

# the radical limits of decolonising feminism

Suzanne C. Persard

Feminist Review

Issue 128, 13–27

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DOI: 10.1177/01417789211015334

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## abstract

From yoga to the Anthropocene to feminist theory, recent calls to 'decolonise' have resulted in a resurgence of the term. This article problematises the language of the decolonial within feminist theory and pedagogy, problematising its rhetoric, particularly in the context of the US. The article considers the romanticised transnational solidarities produced by decolonial rhetoric within feminist theory, asking, among other questions: What are the assumptions underpinning the decolonial project in feminist theory? How might the language of 'decolonising' serve to actually de-politicise feminism, while keeping dominant race logics in place? Furthermore, how does decolonial rhetoric in sites such as the US continue to romanticise feminist solidarities while positioning non-US-born women of colour at the pedagogical end of feminist theory? I argue that 'decolonial', in its current proliferation, is mainstreamed uncritically while serving as a catachresis within feminist discourse. This article asks feminism to reconsider its ease at an incitement to decolonise as a caution for resisting the call to decolonise as simply another form of multicultural liberalism that masks oppression through imagined transnational solidarities, while calling attention to the homogenous construction of the 'Global South' within decolonising discourse.

## keywords

feminism; decolonising; coloniality; race and gender; feminist theory; postcolonial and decolonial feminism

The mainstream has never run clean, perhaps never can.

(Spivak, 1999, p. 2)

## **introduction**

Yoga, our diets, your minds, Obama, syllabi, Christmas, architecture, beauty regimens, fantasy, philanthropy, the Anthropocene: all have been targets of decolonial aims; feminism has figured prominently in its inclusion in this compendium. In the current academic climate of the United States, calls to decolonise feminism follow a common trajectory: evaluate feminist theories and practices that fail to prioritise the most epistemologically marginalised through colonialism, particularly indigenous knowledges and histories, people of colour, poor and working classes and gender and sexual minorities. Decolonial feminism thus currently circulates in the academy as perhaps one of the final analytic frontiers of feminist theory. But the recent surge of rhetoric calling for decolonising feminism has eclipsed its radical margins, now entering the feminist mainstream. This very discourse of 'decolonising' has pervaded the university as one of its most forceful vantage points, an incitement that has reverberated throughout feminist studies with several contradictory and some detrimental effects. In women's and gender studies curricula, 'decolonising' is invoked as another term for non-US alterity. This rhetoric of decolonising feminism proliferates, as the politics of knowledge production through decolonial lenses remains unchallenged. I am cautious about the vindicating effects of decolonising feminism, particularly as its language enters mainstream praxis. But for feminist scholars at different geopolitical points across the globe, I ask, what are the paradoxes within the invocation of decolonise feminism? What kind of violences might be (re)produced within calls to decolonise that actually interrupt a liberatory politics? Furthermore, how is the 'Global South' homogenised as feminist pedagogy liberates itself from the discursive production of its disciplinary limits? In this article, I want to interrogate the geopolitical position from which these calls to decolonise originate and, more importantly, to critically examine the politics of knowledge production within decolonial feminist discourse in the US.

In its promise of finality, the language of decolonising circulates as both an affective promise and simultaneous fulfillment: its subtext supersedes its theoretical application, since its utterance is its very currency. In the specific disciplinary case of feminism, decolonising inherits a genealogy that is rooted within both dismantling the imperial legacies of the site of knowledge production and recognising the role of Euro-American institutions in perpetuating this violence. Feminist scholarship inherits a critical genealogy of decolonial theorising, from arguments spanning the coloniality of gender (Oyewumi, 1997; Lugones, 2010), of research methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), of the human (Wynter, 2003) and of feminism itself (Yee 2011; Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013). In the United States, within a political and institutionalised climate of sustained white supremacy, the urgency of decolonising pedagogy is assumed as a serious and critical undertaking. The language of decolonising has now solidly, however, entered a new terrain of articulation within the university. The recent popularity of 'decolonising' within the feminist institutional space, in particular, has produced the phenomenon of rhetorical performativity, whereby 'decolonising' has become a banal refrain. In calling attention to feminism's decolonial rhetoric, my aim is to problematise the assumptions of feminism's analytic terms and aspirations particularly situated within calls of solidarity with the 'Global South', as well as to emphasise

the heterogeneity of decolonial feminism's interlocutors and the tensions that undergird the discourse. Additionally, I call attention to the additive tendency within feminist pedagogy that has replaced 'Third Wave' or 'postcolonial' non-US-based feminist scholarship with the 'decolonial'.

