must ask ourselves as academics working on and in the area of de-, post- or anti-colonialism, is how we articulate with and position ourselves in relation those powerful institutions? [...] you could choose to say, ‘Okay, an institution like the RGS is so mired in its colonial history, that any decolonial future of the discipline must depart from the RGS’. [Or that] ‘these are institutions have and will continue to play a very big role in shaping the discipline, and therefore, meaningful change will and should come from us working with them and pushing them into the places that we want them to go’. And that’s a political question, a political dilemma which has surfaced in the recent history of geography as a discipline.

This statement therefore highlights the political dilemma relating to the question of doing “decoloniality” from within such hegemonic institutions with colonial legacies, while also considering that most times, their very status as conservative institutions allow these issues to gain legitimacy within the academy and beyond.

University departments vs. institutional limitations

While the learned societies’ role in doing “decolonial” work within their respective disciplines cannot be understated, it was widely agreed by many participants that ultimately it is the departments, faculties and the universities themselves that have a much bigger role to play in prioritizing issues on “race” equality, and to institute the envisioned “decolonial” changes. It may be either through the interventions of learned societies or through the role of activism-oriented scholars and academics, that history and geography departments in various UK universities have increasingly begun to place “decolonial” imperatives on their agendas (Laing 2021). In this context, Lisa, a historian of white background gives a useful illustration in the following statement, of how their department at a Russell Group university is doing “decolonial” work,

One of our strategies was around recruitment and creation of pipelines just through our department initially [...]to bring in students from local communities into the programme, train them through to Master's and then PhD. That's obviously a really slow process, but one that could result in people coming in and staying.

Following this, similar works that few other history and geography departments are doing include – redesigning courses, curriculum and reading list with an aim to centre issues of “race”, ethnicity, migration and colonialism as a foundational element of their taught programmes; as well as re-thinking and attempting to re-do some of their teaching and learning practices by adopting decolonial and anti-racist praxis and pedagogies in their classrooms (Barker and Pickerill 2020; Laing 2021; Ono-George 2019).

A few are also constructively utilizing student feedback such as the NSS or conducting internal surveys and focus groups among their own students and taking on their suggestions. Some departments have also started BME networks and are collaborating with their respective Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) offices as a way of taking forward some of these initiatives at institutional levels. Furthermore, a few departments have also taken further steps to address racialized barriers within their discipline and profession, such as by creating recruitment, training and mentorship programmes for minority scholars as a way to address “broken pipelines” (Williams et al. 2019, 1). Alongside such initiatives at the departmental level within individual universities, many yet again expressed the need for collaboration across departments situated in different HEIs, which could potentially be a key strategy towards making wider “decolonial” changes. This was further expressed by Lisa who stated,

And then, there is a more national project [...] to try to put together pipeline programmes that will transcend our campus and maybe partner with other campuses, and collaborating with others I think is the key, creating some kind of consortium where we can get a larger pool of candidates coming through and getting mentorship and support from undergraduate through to PhD in our discipline of history. The RHS can facilitate the conversations but the hard work has to be done within departments.

However, it was also found that such initiatives within various history and geography departments are very much a result of individual rather than institutional actions, which is a key challenge in instituting “decolonial” changes (Ahmed 2006). Some expressed that alongside institutional barriers, they may also face resistance from individual academics who do not necessarily engage with “decoloniality/decolonising”. This is captured in the following statement made by Laura, a geographer of white background,

I think the big challenge at the moment is that physical geography is not engaging to the same extent, and we don't have enough materials and resources for

human geography as well. People are being very creative about how they ensure that other voices, other experiences are brought into the teaching ... But, we need stronger leadership from the head of department and their encouragement, and resources to make these changes.

This statement highlights some of the institutional challenges faced by departments in their “decolonial” efforts, which include difficulties in securing funds and resources, for instance, to bring in guest lectures, or for organizing workshops and other events, which itself highlights the existing lack of accountability and institutional support to carry out such work. Moreover, within the wider neoliberal climate characterized by casualized labour, short-term contracts, precarity and REF/TEF requirements, doing such “decolonising” work seems extremely difficult for individuals, who are mostly working on these issues on voluntary basis, further showing the need for accountable institutional support (Dawson 2020; Radcliffe 2017).

Student and academic collectives

Finally, doing “decolonising” work is not only confined within the structures and frameworks of HEIs but are also being articulated by those working at its margins or adjacent to it, such as through the initiatives of student- and academics-led collectives. Collectives, particularly Black and anti-racist, are usually formal or informal networks based on shared identities and/or commonalities, often contiguous with hegemonic spaces like HEIs (Grier-Reed 2010). In this context, the following statement made by Melissa, an undergraduate geography student of BME background who is a member of a collective, provides useful insights into some of their efforts,

Our aim is forcing ourselves to be seen in loads of different spaces [so] young people can see themselves in places that they don't often see themselves and know that that is something they can do[and] we share our stories, and our views.

This statement shows that collectives serve as counter-spaces where members, who are often from marginalized backgrounds, can carve a space for themselves in environments where they are often seen as “outsiders”. Given that universities are “emotionally toxic” (Esson et al. 2017, 385), especially for minority students and staff who lack any proper institutional support, such student and academics-led collectives provide a safe space where they can network, share their ideas and experiences and find mutual support.

The role of collectives in doing “decolonising” work was further explained by Melissa, who stated,

Because geography is not a cheap subject to study, we also are trying to get scholarships to help undergraduates who come from low-income backgrounds, and by having these things in place like mentorships, scholarships, etc. we can

have people coming from marginalised backgrounds who want to get into this career, so they can start their journeys, right from their undergraduate degree up to postgraduate level.

