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## **‘The why and the white’: Racism and curriculum reform in British Geography**

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# **‘THE WHY AND THE WHITE’: RACISM AND CURRICULUM REFORM IN BRITISH GEOGRAPHY**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article intervenes in recent debates over the whiteness of the higher education geography curriculum. Focusing on UK based universities, I examine the *why* and the *white* in the question ‘why is our geography curriculum so white’? It is argued that the answer is coloniality induced institutional racism. I propose that engaging with insights from critical race theory, social justice and decolonial scholarship could help British geography to more effectively challenge racism, and other forms of dehumanisation, in our institutional arrangements and teaching practices.

## **KEYWORDS**

Coloniality; Curriculum; Decolonial; Racism; Teaching; White Supremacy

## WHY IS OUR GEOGRAPHY CURRICULUM SO WHITE?

We have compelling 'how-to' stories of what it means to incorporate race, ethnicity and anti-colonial perspectives into our classrooms...but I would argue that still, with all of this, for the most part, we are writing, teaching, and recreating white geographies: by 'we' I mean almost all of us (including me): by 'white' I mean ways of seeing, understanding, and interrogating the world that are based on racialized and colonial assumptions that are unremarked, normalised and perpetuated (Domosh, 2015:1)

The quote above is from an article by Mona Domosh, a former President of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), provocatively titled 'Why is our geography curriculum so white?' The article drew attention to an issue that a relatively small group of geographers have spent decades trying to address, that is; how approaches to learning and teaching in higher education geography are shaped by and perpetuate racism<sup>1</sup> (see Daigle and Sundberg, 2017; Jackson, 1989; Kalapula, 1984; Kobayashi, 1999). I want to contribute to these efforts, and wider attempts to address racism within UK higher education (cf. Bhopal et al. 2016; Shilliam, 2016; Tate, 2016), by providing a response to Domosh's provocation within the context of British geography. More specifically, I want to get at the *why* and the

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<sup>1</sup> In this article racism is understood as a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority based on the marking of certain bodies as less than human (cf. Grosfoguel, 2016; Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Wynter, 2003). "This definition of racism allows us to conceive of diverse forms of racism, evading the reductionisms of many existing definitions...those considered "inferior" below the line of the human can be defined or marked along religious, ethnic, cultural or color lines" (Grosfoguel, 2016: 10).

*white* in the question ‘why is our geography curriculum so white’? And through doing so engage with calls for critical reflection about the conditions that maintain the (non)status of race within British geography (Mahtani, 2004; Noxolo, 2017). After addressing the *why*, I then want to consider *how* geographers in UK based universities can challenge racism in our institutional arrangements and teaching practices.

## **THE WHY AND THE WHITE**

My interpretation of Domosh’s (2015) essay is that the question posed is directed at contemporary conditions within the discipline. But for universities in the UK, any response must acknowledge geography’s history as one of the subjects used as part of empire building and colonial endeavours. British geography was implicated in and benefited from the promotion of white supremacy as part of these activities. Bonnett sums up this situation as follows;

It is difficult to underestimate the impact the ideologies and practices of empire have had upon the imagination of British geographers. Nowhere is this impact more evident than in their approach to race. Racial differences were seen by British empire builders as one of the greatest challenges to colonial expansion. Geographers interested in issues of race saw their task as the elucidation of the hierarchy of the world’s races and the provision of informed speculation on the implications of White settlement and colonial government (Bonnett, 1997: 193).

On the one hand, the public disdain shown by many UK based geographers for Bruce Gilley's 2017 essay on the 'Case for colonialism' suggests that blatant colonial-white supremacist thinking that positions Europe as intellectually and morally superior is widely considered unacceptable. Yet on the other hand, as noted by Elliott-Cooper (2017), such thinking 'remains the conventional wisdom underscoring the citations, curricula, canons and recruitment patterns across geography's academic institutions' (2017:333). This resonates with the wider point Domosh is making about the proliferation of 'white geographies' in a seemingly liberal discipline. So how are these two positions possible simultaneously? The answer is coloniality induced institutional racism. By coloniality I mean the "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243). By institutional racism I mean;

'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (McPherson, 1999: 369).

