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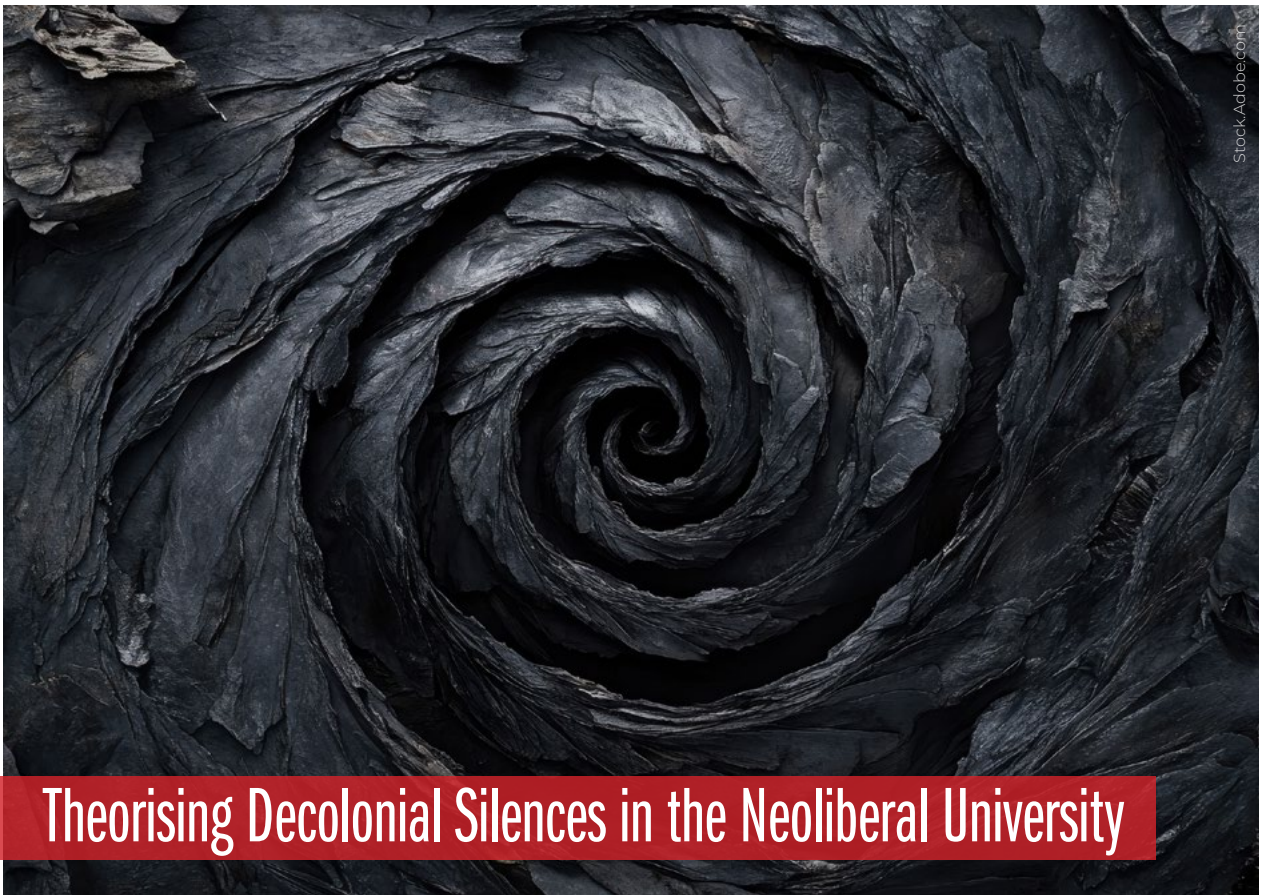
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Theorising Decolonial Silences in the Neoliberal University

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Abstract

During the summer of 2020, several universities and academics made highly radical and progressive statements about their positionality and progressive aims in the context of the Black Lives Matter Protests. The same was observed in 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in the UK, several universities even offered admissions and fellowships to Ukrainian students and academics. This culture of 'radical politics' and protection of academic freedom was soon to change.

