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RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Un)Doing performative decolonisation in the global development 'imaginaries' of academia

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In Western academic spaces, more and more stakeholders are claiming commitments to 'decolonisation'. Yet in environments shaped by rankings, impact factors, citation numbers and third-party funding figures, what claims to be decolonial scholarship can easily end up being as extractive and violent as the subject it is claiming to confront. In this article, we reflect on attempts to decolonise both the discipline and practice of 'development', especially with regard to knowledge 'production' in this academic disciplinary space. We are doing this from a particular situatedness that is itself contradictory, as we are both facilitators of an EU-funded network focused on 'Decolonising Development' and of Convivial Thinking, a non-institutional, transnational web-based collective. We argue that imperial forms of knowing and making sense of the world are deeply entrenched in the structures of higher education, both shaping and limiting the ways in which what we call 'development' is researched, taught and practised. By reflecting on instances of academic activism and institutional pushback in both aforementioned networks, we show how institutional violence limits scholarly imaginations in ways that make sure academic or dominant knowledge structures are not radically challenged, thereby making claims of decolonisation purely performative. Despite this, we also point to concrete openings in both networks where undoing the entanglements of decolonising narratives, 'development' and the imperatives of scholarship – and thereby dismantling the master's house that sustains it – seems within reach.

Keywords development • decolonisation • academia • hierarchies • activism

Key messages

- The article asks what the possibilities and limitations are of decolonising development in academia, thereby undoing epistemic violence in the structures of higher education of which we are a part.
- The article asks what the risks and dangers are of perpetuating and reproducing it by co-opting the label of 'decoloniality'.
- The article asks whether we are trapped in the master's house despite claiming otherwise.

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Introduction

In Western academic spaces, more and more stakeholders and associated activities are claiming commitments to 'decolonisation'. At the same time, the ethics of decolonial scholarship are extremely difficult to practise and defend in academic spaces that incentivise and reward individualised/singular endeavour measured through productivity, competition and professionalisation (see Pereira, 2019). As a result, in an environment shaped by rankings, impact factors, citation numbers and third-party funding figures, what claims to be decolonial scholarship can easily end up being as extractive and violent as the subject it is claiming to confront.

Audre Lorde (1981), challenging racism and homophobia within higher education (HE) and especially the social sciences, famously quipped that 'the master's tools would never dismantle the master's house'. While the quote is referenced in many contexts, it seems particularly apt for critical explorations within the field of 'development' studies, especially in relation to engaging with the calls to decolonise the discipline. 'Development' is a highly contested term.[2] On first sight, its normatively positive promise of betterment and improvement seems uncontentious. However, historical contextualisation highlights that since its 'invention' in Truman's (1949) infamous speech, 'development' as a practice, a discourse, a paradigm and a field of study has been shaped by power divides, structured along the lines of race, class and gender, and fraught with the legacies and continuities of coloniality (Ziai and Schöneberg, 2020; Kothari and Klein, 2023). Esteva (1992: 10) has poignantly called 'development' an amoeba term, an 'empty signifier', which can be filled with any kind of meaning. Despite this 'emptiness', it is nonetheless a terminology with which we have become inexorably tangled, 'a central referent in our global discourse', where 'development' has become 'an ontological object, a "something" that we promote, measure, observe, critique or reject' (Narayanaswamy, 2023: 228). Critical contestations from postcolonial and decolonial, as well as post-development, schools are all in agreement that 'development' practice and knowledge continue to be shaped by Western universalist ideas, most prominently, those of evolutionism, progress and growth, in turn, encoded in global-level agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (see Telleria, 2022). It is not just the concept of 'development' that is built on these dichotomous and Eurocentric logics but the structures that produce knowledge about the same too. We therefore need to question the foundations that uphold, in Lorde's words, the master's house and our own role in maintaining them. What are the tools we draw on as academics, and whose are they?

In this article, we explore the roles we assume and the spaces available for, if not dismantling, then at least destabilising the master's house. We are asking: what are the possibilities and limitations of decolonising 'development' in academia? How can we claim to be undoing epistemic violence in the structures of HE of which we are a part, and what are the risks and dangers of perpetuating and reproducing it by co-opting the label of 'decoloniality'? Are we trapped in the master's house despite our best efforts? And how do we negotiate the political activism that our 'decolonial' activities necessitate within a professionalised academy that encourages us to occupy both 'neutral' and deliberately 'technocratic' positionalities?

It is from this point of departure that we feel it is necessary to collectively reflect on ongoing efforts to decolonise both the discipline of 'development' studies and the practice of 'development'. We would see these as explicitly 'political' contestations

that require as a response forms of academic activism that would engage actively, though of course not exclusively, with challenging the knowledge 'production' norms in this academic disciplinary space (see Narayanaswamy, 2017; Narayanaswamy and Schöneberg, 2020). We are doing this from a particular situatedness that is itself contradictory. Being firmly located in the master's house as academics working in universities in the UK and in Germany, we are also facilitators of both the European Union (EU)-funded European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Action network 'Decolonising Development' (which is predominantly white and Northern based) and the CT collective (which is non-institutional, unfunded and transnational). Both networks claim to bring to the fore pluriversal, dynamic ways of knowing the world (see Kothari et al, 2019) that seek to decentre Western 'development' frames yet are continuously encountering challenges that function as antithetical to 'decolonising development', notably, structural and institutional restrictions.

The norms that shape, and indeed limit, how we conceptualise 'development' are similarly foundational in the function of the academy. The pursuit of 'scholarship', shaping the way we are taught and teach, and the research we undertake, is almost always about impact, understood in a very linear path and pursuit (see Hayman et al, 2016; Maisuria and Cole, 2017). Similar to 'development' work, its success must be measurable, framed within objectives, indicators and timelines for achieving quantitative measures of output, outcome and impact, which reflects very much our engagement in the COST Action network. This logic is antithetical to what Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2021: 178) describe as 'the messiness of, and contradictions inherent within, anti-racist scholar-activism', a contention we feel can be reasonably broadened to incorporate 'decolonial' entanglements with scholar activism in the 'development' space, all of which are often reactive and never linear. Inevitably, activism remains always incomplete, open-ended and far from measurable through indicators. This 'messiness' echoes our experience of working together with our CT collective, as well as those moments we have tried to offer solidarity or raise awareness of particular issues within the COST Action network. These polarising tendencies raise questions for us about what it means to decolonise in spaces of 'development' studies, how 'decoloniality' might be enacted and what might constitute the pitfalls and limitations. On first sight, it looks like the bureaucracy of academia simply cannot coexist with more fluid, reactive forms of activism. However, as we will lay out later, we believe that marrying scholarship with activism is absolutely an imperative, with universities offering what Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2021: 220) identify as 'pockets of contradiction and possibility', in turn, creating what Pereira (2016: 100) suggests are 'new possibilities for the development of forms of publicly and politically engaged academic practice', an imperative we argue is especially urgent within the highly political field of 'development' studies.