At best, the current popularity of the term 'decolonising' in feminist discourse has resulted in a phenomenon that announces radical theoretical intervention without critically interrogating the discursive structures of feminist knowledge production; at worst, this incitement 'to decolonise' redeploys another iteration of neoliberal multiculturalism masquerading as a radical feminist intervention. Yet in both cases, 'decolonising' produces an effect that promises its utterance is the last bastion of epistemic feminist liberation. My argument is primarily concerned with three points. First, the current rhetoric of decoloniality proliferating as a politically correct refrain has produced a slippage in feminist theory. This slippage actually neutralises the very language of coloniality while producing the effect of repositioning the US as the primary site of decolonial intervention, similar to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010 [1988], p. 238) has called the 'Subject of the West', to preserve its preeminent status. Decolonial calls from the site of US universities have resituated the language of decoloniality without recognising the collapse of power that has (re)situated the West as the vanguard of radical thought, while such calls have homogenised rhetorical alliances with the so-called 'Global South'. Second, the language of decoloniality specifically within feminist theory has positioned scholars of colour as temporally afterward within a Euro-American feminist trajectory, utilising the term 'decolonial' as a swappable term for 'postcolonial' or 'transnational'. This results in invoking decolonising as simply a pedagogical synonym of alterity for non-US, non-white bodies within feminist theory. Finally, I am concerned with the ease and self-righteousness with which calls to 'decolonise' are deployed that actually replicate a certain kind of romanticised pre-colonialism that is ahistorical, erasing difference in the name of radical feminist solidarity. This erasure of difference(s) produces a fictitious unified subjectivity among people of colour who seem to be all oppressed by white supremacy, without regard to the ways in which inter-group and intra-group violence masquerades under decolonial ambitions.

In the US, the term 'people of colour' is currently used to name a unifying language of resistance, recognising a shared solidarity against communities encountering white supremacy. For scholars of colour, in particular, a call to 'decolonise' syllabi, institutional practices and theories has meant a call to invest in challenging and undoing the authority of Euro-American knowledge production (Tejeda, Espinoza and Gutierrez, 2002; Shahjahan, Wagner and Wane, 2009; Bakshi, Jivraj and Posocco, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu, 2018). In the particular discipline of feminist theory, however, decolonising inherits a corrective rhetorical frame that counters the historic and epistemic erasure of non-white feminist practices and theories. Such theories and practices were eclipsed by the dominant narratives of mainstream 1970s US feminism, which also ushered in a wave-model paradigm that situated women of colour as a 'third wave' when they were, in fact, writing and organising alongside (and not to mention, prior to) those of the 'first' and 'second' waves. The wave model has been largely—but not entirely—debunked as a pedagogical tool. However, twenty years ago, Ella Shohat (2001, p. 1271) observed that women's studies curricula were often characterised by a 'submerged North American nationalism'. This nationalism is bound to the additive pedagogical tendencies of disciplinary feminism, which has had a tenuous role in acknowledging the role of non-US women of colour within its epistemic formations. The additive formulation of disciplinary feminism produced a feminist temporality that somehow permanently Others the 'Third World' woman; however, in current feminist rhetoric, the 'woman

of colour' has now become a synonym for *decolonial*. Within this additive phenomenon, decoloniality is situated as another name for non-US woman of colour alterity as the last topic in the theoretical addendum. Within a genealogy of liberal progress narratives, which reach its limits in the temporal linearity of Euro-American feminist formations, where does the decolonial feminist reside?

Coloniality has remained an integral part of feminist theorising, whether articulated by Native feminist scholars theorising about the relationship of white feminism to settler colonialism (Yee, 2011; Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013), or by feminist scholars challenging the very category of gender as a colonial production (Oyewumi, 1997; Lugones, 2010). Recognising coloniality was also an integral part of the earliest black feminist texts in the US, as the Combahee River Collective Statement expressed solidarity with Third World women. One of the earliest and most influential feminist texts to explicitly ground the experiences of non-US women of colour through an explicitly decolonial lens was Chandra Talpade Mohanty's groundbreaking essay 'Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses' (1984). In writing the essay, which would become the first chapter of the 2003 publication *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), Mohanty sought to problematise the figural 'Third World woman' per her representation in feminist texts. Mohanty's critical intervention articulated feminist theory as an integral part of postcolonial theory, enabling scholars to analyse gender as an analytic not simply bound to Western productions of the category 'woman'. The publication of 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak, 2010 [1988]), originally delivered by Spivak in 1983, would then produce new theoretical junctures for scholars to engage with coloniality through figural representations of the then-named 'Third World', as well as the very conceptual category of the term 'woman'.

