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Keywords: *Decolonise*

Decolonising has become central to contentious discourses connecting historical (in)equalities and (in)justice to the present day. Recent debates have revolved around proactive inclusion and forcible exclusion, and the concrete and abstract elements of *decolonising*, and it is these competing semantic elements, alongside recent rapid semantic change, that render *decolonising* a keyword. In this journal, *decolonising the curriculum* was described as ‘perhaps the most important slogan in British academic letters in recent years’.¹ Usage of *decolonise* has recently extended well beyond narrow, established specialist or technical debates, such as the decline of empires or *decolonising the curriculum*. Even as those debates have hit mainstream news, *decolonising* itself has spread to other domains and expanded semantically into equalities discourses unrelated to colonial histories.

Decolonise is formed from *de-* and *colonise*, which in turn derives from *colony*. *Colony* itself has a rich history, borrowed into Early Modern English from Middle French *colonie*. *Colony* has referred to a wide range of specific human settlements established by emigrants, whether under political and economic control by the emigrants’ country of origin or not (C16). In extended use, it could refer to a sub-group moving away from a larger population to pursue a disparate lifestyle, as in *artists’ colony* or *nudist colony* (from C17); or, in contrast, forcibly removed, as in *leper colony* or *penal colony* (from C19). In broader usage, it could refer to a sub-group living within a larger population, but distinguished from that population by, for example, status or occupation (from C16), or nationality, race or religion (from C19). *Colony* thus refers from earliest usage to in-group and out-group status.

Colonise has currency from C17, first referring simply to the settlement in a new territory by a group of people; then (from early C18) to settlement by a group alongside deliberate political, military, and economic appropriation, occupation and/or exploitation by that group’s country of origin; and finally (from late C18) to such deliberate exploitation without any population settlement at all.

Decolonise was rare before late C20. Early examples from C19 have one of three senses: (1) to ‘undermine’ colonial occupation; (2) to free from the political and military occupation of a colonial power; (3) to free from the social and cultural influence of a colonial power. It seems that the first sense can represent only the stance of the coloniser, implying legitimacy to the colonial enterprise. The second and third senses can reflect the stance of the colonised and the work for liberation, and it is these two senses that reappear in mid-C20. *Colonise* develops a variation of this third sense in late C20, meaning to socially and culturally influence and subdue a people through colonial power structures.

In late C18, a specialised use in biology arises for *colonise*, indicating the spread of an organism across a habitat. This C18 biological sense seems to parallel the simple ‘settlement’ sense in the human domain, but in early C19, *colonise* comes to refer to the deliberate introduction of a biological organism into a new habitat in order to alter the habitat, evoking the semantic features of control and exploitation of resources in the human domain.

The relationship between concrete and abstract entailments of *decolonise* is complex. For Nkrumah, the basis of *decolonising* was material, but other aspects were political and therefore social and cultural (p. 15),² and ‘decolonisation’ and also ‘development’ would benefit from recognising the particular influence of specific colonialist ideologies.³ Likewise, Fanon⁴ recognised the material foundation to decolonising, arguing that ‘decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon’ because it is ‘quite simply the replacing of a certain “species” of men by another “species” of men’, in a concrete sense; Fanon also understood the depth to which colonial power is maintained by colonialist forms of thought. For Thiong’o,⁵ the material foundation was undeniable, but another key concept was *decolonising the mind*, indicating a ‘struggle to seize back ... creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition’.

Decolonising has acquired an additional sense, referring to former colonial powers reckoning with the legacies of colonialism from their own perspectives, within the geographical space of their own countries. Sartre,⁶ in his preface to *Wretched of the Earth*, writes: ‘...we in Europe too are being decolonised: that is to say that the settler which is in every one of us is being savagely rooted out’. This *decolonising* can be material, as, for example, some UK stately homes (often run by charities) acknowledge that their original owners’ wealth and the homes’ present-day assets were accumulated through colonial rule and respond to demands for restitution or reparations. This *decolonising* can also be cultural, as, for example, British universities acknowledge the

limitations of their canons of literature and philosophy and respond to demands for revision or expansion of the canon, or at least of curricula. These reckonings might thus be seen as redressing material consequences of colonial histories and also exploring intellectual, social or cultural pluralisation in relation to colonial encounters.

To the extent that *decolonising* is exploring pluralisation at the expense of material restitution, it has been critiqued as a metaphorisation of *decolonising*. Tuck and Yang⁷ describe this metaphorisation particularly in relation to settler colonial histories in Canada. They incisively argue that ‘decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.’ Indeed, they decry a trend they observe ‘with growing apprehension’: ‘the ease with which the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, supplanting prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decenter settler perspectives’. Put differently, if decolonising is an embrace of (possibly superficial) pluralism by those in power, then it does not accomplish material restitution, and it is not Fanon’s conceptualisation of a violent replacement.

The tension between these multiple senses and entailments can be a lens for interpreting the debate over *decolonising the curriculum* in universities worldwide, which has widely been seen as one of the most important phrases in higher education in recent years. If *decolonising* in its more concrete sense indicates the removal of colonial forces from colonised land, then *decolonising the curriculum* can be seen primarily as the forcible removal of canonical white authors and intellectuals from university curricula. Many right-leaning critics of decolonising fear exactly that, and some left-leaning proponents of decolonising recently deny that goal. If *decolonising* in its more abstract sense indicates a reclaiming of self-determination and self-definition by formerly colonised people, then *decolonising the curriculum* can be seen primarily as the introduction of writers of colour and the perspectives of previously colonised people into university curricula in response to historical injustice. Either sense might be deemed a metaphorisation of *decolonising*, incorporating equalities into schools but not restoring land and wealth, life and culture. If it were a zero-sum game, the removal of white authors and the inclusion of writers of colour might co-occur—indeed, Fanon referred to ‘replacement’—but the aims and strategies behind those two processes can differ drastically. Both aims and strategies are at stake in this journal’s letter on decolonising the curriculum.⁸ One outstanding question is whether the inclusion of

previously colonised intellectuals in curricula is an end in itself or whether it is a foundation for material restitution.