In 2023, as the state of Israel ramped up its settler colonial tactics against Palestinians (still ongoing at the time of writing) with a genocide directed at Gazans, the silence from universities and prominent decolonial scholars is heard loudly. In all the cases, there is a clear understanding of the embedded power relations and how these contribute to the construction of the oppressor and the oppressed, which would be obvious to any scholar who has engaged with the decolonial school of thought. As an academic who is minoritized in the West but has significant caste and class capital in her 'home country', and is at the receiving end of these silences, this paper is an attempt to make sense and theorise these decolonial silences and their implications within academia.

The article seeks to do this by using an autoethnographic method complimented by a study of the dominant discourses within UK universities in the aftermath of the aforementioned events. This article, first, provides a comparative review of University statements on BLM, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's genocide in Palestine. Then, it draws upon my own engagement with prominent decolonial

scholars and their silence post October 2023. This paper seeks to critically interrogate the power of scholars and universities who have employed decolonial language within their research and projects but refuse to engage in decolonial praxis. Based on this understanding, the paper recommends some strategies of 'being' within academia that counter these decolonial silences to challenge, expand and in a minuscule way, contribute to decolonising the university.

Keywords: decolonial, university, neoliberal, academia

Introduction

Universities have long been spaces of political education and organising. From playing an integral role in anti-colonial movements where revolutionary thought has developed and spread, it is hard to deny the unique placement of universities in anti-colonial movements. It is the students, both within and outside of the university, who have been at the forefront of historical and contemporary anti-colonial struggles movements (Honarpisheh 2020) such as the Rhodes Must Fall Movement (Kwoba, Chantiulke, and Nkopo 2018), Fridays for Future, *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) (Barua 2018) and the more recent global student encampments in support of the liberation of Palestine and its peoples.

However, as decolonial scholars point out, universities have been complicit in the promulgation and normalisation of the colonial-modern world order firmly embedded in eurocentrism and capitalism (Mignolo 2003). To ensure the dominance of these structures, universities, especially those located in the 'West' have not shied away from co-opting the language of decolonisation while firmly reproducing colonial hierarchies. In fact, as Gopal points out, decolonial projects in universities often end up fixating more on concerns of language and ideas rather than material concerns (Gopal 2021).

This becomes even more apparent in the case of Palestine as several scholars have pointed out (Tatour 2024; Funez-Flores 2024). The implementation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism that equates the criticism of Israel to antisemitism in universities across the US, UK, Europe and Australia demonstrates attempts to silence any discussion on Israel's colonial policies and has been utilised by staff and students for the same, often against their racialised colleagues (Tatour 2024). Ultimately, it serves to "protect the persistence of racial domination of Israeli Jews over Palestinians" (Gordon 2024) and the investment of states and universities in enforcing this definition signifies a well-orchestrated effort to silence criticisms of Israel.

In this context, the brutal crackdown on the encampments in the US in 2023-24 (Pilkington, 2024) demonstrated the unwillingness of universities to decentralise power within universities, recalibrate their priorities according to the interests of their own students and staff. Instead, they chose to support their corporate and monetary interests. This was replicated in major western countries such as Canada and the UK. In fact, these bastions of 'free speech' have policed their own members from exercising their academic freedom. In the US, an Assistant Professor at Texas Tech University, Dr Jairo Funez-Flores was suspended for allegations of antisemitism which were later found to be wrong. Funez-Flores notes the implications of the "institutional and political machinations" in silencing critics of the Israeli state and how academic freedom is merely another tool for the neoliberal university to weaponise against those who challenge its very foundations (Funez-Flores 2024).

Hence, the façade of decolonisation of neoliberal universities is laid bare for all to see. As the colonial foundations of these institutions are once again laid bare to see, in this article, I explore the consequences of institutional and personal silences relating to Palestine. There are two key arguments here. Firstly, Universities in the West are complicit in the genocide in Palestine by material support to the colonial state of Israel and by forming discourse that generates consent for supporting the state of Israel. Second, I argue that 'decolonial silences' within universities originate from the 'white-saviour complex' and are carried out for the reproduction of colonial hierarchies and for economic profit. To make this argument, I focus on the United Kingdom, which was one of the largest empires that was integral in establishing the racial-capitalist world order today. I do so by using a mixed methods approach that focuses at a macro level on institutions combined with an autoethnographic record of engaging with decolonial scholars on the question of Palestine.