These iterations of decolonial feminisms, which materialised in relation to the recognition of colonial/modernity and its effects, have remained a critical part of feminist theory and women's studies in general. Within the past three decades, however, women-of-colour feminisms have undergone a linguistic and discursive shift that has transpired from the postcolonial and the transnational to the *decolonial*, which temporally situates an effort to undo the legacies of colonisation as an ever-present and active phenomenon. The language of the decolonial, which appeared in earliest Third World women's texts of the 1980s, has resurfaced as an explicit reorientation within feminist theory and praxis from Euro-American knowledge formations. The present decolonial moment is now the new mainstream. Among women's and gender studies departments in particular, the language of decolonising within feminist pedagogy and curricula has produced a certain politicised cachet. The most current moment of 'decolonising the university' was a refrain that went viral across international campuses. In 2015, the student-led Rhodes Must Fall movement called for the removal of the statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (Boroughs, 2015). The Rhodes Must Fall movement became emblematic of the complicity of higher education to normalise the coloniality of the institution, its curricula and practices. The South African student-led movement extended across the globe, as the University of Oxford began its own movement for toppling Rhodes' statue (Khomami, 2015). Across the Atlantic, Yale University students signed a petition demanding the decolonising of their curriculum (Wang, 2016). The language of decolonising has subsequently prodded university administrators and departments to confront the implications and potential trajectories of decolonising the university. Several important texts interrogating the role of hegemonic Euro-American knowledge production within pedagogy, gender and sexuality include *Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminism and Globalization* (2017), edited by Margaret A. McLaren, addressing how feminism can:

navigate twenty-first century concerns of the increasing influence of global capital and transnational corporations, repressive state forces, nationalism, xenophobia, the forced displacement of peoples and immigration, the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor within nations ... and the looming environmental crisis. (*ibid.*, p. 3)

Similarly, in *Decolonising the University* (2018), Gurinder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu (2018) reflect carefully on the decolonial pedagogical project, providing examples of colonial and capitalist history structuring the current university system in the West. The editors note that the collection 'aims to critically examine the recent calls to "decolonise the university" ... offering a resource for students and academics looking to challenge and undo forms of coloniality in their classrooms, curricula and campuses' (*ibid.*, p. 1). In 'Toward a decolonizing pedagogy: social justice reconsidered' (2002), authors Carlos Tejeda, Manuel Espinoza and Kris Gutierrez situate the decolonial project within the historical racialised violence that constitutes the United States; the authors define neocolonisation as a relation to social existence that 'continues to serve primarily the interests of the dominant white, English-speaking, and Christian population' (*ibid.*, p. 13).

## **decolonising as buzzword**

The aforementioned collections offer a kind of scholarship reflective of multiplying social injustices in a world plagued by a current crisis of asylum seekers and, particularly, children imprisoned in detention camps at the US border, Palestinian apartheid, policing of transgender black women and a climate of increasing environmental and social catastrophes sanctioned by imperial leadership across the world—including, of course, from within the US. The urgency of social issues and injustices continues to multiply and they tend to impact and pervade women's studies departments prominently. The core of feminist theory is rooted within addressing these multiple, moving targets of social injustice. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang describe this phenomenon in their article 'Decolonization is not a metaphor' (2012), problematising the metaphoricity of decoloniality. Subsequently, the language of decolonising is deployed within the academy as the theoretical salve to racism, settler colonialism, colonial hegemony, ableism, transphobia and homophobia, praxis, citational politics and capitalism, among other forms of injustice. Yet there is a slippage when the power of decolonising rhetoric enters the site of the university, which reproduces the very violence that decolonising praxis opposes. Perhaps the slippage emerges most conspicuously through the affective framing of the decolonial, which seemingly promises vindication for feminism through its mere invocation.

Rather than dispute these formidable targets of various forms of interlocking and intersecting oppressions, I want to probe the language of decoloniality and unsettle its proliferating ease within current feminist discourses. My aim is to problematise a few assumptions about its particular currency within feminism, unsettle the assumptions underpinning its politically correct deployment and caution against its universalising effects that subsume difference.

Decolonising has subsequently become a word pervading feminist discourse as a phenomenon similar to what Jennifer C. Nash (2008, p. 3) has observed of intersectionality: a kind of 'scholarly buzzword'. Like intersectionality, the language of decolonising inherits self-righteous effects, even within the parameters of its discursive critique. Similar to intersectionality, the mainstreamed popularity of

decolonising feminism amplifies its rhetorical power. The very rhetoric of decolonising feminism thus encompasses an affective pull that invites its thinkers and practitioners into a series of pedagogical transformations, whereby the authorising force of its utterance absolves the paradoxes of the declaration. I observe similar paradoxes embedded within decolonial rhetoric that Nash has observed of intersectionality, but primarily that decolonial analytics within feminism have become a normative and equally ambiguous analytic frame. The normativity of plurality is one of US feminism's leading analytical frames, which subsumes difference even as it seeks to differentiate its machinations. The universalising language of feminist 'solidarity' also functions as an opaque lens of radical affiliation, without the critical praxis required to interrogate its alliances. Decolonising rhetoric subsequently follows the rhetoric of intersectionality by hailing popularity beyond the university. Nearly every student in my Introduction to Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies course can identify the term 'intersectionality'; yet the majority of the same students never received any substantive pedagogy related to coloniality or Middle Passage slavery. Similarly, students who wish to 'decolonise feminism' or recognise the genealogy of the term 'woman' in the US are often unaware of the number of wars in which the US is currently engaged. *Decolonising* anything encompasses an affective righteousness, a feeling of unequivocal good. Similar to declaring 'I am an intersectional feminist', decolonising discourses concede to the language that something is happening and that we are doing something good—even if we cannot pinpoint what exactly that something might be. Intersectionality, as a feminist analytic, has translated into a descriptive (that is, 'intersectional'). In this ontological shift from an analytic framework, which serves as a vehicle for feminist praxis, intersectionality theoretically becomes not something that one does, but something that one *is*. Similarly, decoloniality has shifted from an analytic as a method of feminist praxis to a descriptor of feminism's disciples. As Nash (*ibid.*, p. 13) has observed, 'intersectionality itself has become an institutionalized intellectual project, and the dominant tool for excavating the voices of the marginalized'. Although one could argue that this shift is both desired and necessary, I ask: what are the effects of this shift that subsequently result in the failure to critically engage with decolonial praxis or genealogy?