We acknowledge that this activism has limits, embodied first and foremost in our modes of communication, including this article itself. While we strive to write accessibly, imperial forms of knowing and making sense of the world are deeply entrenched in the structures of HE, both shaping and limiting the ways in which what we call 'development' is researched, taught and practised (see Narayanaswamy, 2023). To be 'taken seriously', we must write in a professional, jargonised English, aping the norms of mainstream 'development' discourse and practice (Narayanaswamy, 2019), and in recognisable academic formats that are policed within the boundaries

of 'peer review' (see Narayanaswamy and Schöneberg, 2020). Nor is open access (OA) a possible remedy; OA may itself potentially create new forms of inequality in both knowledge production and accessibility, as the capacity to cover OA costs is unevenly distributed globally, thus privileging wealthier, primarily Global North scholars and institutions (Demeter and Istratii, 2020), which means that our words and ideas are more likely to circulate owing to our academic positionality. Paywall or not, it is difficult to deviate from the professionalised norms related to the language and format of academic publishing. These are challenging issues, and even as we write, we are also struggling with both our (perceived) insights and our complicity in the knowledge worlds we seek to undo. We hope in this academic endeavour that we might ultimately illuminate the challenges of scholar-activist collaboration: messy, contested, incomplete and full of contradictions but nonetheless integral to our academic lives.

In this article, we will first sketch out our own positionalities and understanding of socially committed scholarship, including the challenges we identify around academic activism. We will then set out the historical and contemporary discourses and shifts we observe in academic realms with regards to decolonisation and 'development' research. Finally, we will critically reflect on the politics, possibilities and limits of 'decolonial' activism around 'development' and 'development' studies, and the openings we see created by tangible solidaristic practices within higher education. By reflecting on instances of academic activism and/or institutional pushback in both aforementioned networks, we show how institutional violence limits scholarly imaginations in ways that make sure academic or dominant knowledge structures are not radically challenged, thereby making claims of decolonisation purely performative. Despite this, we also point to concrete openings in both networks where undoing the contradictory entanglements of 'decolonising development' narratives and the imperatives of scholarship – thereby dismantling the master's house that sustains it – seem within reach.

Scholar-activist/activist scholar: a tautology or an oxymoron?

'Decolonising development' has been a long-standing commitment between the two of us. We first met during an online conference that Lata hosted in 2017 and at which Julia was one of the keynote speakers. We continued to discuss these issues, and in early 2019, we hosted 'How do we "know" the world?', a collaborative writing project with scholar-activists from diverse backgrounds, bringing together a wealth of positions and reflections on the epistemological and methodological dimensions of this question. 'How do we "know" the world' is not a call to take an inventory of specific facts or perspectives but a question that we ask in order to help frame a more critical and reflexive approach to the assumptions that underpin (academic) perceptions of 'what' counts as knowledge, 'how' we capture and communicate that knowledge, and 'who' gets to both shape and present ideas as academic (read: expert) knowledge (Narayanaswamy and Schöneberg, 2020).

Despite positivist claims of objectivity and neutrality around knowledge-creation processes, the world is much more complex than can be captured by universal(ist) theory (see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). Icaza and Sheikh (2023: 204) instead articulate a need to engage 'of and with collectivity around verbs that most of us use and act on daily, instead of nouns or concepts', in turn, seeking to 'unleash

the creative decolonizing force of the storyteller'. Temporality is key to engagement with coloniality. 'Colonization is not an event', Muñoz-García et al (2022: 641–2) tell us from their vantage point as 'feminist, Indigenous, and non-Indigenous Latinx scholars' working with indigenous Mapuche women in Chile, 'but rather a continuous present in which we all grew up'. It is these calls to engage with positionality, with stories, with change and with temporality that situate our scholarly activism and activist scholarship, especially in the context of 'development' studies as one fluid site of shifting historical and contemporary colonial entanglements.

It follows, then, that how we are located, both in terms of space and intersectional identity, determines our view of the world. As Sultana (2007: 376) reminds us, being reflexive about positionality allows researchers to see where they are in the 'grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production'. We are taking Sultana's prompt to reflect on our situatedness, both in terms of what we understand as scholarship led by intersectional-feminist theories and, drawing on Duckworth's (2020) 'wheel of privilege', to remind ourselves how 'intersectional' aspects of our identity determine how we access power and privileges in many regards, while we may experience exclusions in others. In foregrounding our positionalities, we want to heed Idahosa and Bradbury's (2020: 31) warning to avoid such declarations being simply 'self-indulgent and paralysing'. On the contrary, our positionalities reveal the cognitive dissonances of how 'decolonising development' is too often understood in the academy and our own sometimes contradictory attempts to address, and hopefully (begin to) dismantle, colonial structures in HE (see also Bilgen et al, 2021; le Bourdon, 2022).

Julia is a white able-bodied cis-woman from a privileged German middle-class upbringing. Beyond gender, there have been few glass ceilings and discriminations that she has had to face in life so far. Her scholarship is informed by intersectional feminism, and she has always felt the need and urgency to bring the occupations of scholarship and social justice activisms together. She is, like the majority of post-doctoral researchers in Germany, employed on a precarious, fixed-term contract with recurring phases of unemployment. Attempting to position oneself on the academic job market requires (at least this is what one is told) some strategic publishing (read: a high quantity of single-authored articles in high-ranked journals), as well as success in acquiring highly competitive third-party funding.

Lata is a heterosexual cis-woman born in Canada into a South Asian body that became, by definition, minoritised, a positionality that has not changed with the addition of dual UK citizenship, except perhaps having gone from being a second- to first-generation immigrant. Simultaneously, Lata's was a firmly middle-class, upper-caste (Brahmin) upbringing that came with high expectations of academic achievement and professional success. After some stints at precarity, Lata is now a mid-career, permanently employed academic at a Russell Group (read: elite and research-intensive) HE institution in the UK.

Even as we write this article, we are both also actively engaged with our respective trade unions as part of academic activism directed at our employers that draws on our intersectional experiences and is part of our efforts to challenge the neoliberal and colonial logics underpinning the function of the sector. Julia is also engaged in decolonial activist groupings in her local community, such as Düsseldorf Postkolonial, which is campaigning for a comprehensive culture of restorative justice and remembrance of the colonial past and its legacy. Perhaps ironically – given that our

research focuses on 'decolonisation' – these efforts also remain largely hidden from our 'professional' pursuit of 'decolonising development', a cognitive dissonance that highlights forcefully the artificial distinction that HE knowledge structures foist upon 'decolonising development' as an academic pursuit, deliberately delinked from the activism that sustains it.[3]

From these positionings, the answer to the somewhat rhetorical question posed in the heading is obvious. Olufemi (2020) argues that 'feminist work is justice work' and, as such, scholarship from a feminist positioning inevitably bears the responsibility to be socially and politically engaged. With this call, alongside a critical reading of Freire, one could even argue whether the differentiation between the abstractedness of theory and the applicability of praxis is always useful. Freire (2017 [1970]: 60, emphasis in original) states that when a:

> word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating 'blah.' It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.