The next section provides the methodology employed in this article, followed by a brief discussion on the theorisation of 'silence' within decolonial scholarship. Next, I provide a quantitative summary of UK Universities political commitments along with a qualitative analysis of the discourse generated by Universities. This is followed by a personal account of engagement with self-acclaimed decolonial scholars on the question of Palestine and explores the relationship between their silence and decolonial credentials.

Methodology

This paper is embedded in a decolonial methodology that aims to expose, challenge and reflect on all iterations of power. It seeks to do so in relation to coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) seeking to evaluate its colonial implications. In doing so, it raises questions of hierarchy and domination within systems of knowledge production and challenges the worldviews normalised by neoliberal universities. By utilising empirical and autoethnographic data, this paper uses a mixed methods approach to critically analyse and evaluate decolonial silences within university spaces.

To understand institutional responses, publicly available data was collected on all public universities in the UK. This database has been made available online (University database, 2025). For this paper, private universities were excluded for two reasons. Firstly, they are not funded by the government and hence are not seen as public institutions that have a 'responsibility' towards the public in any manner.

Second, since they are private institutions, they are extremely expensive and have very low number of students as compared to public universities. In the UK there are only seven private universities. Discarding these, a total of 130 universities formed the data set for this paper, out of which twelve universities had no public statements on any of these events. To limit the remit of this paper, public statements issued between 2020-2025 were considered. This time-period allowed me to study the responses of these universities to three major global events – the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (2020), the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) and the Israeli genocide in Gaza (2023).

These statements were then studied through critical discourse analysis where three-five keywords were manually drawn from every statement to study the discourse generated by these universities. This data is complimented with case-studies of two universities that have materially supported the Israeli state in its genocide of Palestinians and sustaining the settler-colonial regime. Through this discussion, I demonstrate how British universities monopolise 'discourse' to generate consent for their material support to the Israeli state. This discourse uses three strategies for this purpose – a. to utilise 'decolonising' rhetoric to build their 'progressive' credentials b. the portrayal of Palestinian colonialism as a religious/culture issue and c. silence to enable the dehumanisation of Palestinians (both, in discourse and materially).

For the last section of this paper, I employ autoethnographic experience as a research method for analysis of the self within the political and cultural context of an ongoing genocide enabled and sustained by the racial-capitalist modernity we are based in. Autoethnography focused on studying the self in relation to peoples and socio-political context, provides a basis for making sense of social phenomenon. Further, it can determine the response and future action to the socio-political context. Starr (2010) notes that autoethnography can be integral in "cultivating an authentic cycle of "action based on reflection, and reflection based on action" (Blackburn 2007)" (Starr 2010:2). This autoethnographic account then is to make sense of the silences in the neoliberal university, it is also to make sense of my response and further reflect on my experiences of navigating the neoliberal academy. I utilise this

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autoethnographic account in a decolonial spirit to use this experience to argue for the importance of using our privileges for speaking out as Said wrote “For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinians rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate individual” (Said 1994: 101 cited in Funez-Flores 2024).

The Neoliberal University Machine at Work

This section demonstrates the differences in responses of Universities in the UK and traces the production of discourse around three aforementioned events to study its impact. By noting the differences and the use of ‘decolonial silences’, these universities are able to prioritise their corporate interests over any ethical or community-based concerns. This section proceeds in the following way: it begins with a brief discussion of universities response to Ukraine and how that has differed from university responses to the other events. It then proceeds to visibilise the discourse generated on Palestine by these institutions and supplements this with the example of two universities complicit with the settler-colonial Israeli state.