## **decolonial as catachresis**

Theorising coloniality and its relationship to modernity is a critical imperative within feminist theory. Yet the catachrestic nature of the decolonial also appears as a term that espouses liberation from white imperialism, while binarising the world into coloniser/colonised. Feminist scholar Asfاده Najmabadi (2008, pp. 70–72) problematises the assumptions of this binary, noting the 'misrecognitions' of feminist scholars categorised as 'postcolonial' simply by virtue of their identities as 'non-West' women of colour. An incitement to *decolonise*, therefore, espouses this kind of rhetoric, which binarises the world into oppressed versus liberated. Postcolonial/decolonial thus become a kind of catachresis, whereas the US establishes the coloniser/colonised binary, sets the terms of inclusion for each group and brands its praxis as liberatory in the name of feminism. In 'Teaching in unavailable intersections', Najmabadi (*ibid.*, p. 71) observes that the colonial/colonised bifurcation encompasses a 'neither-nor, a negatively defined space', failing to recognise 'vast geohistorical spaces, societies that were neither colonizers nor colonized'. In the afterword to *Decolonizing Sexualities: Transnational Perspectives, Critical Interventions* (2016), Aniruddha Dutta writes that as the powerful political coalitions of queer and trans people of colour (QTPOC) have produced 'decolonizing epistemologies and ways of being' apart from mainstream LGBT politics, the very term 'QTPOC' continues to re-centre the West, even as its praxis aims to challenge

white supremacy (*ibid.*, pp. 282–283). Similar to the effects of LGBT organisations in the US that concern themselves with the ‘human rights’ of LGBT individuals globally, universalising and reifying ‘queerness’ across the international division of labour, decolonising risks this same transformation into a liberal politics of multiculturalism without any critical interrogation of its mass deployment. Among its many subject effects, uncritical application of ‘decolonising’ feminism situates the Euro-American university at the locus of pedagogical liberation, obscuring other forms of violence and structures of oppression under the banner of the decolonial. If decoloniality can be deployed as a language of feminist currency, we will proceed with decolonising everything without decolonising anything.<sup>1</sup> Decolonising thus becomes the politically salient category through which liberal discourses of rights, democracy, majoritarian interests and good intentions are deployed.

## **decolonising feminism: a case study**

The particular language of ‘decolonising’ feminism has emerged similarly to its analytic kin, intersectionality, as possessing a certain cachet of politicisation. This tension of the uncritical deployment of decoloniality is a starting point for my engagement with rethinking the current calls to decolonise feminism, particularly through recent attempts to broaden feminist classrooms through invoking decoloniality as the ultimate radical method of inclusion. The inclusion—or in some cases, foregrounding—of women of colour emerges as a response to the disciplinary formation of women’s studies in the US, which has historically centred white feminist scholars and privileged Euro-American knowledge formations. In the essay ‘A feminist case for the decolonial: research and teaching notes’ (2017), Patricia A. Schechter conducts a brief overview of various feminist decolonial scholarship, then expands the term through an ambiguous scope ranging from its role as a reparative act specifically remedying Western knowledge structures that limit inclusion of women of colour to the subversive acts of women in general. In this extension from the specific to the general, Schechter excises race from coloniality in an ever-expanding definition of the ‘decolonial’ that spans non-normativity. Schechter (*ibid.*, p. 650) argues, ‘While some scholars insist that a decolonial politic “must also be a land ethic,” often the territory women claim most pointedly is that of their own bodies (and their children’s)’. By assuming gender is already excised from a theory of decoloniality, Schechter rehearses a common stereotype that feminist theory is implicitly white, while decoloniality exclusively accommodates theories of race. This is one of a few uneasy tensions within Schechter’s expansive definition of the decolonial to encompass all feminist practices of resistance. Schechter (*ibid.*, p. 651) also notes that her earlier scholarship focused on ‘some of the neglected female figures whose political salience was lost or misunderstood in the statist feminist historiography’. There is an uncomfortable but subtle thread of fetishising decoloniality that runs through the argument, which aims to tether all subversive women under the banner of the decolonial. According to Schechter (*ibid.*), ‘By virtue of their liberty, citizenship, and educational status, none of these women can be labeled subaltern, but the idea of the decolonial helped me name the political impulse involved in their geographical boundary crossing’. The decolonial thus emerges within feminist pedagogy as another name for alterity: ‘a decolonial lens thus opens up questions of subalternization by disturbing neat binaries such as colonizer/colonized, master/slave and citizen/alien binaries that usually map onto a restrictive black/white or white/non-white

