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Decolonising the library: a theoretical exploration

Jess Crilly, Associate Director, Content and Discovery, Library Services, University of the Arts London

Abstract
This article explores theoretical approaches that might inform the call to decolonise the library. It explores theories of coloniality and decoloniality and related concepts including 'epistemic totality', 'Eurocentrism' and 'pluriversity'. It then discusses how these terms relate to knowledge production, and how they might inform decolonising practices in the academic library, with reference to the libraries of University of the Arts London.

Keywords
decolonisation; coloniality; knowledge; libraries

Introduction
Decolonisation has become a critical topic of discussion in UK universities. It is a call to action – to decolonise the university, decolonise the curriculum, and decolonise the library and archive. This movement is an international phenomenon, a significant moment being 'The Rhodes Must Fall' campaign in 2015 at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, which resulted in the removal of a statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes. This protest spread, with a subsequent campaign to remove a statue of Rhodes from Oriel College, Oxford University in the UK that was ultimately unsuccessful.

Many UK universities are engaged in programmes and activities to decolonise the curriculum, exploring the discourse of decolonisation within specific disciplines, including reviewing the methods of production and composition of reading lists. There is growing momentum to this activity, as indicated by the recent announcement that the University of Glasgow will launch a reparative justice programme, after discovering that the university benefited from the proceeds of slavery. In parallel, there is also an increasing recognition of indigenous forms of knowledge and research methodologies through their incorporation into academic curricula, particularly in colonial settler nations such as Canada and Australia.

This article aims to explore some theoretical perspectives that might inform discussions on decolonising the library and archive. The aim is to reflect on the particular meanings of decolonisation, which risks becoming a buzzword, the new 'diversity' appearing to address the racism that is the legacy of the UK's colonial and imperial history, without in reality achieving change. It is important to reflect upon criticism of the effectiveness of existing approaches centred on diversity and inclusion (Tate and Bagguley, 2017) in order to learn from these initiatives.

This article makes reference to the work of Anibal Quijano, Nelson Maldono-Torres, Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, theorists connected to the Latin American based Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality collective project (Mignolo, 2011). It draws on insights from other writers in this territory, including Achille Mbembe, who writes from a South African perspective, as well as insights from the field of critical librarianship (Berman, 1971; Bourg, 2014; Drabinski, 2018).

Context and theoretical perspectives

Universities are frequently characterised as neoliberal institutions, primarily concerned with the marketisation of education. In this context decolonisation seems almost a contradiction in terms. In the words of Achille Mbembe, the 'problem of course is whether the university is reformable or whether it is too late' (2016, p.37). Similar critiques of neoliberalism and marketisation also apply to the academic library (Bourg, 2014) and its function within the university. These critiques are typified by arguments about the use of the word 'customer'. However, multiple contexts, value systems and ways of thinking can co-exist, and though marketisation is an increasingly undeniable reality in university education, many librarians have genuine and long-standing concerns with social justice, evidenced for example in 'pro-active collecting' practices. Pro-active collecting is a response to the recognition that mainstream publishing frequently does not represent the work and interests of marginalized groups, and finding ways of addressing that. An example in UAL Libraries is the establishment of the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive, at Chelsea College of Arts Library, in the early 1980s. The construction of this archive was a response to the lack of published material on Black British artists that was itself symptomatic of a wider lack of recognition, and consists of a wide range of unpublished material and ephemera.

This article makes frequent references to 'knowledge', and it should be acknowledged that this is a complex concept, for example there are multiple forms of knowledge and ways of knowing at play in the context of creative arts education (Orr and Shreeve, 2018). Libraries and archives could be said to represent encoded knowledge, (Blackler, 1995), a form of knowledge that is historically privileged in the academic context.

To conceptualise what decolonising the library might mean, it is first necessary to clarify the meaning of colonisation and decolonisation, and it is understood that there have been and continue to be many different geographical and historical periods of colonisation. Singh observes that, 'after all if colonialism is essentially a process of material and cultural conquest isn't this as old as time?' (2018, p.1).

