

# Guest editors' introduction: Decolonising academia

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## Why decolonising academia again?

Engagements with decolonisation and decoloniality in the contexts of curricular and pedagogical transformations are not new. Several symposia, workshops, books, articles, and short pieces have engaged with this challenge, but still, the question remains: How to decolonise academia?

Whatever extent to which we engage with this phenomenon, it seems that it will not be enough. The moment we find a decolonial solution to a colonial knowledge-making problem, another challenge erupts. As a result, it is important to conceive the exercise of decolonising academia as an ongoing and inconclusive process. It is this insight that birthed this special issue on 'decolonising academia'.

This special issue has its origins in a symposium, held at Maynooth University on 27–28 October 2022, confronting urgent socio-political demands for academia to become more equitable, relevant, and transformative, while addressing challenges concerning knowledge hierarchies. The space and place where the symposium was conducted

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proved to be crucial context, as Maynooth University is a predominantly white, European cultural, and intellectual space. The symposium was a brief, two-day intervention, in which black, brown, coloured, and other non-white bodies and voices disrupted the colonial sanctity and linearity of academic spaces. Hopefully, this disruption will remain symbolically etched within academia's ideational and physical structures – its podiums, canteens, and corridors – on an ongoing basis.

The symposium opened up space to discuss the neoliberalisation of academia and the need to dismantle its systems, processes and ideologies, that underpin the hierarchies of academic knowledge production. The discussions included: reviving lost indigenous languages, celebrating fractured pedagogies, creative thinking as a tangential pathway of decolonial knowledge production, ethnic violence, postcolonial feminist anthropologies, decolonising social sciences, and many other topics. These different threads were theoretically, practically, and methodologically interwoven through the lectures and workshop discussions. The intention of the symposium was not to draw closures, but rather open up new and renewed avenues of decolonial knowledge-making, and experiment with practices that could dilute hierarchies and interrogate power structures. These intentions resulted in this special issue's articles, which hopefully continue the processes of collective thinking, acting, and finding ways for building planetary solidarities against the visible and invisible colonial structures of knowledge production.

What does not bode well for decolonisation is the response of the neoliberal state that often doubles down, recolonising the lifeworld of academia for neoliberalism through disaster managerialism, consultancy contracting, and continuous assaults on education and educators. Thus, in academic spaces, from the classroom to academic publications, scholars have a vital role in encouraging new and diverse opinions to be voiced, and heard. New voices and ideas are also critical for the undoing and unlearning of embedded cultures of knowledge production that systematically reproduce the marginalisation of the already marginalised. Academic spaces have the important task of challenging power hierarchies and encouraging dialogues that are intersectional, and diverse, thus, putting the margins at the centre.

The symposium was initiated by two early career scholars, Bhargabi Das and Sayan Dey, leading to conversations between academics across disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, Early Irish, Mathematics, History, and Law among others, and was attended by academics and activists from the United Kingdom, the United States, South Africa, India, Ghana and Ireland. The idea was to create bridges between Irish scholars and academics, from across the world, invested in the project of decolonisation of academia and desiring to learn from each other, sharing both the challenges and joys of being on this journey of decolonisation. This event enabled precarious and minoritised academics to find resonances of their own anxieties, helped many to understand the politics of whiteness in academia, and fostered new and supportive academic friendships.

Interestingly, the symposium also contributed to the formation of the Maynooth chapter of the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation, a union of PhD and early career researchers who have been demanding worker status and rights for PhD students in Ireland. The symposium provided a space for PhD students to gather, engage in conversations surrounding precarity, connect these practical problems to an agenda for

decolonising academia, and in the process helped affected PhD students to develop mutual support. Finding supportive shoulders that support precarious (often non-white, often female) academics, and even uplift them, has been one of the biggest contributions of the symposium. The fact that precarious scholars of colour were leading the conversation and claiming academic space, openly criticising and calling out neoliberal and racist academia, matters for questions of representation, making visible otherwise erased faces and stories, thus taking charge of change-making.

### **This special issue consists of five articles**

In an important, perhaps groundbreaking, article for Irish sociology: ‘Black Unsettlement: Embodied Blackness and Black Studies in the Irish context’, Phil Mullen offers a crucial, little-explored, and deeply authentic critical perspective on Black Studies in Ireland today. Mullen’s essay unpacks what a sociology incorporating Black and critical race studies might mean in Ireland, juxtaposing being ‘Black while Irish’, against the epistemological challenge posed by being ‘Irish while Black’, speaking back against a sociological condition of ‘unexpected Irishness’ and ‘#LivingWhileBlack’, in a social order conditioned by antiblackness. Mullen’s article offers a key intervention explaining how race, and antiblackness as a specific sociological form, comprise an organising grammar of coloniality. Mullen’s article both challenges the normative whiteness prevailing in Irish sociology and expands critical thinking, theorising and engagement, to take Black Studies and Irish sociology beyond the performative avoidance and ignorance around race on the one hand, and the non-performative quality of ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ management efforts, on the other.