<sup>1</sup> I thank Dilek Huseynzadegan for this point.

social imaginary in the United States' (*ibid.*, p. 647). Schechter then gradually expands the definition of decolonial, similar to the additive model of intersectionality, stating:

Decolonial might also encompass the sort of oppositional conformity practiced by womanist black activists and institution builders in the United States and the Caribbean and perhaps include white women whose symptoms such as hysteria, neurasthenia, or even anorexia and bulimia portend a mute protest or at least crisis of embodiment of a racialized ideal. (*ibid.*, p. 653)

If the 'oppositional conformity' of white women is now regarded as *decolonial*, somehow this ever-expansive category has seemingly theoretically run amok. I use Schechter not as an extraordinary example of the increasing theoretical slippage of decoloniality but as one example, among many, that represents the discursive proliferation of the language of decolonising feminism and the uncritical solidarity of its rhetorical effects. Decolonising feminism has evolved into the primary analytic that produces a metonym for universal oppression. I read this phenomenon of decoloniality within feminist discourse as similar to Roderick Ferguson's (2012, p. 204) observations of the academic organisation 'around newly discovered diversities'. In this formula, decolonial feminism traffics in what Grace Hong (quoted in Ferguson, 2012, p. 204) calls the simultaneous current of 'valorization and fetishization'. But this inclusion of women with hysteria or eating disorders is not the only problem, because if it were, then the theoretical remedy would be simple pedagogical gatekeeping. Rather, this is simply one example of theories of decolonial feminist pedagogy incidentally expanding with tentacles in all epistemic directions, ultimately demonstrating the theoretical paradoxes within an analytic detached from its genealogy. If all feminist resistance simply is *decolonial*, what does that mean for the sites of colonisation and communities under colonial rule that continue to exist—and not just theoretically? Furthermore, if the 'mute protest' of white women can be regarded as decolonial, where do we situate women of colour's silence under colonial rule? Somehow, decolonial is becoming shorthand for feminist praxis, and although some would perhaps argue it should be, I am more concerned with the mainstreaming of this category as ultimately signifying everything and meaning ultimately nothing. Schechter (2017, p. 653) continues, 'Decolonial readings also open outward toward comparative work, leaving female residents and citizens of the United States less analytically stranded and exceptional in discussions about empire and globalization'. Yet, following Spivak (2010 [1988])—and perhaps any individual not residing on this side of the international division of labour—decolonial praxis should least of all be concerned with not stranding US white feminists.

## **decolonising the syllabus: mainstreaming inclusion**

Since decolonising is a framework that applies historically to anti-colonial movements during Western imperialism (past and present) as well as to feminist pedagogy, its analytical reach straddles both the academy and activism. Employing decolonial pedagogy as a theoretical framework, scholars advocate overhauling canon formation, engaging with subalternity and interrogating the academic origins of white Euro-American feminism. In the case of indigenous and native pedagogies, Third World women critiques, afterthoughts of transnational and postcolonial feminisms—or simply the prevalence of white supremacy configuring the academy of old and new—the calls to re-evaluate canon formation are not unwarranted or untimely. Canon formation presents itself as another important site from which to



problematise the decolonial feminist method. Although a complete canon is a methodological impossibility, this does not mean that one should abandon texts. Yet feminism in the US still overwhelmingly proceeds through dominant logics of categorical identities, similar to the checking of US Census boxes (i.e. African-American, Latinx, Asian-American, etc.). The racialised order of the US is organised within this trajectory of majoritarian legibility, as political organisations follow this script for political and civil rights. While decolonial pedagogies desire to disrupt the traditional homogenising of identities, these identity categories are often reflected on syllabi as 'inclusive' but actually only continue to reify already dominant colonial logics of race that enable a legibility particular to primarily Western categories. Decolonial syllabi thus establish a trajectory of 'US-born white scholars / US-born scholars of colour' to 'postcolonial/decolonial' as though the temporalities of addressing race in the US still belong to a chronological trajectory of native → non-native/immigrant, without complicating the ways in which feminist pedagogy engages with inclusion of texts and its underlying assumptions about race, space, actual histories of colonialism and temporality. Feminist texts of colour that do not easily fall into these categories are yet again excised from the dominant forms of logic performed in the name of decolonising a feminist canon. There is also a curious investment in recirculating feminism as uniquely Western, without recognising that labour struggles and social movements led by women of colour have occurred within intersectional frameworks, prior to an explicit naming of such movements as either feminist or intersectional.