> The Oxford English Dictionary defines colonisation as 'the action of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area', and decolonisation as the 'withdrawal from its former colonies of a colonial power: the acquisition of political or economic independence by such colonies' (OED, 2019). In his overview of the subject, Dane Kennedy comments that this definition does not capture the violence of decolonisation. Such language and imagery has cast the collapse of empires and the rise of new nation-states in the decades after World War Two as a consensual process, a peaceful transfer of sovereignty. However, nothing could have been further from the truth; decolonization was a violent, fiercely contested process that pitted imperial rulers against colonial subjects.
>
> (Kennedy, 2016, p.2)

Any definition of colonialism must also refer to intellectual or cultural colonialism. The terms 'coloniality' and 'decoloniality' can be considered as alternative or additional frames to colonialism /decolonialism. Originally attributed to Anibal Quijano (2000), coloniality refers to the long-standing impacts and ongoing structures of power that came about through colonialism. Colonialism and decolonialism are often misleadingly referred to in a way that infers that they are historical phases that are now completed, that these occurrences are 'locked in the past, and located elsewhere' (Maldono-Torres, 2016). By contrast, the term coloniality describes an ongoing present that is pervasive in all aspects of lived experience.

> Thus coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in

aspirations of self, and in so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday.

(Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p.243).

Decoloniality then is the movement to counter, or the struggle against coloniality. Mignolo and Walsh describe a specific 'coloniality of knowledge'. This discussion refers to the spread of European epistemic systems to the 'New World' as part of the process of colonisation. This is an ongoing process that carries forward and includes the establishment of institutions like universities and museums, and their libraries, as well as convents and monasteries. For example, universities were established in Santo Domingo, Mexico and Peru and Cordoba in the sixteenth century, and Harvard University (in the US) was founded in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Reflecting discussions about university curriculums, there are frequent calls for academic libraries to be less Eurocentric. Quijano and Ennis define 'eurocentricity' as:

> a perspective of knowledge whose systematic formation began in Western Europe before the middle of the seventeenth century, although its roots are without doubt much older […]. It does not refer to all the modes of knowledge or all Europeans and all epochs. It is instead a specific rationality or perspective of knowledge that was made globally hegemonic, colonizing and overcoming other previous or different conceptual formations as much in Europe as the rest of the world.
>
> (Quijano and Ennis, 2000, p.549)

Mignolo and Walsh describe 'epistemic totality' as a characteristic of Eurocentric knowledge. That is, systems that presume to describe the whole of human knowledge, overriding existing knowledge and systems of belief. This occurred through the colonisation of non-European languages and oral traditions, relegating them to the status of primitive and irrelevant to modern life.

> The tendency to see their own epistemic totality as *the* epistemic totality established the foundations for the secular totality of knowledge in the eighteenth century at a moment when Europe was expanding all over the planet and secular science and philosophy were consolidating such beliefs.
>
> (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.197, italics by Mignolo and Walsh)

This diminution of non-European knowledge continues to have an impact today, affecting the status ascribed to other sites of knowledge. For example,

> Western philosophy traps African philosophy in a double bind: either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that is makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt.
>
> (Bernasconi cited in Mignolo, 2013a)

It is not unusual for cultures to portray themselves as at the centre of the universe and Mignolo and Walsh point out that the main issue here is epistemic totality. All existing civilizations considered themselves the hub of the world. The problem was (and still is in its extension to Americanism and globalism) the pretence to be the planetary center and the desire and design to homogenize the world to its image and likelihood. (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.194). This epistemic totality is articulated and encoded through various forms of documentation and inter-related classification schemes that are constitutive of coloniality. In the field of documentation, the Encyclopaedia Britannica (first published in 1768) is a notable example, together with European cartographic practices that mapped the 'four corners of the world'.

Classification techniques form part of this process of epistemic control. These have included social classification, the codification of difference based on appearance, as well as the introduction of the concept of race, and inferiority or superiority ascribed on the basis of these differentials. Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist who formalised binomial nomenclature, also developed a descriptive classification of skin colours by continent (yellow in Asia, black in Africa, red in America and white in Europe), which worked to establish the idea of racial hierarchies.

Associated with this concept of epistemic totality is the notion of the objective nature of knowledge. Columbian philosopher Santiago Castro Gomez describes 'the hubris of the zero point', as the belief in a detached and neutral viewpoint or point of observation from where 'the knowing subject maps the word and its problems, classifies people and projects'. (Mignolo, 2009, p.1). This apparently detached and neutral view works to naturalise constructed systems of understanding, so that knowledge making appears to have no geo-political location, and is not constructed nor subjective, but instead reflects an 'objective reality'.

As an alternative to the epistemic totality represented by these schemes, both Mignolo and Mbembe advocate the concept of epistemic 'pluriversity' (Mignolo, 2013b; Mbembe, 2016). This term describes the co-existence of different epistemic traditions and systems. Writing in the context of decolonising university education in South Africa, Mbembe describes pluriversity as:

> a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via *a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions.*
>
> (Mbembe, 2016, p.37, italics by Mbembe)

How theoretical perspectives can inform library practices
How do these theoretical perspectives on knowledge help inform thinking about the concept of the decolonisation of the library? The ideas that seem to have particular resonance in the library context are coloniality, Eurocentrism, epistemic totality, the 'hubris of the zero point' (Castro Gomez in Mignolo, 2009), and pluriversity.