We draw inspiration and guidance for our scholarly work from the ideas outlined earlier, but beyond the abstract feeling of responsibility to avoid shallow signifiers, what could an activist scholarship or scholarly activism in the context of 'development' studies really mean? Here, we feel that it is worth highlighting that 'activism' is itself a challenging term; not all activism may be deemed progressive or 'left-wing'. The language of 'activism' undertaken with and through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society invariably carries these connotations (see Narayanaswamy, 2017), but activism within HE may also entail, as Bob (2013) reminds us, support for right-wing movements and associated political positions. In reality, 'decolonising' initiatives, which, as we note later, have been widely accepted as timely and important across academic spaces, may nonetheless generate reactions from indifference to outright hostility and, as Loyola-Hernández and Gosal (2022) found, may frequently echo right-wing activist talking points.

Indeed, the more worrying trend is the explicit ways in which right-wing movements establish legitimacy, and even platforms, from engagement with right-wing academic activists (Bob, 2013) and that 'decolonisation', we further note, is increasingly at the centre of the backlash. While we will return to the ways in which the uptake of 'decolonisation' imperatives poses a direct challenge to the positivist, racialised 'development' imaginaries of our mainstream discourse, we feel strongly that activism to counter such backlash entails not just challenging others but reflecting on our own entanglements. Muñoz-García et al's (2022: 649) reflections on their own journeys, drawing on McKittrick's appeal to 'unknowing ourselves', are instructive here:

> In the context of this project, unknowing ourselves has been a hard and complex process but it invites us to work our ideas relationally, breaking up with various theories, knowledge, ways of writing academically, and authors we love but that are far from giving us enough content for questions that are in the margins of the scholarly work.

Therefore, in order to 'unknow' and ultimately attempt to 'undo', we must first reflect on what we think we know about, in this case, both 'decolonisation' and 'development'.

What do we mean by 'decolonisation' and 'decolonising'?

Our own misgivings notwithstanding, interrogating the purpose and direction of 'decolonisation' is a timely endeavour, not least because of the (performative) enthusiasm with which this agenda has been embraced in spaces deemed to be progressive, notably, HE. We may observe how these ideas have been enthusiastically taken up within 'development' discourse and practice, spawning podcasts, new guidance, policy briefs and training on the part of 'development studies' programmes in HE, international NGOs, bilateral and multilateral donors, and philanthropic foundations. Indeed, we have ourselves been professionally invited to support and facilitate 'decolonisation' projects across UK and German academic and non-academic 'development' spaces, a process that accelerated considerably in light of the Black Lives Matters protests that erupted worldwide in response to the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the US in 2020. Attempts to 'decolonise' are very much becoming a new norm, including within those spaces that we might label notionally as linked to 'development' studies and its curriculum, even if the purpose and eventual outcome of such ideas – which may be broadly about diversity, anti-racism, equality or inclusion (see Eten Angyagre and Hannam, 2022) – 'risk reproducing what neoliberal corporate engagements with calls for decolonisation, diversity and inclusion have been doing so well: adding and stirring at the service of a silent and disavowed reproduction of the colonial status quo' (Rutazibwa, 2023: 325; see also Kothari and Klein, 2023: 107).

First, we feel that it is important to attempt a definition of what we, departing from our specific situatedness as 'development studies' scholars in Western Europe, understand as 'decolonising'. Tuck and Yang (2012) have forcefully argued that decolonisation is not and cannot be a 'metaphor' and, indeed, taking a historical view, decolonisation movements are 'associated with struggles against colonizers in stolen lands' (Sondarjee and Andrews, 2023: 2). Beyond this very material dimension of decolonisation, the so-called 'decolonial turn' has shifted to include colonial structures of power and knowledge. As Maldonado-Torres (2011: 2) points out, decolonial thinking has always existed, yet through the works of 'Aimée Césaire and Frantz Fanon … Sylvia Wynter, Enrique Dussel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lewis Gordon, Chela Sandoval, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others', a profound shift from modernisation to decoloniality has become more pronounced. In fact, the term 'decolonisation' has now become 'associated with freedom from intersubjective power structures based on racial hierarchies in modernity, racial capitalism, and epistemic violence' (Sondarjee and Andrews, 2023: 2). The imperatives for action that Sondarjee and Andrews (2023: 11) derive from this are threefold: '1) abolishing racialized hierarchies of bodies, 2) dismantling the geopolitics of knowledge production, and 3) rehumanizing our relationships with other humans and with nature'. While debates around decolonising are relevant for all aspects of 'development' theorising and practice, we are focusing on the colonial politics of knowledge production about 'development' within the academy, the second point that Sondarjee and Andrews put forward. For further conceptual clarification, we align with Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu (2018: 2),

who identify two key referents of decolonising: the first being a 'way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study'; and the second offering 'alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis'.

Part of the questioning and dismantling of the geopolitics of knowledge production are the calls for decolonising the university that are multiple and have been voiced in various geographical locations over the past few years. In the UK context, 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' has gained prominence, and in South Africa, the Rhodes Must Fall movement has been especially vocal. There are too many campaigns and contestations to name, and the demands are varied. As Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu (2018: 1) note, many of the groups build on, and take inspiration, from wider demands for social justice and anti-racism. At the same time, institutions are taking up the calls for 'decolonising', and workshops, conferences, strategy papers and awareness days are framed under the heading of 'decolonising'. Noting caution, Moosavi (2020) warns us of jumping on the 'decolonial bandwagon' simply because it has become fashionable. He points to the dangers of intellectual decolonisation that, in line with Tuck and Yang's critique, can be very much at risk of being purely performative, tokenistic and/or essentialist and nativist (Moosavi, 2020).

This warning seems especially apt in institutional contexts that are not only shaped by a neoliberal logic but also, as we will lay out later, imbued with a deeply colonial logic. Much has been said about neoliberal logics and structures within academia generally and the geopolitics of knowledge production, especially the politics of citation and publication (Brunila, 2016; Gair et al, 2021). These deliberations have focused, in particular, on struggles for promotion, pedagogical challenges, the imperatives of hyper-productivity and confrontations with bureaucracy and institutional politics (see Pereira, 2016). We also note that engaged decolonial scholarship also intersects with contestations around unpaid labour in academia and the particular burdens placed on People of Colour (PoC) and Black scholars (Anonymous, 2023). Of course, we ourselves both observe and experience these concerns, but for our purposes here, we especially want to focus on the nexus of neoliberal and colonial logics, and what calls for decolonisation might mean for us not only as scholars working at universities caught up in these logics but also specifically as scholars based in the field of 'development'.