Feminist syllabi should undoubtedly be revised with a critical eye, as an anti-racist feminist syllabus should be a basic aim of feminist pedagogy. Although there are varied methods and intentions for syllabus construction (which is not the goal of this article to critique), there is an unintentional yet curious replication of 'decolonising' feminist pedagogy that permanently positions the woman of the Global South *at the end of the decolonial syllabus*. In a recent survey of Introduction to Women's Studies syllabi, a public university in the north-eastern US grouped texts by women of colour, including Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Uma Narayan and Jyotsna Agnihotri Gupta, together under the syllabus. If anti-racist pedagogy eliminates Seneca Falls or Simone de Beauvoir as feminist progenitors, scholars from the 'Third World' still end up as the textual, historical and pedagogical *elsewhere*. The observations of the order of syllabi indicate where we envision the theoretical beginnings and endings of disciplinarity, even within the interdisciplinarity of women's and gender studies. For example, syllabi that begin with US-born women of colour often situate scholars of the Global South at the end of the syllabus, similar to the pattern of structuring a syllabus as follows: Seneca Falls → 1970s women's liberation → Third Wave → postcolonial → decolonial. In this permutation, it ironically appears that women of colour are last among the feminist list, while decoloniality appears as a contemporary analytic for feminist praxis. Decoloniality, then, seemingly takes the place of 'Third World' or 'postcolonial' destined for its new life as feminism's last theoretical bastion but somehow its most important preoccupation. Although a survey of syllabi might reveal that this order is simply chronological, an analysis of the implications of this common formulation reveals some critical assumptions about feminist theory's implicit hierarchies and placement of the 'Other'. This formulation of situating decoloniality last therefore misses at least three critical points: first, it temporally situates 'decolonial' feminism as the latest in a long line of feminist waves and theories, without recognising that late nineteenth-century women's movements were already organising successfully against British colonial rule with respect to both gender and class in countries such as Jamaica (Reddock, 2007, pp. 6–7). Second, this formulation of US/white feminism → Global South

feminism—which is regarded as simply chronological—preserves the status of Euro-American feminism as its primary referent. Feminist scholars and activists outside of the US seemingly recede into the epistemological background as imposters of a unique Euro-American feminism, without recognising that US-based scholars—including scholars of colour—are subject to repeating these patterns of exclusion. This tendency to include scholars from other countries at the syllabus' end maintains a trajectory that situates non-US born feminists of colour as additives within the a priori structure of Euro-American feminism. Finally, the emphasis on the singular valence of decoloniality actually overemphasises coloniality as a singular force of oppression, assuming that anti-colonial struggle has also meant fighting gender-based oppression and all other forms of social inequalities.

## **decolonial, but for whom?**

Decolonial feminism for South Asians in the US and other diasporas also means that the violence of caste is often left intact within the rhetoric of solidarity aimed at fighting white supremacy. In the US, the terminology 'people of colour' remains a political identification aligned with the advancement of social justice issues. The language of 'people of colour' and 'decoloniality' has thus been advanced in theory and praxis in tandem. Yet this language can also enact a false and romanticised transnational solidarity that already exists within the decolonising context. Although the coloniality of gender is taught in more radical feminist classrooms as a colonial construct, Dalit women theorists and activists have demonstrated that gender is absolutely a dimension of historical and structural oppression within their communities and societies, prior to any European colonial power. Lawyer and Dalit activist Kiruba Munusamy declares that Dalit women are never included within the category of 'woman', emphasising, 'you know, the Indian nation or the feminist movement never consider Dalit women to be women at all. So the women issues that are discussed in the international platform or in the mainstream media are particularly about the dominant caste, elite women'.<sup>2</sup> Munusamy's remarks underscore the importance of recognising that the category of 'woman' does not necessarily translate into a transnational transcendental feminist solidarity, particularly as the very category of 'woman' inherits a genealogy of violent, upper-caste Brahmanical hierarchy for Dalit and Adivasi women.