Nasrin Khandoker’s article, ‘Decolonising Anthropology from the Margin: A post-colonial and feminist anthropologist from South Asia in Europe’, auto-ethnographically analyses the trajectory of an anthropologist and feminist from South Asia to Europe, turning anthropology’s gaze from the margin to the centre. While describing this trajectory, the article presents a comparison between the disciplinary trends of knowledge production by European scholars and by scholars from ‘other cultures’. Through this comparison, Nasrin suggests the need for a focus on decolonial politics in anthropology in the global North.

Bhargabi Das’s article titled, ‘Loneliness of PhDing: Migrant bodies of colour and Irish neoliberal academia’ is an autoethnographic account that looks at her own experience of pursuing a PhD in a white, neoliberal Irish academia. Das, a migrant woman academic of colour, unpacks why loneliness sticks to some bodies more than others and delves into questions of racist politics in Ireland to find answers. The paper then looks at how neoliberal university spaces aggravate, and contribute to, experiences of loneliness of migrant PhD academics of colour. Thus, it understands loneliness as a political reality (rather than a subjective affective reality alone) and evaluates the structures that sustain this reality. Putting the concepts of ‘care’ and ‘community’ at the centre of practising decoloniality, the paper finally brings forth discussions surrounding tools that can be used by migrant precarious academics of colour, to counter neoliberalism and racism in academic spaces and practices.

With ‘Decolonising Medieval Irish Studies’, Elizabeth Boyle, Chelsey Collins, Victoria Krivoshchekova, Seungyeon Lee, Truc Ha Nguyen, and Tiago Veloso Silva provide a collective standpoint that looks critically at academic experiences within Medieval Irish Studies, with the view to engage in a wider conversation on decolonial discourses and praxes. They do so by highlighting the colonial origins of their area of study, while interrogating the contemporary effects of those origins on power relations, minority experiences, and anti-colonial strategies in the discipline. They also offer a range of possibilities for decolonising academic business-as-usual, thus speaking to the urgent need to engage decolonial praxis within the neoliberal university settings of today.

In the article ‘Decolonising the Social Sciences’, Su-Ming Khoo situates the social sciences in relation to the current world system. Discussing the context of decolonial-postcolonial, white-Catholic, and semi-peripheral contradictions of Ireland, Khoo highlights ‘decolonial repair’ as a possible strategy for healing colonial wounds and reimagining and recreating a more diverse world. As a part of the reparative exercise, Khoo invites us to collectively realise the simultaneous necessity for both the colonisers and the colonised to overcome and transform coloniality’s legacies.

## **Ways forward**

Neoliberal academia portrays itself as creating more inclusive spaces by making universities more diverse, where diversity acts as merely a token for marketing to students and parents who are increasingly treated as consumers. However, the precarious and the marginalised continue to have no real power. In a context such as this, how should the conversation about ‘decolonisation’ spill over and spread, particularly when the term has become trendy, and even actively appropriated by the right wing in countries like India, as a tool to spread hate politics?

It is crucial for conversations about ‘decolonisation’ to identify and clarify what is meant by ‘the colonial’, and to acknowledge that its meaning might change depending on context. Contexts are always intersectional, having multiple axes that require continuous reflexivity and dialogue, recognising a plurality of identities and geopolitical locations. In practice, decolonising academia involves creative collaboration, transgressing divisions between students and academics, and among countries and cultures. Decolonising academia involves the entire exercise of knowledge exchange becoming more equal, pluralising knowledge, while bringing marginalised knowledge into the centre. Knowledge that is embodied in varied media and languages should not be excluded from the curriculum, while a decolonised academia should enable varied knowledge to be understood, discussed and circulated, redressing the dominance of academic English. Decolonising academia points to a reimagination of academic language itself.

We began this editorial with the question of ‘how to decolonise academia’, but we might conclude this with a ‘why’ question. While decolonising efforts ordinarily take into account multiplicity, context, curriculum, and language, we believe that something more may be needed. We sense that decolonising academia points to deeper questions about decoloniality’s ultimate goals, but these must remain beyond the scope of this


special issue. We are only beginning a struggle to find common foundations, while acknowledging the necessity of pluriversality, the need to counter the monological character of neoliberal academia, and to guide those invested in the process of decolonisation.

Perhaps alternative systemic values, such as care, or decolonial love, point to different relational possibilities for academia. Love is mentioned as an alternative guiding principle for educational ecosystems and learning spaces, by thinkers as diverse as bell hooks, Gandhi, Tagore, and Freire. Love applies to learning, friendship, love for each other, for the surroundings and the world, along with love for oneself. Any action within academic spaces should be informed by love. What this really means is a question that we would like to keep open to generate ongoing debate and conversations. What decolonising academia means, and what it practically implies, should ultimately be an open question for all who inhabit it, embody it and dream it.

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