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Decolonising while white: confronting race in a South African classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore whether and how white people can make a meaningful contribution to decolonising university curricula. Drawing on my experiences as a white academic teaching at a South African university, I argue that identity matters when talking about decoloniality and that whites need to think carefully about the effects of their whiteness on their attempts to contribute to decolonial scholarship. I also suggest that white contributions to attempts to decolonise university curricula involve a kind of ambivalence that needs to be recognised and worked with, rather than denied and obscured. Without such recognition, white participation in decolonial struggles may ultimately do more to alleviate the guilt of white academics than it does to dismantle the hierarchies that decolonial struggles ostensibly oppose.

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Introduction

The #RhodesMustFall protests drew heightened attention to long-standing concerns about the need for the decolonisation of university curricula. Since then, much ink has been spilt on the topic. Indeed, Behari-Leak (2019, 58) suggests that there is something of a ‘decolonization hype’ at present and Moosavi (2020) warns that there are several dangers that need to be addressed by those clambering on the ‘decolonial bandwagon’ or else they may actually end up reinscribing coloniality (see also Vandeyar 2020). Voicing considerable scepticism about current enthusiasm for decolonisation, Tuck and Yang (2012, 3) argue that a ‘too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse’ can play out in a way that ultimately serves to ‘reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity’. There is a danger that writing on the topic of decolonisation may do more to help alleviate the guilt of white academics and to ensure their¹ continued prominence in academia than it does to meaningfully contribute to decolonial struggles.

In this short discussion piece, I reflect on the uneasy question of white involvement in decolonial struggles, using my positionality as a starting point. I am a white university lecturer teaching at a South African university. Over the last few years, I have been thinking about how to decolonise the curriculum in my disciplinary areas (Political Studies and African Studies). While the paper takes my context and disciplinary background

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as a starting point, I will keep my comments general enough to be applicable to those in other contexts and working in other disciplines. The article begins and ends with some personal anecdotes intended to illustrate the arguments laid out in the rest of the article.

Setting the scene

It is 2016 – a time of heightened student protests here in South Africa. In response to these protests, my academic department has invited our senior students to give us some honest advice about how we might go about decolonising our curriculum. The students welcome the opportunity and we have a robust but mostly cordial discussion. As the discussion is ending, a student seated next to me, who took an African Studies course with me the previous year, turns to me and says, with quite some anger, that I should not be teaching the African Studies course. ‘I need a black body in front of me!’ she says and points to one of my black colleagues saying something like ‘Why doesn’t she teach the course rather than you?’ I was quite shaken by her comments and by the visible anger behind them and I cannot remember exactly what I mumbled in reply (probably something rather defensive). This was not the first time (nor the last) when a student has said (or implied) that my whiteness makes me an unsuitable teacher at this time (and, particularly, an unsuitable teacher of a course focused on Africa), but I am yet to work out exactly how to respond. This article is an attempt to grapple further with the questions that arise in encounters like this one.

I have some ambivalence about starting the discussion with this incident. I fear that doing so invites some degree of sympathy towards me – ‘poor me, I’m doing my best to decolonise my teaching but some nasty students just refuse to see past my skin colour and say hurtful things’. My seeking such sympathy is a form of what DiAngelo (2018) and others call ‘white fragility’. However, I include a description of this incident as it usefully highlights the questions informing this article and may resonate with the experiences of others – both those who have come to feel like this student did and those who have been confronted like I was. Can white people play a genuine role in decolonising university curricula? If so, is their role different to that of black scholars? Are there particular issues that arise when white people try to embark on the decolonisation of university curricula? I cannot do justice to these complex questions in this short article, but I would like to share a few preliminary thoughts. In doing so, I must emphasise that I remain very unsure about the answers to these questions. For this reason, this article is not some kind of manual for white people who want to get decolonising right and is also not meant as a defensive response to black people who are sceptical of white people’s commitment to decolonisation. I am not qualified to write such a manual and I think such scepticism is for the most part justified. All I would like to do is to share some readings and throw out some tentative thoughts in the hope that they might be helpful to someone as we fumble our way towards more ‘decolonised’, curricula.

On bodies in the classroom

University curricula are communicated to students by human beings who are embodied in particular ways and who have particular identities and histories. Yet, some commentators note that we spend comparatively little time thinking about the body and

embodied experiences of scholars in the classroom. bell hooks (1994, 191) argues that academics are so well-schooled in Western metaphysical dualism that we have accepted the idea that the mind and the body are separate and believe that it is minds not bodies that should enter the classroom. From this perspective, the lecturer stands in front of the class as a disembodied mind interacting with other minds. But of course, this is not true. Each of us is embodied in a particular way and the bodies in which we dwell affect how others respond to us and interpret what we say.