It is not possible to adequately address the extent and nature of coloniality induced institutional racism within British geography in this article. But I want to provide an

indication of the situation based on insights from two recent papers that document the status of 'Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and staff in contemporary British Geography' (Desai, 2017), and the everyday experiences of racism encountered by academics racialised as non-white (Tolia-Kelly, 2017),

Vandana Desai's (2017) article is a defining moment for discussions about racism in British higher education geography. Drawing on a range national data sets, Desai illustrates the marginal and precarious position of BME students and colleagues. For example, in terms of the undergraduate student body, where nationally 21.3 per cent of all UK-domiciled first degree undergraduate students are BME, for UK geography this is only 6.3 per cent (ibid 2017:320). Those BME geography students who are admitted on to geography programs end up graduating with degree results significantly below those of their white peers. 11.2 per cent of BME students attained a first and 69.5 per cent attained an upper second or better (across the three years, 2013–15) as compared with 16.9 per cent and 80.0 per cent for white students respectively (ibid 2017:321). To be clear, this situation, which is not unique to geography and is known as the 'attainment gap', has been well-researched and studies have found that the disparity exists even when entry-level qualifications are accounted for (Tatlow, 2015). The problem is not therefore attributable to an intellectual deficit in BME students, nor should we lay the blame on secondary schooling, rather we need to look at our own institutional practices and ask ourselves why they are disadvantaging our BME students.

British geography not only has a low proportion of undergraduate BME students, who leave with lower grades than their white peers, but it also fails to encourage them to go on to postgraduate study. 'The fraction of UK domiciled research postgraduate students who are BME is 16.4 per cent, whereas the comparable

number in Geography is only 4.4 per cent' (ibid 2017:320). The situation is no better when we look at academic staff. Among all UK national staff in the UK, 8.2 per cent are BME, which is almost twice the 4.3 per cent of UK national geography staff who are BME (Desai, 2017:322). This has implications for who produces geographical knowledge and how it circulates, but the consequences of unfavourable and unsupportive environments for BME academic staff in geography also make themselves manifest in lower levels of progression in the discipline (ibid 2017:322). In the UK as a whole, only 7.3 per cent of UK professors are BME, yet geography at 1.4 per cent is disturbingly low.

The findings from Desai's study are brought to life in Divya Tolia-Kelly's (2017) article 'A day in the life of a geographer: lone, black, female'. Tolia-Kelly illustrates how these statistics take the form of racist relations that intersect with other ideological constructions, such as gender, to maintain the oppressive normative architecture underpinning our institutions and praxis. Notably, given the context of this article, Tolia-Kelly demonstrates how geography teachers can find themselves in learning environments dominated by white students resistant to anti-racist messages (see also Jackson, 1989). The following example was used to illustrate the fraught ways in which this can play out;

Recently, a black academic was teaching about the myth of race based on Stuart Hall (1997) and recent debates in popular culture. The discussion was focused on the discrediting of racial science. In response, the students dismissed her argument. Their responses included 'it's proven scientifically, race does exist'. 'It is biological. Look at our skins.' Also to prove their point,



students started 'Googling' for evidence while in the lecture theatre. 'Look here's the evidence!' said a throng, while looking at a sports piece arguing for recognition of biological differences between white and black runners in capacities for running (e.g. Isaksen 2013). In that space, her authority and expertise were placed on an equal or lesser platform to the students (Tolia-Kelly, 2017: 326).

These insights from Maldonado-Torres (2007), Desai (2017) and Tolia-Kelly (2017) indicate why, in the context of British geography as an example, 'white geographies' are being reproduced. But they also show why the reproduction of 'white geographies' needs to be challenged using a firmly anti-racist position that goes beyond questions of unconscious bias and unintentional prejudice, because what we are seeing is the reproduction of whiteness as a form of institutional/structural hierarchy that disadvantages, and enables the oppression of, those racialised as non-white. We might therefore need to start asking ourselves a different question, because the 'so' in 'why is our geography curriculum so white' could be interpreted as suggesting that there is an acceptable amount of whiteness a curriculum can reproduce without perpetuating racism. I do not believe such a threshold exists, so perhaps we should start asking 'Why is our geography curriculum white?'