Universities UK (UUK) is a collective organisation of all the universities in the UK that lists its cause as “thriving universities, serving society” (UUK website, n.d). In their report on evaluating the role UK universities can play in responding to humanitarian crisis around the world, the report notes the important role played by the UK University sector in supporting higher education in Ukraine through collaborative and locally led efforts (UUK 2023). It notes that, “It is through collective efforts and humanitarian support that the UK has contributed to continuing access to both higher education and research in Ukraine. Not only is education important in continuing personal attainment, it also supports participation in rebuilding and reconstruction, as well as future economic activity.” (UUK 2023: 7). This demonstrates the intention of UK universities to be actively involved in periods of humanitarian crisis and playing an active role in ongoing political conflict.

In line with this, it is noteworthy that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, UUK published a collective statement condemning the actions

of the Russian government and went on to call all universities part of its association to review their relationships with Russian universities and any other Russian institution (UUK 2023). The response was that of 93 Universities in the UK making a pro-Ukraine statement condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine with at least 6 Universities promising to review their relationships with Russian partners and The University of Nottingham pledging to end all such relationships (Website 2021).

In the report on evaluating UK universities response to the Ukraine invasion, UUK’s director Jamie Arrowsmith noted that

response to the invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated what is possible when policy, funding and political interests align with the goodwill, creativity, and commitment of colleagues in the UK’s higher education community. The broad spectrum of responses – which has drawn together funders, regulators, government agencies, universities, and both private sector and charitable organisations – has meant the UK’s response to supporting the higher education community in Ukraine has been significant (UUK 2023: 5).

The same report calls for universities to coordinate and respond to future humanitarian responses in a collective manner. This showcases not only the capacity of universities to provide and garner support during a crisis, but also the role played by political intent and will where in the interests of the government in opposing the Russian state and the universities management were aligned – leading to benefit so many researchers, students and civilian Ukrainians.

This has not always been the case. After the kick-off of the Decolonising the University movement in South Africa and its journey to the University of Oxford in the UK, challenging the institution’s imperial legacy, universities were forced to reckon with their colonial histories and legacy. Student movements were central to organising this political movement (Kwoba eds 2018). Forty-eight universities in the UK published statements in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, with a few of them calling for contributions to Black Lives Matter or local charities, and signposted support for racialised staff. During that time, I was pursuing

my doctoral studies (2018-2022) at the University of Westminster. Their BLM commitment was direct, action-based and written in a collective manner (University of Westminster website 2020).

Universities followed this by publishing anti-racist strategies, primarily promising to diversify their staff bodies and reckon with their colonial lineages. At the same time, increasingly the word ‘decolonising’ began propping up on university websites and communications as the majority of the universities in the UK promised to “decolonise the curriculum”. Universities such as the University of Aberdeen and University of Newcastle also began teaching courses around themes of ‘decolonising’. However, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni reminds us, “Just like the Euro-American constituted international system, the university and its episteme is resistant to radical decolonial change” (2013: 48), the decolonisation project has often been co-opted by the university with their decolonial commitments remaining limited to discourse only, or as Moosavi terms it “tokenism” (2017).

While initiatives such as Black History Month are useful, they can often be performative, essentialise identity and end up extracting additional (often, unpaid) labour from Black people (Girvan, Dove and McGreer 2023). Another example of this is the work of universities in covering their role in the transatlantic slave trade, spearheaded by the University of Glasgow. Their study and subsequent published report led to the setting up of the first institutional restorative justice scheme that would pay £20 million in slave trade reparations (Carrell 2019). Several other universities such as University of Liverpool, Oxford, Bristol have centres focused on studying institutional links with the slave trade but until now Glasgow remains the only one with plans for economic reparations. This contributes to the notion of universities discursively committed to progressive projects without making any structural changes.

This façade of discursive progressiveness was dropped like university workers on zero-hour contracts when it came to Palestine. The “Palestine exception to academic freedom” has been noted by scholars such as Shwaikh & Gould (2019) who have been viciously attacked for taking pro-Palestine and pro-BDS stances with no support from their institutes. This has only worsened at the

time of writing. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, scholars have not only been suspended without any evidence, fired from their posts but have even been referred to counterterrorism agencies as in the case of Dr Amira Abdelhamid. After a complaint by her employer, University of Portsmouth, Amira’s house was raided in the early hours of the morning with her electronics confiscated without any notice. The case was later dropped due to lack of any evidence on the charges pressed by the University (Ullah 2024).

