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Clarke, Marilyn. 2021. Liberate the Library: What it Means to Decolonise and Why it is Necessary. In: Jess Crilly and Regina Everitt, eds. Narrative Expansions: Interpreting Decolonisation in Academic Libraries. London: Facet Publishing. ISBN 9781783304974 [Book Section]

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## **Liberating the library: what it means to decolonise and why it is necessary**

**Marilyn Clarke**

'I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.'  
(hooks, 1994, 12)

This chapter will discuss the commitment to anti-racist practice by library workers who seek to engage with social movements - predominantly led and created by university students and progressive academics - calling for social justice in educational spaces, in particular, the westernised university, which has many sites around the world due to the ongoing influence of the Empire and colonialism. It will look at how our praxis as library workers is steeped in racism and coloniality, hence the use of the term 'decolonisation' and/or 'decoloniality'. It will also focus on the work of the *Liberate our Library* initiative at my current institution, Goldsmiths, University of London, which posits itself in the arena of critical librarianship, which draws from critical theory, critical information literacy, and critical race theory (CRT) which asks library workers to 'consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, political and other forces that affect information'. (Gregory and Higgins, 2013, 7). hooks writes of the classroom as a space to experience freedom and eventually empowerment through rethinking teaching practices that lead to systemic changes around race and representation. So too can library workers 'transgress' by rethinking professional practices that disempower and silence certain voices and experiences, and instead work with educators and users to empower the voices kept silent for far too long.

Using such terminologies can often depend on the racial and cultural identity of the author, their geographical location, their class, their socio-economic status, and their experience of the education system in which they were taught. I am a Black, British, working class woman of mixed heritage - German/Hungarian-Jamaican - born and raised in London, and educated in the comprehensive, state school system. A system that to this day does not teach Black British history to school children. A UK-based social enterprise called *The Black Curriculum* with its roots in student-led activism, has taken up the mantle to go into schools and teach Black British history due to the 'lack of Black British history in the UK Curriculum.' A Black British school child is more likely to leave school with more knowledge of Black African-American history – particularly the Civil Rights period - than of their own Black British history. The academic year of 2020-21 saw the launch of the MA in Black British History at Goldsmiths, University of London.

'You'll not only learn about Black British histories, which have been marginalised from our public understandings of British history and are too often invisible in education and in the media, you'll also join in the work of researching and sharing the histories of Black people in Britain.' (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2020)

To me, the experience of growing up intersectional in the UK with its history and present steeped in the British Empire and colonialism, requires a dismantling of the systems that exist as a result of Britain's invasive, more often violent, presence at one time across almost three fifths of the world. I cannot divorce my intersectional identities and experiences from the terminologies used to describe what I see as essentially liberation work, leading towards social justice and demonstrable change. I seek to liberate and decolonise, myself and my thinking as well as the spaces - both physical and virtual - in which I work and practice. In turn, I seek to use practices that work towards liberating the library, in all its manifestations, to be discussed herewith.

Before we can talk about decolonising the library, we have to talk about building a movement of people to lead and do the necessary work, without whom nothing will change. The

inspirational Executive Director of the American Library Association, Tracie D. Hall, commented in *Information Professional* (2020) on the necessary role of library workers as 'activists': 'to be a librarian in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to recognise that we must attend to the social issues that make for the differences in information access and equity. I think that we have to imagine ourselves as activists.' I wholeheartedly agree, without the people as activists, the work will not happen. Change rarely comes from those at the top or in positions of power. Change comes from grassroots organisers, often from those who are themselves marginalised and underrepresented in well-established systems of power.

It is all too easy to catch the zeitgeist and adapt our language without fully understanding what one is actually committing to. Society at its performative best, can profess to be 'multicultural', 'post-racial' and still be racist. Employers can commit to 'equal opportunities', 'diversity', 'inclusion' and still be racist. This has been all too evident in 2020 after the racist murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Statements and commitments to change and finally address racism in all its forms were released in what is viewed as a turning point in our history on the road to eradicate racism. Similarly, universities can cry 'No to racism!' yet fail to recognise their own deeply entrenched systemic racism. The academic library exists within the environs of the university structure and is therefore by default systemically racist. Today, one must be cognisant of social injustice and social inequity in order to participate in social justice.

### **Knowledge democracy**

If we are to talk of decolonising collections, we must first understand where we exist and reside in the world and through which lens the knowledge within our collections has come from. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison) declares, 'there will be no global social justice until there is global cognitive justice' (de Sousa Santos, 2014, vii). de Sousa Santos is a world leading intellectual who is part of a movement of 'Global South' scholars who challenge the dominance of western and Global North ideologies at the expense of all other world knowledge. In other words, it is Eurocentrism that dominates because of the legacy of Empire, colonialism, and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Similarly, Cupples and Grosfoguel speak of the 'westernized' university where 'the production, acquisition and dissemination of knowledge are embedded in Eurocentric epistemologies that are posited as objective, disembodied and universal and in which non-Eurocentric knowledges such as black and indigenous knowledges are largely ignored, marginalized or dismissed.' (Cupples and Grosfoguel, 2019, 2).