These observations are significant given that the curriculum and classroom are increasingly seen as a key way to enact progressive changes that will address racism within the academy and wider society. For example, Domosh highlights how the AAG diversity task force recommended that 'departments should review their curricula to determine the degree of commitment to diversity and, if necessary,

create courses that make the curricula more relevant to today's racially diverse society' (AAG 2006 cited in Domosh, 2015). To the best of my knowledge a similar task force does not exist in British geography, which is telling, but if it did the discussion in this section raises two key concerns regarding a similar focus on the curriculum to address issues of racism. The first concern, based on the limited profile of non-white staff and students in British geography as described above, is that the creation of more courses on race may serve to objectify the issue and treat it as an issue divorced from, not inherent to, geographies racially problematic institutional structures (cf. Bonnett, 1997; Dwyer, 1999; Pulido, 2002). There is therefore a danger that geographers will continue ignoring Mahtani's advice to 'look at sites closer to home' and ask 'are we sharing with our students how gendered and racialized identities influence who is teaching in geography, and why? (2006: 22).

The second concern with a focus on the curriculum, is that the idea of higher education geography classrooms as emancipatory spaces and mechanisms for enacting positive social transformation is difficult to reconcile with the institutional racism outlined above. To be clear, I believe that calls for curriculum reform are usually well-intentioned, and change is needed in this area. Yet both concerns relate to the same underlying issue, which is that any problems with the higher education geography curriculum are symptomatic of coloniality induced institutional racism and not the cause. Reforms to curricula must take place as part of substantive efforts to change our institutional arrangements and practices. If they do not they risk becoming 'moves to innocence' i.e. strategies and positionings that aim to relieve those who benefit from coloniality of feelings of guilt or complicity, without having to change their privileged position at all (Tuck and Yang, 2012). This is especially true of curricula reform associated with the suite of approaches usually bracketed

together under the banner of multiculturalism and diversity. These approaches often invest learners in a liberal humanism that includes violent colonial histories in teaching merely as symbolic representations. This does not encourage critical reflection that exposes the costs of Western modernity and empire in the past or challenge us to address their consequences in the present (Desai and Sanya, 2016).

## **PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE**

I now want to propose three approaches that geographers based in UK universities could consider adopting to address coloniality induced institutional racism and mitigate against the recent interest in curriculum reform becoming a collective 'move to innocence'.

### **Proposal 1: Critical Race Theory**

British geography departments and institutions, such as the RGS-IBG, need to adopt an explicitly anti-racist position and acknowledge that coloniality induced racism is an endemic feature of society and therefore the academy. There also needs to be recognition that the effects of this situation relate to explicit acts of hostility, as well as more subtle and covert workings of power associated with white supremacy that have the effect of dehumanising and disadvantaging groups racialised as non-white (Gillborn, 2006; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000). This recognition is crucial for generating constructive dialogue and tangible actions to address the institutional racism taking place within the discipline as illustrated above. Such a focus will hopefully avoid redundant debates about intention, and divert efforts towards addressing the outcomes of the actions that perpetuate racism via our institutional

arrangements and practices (cf. Gillborn, 2006). This is significant because the circulation of race as a social force is often supported by well-intentioned members of the dominant racial group who see themselves as liberal progressives (Bonila Silva, 2017; Wekker, 2016).

Some readers will note that this first proposal aligns with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective. CRT emerged in the US in the post-civil rights era and is associated with scholarship and activism that 'sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better' (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017: 3). The US and UK have different circumstances, not least in relation to ongoing settler colonialism (Bonds and Inwood, 2016), but the motivation to not only recognise racism but *actively try to* remove it from society is applicable to both contexts. Activism is therefore crucial if British geography wants to substantively alter institutional arrangements and practices by making them more humane. What might this activism look like? Are there any sources of guidance? At a 2017 workshop organised by the RGS-IBG Race, Culture and Equality Working Group (RACE), Dalia Gebrial addressed both questions based on the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford movement.