'Development' as an ontological 'object': coloniality in HE

The second large conceptual block of our deliberations, then, is the paradigm, the narrative and the practice of 'development'. It is important to reflect critically on the notion of 'development', to which 'decolonisation' is, as we have found from our own experience, increasingly intrinsically linked in the professional and academic spaces in which we both move. Whether or not the word 'development' itself is a term that could be considered a part of our everyday lexicon is not something we could reasonably or empirically assert one way or another. What is striking, however, is that the ideas that underpin notions of 'development', including articulations of 'modernity', 'wealth', 'rich worlds'/'poor worlds' and 'civilisation' (see Dunford, 2017), are definitely foundational concepts in how we 'know' the world in mainstream academic and political discourses.

For those of us who align ourselves broadly to the field of 'development' studies, we are heavily invested in an immovable or fixed ontological something we are calling 'development'. Recent interventions include mapping different types of 'development studies' (Sumner, 2022) and arguing for a more universalist approach to 'development' in a post-COVID-19 world (Oldekop et al, 2020; Leach et al, 2021). Critiques of these positions abound, raising concerns, for instance, of a decentring of Global South histories, knowledges and agency (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022; Wiegratz et al, 2023). In all of these interventions, however, no one seems to question whether part of our shared concern should be our ontological investment in something called 'development' in the first place.

Yet, Julia, drawing on Ziai (2016), has made explicit critiques around the need to abandon this terminology and what it represents entirely (Schöneberg, 2019). This call has been echoed by others, including by Rutazibwa (2023: 329), who, in reflecting on anti-colonial thought and 'international development studies', asks us to broaden our lens to consider 'what needs to go, beyond that what needs to be enriched or reformed', as part of 'how we have organised and sacralised knowing through canons and disciplines'. Despite such calls, these voices are squarely in the minority, raising questions about not only the opportunities but also the constraints of an academic-activist project seeking to 'decolonise development'. Furthermore, before we can contemplate what a decolonial project engaged in 'development' might look like, including our own, we need to interrogate further how we, as academics, are implicated in the persistence of 'development' as a foundational discursive norm for how we understand our academic selves and the world around us. Moreover, it is a norm that is intrinsically linked to coloniality that we are seeking to dismantle.

Seeing the world as 'developed' versus 'developing' has a well-established history that is not simply reflected in but overtly fuelled by an HE sector designed to protect and promote particular elite interests. While access to education is now considered a universal human right, it would be naive to presume that it exists outside the social, political and economic systems in which it is designed and delivered. Drawing on the work of Amadiume (2000) and Kothari (2005), Lata has previously argued that during the period of empire, education 'was not about redistributing power but was instead meant to "civilise" populations in the imperial colonies through interventions promoted by organisations linked to either the church or the monarch' (Narayanaswamy, 2017: 5). Empire offered a laboratory to test ideas around modernity that took as its core the establishment of the 'native, other' to justify the colonial enterprise and its main mechanisms of land expropriation and universalising, for instance, Enlightenment principles against a perceived 'barbarism' (see Dunford, 2017).

So, what of the role of HE? Hall and Tandon (2017) remind us of the centrality of the elite university to the establishment, maintenance and proliferation of the modernisation project. Dividing the world into 'civilised' and 'uncivilised/barbaric' mirrors contemporary developed–developing divides, and this is a process that they suggest started before, but then rapidly accelerated throughout, the period of European imperial expansion, universalising both what and how we 'know':

> The act of creating … medieval universities was an act of enclosing knowledge … providing a means for a small elite to acquire this knowledge for the purposes of leadership of a spiritual, governance or cultural nature. *Those within the walls became knowers; those outside the walls became non-knowers*….

> The enclosing of the academy dispossessed the vast majority of knowledge keepers, forever relegating their knowledge to witchcraft, tradition, superstition, folkways or, at best, some form of common sense. (Hall and Tandon, 2017: 8, emphasis added)

Whether it is the science of eugenics established by Francis Galton at University College London or the role of Western intellectuals like German philosopher Hegel – whose reflections, deemed central to the social science 'canon', provided post hoc justifications for European colonial expansion and the slave trade (Hegel, 2001 [1837]: 116–17] – universities have been central to producing knowledge that legitimises imperial world views premised on reinforcing race, gender and class divides:

> In many cases universities and intellectuals were responsible for upholding the legitimacy of racist hierarchies and the necessity of colonialism in the West *against the grain* of anti-colonial and anti-racist social movements and intellectuals in the colonies, and subsequent grassroots movements for the abolition of colonialism and racism in the West. (Gani and Marshall, 2022: 9, emphasis in original)

In short, universities offered spaces where ideas to justify colonial control and expansion could be further tested, codified and validated.

The world of politics and policy also intertwined seamlessly with academic spaces at the height of empire. Vadasaria and Perugini (2021) reflect critically on the role of Arthur James Balfour – who was first prime minister and later foreign secretary in the UK while simultaneously holding the post of the chancellor of the University of Edinburgh from 1891 to 1930 – as part of a research project seeking to engage with the history of the University of Edinburgh as part of its 'decolonial agenda'. They note the centrality of the university to Balfour's colonial world-making commitments, with 'British academic space as an imperial project' that would 'further those great interests of knowledge, scientific research, and culture without which no Empire, however materially magnificent, can really say that it is doing to share in the progress of the world' (Balfour, 1903, quoted in Vadasaria and Perugini, 2021). Vadasaria and Perugini's revelations highlight well the persistence of arguments that empire was ultimately a force for good, for 'progress', echoing the justifications for 'development aid' to help the Global South to be more like 'us' (see Narayanaswamy et al, 2021). Balfour was not exceptional; Gani and Marshall (2022: 9) further note that academia has historically been complicit 'through a supply chain of academically trained experts who go on to work in policy, either as consultants or by holding office in government or in other state institutions such as the military'. Nor is this a colonial-era relic; this pipeline extends both across professional and temporal boundaries. In the context of 'development', 'aid' as we know it is, in fact, an extension of the colonial system that was implemented, as Hodge (2010) emphasises, by redeploying colonial-era officers as 'technical development' officers. These redeployed officers, in turn, went on to shape the main Bretton Woods institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and United Nations (UN) specialist agencies (Hodge, 2010) – reproducing the colonial logics that placed Western notions of both 'civilisation' and 'whiteness' at the heart of these global systems. Given the continuity of the colonial–postcolonial relationship, as evidenced by those who lived through these transitions,

it raises questions about the tendencies in what we continue to call 'development studies' to 'conjure up a clear disjuncture between colonial and development eras' (Kothari, 2006: 251). Taken together, the idea of a 'civilised' centre versus a barbarous periphery had already taken hold as a central organising principle for scholarship and policy/practice within European universities and beyond, which have carried over into how we teach and research about the world now. The result is that, 'far more so than Coca-Cola or Disney, it is the frameworks of knowledge, encapsulated in the academic disciplines, which have become universalized' (Lal, 2005: 124). This is no less true in our deliberations on the centrality of 'development' as an ontological object and disciplinary focus that mostly does not occur (according to the literature that we in this discipline produce) in a place called 'the Global South'.