This shows that collectives are also addressing issues like pipeline problems and engaging with wider public and members of marginalized communities to make higher education more accessible to them. They are also engaging with schools to make these disciplines more attractive to BME school students and assisting individuals from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds to get into university by providing pots of funds, or via fellowship and mentorship programmes. They particularly make very good use of social media platforms to facilitate conversations on pertinent issues. As such, the following statement by Melissa captures what doing “decolonising” means for such collectives,

Decolonising geography is not just about having more Black people in geography but actually keeping them, because Black people in geography do genuinely like the subject but dislike their experiences of it!

This statement thus shows that student- and academic-led collectives play a role in “decolonising” by amplifying and centring minority perspectives and needs, as a way of countering the whiteness and coloniality of their disciplines and the academy. However, such “decolonising” efforts made by student- and academic-led collectives also face challenges, including lack of legitimacy and resources given their marginal status within the wider HE landscape. Related to this, they also face backlash from wider public who often perceive these collectives as creating racial tensions, which may further delegitimize their voices, thus suggesting a need for a supportive environment for such efforts.

Conclusion and implications

This paper examines “decoloniality” or “decolonising” both as an emergent conceptual language and praxis within the UK HE through the cases of the disciplines of history and geography. It argues that, on the one hand, “decolonising” in UK HE is being articulated as a “new” *language* aimed at addressing racialized inequality and coloniality within each of these disciplines and the academy. As a “new” language, “decolonising” is being deployed through three key currents/positions, namely (a) the neoliberal university system; (b) universities’ diversification strategies; and (c) by activism-oriented scholars; such that each current is fraught with tensions. In the context of the neoliberal universities and their diversification strategies, the articulation of “decolonising” can be seen as a top-down process, which exhibits dangers of neoliberal co-option of “decolonising” and its depoliticization; which fails to address structural inequalities, coloniality-induced racism and institutional

whiteness. However, tension also exists in the bottom-up usage of the concept, particularly between the older political language of anti-racism and the “newer” language of “decolonising”, suggesting a need for centring anti-racism within the “decolonial” imperative.

On the other hand, “decolonising” is also being articulated as *praxis* aimed at addressing racialized disparities and coloniality within the disciplines and the academy, which is nonetheless also fraught with practical and political challenges. As *praxis*, “decolonising” is being “done” at the practical/pedagogical level by various key actors, including (a) learned societies like RHS and RGS-IBG; (b) university departments; and (c) student- and academics-led collectives, who are acting as agents of “decolonising” through interventive measures such as public and community engagement, providing fellowships and funding sources and more. However, the key challenges they face include lack of institutional support and the difficulties or dilemmas in working within hegemonic colonial-neoliberal institutions and structures that have historically reproduced wider coloniality, whiteness and racialized inequalities. This further suggests that at the practical level, a collaborative effort across disciplines, their learned societies and HEIs, including with those on its margins such as collectives is a requisite to making meaningful “decolonial” changes.

As an implication therefore, this paper follows Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly’s (2021) argument that within the current context of neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university system, higher education requires a collective response and action to address the challenges, tensions and barriers that stand in the way of making meaningful changes. Given the recent “decolonial turn” in UK higher education, where the notion of “decolonising/decoloniality” is increasingly becoming (re)popularized, this collective response entails incorporating and engaging with anti-racism both at the conceptual and pedagogical levels, such that “decoloniality” particularly in UK HE is inadequate without anti-racist action. In a more practical sense, such collective response towards “decolonising” would entail establishing meaningful collaborations that stretch across disciplines, learned societies, university departments, research centres as well as collectives, students and staff, to work together in instituting the envisioned “decolonial” changes. Thus, by decoding “decoloniality” in the UK academy and identifying key tensions and challenges in “decolonising” history and geography, this paper contributes to the ongoing debates on pedagogical transformation and social justice aims within the disciplines under discussion, and both inside and outside HE.

Notes

1. This paper uses “decoloniality” and “decolonising” in an interchangeable manner to signal the contemporary usage of the term(s) as a way of contesting

racism and coloniality within UK HE, albeit acknowledging their conceptual differences (Mignolo 2011).

2. A “good degree” refers to a 2:1 or 1st class honours. This attainment gap has reduced from 13.3 percentage points in 2018/2019, which may in part be due to assessment changes due to Covid-19 (Advance 2021).
3. The term “BME” is used mainly as a blanket term to ensure anonymity, rather than to reify and essentialize the contentious category.
4. The quotation marks are to indicate that “decolonising” itself is a much older language and discourse rooted in colonial struggles particularly in the Global South but its usage is relatively “new” in Northern universities.
5. It must be noted that these practices are termed “decolonial” in a rather loose sense to simply refer to practices that are currently being done to address racialized inequalities, institutional whiteness and coloniality within UK HE.

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Social media excerpt

What does #decolonising mean in #UKAcademy? @rairohini06 and @Karis-Campion examine #decoloniality in #Britishhistory and #Britishgeography and argue for an #antiracist collaborative effort towards making #socialjustice transformations in #BritishHigherEducation. @RoyalHistSoc @RGS_IBG @brit-soci @EthnicityUK @MCRSociology @SocCommsBrunel @SLRC_DMU @ERSJournal

Twitter Handles: rairohini06 (Rohini); KarisCampion (Karis).

Disclosure statement

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

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