It is not surprising then that not a single university in the UK has published a statement in support of Palestine or Palestinians. The previously mentioned role of the UK universities in responding to humanitarian crisis, even as the toll on Palestinian lives and land continues to increase, has disappeared. Even UUK has been absolutely silent – though this silence has spoken louder than any statement could and the message is clear – Palestinian lives do not matter to universities in the UK, and by extension, their pro-Palestinian community members do not matter to universities.

Even so, forty universities did publish statements in the aftermath of 7th October (Statements A) however, these statements differed vastly to the post Ukraine invasion statements (Statements B). They were different from previously issued statements in these ways; firstly, the Statements A were often quite vague with no direct placement of responsibility. In contrast, in Statements B, the responsibility was placed squarely on Russia and the invasion was labelled as ‘unprovoked’, framing Ukraine as an innocent country that must be aided. Post BLM 2020, Universities talked about their racist histories and slave traders who had contributed to the University such as Edward Colston in the University of Bristol (Website 2020). However, Statements A very rarely even mention ‘Palestine’ with ‘Israel-Gaza’ or ‘Conflict in the Middle East’ being the most used term, contributing to the erasure of Palestine and Palestinians. Often, universities such as the Open University referred to the events as “Israel-Hamas War” falsely equating a colonial regime with support from the world’s largest military to a political organisation governing a colonised territory.

Second, Statements A often referred to the impacted staff and students in religious terms and

directed them to university chaplaincy services. In fact, Manchester Metropolitan University thought it appropriate to issue a statement with Muslim and Jewish chaplains. In contrast, only two universities, Keele University and University of Wolverhampton directed students to their chaplaincy services for support in Statement B. This is quite problematic because it ends up reducing the settler-colonial regime of Israel in Palestine to a matter of a religious conflict. This is integral to Israel's claim over Palestinian territory and its ability to weaponize antisemitism to silence any critique, including the recent campus protests calling for the end of settler-colonialism in Palestine (Montaq 2024; Young 2023). As Palestinian scholars painstakingly remind us, the issue is one of settler-colonialism with the dispossession of Palestinians as central to its project (Sabbagh-Khoury 2023: 153-154) and the erasure and denial of Palestinian existence – that includes Muslims, Jews, Christians, and atheists (whether it be as a nation or not) (Khalidi 1997).

Why are these universities using such language? Is it to provide a safe environment for their staff and students, in line with the university's duty of care? The fact that a Jewish chaplain, Zachariah Deutsch, Chaplain for several universities in Yorkshire, including for the University of Sheffield, was still allowed on campus after he had re-joined the IOF (Israeli Occupation Forces) and celebrated Israel's genocidal actions in Gaza (complete with a video), contradicts any intention of making a 'safe environment' or providing any care to students. Despite resistance from Unions as demonstrated by Sheffield and Leeds branches of University and Colleges Union (Sheffield UCU, Leeds UCU, 2024), Deutsch remained as a chaplain and has subsequently, returned to Israel. There has not been a single word from universities addressing his role in the Israeli military.

Then, language becomes a tool to maintain the status quo that ends up supporting the oppressor, in this case the Israeli state. As shown above, universities choose to be silent or to represent the ongoing Israeli genocide of Palestinians as an issue that is too complex (University of Arts website 2024) and as a religious issue which is beyond the purview of university business, unless it is about antisemitism. The consequence of each of these facets is the dehumanisation of Palestinians. This decolonial silence pushes us to believe that Palestinian lives

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are unworthy of comment, their rhetoric pushes the notion of Palestinians as Islamic fundamentalists (due to association with Hamas) and as peoples without a history or voice, hence universities are unable to decipher settler-colonialism in action. This is dehumanising in so many ways that one has to ask, how does the dehumanisation of Palestinians benefit universities?