This critical differentiation is necessary within decolonial feminist praxis in order to problematise 'brown' solidarity in places like the US, where non-white bodies are racialised as homogenous, as Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sharmin Hossain (2020) of Equality Labs contend. Equality Labs, an Ambedkarite progressive South Asian organisation, has been at the forefront of calling attention to the entrenched caste-based discrimination among the South Asian diaspora in the US. In the organisation's report *Caste in the United States: A Survey of Caste Among South Asian Americans* (2018), the authors describe the majoritarian upper-caste Hindus who have established civic, religious and cultural norms to the exclusion of caste and religious minorities (Zwick-Maitreyi *et al.*, 2018). The report is significant for upending assumptions regarding intragroup immigrant solidarity and, perhaps most importantly, situates caste-based discrimination as interrupting an imagined

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<sup>2</sup>Hague Talks, 'Hague Talks portrait: Kiruba Munusamy', video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NB0WEia51f4> [last accessed 21 July 2020].

racial 'brown' solidarity within diasporic communities. By emphasising the role of caste in the US, the imagination of caste as a structure only within the subcontinent is rendered visible as operative across geographic boundaries and interrupting any romanticised racial solidarities that would customarily appear under the Western banner of 'people of colour'. It is also an important feminist lesson that both Equality Labs and the #DalitWomenFight movements have been led by Dalit women who elevate the work of B.D. Ambedkar, an Indian jurist, economist and political activist who co-authored the Indian constitution and fought for the abolition of caste. It is within this theoretical space of feminist complexity that a decolonising feminism must engage, resisting the very uncritical categorical markers of 'South Asian', which in many Euro-American contexts have simply meant 'Indian'. Furthermore, within US conceptions of decoloniality, indigeneity is routinely demarcated as solely within a North American frame that fails to recognise the indigenous movements within places like India, which continue to be exploited by the state. At the same time, however, Dalit women should not be regarded as the homogenous paradigm of decoloniality, as Nash (2008) has observed of black women within US theories of intersectionality. Such an analytical framework would only serve to homogenise representation once again in the name of decolonising. While the heterogeneity of Dalit theorising and activism itself cannot be subsumed by tensions within decolonising discourse, this example serves as both a case study and a caution against homogenising feminist alliances in the service of producing romanticised narratives of community.

Orienting a focus to coloniality purely through a European framework also obscures the important present-day occupations that formerly colonised European territories, like India, wage against territories like Kashmir. Feminist scholar Nitasha Kaul (2018, p. 127) advances this point, noting that India is credited as thriving on a reputation of 'anti-colonial roots' due to expelling the British, but 'there is an alternative account which relies on a serious acknowledgement of the ways in which the state in India has always been violent toward Dalits, Adivasis, women, sexual and religious minorities, and the people of Kashmir and the Northeast, to name a few'. In fact, the new wave of patriotism of an anti-colonial—or *decolonial*—political system in India has produced a brand of fierce Hindu-fundamentalist nationalism that has actually fuelled right-wing gender-based violence and Islamophobia under its current prime minister, Narendra Modi. The tendency to locate coloniality as purely a European phenomenon subsequently obscures the present-day occupations that continue, like the Indian occupation of Kashmir. Importantly, Kaul (*ibid.*, p. 119) writes that this very patriotism is fuelling a 'hegemonic masculinist Indian nationalism': a patriotism founded upon the very decolonial cries of liberation from the British. The violence of the state is thus obscured by the romanticisation of anti-colonial struggle, which is accomplished through deeming the colonial occupier as the most ferocious singular force of repressive power. India's invocation as a prime example of a country's successful decolonial efforts to become independent from British rule has produced a mythic solidarity among all Indians that obscures the violence of a caste system, which continues to historically perpetrate and tolerate violence against Dalits, indigenous peoples and Muslims.

## **decolonial and the homogenised 'Global South'**

In this performance of global intellectual wokeness, 'Global South' becomes a term interpellated by its pronounced alterity, reconstituting its homogeneity in the midst of its roaring calls for recognising difference. 'Decolonising' feminism in the academy therefore produces the rhetorical effect of

self-righteous radicality, as decoloniality is disseminated as though the university was not only its origin of counter-insurgency but its most effective vector of praxis. The rhetoric of decolonising feminism has established the site of the decolonial as sometimes ambiguous, uncritically calling for Global South alliances without recognising the geopolitical power from where such scholars and students stand. The heterogeneity of power collapsed into the single frame of 'decolonial' subsequently situates the decolonial as an idealised form of liberation, with its vanguard in the Western academy. Decolonial must subsequently resist its role as the name for a universal 'Other', a universal oppression or a more radical alternative to something else. It is curious that in the calls to 'decolonise the university', scholars declare the refrained addendum of '... and the Global South' as though there are alliances between the imperial sites of the United States and United Kingdom and Global South territories. In this sense, decolonising rhetoric replicates a 'speaking for' that Spivak (1988) warned us of over thirty years ago, but the imperial critique is less conspicuous than in the case of the native informant. Yet within decolonial politics of representation, the 'Global South' is invoked as a site of homogeneity—like the so-called 'Third World' of the 1980s—without respect to geographical particularities and the international division of labour. The 'Global South' recalls the anonymous worker of Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze, with whom they seek solidarity within a homogenous international 'workers' struggle' (Spivak, 2010, pp. 238–239). Is it a coincidence that the very term 'Global South' is invoked both by scholar-activists in Euro-American countries and by Bretton Woods circulars?<sup>3</sup> Should not the scholars and activists share the same concerns when the geographical demarcation of economic disenfranchisement is speaking the same language?