Decolonising and 'development' go mainstream

So, how does the convergence between the historic colonial dynamics that underpin HE and the associated discursive 'world-making' norms that divide the world into developed and developing manifest in our mainstream present? We find a stark illustration of these foundational norms in the words of Josep Borrell (2022), High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in a speech he delivered at the European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges, Belgium, on 17 October 2022:

> Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that the humankind [sic] has been able to build – the three things together…. The rest of the world … is not exactly a garden…. Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden.

This is perhaps surprising coming from Borrell, who has historically aligned himself with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, given the prevalent assumption, which we will return to shortly, that it is a 'radical left' challenging these Western hegemonic foundational norms. As Lata notes in a recent book chapter (Narayanaswamy, 2023: 226): 'this quotation provides a rich illustration of the persistence of colonial ways of "knowing" the world' that consist of 'a "civilised" European "garden" … that places itself at the top of a hierarchy that is distinct from, and looks down upon, the untamed, unruly "jungle"'. Colonial ways of knowing, as illustrated by Borrell's words, reinforce ideas of a (raced) civilisational hierarchy between 'developed' and 'developing' places, and can, in fact, be found across the European political spectrum, cutting across left–right divides.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the most strident attacks on 'decolonisation' emanate from right-wing forces, where drawing attention to coloniality is perceived as a direct challenge to the idea that 'development' does indeed represent a form of heightened 'civilisation', embodied in the norms of not just Europe but an imagined, flattened 'West'. 'Decolonisation' has become the 'spectre' of right-wing ideologues keen to celebrate, rather than denigrate, European global colonial domination as perhaps regrettable at times but nonetheless a necessary and even benevolent global change process that is now a marker of Western progress, developed modernity and the 'natural' (liberal international) order (see, for example,

Ferguson, 2003; 2011). As noted earlier, right-wing academics have established activist formations like History Reclaimed (2023), which maintain a 'shared conviction that history requires careful interpretation of complex evidence, and should not be a vehicle for facile propaganda', in the face of what they claim are 'campaigns to rewrite the history of several democratic nations in a way that undermines their solidarity as communities, their sense of achievement, even their very legitimacy'.

Drawing at least some of its inspiration from the 'rigour' offered by the cover of academic endorsements, decolonisation is perceived as so meddlesome to a project of national (historical) pride in the current political moment that then-UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman spoke at the National Conservatism Conference in May 2023, convened by US right-wing think tanks in London, at which some members of History Reclaimed also spoke. She chose to express her concerns using the following language:

> The defining feature of this country's relationship with slavery is not that we practised it but that we led the way in abolishing it. We should be proud of who we are. But look at what the radical Left is preoccupied with: Decolonising the curriculum, demanding reparations, denigrating our heroes, tearing down statues. (Braverman, 2023)

This mainstream, public rebuttal of 'decolonisation' by a serving UK home secretary suggests that 'decolonisation' poses an existential challenge to foundational ideas of modernity and progress that rely on fixed imaginaries of a wealthy, 'developed' Global North and a poor, 'developing' Global South.

Nor should we presume as academic-activists that our commitments to 'decolonising development' are read or understood in the same way in a diversity of contexts, including in so-called 'Global South' contexts. We can identify an explicit co-option of the language of 'decolonisation' – for instance, to push back against perceptions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) movements and policies as 'Western' (see McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023), or to promote certain forms of ethno-nationalism (see Wilson et al, 2023) – where the rejection is framed as regaining 'national sovereignty' and 'promoting development'. In still other cases, some actors engaging with the push by a range of Northern organisations to 'decolonise' have indicated a feeling that 'decolonising' efforts have themselves become colonised (Devex Partnerships, 2022). It is this fraught and contradictory terrain in which (our) efforts to 'decolonise development' are being undertaken.

Situating dichotomous 'selves': funded and unfunded decolonial engagements

As researchers in the field of 'development', global inequalities and social justice, we are oftentimes personally affected and passionately involved in the issues we are researching. As academics, funding is the currency that provides spaces to pursue specific interests. At the same time, as we well know from 'development' projects, it is often funders who hold the money that decide on the music played. Both Lata and Julia are part of two networks with the aim of doing decolonising in the context of 'development', particularly 'development' research. In this section, we will take a closer

look at their possibilities, legitimations, pitfalls and limitations. We are asking: 'What exactly do we have the power to "decolonize"?' (Sondarjee and Andrews, 2023: 3).

Funded 'decolonisation' work

The COST Action (CA19129) 'Decolonising Development' is a network consisting of more than 200 scholars with institutional affiliations in 29 countries within Europe.[4] According to its self-description, COST is a funding organisation for research and innovation networks in the context of the EU's research cooperation framework. The context and structure of this funding has repeatedly resulted in challenging situations that we have had to navigate. These include confrontations with the funder and within the network, and the continuous questioning of the overall legitimacy of the network.

First, on several occasions, network members demanded to vocally take a stand on issues related to the network themes and initiated the collaborative formulation of statements.[5] While these statements were never communicated as statements representing the entire network but, rather, of those undersigned, on one occasion, a serious confrontation with representatives of the funding agency arose. They demanded that one of our statements be removed from the network's website, claiming that political expressions were not within the mandate and objectives of the network. Further, they argued that research must be neutral and apolitical. Within the leading team and the core group (a smaller group constituted across the network to manage the day-to-day functions of the Action) we persisted by pointing to the statement of shared values that had been formulated and endorsed by the entire Management Committee at the start of the Action, on which COST had signed off, which clearly stated 'that decolonisation of "development" and academia more generally is not a purely academic or theoretical activity but a site of activism with political and social relevance' (Decolonising Development COST Action CA 19129, no date). Finally, we persisted in keeping the statement in question online. Yet, the confrontation outlined the deeply positivist, technocratic understandings of research that exist in this particular funding organisation (and very likely in many others) and that seem entirely contradictory to scholarly activism or activist scholarship.