When I stand in front of a class, I stand there embodied as a white woman. In my context – that of a university whose student body is now mostly black but was previously exclusively white – my presence may remind black students of the history of their exclusion from this place of learning. It might call to mind negative experiences they have had in previous classrooms where the instructor was white. Regardless of what I might say, the very fact that it is me – a white person – who has the authority to stand in front of the classroom and decide what will be in the curriculum is a reminder of the long history of white dominance in educational spaces in South Africa and of the fact that whites are still very much over-represented as academics, authors and educational authorities.

To say that identity matters in the classroom is not to say that the meaning that attaches to a person's race (or other identifying characteristics) is fixed and unchanging – not all white bodies will be interpreted in the same way, for example. As Cooks and LeBesco (2006, 235) explain: 'the teacher's body is slippery; privilege or oppression does not attach itself forever to a body but varies in interaction'. However, as Brisett (2020) observes, although our identities do not determine what we teach and how we teach it, our teaching is influenced by the identities we assume and which others attribute to us. Therefore, it is important to reflect on how our identities might influence what happens in the classroom.

There is now a considerable body of literature in which black instructors reflected on their experiences of teaching at predominantly white institutions in the West – just a few examples of this kind of writing are those by Brisett (2020), Dlamini (2002), Hartlep and Ball (2020), Tuitt et al. (2009) and Turner, González, and Wood (2008). In a useful summary of the experiences of black scholars at predominantly white institutions, Trower (2003, 3, 6) says that such scholars experience both overt and covert racism; feel isolated, excluded and marginalised; bear the burden of tokenism and feel that they have to 'represent' their race; experience the negative consequences of being perceived as being 'affirmative action' appointments; feel that they have to work harder to achieve tenure and promotion; and, finally, are generally less happy as academics and more likely to leave academia than their white counterparts. The above summary relates to the experiences of black scholars in the West, but there is a smaller body of literature focusing on the experiences of black scholars in the South African context – see for example Dass (2015), Hlatshwayo (2020), Hlengwa (2015), Khunou et al. (2019), Mahabeer, Nzimande, and Shoba (2018), Njovane (2015) and Potgieter (2002). While these scholars are teaching at South African universities, their experiences in many ways mirror those of their colleagues in the West as South African universities have also historically been dominated by white people.

While there is thus existing rich debate about what it means to be teaching while embodied as a black person, there is relatively little literature in which white academics

reflect on how their race affects their experience of the classroom (some exceptions are Behm Cross 2017; Davis, Mirick, and McQueen 2015; Jawitz 2016; Routley 2016). This lack of scholarship is itself reflective of the very problem that those calling for the decolonisation of universities are raising: there is something so apparently 'natural' about white people being positioned as scholars and teachers that it seems unnecessary to comment on what it is like to teach as a white person. While black university instructors often find the experience so uncomfortable and difficult that they are driven to write about it, white instructors seem to less often experience significant discomfort when positioned as teachers, regardless of the race of their students, and therefore are seldom compelled to write on this topic. Indeed, it was only once my own authority had been unsettled by incidents like the one described earlier that I was pushed to think more both about my privilege as a white educator and about my (un)suitability for the project of decolonisation.

The ambivalent position of white scholars in a decolonising classroom

The experience of having some students and colleagues show scepticism about my ability to understand and teach a decolonised curriculum, has pushed me to ask the question: Can white people make any meaningful contribution at all to decolonising university curricula? So far, my tentative response to this question is 'Whites should try to do so, but not assume their ability to do so or their right to participate in decolonial projects'. They should try to do so because to withdraw completely from all attempts at decolonising the curriculum is to leave the burden of decolonising on the shoulders of those who already bear the burden of racism and other forms of discrimination. Also, given how over-represented whites are in educational institutions around the world, any decolonised curriculum will have to be taught, at least in part, by white scholars (unless, of course, white scholars are to be driven out of the academy altogether, which is not something likely to be seriously recommended).

