





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 the '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' redeployes 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 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 postcolonial status. Decolonial calls from the site of US universities have resituated the language of decolonisation without recognising the collapse of power that has (re)situated the West as the vanguard of postcolonial 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 scholarship on race and colour as temporally afterward within a Euro-American feminist trajectory, utilising the term 'decolonise' as a swappable term for 'postcolonial' or 'transnational'. This results in invoking decolonising as a pedagogical synonym of alterity for non-US, non-white bodies within feminist theory. Finally, the current rhetoric concerned with the ease and self-righteousness with which calls to 'decolonise' are deployed 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 subjectivity among people of colour who seem to be all oppressed by white supremacy, without recognising the ways in which inter-group and intra-group violence masquerades under decolonial ambition.

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 to invest in challenging and undoing the authority of Euro-American knowledge production (see Espinoza and Gutierrez, 2002; Shahjahan, Wagner and Wane, 2009; Bakshi, Jivraj and Pooja, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Bhabha, Gebrail and Nisa, 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 dominant narratives of mainstream 1970s US feminism, which also ushered in a wave-model of feminism that situated women of colour as a 'third wave' when they were, in fact, writing and organising as feminists (and not to mention, prior to) those of the 'first' and 'second' waves. The wave model has been widely critiqued but not entirely—debunked as a pedagogical tool. However, twenty years ago, Ella Shohat (1997, 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 institutional formations. The additive formulation of disciplinary feminism produced a feminist temporality that somehow permanently Others the 'Third World' woman; however, in current feminist rhetoric, t

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 and Morrill, 2013), or by feminist scholars challenging the very category of gender as a colonial product (Oyewumi, 1997; Lugones, 2010). Recognising coloniality was also an integral part of the earliest 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 experience 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' (1995), 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 analysis 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 coloniality 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 feminist texts of the 1980s, has resurfaced as an explicit reorientation within feminist theory and praxis beyond 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 via feminist pedagogy and curricula has produced a certain politicised cachet. The most current moment '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 is 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 administrative departments to confront the implications and potential trajectories of decolonising the university. Several important texts interrogating the role of hegemonic Euro-American knowledge production in 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 people, immigration, the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor within nations ... and the environmental crisis (p. 3)

Similarly, in *Decolonising the University* (2018), Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kere Nisang (2018) reflect carefully on the decolonial pedagogical project, providing examples of how colonial and capitalist history structuring the current university system in the West. The editors state that the collection 'aims to critically examine the recent calls to "decolonise the university" ... and to provide a resource for students and academics looking to challenge and undo forms of coloniality in classrooms, curricula and campuses' (1). In 'Toward a decolonizing pedagogy: social justice reconsidered' (2002), authors Carlos Tejeda, Manuel Espinoza and Kris Gutierrez situate the project within the harem

decolonising feminism amplifies its rhetorical power. The very rhetoric of decolonising feminism 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 declaration. I observe similar paradoxes embedded within decolonial rhetoric that Nash has observed in 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 analytic frames, which subsumes difference even as it seeks to differentiate its machinations. The universal 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 colonialism or the Middle Passage slavery. Similarly, students who wish to 'decolonise feminism' or recognise the gendered history of the term 'woman' in the US are often unaware of the number of wars in which the US is currently engaged.

white supremacy (pp. 282–283). Similar to the effects of LGBT organisations in the US that co-opted themselves with the ‘human rights’ of LGBT individuals globally, universalising and reifying ‘queer’ across the international division of labour, decolonising risks this same transformation into a politics of multiculturalism without any critical interrogation of its mass deployment. Among its 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 politics, we will proceed with decolonising everything without decolonising. 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 analytical counterpart, 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 project to decolonise feminism, particularly through recent attempts to broaden feminist classrooms to

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

social imaginary in the United States (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 with symptoms such as hysteria, neurasthenia, or even anorexia and bulimia portend a mute protest or at

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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 overwhelmingly proceeds through dominant logics of categorical identities, similar to the checkboxes on US Census boxes (i.e. African-American, Latinx, Asian-American, etc.). The racialised order of knowledge is organised within this trajectory of majoritarian legibility, as political organisations follow this trajectory for political and civil rights. While decolonial pedagogies desire to disrupt the traditional homogeneity of identities, these identity categories are often reflected on syllabi as 'inclusive' but actually continue to reify already dominant colonial logics of race that enable a legibility particular to particular Western categories. Decolonial syllabi thus establish a trajectory of 'US-born white scholars / scholars of colour' to 'postcolonial/decolonial' as though the temporalities of addressing race in the past still belong to a chronological trajectory of native/native/immigrant, without complicating the ways in which feminist pedagogy engages with inclusion of texts and its underlying assumptions.

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 an 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 violent 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 often 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 that 'you know, the Indian nation or the feminist movement never consider Dalit women to be women'. So the women issues that are discussed in the international platform or in the mainstream media are particularly about the dominant caste, elite women. Munusamy's remarks underscore the importance of recognising that the category of 'woman' does not necessarily translate into a transnational or transcendent 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. 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 its 2020 organisation's report *Caste in the United States: A Survey of Caste Among South Asian Americans*

<sup>2</sup>Hague Talks, 'Hague Talks portrait: Kiruba Munusamy', video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NB0WEia5lf4> [last accessed 21 July 2020].

racial 'brown' solidarity within diasporic communities. By emphasising the role of caste in the imagination of caste as a structure only within the subcontinent is rendered visible as opposed to across geographic boundaries and interrupting any romanticised racial solidarities that customarily appear under the Western banner of 'people of colour'. It is also an important lesson that both Equality Labs and the #DalitWomenFight movements have been led by Dalits 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 universal categorical markers of 'South Asian', which in many Euro-American contexts have simplified to 'Indian'. Furthermore, within US conceptions of decoloniality, indigeneity is routinely demarcated solely within a North American frame that fails to recognise the indigenous movements within countries 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. 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 theorising and activism itself cannot be subsumed by tensions within decolonising discourse, this example serves as both a case study and a caution against a

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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  
organisations and the United Nations as 'beginning to legislate for a monstrous North/South global state'. Several article

an easy target for caste-privileged South Asians in the US to serve as an authorised voice for the 'South Asian' cultural norms. As a seemingly homogenous group of people of colour, the outcry against South Asians could not be challenged in the US, because their non-white identity was the basis of their 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. The appropriation of yoga thus allowed privileged-caste South Asians to squarely blame the violence on other people, without themselves acknowledging the enduring and normalised violence of caste embedded in access to yoga. In a sense, decolonising yoga made the blame easier to place elsewhere: 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. If decolonial feminism prove to be the same? A caution against deploying the language of decoloniality in the US academy 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 category. Decolonising is not a dangerous incitement because of its desires, but because of the violence it

<sup>4</sup>FUC, 'FUC 012 | Fred Moten & Stefano Harney—the university: last words', video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU8&t=153s> [last accessed 10 July 2020].

## author biography

Suzanne C. Persard is a doctoral candidate at Emory University. Her scholarship engages the 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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