The second deeply limiting factor is the spaces to which network activities stretch, both spatially and in living up to the aspirations formulated in the objectives. COST funding guidelines insist that only participants situated in European institutions or universities can become members. Although this does not necessarily mean that all of these members must hold European passports (quite the contrary, as we will see later), it does mean that any engagement or participation from colleagues and scholars based in Global South countries may not be funded by the network. The question of the legitimacy of a decolonising network made up entirely of researchers based in Europe continues to haunt us. Who is at the table? Who has a voice? Who is represented, and how? With what kind of legitimacy can we speak on the decolonising agenda if many of us are situated in rather privileged contexts?[6] What does 'privileged' even mean if we are taking the European peripheries into account? Most certainly, there is plenty of work, both reflective and practical, to do by Europeans themselves, and it is a point that we will return to shortly; nevertheless, focusing on Europe leaves out the majority world. We continue to ask ourselves: if the funding guidelines limit us in this way, is this maybe not the right funding for us and the topic we are attempting

to pursue? Should we not have applied for it? Or, is it better to do something rather than nothing, albeit in the 'wrong' context? Strikingly, this (felt) imperative to act seems to have parallels in 'development' practice, projects and programmes, which is perhaps not a coincidence. Having some funding seems at least better than nothing at all, and given our misgivings about our academic survival, there is undoubtedly pressure to accept the money, despite the conditionalities.

Third, in the context of 'decolonising' being a current buzzword and the nature of the network as being radically open (meaning anyone is able to join if they can demonstrate a link to the Action's objectives and are based at a European university), we have had to navigate the different motivations and objectives that participants brought in for joining. Earlier, we pointed to the neoliberal logics that shape academic structures and university environments in many contexts. These logics also reflect the motivations of scholars joining a professional network. While in the beginning, we had a vision of building a scholar-activist network of conviviality and mutual sharing, we soon had to acknowledge and accept that some members were almost exclusively interested in building and enhancing their individual academic CVs; echoing Moosavi (2020), the network undoubtedly attracted interest from 'bandwagon' jumpers. However, for many others, it is not that we are unaware, nor unsympathetic, to the contradictions and tensions that many colleagues might be experiencing as they seek out spaces to try to enact commitments to 'decolonisation'. Balancing this vision with increasingly precarious academic lives, especially in countries of Eastern or Southern Europe, with a – possibly prescriptive and extremely time-consuming, yet unquantifiable/measurable – vision for what decolonial activist scholarship is or might mean without any obvious (neoliberal) academic reward or dividend is a challenge we continue to negotiate. In any case, we have had to acknowledge that despite our aspirations, the COST Action network remains just as much a part of the logics of established and mainstream academic conventions and the ensuing limitations this poses.

Last but not least, one question that continues to trouble us is how we can bring scholarship and lived realities together. As a reaction to Uluğ and Bilgen (2022), Julia organised a panel on 'visa violence' as a COST Action activity to bring to the fore the deeply racialised structures of passport privilege and global academic mobility (Coetzee, 2019; Burlyuk and Rahbari, 2023). The panel emerged organically out of the lived experiences of attempting to use the COST Action funding as it was intended, that is, to travel and network with like-minded colleagues across Europe. In organising workshops, summer schools and other events within the network, we have recurringly experienced that colleagues with non-European passports are unable to attend due to European visa restrictions. The online event was well attended and widely taken up and shared on social media, featuring many early-career scholars from the network sharing their experiences and reflecting on what these mean for the 'labour' of 'decoloniality'. While visa rules are not in our power to influence, it yet again raises the question of who is present in conversations and who remains excluded.

We also attempted to see if we could perhaps address the problem. We held a meeting with the funder representative linked to our Action to raise these concerns, and our query came as a shock: the challenge of mobility within Europe was not something they had ever encountered, and our request for support was met with no constructive or helpful response beyond their genuinely felt sympathy and expressions of regret

about "unfortunate circumstances beyond the funder's control". We appreciate that the power to change the rules did not rest with this person, whom we believe would have helped if they could; rather, we are struck by the lack of awareness around the structural constraints to mobility for non-European passport holders by a European-level funder. As a result, we keep wondering if we can continue to be claiming what we do claim, that is, practising decolonial scholarship and working towards dismantling intersectional discriminations and divides informed by notions of 'development' (given that many of the non-EU passport holders were/are from the Global South). We are uncomfortable with the reflex of academic performativity, about the words that are easily written down or formulated in statements, publications and panels but more difficult to put into practice. If we are simply performing lip service in open letters or solidarity statements, and in publications published in the same restricted outlets in the same colonial languages, are we really going to the roots of coloniality? Are we, as Sondarjee and Andrews (2023: 11) demand, contributing to 'abolishing racialized hierarchies of bodies, [and] dismantling the geopolitics of knowledge production'? Or, are we simply, as Moosavi (2020) warns, also jumping on the decolonial bandwagon to further our careers?

Unfunded 'decolonisation' work

The second network is Convivial Thinking (CT).[7] CT is a platform and collective founded in 2018, seeking to surpass boundaries of origin, ethnicity, professional affiliation and academic discipline to give space to inclusive, interdisciplinary and alternative approaches to mainstream methods of knowledge production, especially in the context of 'development'.

CT is unfunded[8] and run entirely on a voluntary basis. The fact that there are no institutional or funder obligations, nor expectations attached, means that the platform has been entirely shaped over the years by the priorities and political commitments of those involved. Already many years before the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift to the virtual realm, CT used and explored a wide range of online meeting and conferencing tools to connect people from different geographic and disciplinary contexts. Ongoing activities include a newsletter with subscribers worldwide, the website and blog, a reading group, a YouTube channel, podcasts, and online discussion sessions.

The writing workshop that we hosted on 'How do we "know" the world?', which we mentioned earlier, was funded by a small grant from the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI). This funding allowed us to host an in-person event, but even here, CT was integral to our plans, as we invited all participants to share their contributions to the workshop via a blogpost on the CT website. From this point on, however, we undertook largely unfunded work, as so many of our fellow travellers were either PhD students or on precarious contracts working across different countries within and beyond Europe, many of whom were themselves from Global South countries. Determined to work less hierarchically, we established ourselves as an editorial collective, reading and commenting on each other's work, while also approaching a Southern-based Open Access journal, *Acta Academica*, to publish our work as a special issue (Convivial Thinking Writing Collective, 2020). We managed to publish some pieces as 'dialogues' between authors, but beyond obvious limitations, such as publishing

in English (which we were not able to surmount for all the reasons noted earlier), a key concern was 'time' to try to pursue more inclusive forms of scholarship, a theme we also return to shortly.

The reading group hosted by CT, which has been ongoing almost since the beginning, has been described by many as a refuge of care within the neoliberal university – a space for collective thinking and for asking questions or sharing doubts without fear of being called out or losing ground in competition with colleagues. For us, the engagement with CT over the years has been incredibly rewarding, and we would highlight two key reasons here. First, we have made connections with fellow travellers, including many Global South scholars, whom we would have never met in traditional university spaces or conferences, either because of spatial or formal disciplinary distance, or due to visa violence. Second, even though collaborators keep floating in and out, all without exception have come in the spirit of generous sharing and with an open mind, prepared to learn and unlearn without career considerations.