But do white scholars have to engage *differently* to black scholars? I suspect so. For the most part, any scholar committed to decolonising university curricula, has to follow a similar programme of reading, listening, reflecting and interrogating. I hope other contributions to this special issue will lay out some of the general work to be done. The focus of this paper is narrower: I ask what white scholars who wish to contribute to decolonial scholarship might need to do that other scholars do not need to do. As I have emphasised before, I remain very unsure about the answer to this question, but I have come to think that there is something ambivalent about white people's involvement in decolonial struggles and that whites need to recognise and work with this ambivalence rather than to try to obscure or deny it. There may be some ambivalence in other scholars' engagement with decolonisation too, but white participation in decolonial initiatives is *unavoidably* ambivalent and this has a range of implications.

What do I mean when I say that white involvement is unavoidably ambivalent? Acknowledging and addressing the wrongfulness of colonialism entails recognition of white complicity with colonialism. But there is something awkward about being complicit with colonialism *and* being an avowed advocate of decolonisation. Decolonisation must necessarily dismantle some of the benefits whites have come to enjoy. Whites might recognise the rightfulness of decolonisation, but surely cannot unambivalently

celebrate their loss of comfort, centrality and privilege. Critical commentators on this issue point out that white scholars often attempt to escape this awkward position by recentering themselves through vociferous participation in debates on decolonisation. Moosavi (2020, 343–345) warns that in so doing scholars from the Global North sometimes appropriate the ideas of those from the Global South and, in their eagerness to remain relevant, may displace such scholars. He asks scholars from the Global North to ‘step aside rather than taking up more space than [they] deserve’ (Moosavi 2020, 345). While he refers to Northern scholars rather than white scholars, the point applies in a similar way to white scholars. The implication of this is that whites need to work harder to demonstrate their commitment to decolonisation (because there are good reasons to doubt this commitment) and that they need to do so in a way that does not involve taking up too much space.

White people’s involvement in decolonial struggles is also ambivalent because this involvement almost inevitably functions as an example of what Tuck and Yang (2012) call ‘settler moves to innocence’. They define such moves as ‘strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege’ (Tuck and Yang 2012, 10). By inserting themselves into attempts to bring about a decolonised university, whites are trying to find a way to remain relevant and important and are, at least partly, acting out of a fear that decolonisation might render them irrelevant and unwanted. White participation in decolonial initiatives involves a kind of trade off: whites hope that their participation will enable them to claim the position of a ‘redeemed subject’ (Hook 2011, 28). Even if this is not their conscious or stated intention, white contributors to projects aiming to dismantle racism are likely to receive what Hook (2011, 29) calls ‘narcissistic gains’ linked to their involvement. By being involved in attempts to decolonise university curricula, white academics are able to distance themselves from racism and to present themselves as non-racist subjects whose presence ought to be welcomed and affirmed. In this way, they protect themselves from the possible loss of privilege and prestige that decolonisation may bring. Perhaps the real test for white contributors is whether they are willing to commit to decolonisation even when it seems that such commitment does not lead to any affirmation of their continued relevance.

White contributions to decolonising the curriculum are undermined by the ambivalence discussed above. Whites who are doing this work are both part of the problem *and* trying to be part of the solution. Occupying this ambivalent position does not mean that whites cannot make any meaningful contributions to decolonial initiatives, but in attempting to do so whites need to be aware of this ambivalence rather than trying to move too quickly beyond it. I am reminded here of Sara Ahmed’s comment that whites need to ‘inhabit the critique [of white racism], with its lengthy duration’ (2004) and of Samantha Vice’s (2010) call for white South Africans to recognise themselves ‘as a problem’ and to learn to live with this awareness. Both authors insist that the problem of white racism (and of colonialism) is a persistent one and that whites need to recognise its tenacity and their entanglement with it, rather than trying to ‘rush too quickly past the exposure of racism’ (Ahmed 2004) in order to present themselves as innocent, as on the ‘right side’, as ‘good whites’ who are contributing to decolonisation. Also useful here is Tuck and Fine’s (2007) discussion of their frustration with white people who, when presented with a critique of colonialism, ask ‘What can I possibly

do?’ This question, they argue, is an attempt to escape being an object of scrutiny and bearer of guilt by moving quickly to a position of action and innocence. Whites are so eager to be ‘part of the solution’ that they do not stop for long enough to reflect on the ways in which they might be part of the problem.

What does this look like in the classroom?