The response to this is bleak and here I draw attention to the material benefit accumulated by UK universities dependent on the dehumanisation of Palestinians. Palestine Solidarity Campaign UK has reported that UK universities “collectively invest nearly £430 million in companies complicit in Israeli violation of the international law” (website, n.d). Staff and students at institutions such as the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) have reported that LSE holds £89 million worth investments in companies complicit in maintaining Israeli settler-colonialism in Palestine (LSESU Palestine Society 2024). The staff-student campus coalition for two Sheffield based universities found that the University of Sheffield received the highest amount of funding from military companies in the UK and has directly been involved in the production of weapons used in the ongoing Israeli genocide of Palestinians (SCCP 2024).

The helplessness of complexity, the overemphasis on religion and the silence of these Universities is then integral for universities to generate consent for continually profiting off the lives of Palestinians. It enables university to hide behind one-off student scholarships for persecuted Palestinian

students without making any structural changes to stop the conditions which dispossess these students in the first place, forcing them to search for educational opportunities where they will not be attacked by weapons researched and developed in these universities.

This section highlighted the process by which UK universities generate discourse for their material benefit. They did so by mobilising progressive discourse to garner support for their institutions and then by their (lack of) discourse on Palestine that seeks to dehumanise Palestinians and justify Israel's genocidal actions whilst continuing to make profit on the bodies of Palestinians. In the next section, I shift from the focus on institutions to individuals, exploring the 'decolonial silences' of self-acclaimed decolonial and critical scholars.

Autoethnographic experience

This paper began taking shape when one of the co-editors' of this special issue reached out to me addressing a critique I had made of their work. As an early-career scholar, genuine engagement of a scholar who is very well-reputed in their field, seemed surprising and it led me to address other engagements I have had in similar situations. In this section, I provide a brief overview of my interaction with two scholars whom I have worked with closely to raise questions about our decolonising movements. I bring this interpersonal engagement in an academic paper with a sole objective – to reflect on the various facets associated with decolonising academia. Despite the neoliberal university, we continue to work within spaces and with people, which we think may contribute towards our collective goals of decolonisation. In that situation, it becomes incredibly important to be aware of the spaces we occupy and its implications, the people we work with and how/ what we enable, and to reflect on where does our work fit in relation to our decolonial hopes/futures? This reflection is an attempt towards that.

To begin with, I never thought of myself as an 'academic'. Even though I come from an upper-caste and middle-class family in India with access to formal educational structures, the idea of a PhD was never in my imagination. A PhD was this grand thing reserved for 'super-genuises', not someone like me. Yet, as my MA program was ending, I was

advised by my lecturers to consider doing a PhD. A senior academic who was an expert in the area I wanted to work on provided me with integral advice on pursuing a PhD without which, I am unsure if I would even be here. This began my journey into academia.

During my PhD, I had the privilege of working with academics whose seemed to care about issues beyond academia. While examining the Indian state's exercise of colonial power in the region of Jammu & Kashmir, I collaborated with scholars focused on communities and justice. Some of them identified as 'scholar-activists', some just considered it a part of their role and responsibility while others considered it a 'payback' to the communities they had produced research on which, in turn, directly benefited these scholars. For a mixture of reasons, I came to be associated with several groups working towards self-determination of communities such as Students for a Free Tibet, the Jammu & Kashmir Reading Room, The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons and strongly identified with anti-colonial movements globally and, to an extent, political organisation within Leftist movements. I have been public with my involvement in these groups, and I am currently a Union member as well as involved in organising for Palestine. In this regard, my politics, through my research and with my non-academic work, is visible and I would like to believe, transparent.

To my absolute surprise, some of these academics that I have worked with in different groups and capacities have not only been silent since the Israeli genocide of Palestinians began but have even taken openly, anti-Palestinian stances. Two of them, with whom I have worked in close capacity and currently occupy senior academic positions, have gone to the extent of taking pro-Israel stances while actively dehumanising Palestinians. One of them has even shared fake news on their social media that feeds on the sexual dehumanisation of Palestinian/Arab/Muslim men and refused to remove it, despite being proven false and the story revoked even by *The New York Times*. The fact that a so-called postcolonial scholar was doing this, was shocking and worrying. As Steve Salaita, writing from and about an American context reminds us,