Three themes stood out during Gebrial's talk on anti-racist activism and subsequent writings (ibid; in press) that I will try to summarise. First, drawing on the work of Paul Gilroy, is the observation that in a context of managerial neoliberalism that frames the individual as the primary social unit and organising category, we must not do away with collective mobilisation in favour of individualised, self-help methods of change. Second, while a holistic understanding of race entails engaging with ideas around identity and culture, we must avoid the identity/culture lens turning anti-racist agendas into insufficient demands for increased diversity. Merely increasing diversity

can leave racist structures in place because the issue becomes one of acknowledging and tolerating difference. This hinders the recognition of racialisation as a political and historical process designed to facilitate the material and ideological domination of human beings. Lastly, we must situate moves to address racism in higher education within the wider social context of environmental, economic and political struggles. In sum, I am calling for an approach to activism that is a collective endeavour, which challenges racist epistemologies *and* institutional/structural hierarchies, and pushes for an equitable allocation of resources and opportunities within and beyond the academy.

## **Proposal 2: Social Justice**

The second proposal draws inspiration from work on environmental justice, particularly the writings of Robert D. Bullard. In short, scholars and activists working in this area have spent decades highlighting, and addressing, 'how people of colour and low-income persons have borne greater environmental and health risks than the society at large in their neighbourhoods, workplaces and playgrounds' (Bullard, 1999: 5). This has led to research and grassroots activism based on an environmental justice framework that attempts to uncover the underlying racism that contributes to and reproduces variations in exposure and protection from environmental and health risks (cf. Pulido, 2015). Environmentalism therefore becomes an issue of *social justice*, because it calls for answers to ethical and political questions of 'who gets what, when, why and how much' (Bullard, 1999; 7). So how does this connect to racism in British geography? I propose that a potential way to move from recognising racism to adopting anti-racist practices and reforming our institutions, is a social

justice approach that addresses how coloniality impacts on redistribution, recognition and representation. Luckett and Shay, influenced by the work of social justice scholar Nancy Fraser, posed the questions below in relation to higher education in South Africa. But Desai's (2017) findings indicate that British geography needs to reflect on these questions and respond to them also;

First, addressing redistribution, what resources and structures are needed so that all citizens have an equal chance of accessing, participating and succeeding in HE? Second, addressing recognition, who is the curriculum for and whose cultural values should it recognise and value? Third, addressing representation, how are students, previously excluded from decision-making that affects them, to be included in decision-making roles and procedures around curriculum and pedagogy? (Luckett and Shay, 2017:9).

### **Proposal 3: The Decolonial**

The last proposal is perhaps the most contentious of the three, and the one I am most reticent about putting forward. There is, I would argue, a need to complement the current focus on curriculum *content* with a more explicit reflection about 'the epistemological principles that secure the legitimacy of the content of what is taught and subsequently learnt by way of an underlying pedagogical position' (De Lissovoy, 2010: 282). In terms of British geography, what is needed is a critical discussion around identifying and using *pedagogies* that are founded upon coexistence and respect, as opposed to domination, separation and assimilation. Decolonial pedagogical approaches have the potential to achieve this because they not only

insist that we should remain vigilant to how colonial modes of thinking are reproduced pedagogically in and through curricula content and design (Daigle and Sundberg 2017), but also encourages an overhaul of the oppressive structures informing educational institutions and learning environments through pedagogical praxis (Tejeda et al. 2003; Shahjahan et al. 2009).

In my own academic practice, for example, decoloniality scholarship has made me reflect more critically about implicitly dominant narratives of academic excellence and the aesthetic forms they take across a range of activities, for example; recruitment and admissions, pastoral support, assessments and marking. This critical reflection is needed because certainty about European superiority, as alluded to in the quote above from Bonnett (1997), played a crucial role in colonial expansion tied to Europe's projection of itself as modern. Yet the conflation of Western modernity with excellence and superiority includes but goes beyond the physical act of colonisation. It is also an organising logic and modality of knowledge, power and being that shapes intersubjective relations, i.e. coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). I recognise that my upbringing and schooling mean I am a product of Western modernity, therefore my unreflexive understandings of excellence when engaging in the activities mentioned above are entangled in, and likely to reproduce, coloniality. Crucially, decolonial approaches insist that this situation is fixable. Because it is possible to create ways of knowing and being that are humane and founded on coexistence using the collective set of ideas and practices that exist throughout the world including Europe (Maldonado-Torres, 2016).