The other side of the truth, however, is also that at the time of writing this article, the core team of four people curating and organising the webspace, newsletter, reading group, and discussion sessions, and inviting and editing new contributions, are all experiencing complex work- and life-related demands. Curating and caring for the Convivial Thinking space is rewarding, but it is also extremely time-consuming. It is an activity we do in our free time, oftentimes in the evenings or at nights and weekends. At the moment, we have care work commitments, we are relocating and changing jobs, and we are involved in projects, publications, teaching, strike action and activisms. All this, and the fact that our engagement for CT is entirely unremunerated, means that it has to take a back step in periods when we have to prioritise other things. Currently, we are merely able to keep CT alive, not to nurture it. Moreover, perhaps ironically, the demands it does place risk the overwork embedded in the neoliberal and colonial logics of HE itself that in other parts of our activist-academic life, we are actively seeking to challenge in order to reach a more inclusive, caring work–life settlement.

The similarities of these two endeavours to do decolonial work and scholarship with projects and programmes in 'development' cooperation seeking to practise differently are also striking. Once again, the question of donor/funder dominance and the question of who holds the funds is intimately connected with power and the concomitant room for manoeuvre the resultant spaces might offer, which raises concerns around the time we have to undertake the work and the limits placed on how we do this work, notably, in relation to the language(s) in which we communicate, which is mainly a professionalised English.[9] What appears crucial is an unconditional core funding for such work that gives space and time to build communities of care, contestation and reconstruction beyond tied budgets, indicators and reporting schedules. We also need to consider how 'development' is experienced on our doorsteps through visas and border regimes that (at times violently) police the movement of Global South and EU-periphery scholars 'invited' into European spaces. What we can see is that such untied funding, or an awareness on the part of funders of the challenges we have outlined, which may support more overt challenges to the neoliberal and colonial logics that shape our work lives, is very rare indeed, posing an existential challenge to any scholarship claiming to be 'decolonial'.

The politics, possibilities and limits of activism to 'decolonise development' within HE

With both the growing (performative?) uptake of, increasingly high-profile backlash against and selective co-option of 'decolonisation', we find ourselves in a political moment that is full of not only contradictions and pitfalls but also possibilities. It is a moment where someone with Borrell's political seniority offered a world view that, as Orbie et al (2023: 1) remind us, 'was not new, nor was its underlying logic a surprise', given, as they argue, that many analysts 'have pointed out the colonial tropes in European policymakers' discourses over the past decades'. At the same time, Orbie et al (2023: 1) note 'the intensity of the debate and condemnation that Borrell's speech has generated within policy and scholarly circles', perhaps, they argue, pointing to a new dynamic that emphasises a need for the EU to 'acknowledge the long and dark shadow of its colonial past'.

So, where does that leave our 'decolonising development' activist commitments in HE? Despite the political antecedents/foundations of HE itself, as outlined earlier, we note that all of our experiences affirm, as the literature also reinforces, that HE itself is far from monolithic or fixed but, like any institutional context, messy and fluid, and can and often does act as a site of contradictions and contestation. We recognise the pitfalls, such as the aforementioned research undertaken at the University of Leeds around the indifference and even outright rejection of 'decolonisation' agendas among some staff at the university (Loyola-Hernández and Gosal, 2022). We recognise that this is hard work and a very steep, uphill climb. However, as Orbie et al note with regards to the reaction to Borrell's speech,[10] this is also a moment of possibility, of potential awakening. We take inspiration from Pereira, Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, Muñoz-García et al, and Rutazibwa, whose works we cited earlier, to think not just within but also beyond academic spaces in order to envision activism and actions that might expand the bounds of academia itself. We have the privilege of working with colleagues like those in our COST Action and in CT who offer ways of (un) knowing that are solidaristic and generative. Moreover, the risks of technocratic performativity do not diminish the fact that by funding this Action, COST has also provided space and recognition to 'decolonising development' as a 'legitimate' and worthwhile area of scholarly enquiry. This is particularly important for colleagues who are situated in contexts or institutions where it is a struggle to have academic or activist commitments to 'decolonisation' taken seriously, or, worse, where a right-wing backlash makes such engagement virtually impossible. Rather than painting an entirely pessimistic picture, we do not fail to notice that there are openings where universities and research institutes can serve as refuges of care, sanctuary and inclusion even as 'development' challenges descend into outright crisis.[11] Some notable examples are the Scholars at Risk initiatives at several institutions around Europe, providing sanctuary for colleagues endangered because of their research/activist engagements, more recently extended to colleagues fleeing the war in Ukraine,[12] as well as the many practices of (informal) mentoring and conviviality among colleagues and students.

All of these practices can and do form an important basis for more inclusive academic practices that are mindful of decolonial imperatives. Nevertheless, we should not forget that decolonial practices must inevitably be structural and fundamentally contest and destabilise those structures in HE that maintain imperial logics, as the literature we have cited also emphasises. While individual acts of kindness and care

are giving us hope, the burden cannot exclusively be laid on individuals taking on these tasks on top of their workloads. Sondarjee and Andrews (2023: 19) forcefully remind us that 'to decolonize is not a theory, but a praxis: it is about a political project of academic democracy, of pulling down hierarchies in education'. In light of our personal experiences and positionalities, as outlined earlier, we are discouraged and hopeful at the same time. For once, it becomes recurrently clear that structures of HE require a fundamental dismantling of their imperialist, colonial and increasingly neoliberal underpinnings. While these remain in place, commitments to decolonising, including in relation to 'development studies', are likely to remain simple lip service, or, even worse, to co-opt emancipatory struggles, 'depoliticizing and whitening' (Sondarjee and Andrews, 2023: 20).

Some tentative concluding thoughts

In this article, we have worked our way through the limitations and frustrations of what attempting to pursue decolonial engagement in the (neoliberally and colonially shaped) academic context of 'development' studies entails. We have reflected on the tensions and paradoxes of our positionalities and the multiple, oftentimes contradictory, demands that we are subjected to as scholar-activists.