## **decolonising: a final caution**

A few years ago, #decoloniseyoga began trending on social media sites, declaring cultural appropriation against anyone who was not of South Asian ancestry. It seemed (and still seems) that the majority of 'yoga' teachers in the US were in fact so far removed from any Vedic yogi that the entire practice had become a parody of sorts, with white women taking on Hindu-sounding names, chanting *Oms* and the like. Decolonising yoga, it seemed, would focus attention on reclaiming the practice as something specifically South Asian / diasporic, rather than some commodified and culturally appropriated practice that you could pay for at your local gym, taught by a *white* woman, no less.

Following the cries to 'decolonise yoga!', South Asian activist Prachi Patankar (2014) published an article in *Jadaliyya* stating that all these efforts to 'reclaim' yoga were ironic, since yoga was a spiritual practice only available to upper-caste Hindus, despite its circulation as universally 'South Asian'. Citing the work of Indian scholar and historian Meera Nanda, Patankar (*ibid.*) argued that yoga in its current iteration is a hybrid of techniques and poses from several continents, 'to create an impression of five thousand years of continuity where none really exists'. Patankar, who grew up in a rural Indian village and hails from a lower farming caste, declared that yoga was not even part of her cultural reality—eliminating the imperative for her to participate in its reclamation. Yoga, which Patankar notes was not timeless nor monolithic, became

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<sup>3</sup> In the revised 2010 edition of 'Can the subaltern speak?', Spivak (2010 [1988], p. 42) comments on the role of Bretton Woods organisations and the United Nations as 'beginning to legislate for a monstrous North/South global state'. Several articles published by the Bretton Woods Project include the language of 'Global South', including a 2012 response to the World Development Report about gender equality (Bedford, 2012) and, most notably, the 2015 policy briefing titled *Rise of the Global South and Descent of the Global North?* (Prates and Peruffo, 2015).

an easy target for caste-privileged South Asians in the US to serve as an authorised voice for establishing 'South Asian' cultural norms. As a seemingly homogenous group of people of colour, the outcries of South Asians could not be challenged in the US, because their non-white identity was the basis of their authorised indignation. Patankar notes that these outcries eerily mirrored Hindu fundamentalist sentiments of the current Indian Prime Minister and his anti-Muslim government acting to 'preserve' Hindu culture while actively perpetuating propaganda and policies against religious, ethnic and caste minorities. Cultural appropriation outcries over yoga thus allowed privileged-caste South Asians to squarely blame white people, without themselves acknowledging the enduring and normalised violence of caste embedded within access to yoga. In a sense, decolonising yoga made the blame easier to place elsewhere: in this case, squarely in the West.

## conclusion

Is decolonising feminism possible? When theorising a decolonial feminism, I am reminded of Fred Moten's recent assertion that an abolitionist university would be like an abolitionist prison.<sup>4</sup> Would a decolonial feminism prove to be the same? A caution against deploying the language of decoloniality uncritically is thus not simply to deny the multiple institutionalised injustices that exist in the US academy, but to probe into a broader issue of haphazardly transforming this term into a liberal feminist catch-all. Decolonising is not a dangerous incitement because of its desires, but because of the violences it risks obscuring in uncritical rhetorical refrains of performativity. The privilege of institutionalised academic spaces does not mean we declare our geopolitical privilege and shrug. Instead, we proceed with these tensions with a commitment to pedagogy and praxis that seeks to problematise traditionally oppressive structures of knowledge production and endeavour to create new knowledge formations and pedagogical practices, even as coloniality and its remnants saturate and structure our feminist realities. A critical interrogation of solidarity even within the most radical of feminist discourses of decoloniality must be aware of its own limits, which actually generate liberatory possibilities. Perhaps, instead of proceeding as the vanguard of righteousness, we should proceed oriented towards our own self-fulfilling prophecies with caution in our bids to claim and reclaim feminism. I recall a question posed by anti-caste activist and lawyer Manisha Mashaal (quoted in Alok, 2016): 'So when the word *azaadi* (freedom) is uttered, my question is which *azaadi* are you talking about?'. We must earnestly listen to that answer.

## acknowledgements

I am grateful to Karuna Ramachandran for her enduring intellectual insights and careful readings of the earliest drafts of this paper. I thank Elizabeth A. Wilson, Lynne Huffer and Jennifer C. Nash for providing invaluable feedback and encouragement. I also wish to thank the two anonymous readers for their generous engagement with this paper.

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<sup>4</sup> FUC, 'FUC 012 | Fred Moten & Stefano Harney—the university: last words', video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD\\_XU8&t=153s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD_XU8&t=153s) [last accessed 10 July 2020].

## author biography

Suzanne C. Persard is a doctoral candidate at Emory University. Her scholarship engages theories of gender, sexuality and archival production during the period of Indian indentureship and post-indenture visual culture; theories of decoloniality; and queer genealogies.

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