In recent online news data, three of the most frequent collocates of *decolonise* (even more frequent than *curriculum* and *education*) are *technology*, *digital* and *data*, indicating the spread of *decolonise* across domains. *Decolonising* in these contexts focuses largely on relatively abstract elements in two ways. First, *decolonising* in the domain of technology entails the active inclusion of underrepresented identities, voices and perspectives in tech by promoting linguistic and cultural pluralism throughout all processes of technological innovation, data collection and maintenance. This can be seen as ‘technology for social inclusion’.⁹ Second, *decolonising* in this domain means understanding and addressing the social, cultural and historical contexts and power relations that motivate technological innovation. Couldry and Mejias¹⁰ argue that *data colonialism* is an extension of historical colonialism. An economy that generates profit by quantifying or datafying everyday tech users’ personal, social, political, medical and other characteristics is the obvious next step for an expansionary capitalism that, in the past, drove colonial empires to generate profit from material resources, including bodies. Thus, *decolonising data* is intractable but must move beyond regulation or education towards reimagining our relationship with data in order to redress the imbalance of power and wealth engendered by data colonialism.

Indeed, *reimagine* has a strong relationship with *decolonising* in recent online text data, along with *redefine*, *reframe*, *reorient* and *rethink*. In this sense, *decolonising data* or *curricula* is popularly conceptualised primarily as an act of thinking otherwise and only secondarily (if at all) as an act of material restitution. Nonetheless, in recent online corpus data, frequent alternates for *decolonise* include *liberate* and *reclaim*, as well as *indigenise* and *Africanise*; *democratise* and *diversify*; *internationalise* and *globalise*; and the verb *queer*. All of these potential alternates, in more or less general ways, encompass the concrete and abstract processes of material and cultural negotiation around historical inequality and injustice.

Whereas *decolonising technology* and *data* are the highest frequency collocates in recent corpora, followed by *decolonising the curriculum* and *education*, other attested Direct Objects of *decolonise* in recent online news include references to physical land, particularly *Palestine* and *Ukraine*; references to territory as it is seen to represent colonialist forces, as in *decolonising Brussels*, *Britain* or *Russia*; and socio-cultural Direct Objects including *science*, *maths*, *history*, *tourism*, *architecture*, *wealth*, *diet*, *food*, *medicine*, *narrative*, *faith*, *Christianity*, *identity*,

gender, the self and even *decolonising forgiveness*. Book titles from 2023 include *Decolonising My Body*, *Decolonising Methodologies*, *Decolonising Design* and *Decolonising Therapy*. Discourses of *decolonising* are widespread, popular, creative and critical.

In recent corpus data, *decolonisation* has become common in lists referring to protected characteristics, in light of historical inequalities, often presented as lists of issues surrounding *decolonisation*, *ethnicity*, *race*, *gender* and *sexuality*, among many others. Colonial histories are intertwined with these histories of inequality, and the discussions of them have long intersected, but the discourse now seems to incorporate the recurrent usage of more or less fixed lists. At the same time, one of the highest frequency collocates of *decolonise* is *intersection*, and across mainstream and independent news, online social and cultural commentary, and blogs, discussion has focused on *intersections* and *intersectionality* between *decolonisation* and protected characteristics related to histories of discrimination.

Indeed, *decolonising* has recently come to refer to redressing histories of inequality regardless of colonial histories. As indicated by Tuck and Yang,¹¹ there is ongoing evidence of semantic broadening, as *decolonising* is used to indicate a wide range of processes aimed at improving societies and education, among other spheres, driven by principles of equalities and social justice, whether the legacy of colonial histories is present, tenuous or entirely absent. For example, *decolonising the curriculum* has been defined at various UK universities as simply celebrating diversity, a trend that the Higher Education Policy Institute has observed and criticised as inadequate. One UK university framed decolonising the curriculum in terms of increasing representation of students with disabilities, among other things. This example illustrates that *decolonising* can entail improving equalities and diversity, and even social justice, while being unconnected to colonial legacies. In a more extreme example, *decolonising the fitness industry* in online news has emphatically referred to rendering gyms LGBTQ+ friendly. While some would argue that transphobia and homophobia are colonial constructs, this usage certainly represents a novel development in the semantics of *decolonise*.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Notes

- 1 McCabe, Colin. 2022. Editor's Introduction. In Tomiwa Owolade, 'A letter on decolonising the curriculum'. *Critical Quarterly* 64 (2): 10-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/criq.12675>
- 2 Nkruman, Kwame. 1964. *Consciencism: Philosophy and ideology for decolonisation and development with particular reference to the African revolution*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- 3 Ibid., p. 12.
- 4 Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The wretched of the earth*, trans. F Constance. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- 5 Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa. 1986. *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- 6 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1963. 'Introduction'. In Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth*, trans. F Constance. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- 7 Tuck, Eve & K. Wayne Yang. 2012. Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & Society* 1 (1): 1-40.
- 8 Owolade, Tomiwa Owolade. 2022. A letter on decolonising the curriculum. *Critical Quarterly* 64 (2): 10-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/criq.12675>
- 9 Warschauer, Mark. *Technology and social inclusion: Rethinking the digital divide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 10 Couldry, Nick and Ulises A. Mejias. 2019. *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- 11 See note 7.

Author Biography

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