These compliant radicals purport to raise principled criticism of injustice as a universal

ideal, equally applicable in any situation, but in their choice of condemnation, in their choice of language and timing and audience, they simultaneously choose to reify the logic of U.S. imperialism. They aren't rewarded with professorships and prominent media platforms through some special insight or scholarly rigor. Lack of imagination is precisely the attraction. And they know it. Whatever creativity they possess is used in service of convention. (Author's website 2024)

This became even more apparent when these two scholars were co-editing a book on coloniality and wanted to include a chapter from my PhD thesis in their edited volume. Initially, I had provided a verbal agreement about contributing a chapter of my PhD thesis to their co-edited book. Post submission, almost two years passed without any communication regarding this book. Due to the lack of communication and the co-authors pro-Israel stance, I assumed that either the book was no longer going to be published, or my work was no longer part of it. This was not the case. When I reached out for clarification, I was told that my work would be included, and the book would be out in a couple of months. As there was no contract, no reviews, and no communication, this was a complete surprise to me.

I could not imagine a book on coloniality by two scholars who had claimed to be post/de/anticolonial but were currently supporting the genocidal and settler-colonial regime of the Israeli state. Hence, I refused. However, I had forgotten that one cannot refuse their academic seniors, to do so is to refuse future publication, future recommendation letters, future grants, future mentors, future jobs ... a future. I was aware of this but as we witness the genocide of a people with the neoliberal world order making us all complicit through our taxes to governments and our money and labour to businesses that support Israel, is it even possible to think of a future? This lack of optimism might be personal, but once you have seen an occupying army defacing a graveyard of the occupied people they murdered – what future does one think of? That is a question for another day, but I was sure, that future, if it did exist, did not include genocide enablers.

The conversation that followed was a discussion where I laid out the reasons as to why I could not

be part of the co-edited collection – emphasising upon these academics' complicity and the tension between their post/de/anticolonial credentials and current stance. I was accused of being totalitarian and a purist – though I did not realise taking a stance against genocide accounted for being a totalitarian. Finally, one of the academics thought it appropriate to remind me that they had written me a recommendation letter that, according to them, got me my current job and how they regretted it. This academic was the research head for a university, and I cannot imagine they mentioned the recommendation letter for any other reason than to emphasise their power over me, and to demand my gratitude in return. The conversation ended with them agreeing for my work to not be included in their work and, needless to say, on a sour note. Admittedly, all of this could have been avoided if the two scholars had kept me informed about the publication process, where I could have objected earlier, if needed.

Since the incident, I have thought several times about it. Two main questions still bother me – first, why did these scholars feel so much ownership over my work? And second, why were these post/de/anticolonial pro-Israeli academics publishing on coloniality? Here, similar to universities, I come to separate conclusions, however both demonstrate an intricate web of coloniality that links the neoliberal universities and such academics to uphold contemporary colonialisms. Let me explain.

These academics, as former research advisors, felt they contributed to my intellectual development and research (rightfully so) and as senior members were obligated to 'something' in return. This is where the academic hierarchy between the supervisor and the PhD student, teacher-student, Professor and Early-Career Researcher all come into play. While this is not new and has been a topic of discussion for a long time, it makes an important point about academics. Academics, contrary to widespread belief, don't do what they do because they are super passionate about it (the selfless teacher/educator), instead, they do it for their own interests. Judging the interests themselves is a discussion for another time, but we may observe this in several instances. Academics who represent communities in conflict often enjoy a lot of support and gratitude from them. Academics who undertake extra responsibilities

or sit on committees to reach managerial levels within university spaces (like the senior academics referred to here).

This maintains the hierarchy between the researcher-researched, teacher-student, knowledge-generator and knowledge receiver; or what Mignolo has referred to the “colonial difference” (Mignolo, 2002). This enables the academics in this case to maintain their power under a garb or progressiveness – which may be utilised occasionally for the oppressed, but largely in service of the neoliberal institution that continues giving them rising pay checks and titles that almost sound made-up to demand their loyalty. The impact of this to academia in general, and more importantly, on the lives of Palestinians, and other anti-imperialist communities is absolutely devastating.

What is the role of ‘decolonising’ then?