I began this piece by telling of an incident in which a black student suggested that my whiteness makes me an unsuitable person for teaching about Africa (or, perhaps, even for teaching at this juncture in South Africa at all). It seems fair to end the article by detailing where interactions like this one have led me since. I still teach African politics and, in so doing, clearly do not think that my whiteness makes it completely impossible for me to understand or teach about Africa. I do, however, recognise that white, non-African scholars have dominated, and still dominate, the study of Africa and I encourage students to recognise and respond critically to this continued dominance.² As part of eroding this dominance, my course on African politics is based principally, but not exclusively, on the work of African authors. But, of course, there is the irony of my own positionality – while I am South African by birth and upbringing,³ I am white and therefore there is a tension between my insistence that we ought to address the continued dominance of white scholars in African Studies and my own authority and influence as the lecturer of the course. When teaching the course, I comment briefly on this irony and respond to questions about it, without spending too much time focusing on my own positionality (partly due to my own discomfort, but also out of a desire not to make the question of my identity take up too much space). A few years ago, I introduced another change to the presentation of the course, by replacing some lectures with small group discussions, facilitated by a black postgraduate student. One of several motivations for this change was to de-centre my presence as a white person in the classroom. I attend these group discussions, but only to listen.

Do these changes mean that my course can be considered to be ‘decolonised’? I do not believe so. In a recent discussion of decoloniality, Lewis Gordon (2021, 16) suggests that we should not think of decolonisation as an objective and try to demonstrate that we have achieved decolonisation. He says that rather than focusing on ‘decolonisation *from*’, we should adopt a more forward-looking and open-ended orientation – a ‘decoloniality *for*’. This approach reminds us that the aim of any scholar participating in decoloniality ought not to be the demonstration that they have ‘arrived’ and are able to produce decolonised knowledge. But this insight is particularly important for white scholars whose attempts to produce ‘decolonised’ knowledge can function as attempts to present themselves as ‘redeemed’, non-racist subjects. Rather than this moralistic and potentially narcissistic response, perhaps it is better to acknowledge that struggles against coloniality are ongoing and that the contribution any of us can make is a partial, incomplete one which ought to be transcended and improved upon in the future. This is certainly the case with my course on African politics, which no doubt remains entangled in coloniality, but which will I hope will continue to change in response to the engagements I have every year with thoughtful, critical student participants in the course.

Conclusion

In concluding, I would like to acknowledge that my general experience of participating in initiatives to decolonise the curriculum has been that students and colleagues have been supportive of my efforts and have graciously welcomed my attempts to contribute.⁴ I am very grateful for that openness and trust. But the occasional more hostile response (such as the one I describe at the beginning of this article), has been helpful in preventing complacency and improving understanding. In my context, and so many others, there are several sticky, recalcitrant layers of racism and colonial oppression that cannot easily be understood and eliminated. The very brief foregoing discussion highlights some of the reasons why black scepticism of white involvement in curriculum decolonisation may be justified. Rather than insisting on their right to involvement in struggles for curriculum decolonisation, I suggest that white contributors need to be a bit more hesitant and vigilant about any implicit expectation that their apparent commitment to curriculum decolonisation earns them the right to be seen as redeemed subjects. But, ironically, the writing of this article is undoubtedly not the muting of my voice and my contribution to this special issue cannot escape the accusation that it is written in order to secure exactly the narcissistic gains I suggest whites forego.⁵ Avoiding engagement is not the right thing to do, but engaging can also not be the right thing to do. Curriculum decolonisation is a fraught and treacherous topic and the best way to contribute is difficult to discern. But this does not mean that we should not continue to try to move forward, however tentatively.

Notes

1. I struggled to decide which pronouns to use in this piece when referring to white people. As I am white, it makes sense for me to use 'we', 'our' and 'us' in reference to white people. However, doing so might make the article read like a discussion between 'us white people' and that is not my intention. For this reason, I use 'they', 'their' and 'them' when referring only to white people and reserve 'we', 'our' and 'us' for general comments that are aimed at all possible readers of this text.
2. For evidence of the continued dominance of non-African authors in African Studies, see Basedau (2020) and Briggs and Weathers (2016). For discussion of the implications of this continued dominance of non-African authors, see Adomako Ampofo (2016), Hountondji (2009) and Olukoshi (2006).
3. Some might say that my place of birth means that I can legitimately claim the identity 'African' and therefore that my contribution to scholarly writing on Africa can be considered to be an African contribution. For a range of reasons which I have laid out elsewhere (Matthews 2011, 2015), I do not think I can so easily assume the identity 'African'.
4. I am fortunate to work in a department and a faculty in which I feel generally supported by my colleagues and students. I would like to recognise and express gratitude for this support.
5. Derek Hook (2011) has some helpful thoughts about this kind of problem – see especially his comments on 'guilt superiority'.

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