Coloniality of knowledge
Coloniality is helpful for considering the ongoing lived impacts of the colonial on knowledge production, and library and archival practices on many levels. Coloniality is perhaps not always recognised but nevertheless informs and influences both the historical and ongoing development of collections and wider structures such as the whiteness of the library profession in the UK.

Decoloniality infers an active undoing, deconstructing, or delinking from coloniality, and in the library or archive this is a different concept to the process of diversifying collections, or ensuring that multiple narratives are represented. Decoloniality can focus for example on a process of re-contextualisation. An example within UAL Libraries is the recent exhibition and publication *Practice: special collections and decolonisation.* (Anoche *et al,* 2018).This describes how a special collection, *The Printing Historical Collection*, which is generally used to demonstrate the history of the book as artefact, can be re-contextualised, focussing instead on the content of the collection through a lens that examines the expression of colonial assumptions, expressed through a series of provocations.

This re-contextualizing work in libraries both echoes and is integral to a broader academic discourse around decolonisation within particular disciplinary traditions. The Decolonising Design project and research collective is an international collective of scholars exploring the diverse and complex ways in which design and decoloniality can be thought of in relation to each other (Schultz *et al.*, 2018). They

explore how decoloniality must be more than an amplifying of the concerns and interests that have been marginalised within dominant discourses.

> In other words, it is a *radical* rather than reformist project, organised less around a struggle for the inclusion and representation of difference and marginality within colonial forms, than around the unsettlement and destabilization of forms – diffused, naturalized, and habitual – that instil colonial relations of power.
>
> (Schultz *et al.*, 2018, p.3, italics by Scultz)

'Knowledge' conjures an image of books on shelves, but information is increasingly digital and flows of information, knowledge production and consumption are global in nature. Elements of information distribution in the academic realm are effectively commodified and outsourced to publishers, so academic resources are frequently disproportionately expensive, presenting barriers to access (Rosenblum, 2015; Connell, 2007). In response, the Open Access movement has improved the availability of research – typically journal articles – which are otherwise inaccessible due to the establishment of 'pay walls', which require users to pay money to access and read them. However, the dominant method for achieving this, 'gold open access', has also been critiqued for favouring nations with better-financed research infrastructures, as it is a pay to publish model (Bonaccorso *et al.*, 2014). This is one of the factors producing what Canagarajah describes as a hierarchy of mainstream and 'periphery scholars'. These scholars 'need to negotiate their interests and knowledge with center scholarship. This is important for challenging the limitations of mainstream knowledge, disseminating periphery knowledge effectively and eventually contributing to the enrichment and democratisation of international relations' (Canagarajah cited in Bonaccorso *et al.*, 2014, p.3).

Libraries have a role in supporting access to research and scholarship through open systems and supporting open academic practices. They are in a position to challenge the excessive cost of commercially produced journals, contributing to a more level playing field for the production and circulation of knowledge.

Eurocentricity

As defined earlier Quijano and Ennis Eurocentricity does not necessarily equate to knowledge produced in Europe, but is 'the expression of a specific rationality or perspective of knowledge'. Aspects of our collections are inevitably Eurocentric, given our institutional history and geographic location, for example UAL is a London based institution. The project of decoloniality is not about dismissing European knowledge and cultural outputs, but about re-contextualizing or destabilising the Eurocentric, and reframing these forms of knowledge as regional (indigenous) knowledge.

The Eurocentrism of the canons that have historically dominated art education and conceptions of art and the artist is well documented. For example, O'Rourke characterises 'the arts' as white property.

> Ultimately curriculum reform for racial equality must begin by de-centring dominant 'grand European narratives' that constitute the visual arts as white property and developing programs of study that bring all racialized groups into the center of the curriculum and recognise them as key contributors to present-day artistic knowledge […]. One of the ways this could be achieved is by recognising our global artistic heritage as the product of reciprocal, dialogic encounters between diverse racialized groups in ways that equally value their respective contributions.
>
> (O'Rourke, 2018, p.221)

Structures or ways of knowing are not monolithic nor impervious to contestation; narratives can be revised and retold. For example, the AHRC funded project 'Black Artists and Modernism' (2019), based at Chelsea College of Arts (UAL) questioned how artists of African and Asian descent in Britain

feature in the narratives and documentation of twentieth century art. 'The arts' is not a stable nor simple category, as traditional disciplinary boundaries are challenged through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches; arts and design research agendas can encompass identity politics, real world challenges and socially engaged practices. These shifting disciplinary boundaries challenge the development of collections in the arts university library whilst also liberating this process and enabling exploratory and alternative approaches to collection development and engagement.