This type of critical reflection that could lead to substantive changes to our praxis appears to be precisely what geography as a discipline is crying out for when members ask, 'why is our curriculum so white?' So why am I reticent about

encouraging decolonial approaches? It is because while I am mindful that a decolonial position can and does resonate with CRT and social justice approaches as outlined above, I am also aware of, and agree with, Tuck and Yang's observation that

'Decolonisation as a political project made up of social movements and enacted in myriad practices that are 'accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity' and which 'cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks' (ibid 2012 cited in Daigle and Sundberg, 2017: 338).

I therefore propose decolonial approaches in higher education geography provided we do so sensitively, collectively and actively as part of 'the removal of ongoing colonial domination, thereby connecting moves to dismantle the racist social classification of the world population under Eurocentric world power... to Indigenous-led demands for radical restructuring of land, resources and wealth globally' (Esson et al. 2017; 385).

## **WIDER STRUGGLES**

This article offered a response to Mona Domosh's (2015) much needed essay about the reproduction of 'white geographies' through approaches to teaching and learning geography in Western universities. My aim, while too ambitious for an article of this



length, was to situate the existing focus on the whiteness of the geography curriculum within a wider discussion about institutional racism in British geography. This intervention might appear unsophisticated and obvious when placed against the work of pioneering scholars cited throughout the text. But it is an intervention that is needed because, while well-intentioned, liberal progressive moves to delegitimise the privileging of 'white geographies' via curriculum reforms are likely to prove ineffective if they merely 'add black thinking to a white pot' (cf. Ndlovu-Gatsheni cited in Biney, 2016: 6). Given the precarious and marginal position of non-white staff and students in British geography, wider reforms to the discipline are needed lest these liberal moves become 'moves to innocence'.

If the question at hand is 'Why is our geography curriculum so white?', and the answer to this question is coloniality induced racism, then UK based geographers must accompany our attempts to reform curriculum content with an attendant engagement with, and incorporation of, CRT, social justice and decolonial approaches. Why? Because such a move would require us to confront the reproduction of 'white geographies' as a historical process with contemporary effects, particularly the ontological and epistemological Eurocentrism and white supremacy that sustains it. In relation to learning and teaching specifically, a decolonial imperative would aid us in imagining pedagogies that 'summon subordinated knowledge that are produced in the context of practices of marginalisation, in order that we might destabilise existing practices of knowing and thus cross the fictive boundaries of exclusion and marginalisation' (Alexander 2005 cited in Walsh, 2015: 16). This is a difficult task, because it is not just our minds that have been colonised but our imaginations also (hooks, 1991: 55).

I want to end by highlighting guidance from scholar-activist Ama Biney, who notes that decolonial projects within the academy 'must be part of an inclusive task to systematically transform the wider society of which the academy is an integral part' (2016: 6). It is fair to say that UK based geographers, myself included, have had limited substantive engagement with the various social movements seeking to challenge coloniality inside and outside UK higher education, for example; those asking and investigating 'Why isn't my professor black?' (Black, 2014), activism linked to Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa (Mbembe, 2016), and indigenous led movements such as the Standing Rock resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline (Lane, 2017) and the Katribu resistance to mining in the Philippines (Simbulan, 2016). I agree with Parvati Raghuram's (2017) assertion that geographers need to acknowledge and support movements beyond the academy because they reflect 'possibilities of new beginnings arising out of the changing nature of racism and colonisation in different places at different times'. Furthermore, alongside colleagues in RACE, I am taking up Raghuram's (2017) call for geographers 'to make space for this ever-evolving nature of both colonising and decolonising activities'. I hope you will join us in doing so.

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