In this paper, I have demonstrated how universities and powerful academics within these universities generate a discourse that co-opts decolonial language with the objective of accumulating profit (both material and social). The compliance of senior academics with this academic system further entrenches a culture of obedience within academia (Salaita 2024) that only has interests of the neoliberal establishment at heart. Then, we must ask, what is the role of decolonising and the decolonial school of thought within academia? How do we ensure that as academics our daily practices are aligned with the radical decolonial and anticolonial thought we talk about in our courses? Or, do we just drop the show and align ourselves with the neoliberal institution and focus on our tenure applications and promotions?

Here, I turn to decolonial theory and Palestinian thinkers for guidance. If decolonial theory emphasises on the importance of praxis (Walsh 2018), we must refer to the theory to define our praxis. Decolonial theory, despite its criticisms, tells us strongly to centre the marginalised and to embody a praxis derived from deep and honest engagement with them. Hence, I turn to Palestinian scholars to understand how to navigate this time of utter hopelessness within academia.

During my visit to Birzeit University in the West Bank as part of an academic delegation organised and funded by Friends of Birzeit University

(FOBZU), I was told by several staff and student members about the importance of education within Palestinian society. The university workers have a dedicated campaign, called the Right to Education, that is a grassroots Palestinian movement that seeks to “document, research and raise awareness about the issues facing Palestinian students, teachers and academic institutions under Israeli military occupation.” (Website, n.d). This has been echoed by the Gazan university collective in a statement to assist them in challenging Israeli scholasticide by enabling them to continue living, working, studying, learning, building their lives and universities, on their land (Statement, 2024). This straightforward sentence clearly lays out the stakes for Palestinians –the settler-colonial regime of Israel is devoted to the erasure of Palestinians for its Zionist projects. Palestinian people and academics are calling upon us, especially those of us who claim to care about social justice and self-determination and the end of neoliberalism, none of this exists without the liberation of Palestinians. So then, noting the urgency of this situation, what do we do, as decolonial scholars?

First, as scholars, thinking and writing is an integral part of our job. Tabkhi (2023) demands that this scholarly work must be put in service to a cultural or symbolic intifada, hence we must stop making excuses and hiding behind forms of tenure and promotions. Putting ourselves (often minoritised) and our vulnerabilities forward is crucial, when I walk into my class, I talk to my students about the absurdity of continuing as if the genocide isn't real, enables us to realise our shared fears, griefs, hopes and dreams, few of which are in service of the neoliberal institution. As I have often learnt from the students at the Sheffield Encampment for Gaza, ‘radical’ doesn't mean anything if it doesn't call for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Our writing must then be utilised to expose the industrial-military complex our universities are embedded in and to educate and mobilise people against the complicity of our institutions.

Second, drop the civility. Salaita (2023) has demonstrated to us the farce of academic freedom due to its liberal co-option. Drop the notion of normalcy, of friendships with people supporting genocide and of maintain academic hierarchies for the purpose of promotions and lucrative opportunities. As Salaita states,

“you can no longer expect audiences to accept social climbing as a method, no matter how meticulously it is branded as courageous or conscientious. Today’s intellectual economy is growing more competitive and subsequently more insipid. The change benefits a small class of content creators but has also increased cynicism among consumers toward the sources of that content. The revolutionary promise of decentralized information never materialized. The ruling class is stronger than ever, in no small part based on the consent of those who claim to be its enemy.

Do it or don’t do it. Keep in mind, though: you can go up on the university’s front page, all smiles and sartorial splendor, an avatar of all the great things the institution can offer, happily having avoided the disrepute that comes of the wrong type of obedience, but the world is no longer made to sustain old habits of subservience. It has grown tremendously precarious, which means it has also become simpler to understand. So go ahead and make your choice. We’ll revolt either way” (2023).

Finally, dedicate your time, energy, and resources to fostering a community that would never tolerate injustice. Imagine a society where everyone feels safe and respected, where the suffering of others is met with immediate action. Build a community that would refuse to stand idly by if genocide were being perpetrated against your own people. Once you have established this foundation, organize with these individuals to fight for the liberation of all oppressed people. Work collectively until the very end, until liberation from all forms of oppressions.

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