The question that remains most troubling to us is what legitimacy a decolonial project such as the COST network has, with its membership of scholars based in European institutions and the restrictions to bringing in collaborators from elsewhere that are imposed through unjust visa regimes. Undoubtedly, in the context of decolonising, there is plenty of work, both reflective and practical, to do by Europeans themselves. This work includes decentring or 'provincialising' an 'imagined' Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000) that we see persisting in the world of Borrel and others, as outlined earlier. It is also important to point out the ways in which coloniality has shaped, and continues to shape, inequalities within Europe. As we experience within the COST network, 'Europe' is far from monolithic itself. Europe is not only discursively separated into a core and periphery but also a 'creolised space' far from a coherent entity, being rather a site of 'transregional entanglements and the internal hierarchies that European colonialism and imperialism have produced since at least the sixteenth century' (Boatcă, 2021: 390). For Europeans, or at least for 'white' scholars situated in European universities, there is a responsibility to educate oneself (on the many aspects where this is needed, see Shilliam, 2019: 198–9) rather than reversing the imperative and relying on the so-called 'Global South' telling us what to do. Our work has also supported a more nuanced reflection on 'whiteness' itself, decolonising our understanding of European peripheries, including homogeneous descriptors like 'Eastern Europe' that have racialised dimensions to them (see Vilenica, 2023). There is, as Bhambra (2022: 229) forcefully argues, a need to contend with the '"varieties of colonialism" at the heart of the European project', reorienting our understanding away from 'Europe' as a monolithic and epochal civilisational project towards an understanding of how coloniality is itself implicated in the divisions we see across Europe today. The COST Action has at least allowed us to interrogate the realities and practicalities of these tensions and divisions, facilitating reflection on the persistence of these colonial dynamics and what that might mean for our investments in an ontological something we call 'development'. Making 'decolonising development' a European project does not necessitate it being a Eurocentric one

because it not only allows us to see and reflect on the perpetuation of colonial dynamics in European contexts but also supports us to see how we are inextricably intertwined with notions of 'development' that, as we have seen, form so much of the basis of how we 'know' the world. We hope to express these values in CT as well, but we are, as we have outlined, constrained by time and funding, creating existential challenges for our decolonising 'development' commitments.

We would agree with Sondarjee and Andrews that claiming the language of decolonising bears particular, tangible and material responsibilities towards practice. If we are unsure whether we can live up to this responsibility, we should instead use terms 'like decentring the white or the Western gaze, rehumanization, or simply inclusion' (Sondarjee and Andrews, 2023: 20). Decolonial thinking and practice in any context must be connected with the 'profound political project of dismantling colonial hierarchies that perpetuate discrimination and global inequality' (Sondarjee and Andrews, 2023: 20). Despite it feeling somewhat daunting, we still dare to take inspiration from Nagar's (2014: 87) plea for an 'acute awareness of the place-based nature of our intellectual praxis' and her call for situated solidarities. She understands them as spaces where we are seeking to 'reconfigure our academic fields in relation to the "fields" that our "research subjects" inhabit.… Situated solidarities aim to understand the larger interconnections produced by globalization of economies and labor forces while challenging the colonialist prioritizing of the West' (Nagar, 2014: 87). As scholars broadly situated in the field of 'development studies', it is crucial that if we are to 'decolonise', it must be about not only 'development' but also ourselves.

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Notes

[1] In no particular order, we are Julia Schöneberg (julia.schoeneberg@uni-kassel.de) and Lata Narayanaswamy (l.narayanaswamy@leeds.co.uk). As part of our commitments to shared, decolonial scholarship, we are trying to actively challenge the hierarchies created through academic markers that are part of the politics of citation. We had a long discussion about how to deal with authorship and found ourselves falling back into neoliberal logics of who should get credit for what, the metrics against which we are being measured and whether authorship would have an effect on career progression. We agreed that it is best to reject these entirely as the only way to stay true to our shared efforts. We wrote this together in a generative, mutually supportive way, without 'track changes' in a shared document, and we exchanged ideas on messenger and in virtual meetings, and not just with each other. In choosing to publish this article under the pen name of 'Two Convivial Thinkers' we are not making a point about anonymity but rather want to draw attention to how traditional citational practice represents both hierarchy and erasure. Claiming exclusive, ranked authorship would not only have imposed a hierarchy, it also erases all of the supportive and generative conversations that have enriched our own thinking, acknowledgements that are too long to list here but necessarily include our colleagues in both the COST Action and the Convivial Thinking collective. While we feel nurtured and supported by both of these groups it should be clear that we take responsibility for the ideas and opinions expressed in this article (and any shortcomings) as they have not been written down on behalf of

anyone but ourselves. Further, we also want to acknowledge that the support of so many fellow travellers reaches far beyond the intellectual but encompasses multiple practices and expressions of solidarity, conviviality and care. A collective name is therefore an attempt, however incomplete or partial, to acknowledge the communal nature of knowledge creation by actively avoiding trying to 'take credit'. Setting out our authorship as a 'convivial' effort is the only way we feel we can acknowledge our collective endeavour. Echoing El Kotni et al (2020), we understand this approach to co-writing 'as a form of feminist writing and methodology because it challenges entrenched power dynamics, promotes multiple perspectives and experiences, and emphasizes reflexivity'.

2 To signpost the contentious nature of the term 'development', we have opted to write it in inverted commas throughout this article.

3 On our Convivial Thinking platform, we hosted an anonymous contribution that highlighted the dangers of this cognitive dissonance, rendering 'decolonisation' as a performative rather than substantive endeavour, with material implications for the minoritised bodies, in particular, that are inevitably co-opted in service of these efforts (Anonymous, 2023). The contribution has received attention on social media, with academics in different institutions in Europe confirming similar experiences.

4 See: www.decolonise.eu.

5 These include statements: against racial violence, racism and discrimination; on threats of academic authoritarianism; of solidarity with Palestinians in their struggles against displacement and colonisation; against Frontex practices; of solidarity with Ukrainians in the face of war; of solidarity with Turkish and Syrian people in the face of earthquake devastations; and, most recently, of solidarity with survivors of sexual harassment at the Centro de Estudos Socais, Portugal, as well as elsewhere.

6 In this case, there is also the question: who is (un)funded? The network itself is funded, yes, but the majority of work is not. One colleague had to step down simply because they could not afford to do further unfunded academic work on top of their work contract.

7 See: www.convivialthinking.org.

8 With the exception of a few modest contributions from the Development and Postcolonial Studies section at Kassel University to support the website and server costs.

9 The question of the use of English has come up many times, and while the COST Action network does provide resources for translation, anecdotally, we note the challenge faced by so many of the members, including Julia herself, in having to function fully in a second language, for which network resources cannot fully mitigate. Moreover, the lack of time generally means that it is too time-consuming to actually undertake the translation of resources even where we might see the value in doing so.

10 See: www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/19/josep-borrell-apologises-for-controversial-garden-vs-jungle-metaphor-but-stands-his-ground.
See also: www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/10/17/josep-borrell-eu-racist-gardener.
See also: www.nytimes.com/2022/10/17/world/europe/eu-ukraine-josep-borrell-fontelles.html.

11 In a conversation hosted by the Surviving Society Podcast series, Carmen Geha, who is an academic based at the time of the recording at the American University in Beirut, discusses the role of the university not merely as a space to practise epistemic care but also as a place of 'literal' sanctuary and safety from crisis (Stream S2/E4 activist-scholarship

in Lebanon [Carmen Geha and Srila Roy] by Surviving Society; listen online for free on SoundCloud).

[12] See: www.scholarsatrisk.org/.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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