The complexity of the European or Western canon, or archive, is also a consideration. As Mbembe comments:

> Yet the Western archive is singularly complex. It contains within itself the resources of its own refutation. It is neither monolithic, nor the exclusive property of the West. Africa and its diaspora decisively contributed to its making and should legitimately make foundational claims on it.
>
> (Mbembe, 2015, p.24)

Epistemic totality and the zero point
The classification systems that are still pervasive in research and academic libraries across the world today emerged at the turn of the twentieth century with the invention of Dewey Decimal Classification System in 1876 and US Library of Congress classification in 1897. These schemes, by definition, present an epistemic totality, and centre some perspectives and experiences (male, Western, heterosexual) while marginalising others.

This has had long reaching impacts on the way that libraries describe and organise information, despite the ongoing processes of adapting and updating classification schemes and terminology. There is a particular body of critique around the Library of Congress Subject Headings. Subject headings are a controlled vocabulary that provide an additional method for locating material in libraries. Criticism of the Subject Headings was initiated by librarian Sanford Berman whilst working in Zambia, when he questioned the Subject Heading 'kaffir'. (Kaffir is a word with a complex history, which in the twentieth century became an offensive reference to Black Africans). This objection triggered a long-term mission to revise the descriptions of people in Library of Congress Subject Headings (Berman, 1971). The struggle for control of language continues to this day, as exemplified by the Library of Congress' recent attempt to replace the term 'illegal aliens' with the preferred alternative term 'migrants'.

Addressing the biases presented by classification systems and terminology is the work of decolonisation (Farnel *et al, 2018)* and libraries are addressing this in various ways, through the correction of classification schemes and terminology, though this approach has philosophical and logistical limits, as well as by more openly discussing the historical roots and constructed nature of systems of knowledge with students. Parallel concerns exist about the representation of indigenous people in archives that archivists are seeking to redress in collaboration with those communities (Delva and Adams, 2016).

Libraries have long upheld the value of 'neutrality', a position that is now widely challenged. This position is well intended and associated with being 'even-handed' and impartial but fails to acknowledge that knowledge production is situated and relational, always part of wider economic, social and political contexts, as Emily Drabinski puts it:

> I don't think 'neutral' is a thing that can exist. We are always siding with something or some idea and against others. It's inescapable. Those of us who came into the world as outsiders in any way know this to be true. Those steeped in and rewarded by dominant ways of seeing the

world don't have to know how intensely political the ostensibly neutral position is. (Drabinski, 2018).

Pluriversity
The concept of pluriversity, or multiversity, is also helpful to libraries considering the development of collections, as well as, in the art library context, the continuous exhibitions that are integral to the library space. Our libraries are already concerned with identifying and acquiring published material from wide geographic and cultural sources, and we sometimes struggle with challenging acquisition processes. We continue to proactively collect in order to present multiple narratives, through strategies that include do-it-yourself and unpublished texts, including zines, so that we are not reliant on dominant publishing sources, models, formats, languages or timescales for the content of the library. As Mbembe comments:

> Our capacity to make systematic forays beyond our current knowledge horizons will be severely hampered if we rely exclusively on those aspects of the Western archive that disregard other epistemic traditions.

(Mbembe, 2015, p.24)

Conclusion
The academic library has a particular relationship to the university, as a site for the collection, production and consumption of knowledge, validating some narratives and excluding others. It can be characterised as both a site that replicates hegemonic power structures but also as a site of resistance and change, including in relation to decoloniality (Rosenblum, 2015).

This article has explored concepts relating to knowledge production and coloniality, and related them to current debates on decolonising the library and archive. Reflecting on terms such as coloniality of knowledge, neutrality and Eurocentrism are helpful for thinking through the historic roots of many of the systems and perspectives still evident in libraries and archives, and how they might be contested to inform our future collection development, management and engagement.

However, the library is not an isolated entity within the university but exists within a network of partnerships and academic processes; significant change comes with collaboration (an example of this being the decolonisation of reading lists). Libraries must now collaborate in 'the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world' (Maldono-Torres, 2016, p.10).

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Biography
Jess Crilly is Associate Director for Content and Discovery, Library Services, University of the Arts London, and has mainly worked in academic libraries. In her current role she has responsibility for overseeing the development of library and archival collections. Jess's interests include debates around the decolonisation of collections, the multiple contexts and used of archives, and other areas of collection management including digital preservation and open access.