If we are in the UK, then that knowledge is Eurocentric, and it essentially relies on a Eurocentric canon. Mbembe (2015,10) posits that, 'the emerging consensus is that our institutions must undergo a process of decolonization both of knowledge and of the university as an institution.' As a result of being an adjunct of the academy, libraries are also part of the Eurocentric academic model, and therefore engaged in 'epistemic coloniality'. If one looks at the production of academic knowledge, it is evident that the USA dominates academic publishing. It is because of imperialism and colonialism that the Western canon dominates the curricula of the vast majority of universities across the world. However, the call for 'knowledge democracy' and 'decoloniality' grows louder by the day and is principally led by Latin American scholars pushing for the representation of different voices in a move away from the predominance of Western knowledge and culture. In a blog piece from 2013, Rajesh Tandon posits that,

'...different voices represent different forms and expressions of knowledge—different modes and articulations of knowledge from diverse experiences, locations and perspectives.

This is the essence of 'knowledge democracy'—a movement that respects multiple modes, forms, sources and idioms of knowledge production, representation and dissemination (Tandon, 2013).

These scholars envision a knowledge that embraces multiple forms, from texts to drama, and from story to ceremony. Grosfoguel (2013) writes of the 'four Genocides/ Epistemicides of the Long 16<sup>th</sup> Century' which explain how the colonisation of knowledge happened from its Islamic centre to its European centre. The four epistemicides are: the displacement of Muslims and Jews from Europe, the invasion of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the murder of Indo-European women deemed to be witches because of their knowledge practices. Grosfoguel highlights the burning of libraries as the physical manifestation of conquest:

'In addition to the genocide of people, the conquest of Al-Andalus was accompanied by epistemicide. For example, the burning of libraries was a fundamental method used in the conquest of Al-Andalus. The library of Cordoba, that had around 500,000 books at a time when the largest library of Christian Europe did not have more than 1000 books, was burned in the 13th century. Many other libraries had the same destiny during the conquest of Al-Andalus until the final burning of more than 250,000 books of the Granada library by Cardenal Cisneros in the early 16th century. These methods were extrapolated to the Americas. Thus, the same happened with the indigenous "códices" which was the written practice used by Amerindians to archive knowledge. Thousands of "códices" were also burned destroying indigenous knowledges in the Americas. Genocide and epistemicide went together in the process of conquest in both the Americas and Al-Andalus.' (Grosfoguel, 2013, 79-80)

As librarians, it is important that as the gatekeepers of knowledges that exist within collections, we recognise and acknowledge 'this violence, that detached and disaffiliated colonized people from their rich pre-invasion worlds and is still shielded in Western museums, archives and libraries...' (Azoulay, 2019, 77). Alongside the movement to tear down statues that glorify the Empire, so too there are many movements towards repatriating violently plundered objects which adorn the walls, display cases, and floors of the Western world's museums, galleries, and archives. In her seminal publication, *Decolonising methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013,10) states that, 'I wrote [it] primarily to disrupt relationships between a colonizing institution of knowledge and colonized peoples whose own knowledge was subjugated, between academic theories and academic values, between institutions and communities...' Through the decolonisation of research methods, Smith reclaims control over indigenous knowledge and knowledge gathering, thus rewriting and re-legitimising what was thwarted, disregarded and destroyed through the processes of colonisation.

### **Student activism and the birth of *Liberate our Library***

The Rhodes Must Fall protest movement which began at the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, in March 2015, set off a swathe of student protest across the world, calling for racial justice, and to expose the open institutional racism in university life in South Africa and Britain, as well as to decolonise education. This movement also inspired student counterparts in the UK, with the creation of the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign, calling for the removal of a Rhodes statue at Oriel College. As noted in an article in the Guardian by Amit Chaudhuri, the UCT movement declared itself as 'a collective movement of students and staff members mobilising for direct action against the reality of institutional racism at the University of Cape Town. The chief focus of this movement is to create avenues for REAL transformation that students and staff alike have been calling for.'

The UCT campaign led to the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, a white supremacist. Rhodes was the founder of the southern African colony Rhodesia, modern day Zimbabwe, which was named after him in 1895, served as prime minister of the Cape Colony in the early 1890s, and has been linked to apartheid-style policies that disenfranchised most Africans.

In 2016, at a time when UK student social movements were beginning to campaign around anti-racism, the library learned of a Goldsmiths Student Union-led (SU) initiative to diversify the book collection by placing a bookmark in a book with a suggested title for purchase. The hope was that these bookmarks would find their way back to the library team for future acquisition. Although very few of the bookmarks did in fact reach the library team, the idea did not die. Instead, library staff met with the SU to scope how to collaboratively grow the idea and make it a significant and impactful success. This campaign inspired the library's first steps towards its decolonisation work, and ultimately led to the creation of the *Liberate our Library* initiative, led by the *Liberate our Library Working Group*. The working group, established in Autumn 2018, consists of range of colleagues from several teams, and is primarily made up of staff who volunteered to join the group. The group also benefitted from some members of the SU, namely, the Education Officer, the Welfare and Liberation Officer, and the Liberation Coordinator, who give their unique insight and perspective from the voice of the student body.

For geographical context, Goldsmiths is located in the South East London inner city area of New Cross. It is a single-site campus and a constituent college of the University of London specialising in arts, design, humanities, social sciences, business, and computing. Its student population – from undergraduates to post-doctoral researchers – is circa 10,000. The international student cohort represents over 100 different countries, and 44% are from Black, Asian, Mixed, or Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, including UK residents.

In Spring 2019, a group of Goldsmiths students under the name of Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA) held a 4-month long occupation of a university building - Deptford Town Hall - calling for an end to systemic and institutional racism. The building itself was and still is contentious due to the presence of four statues in the niches of its exterior depicting four naval figures:

- **Sir Francis Drake** (c.1540 – 1596) was a pioneer of the slave trade making at least three royally sponsored trips to West Africa to kidnap Africans and sell them. Elizabeth I awarded Drake a knighthood in 1581 which he received on the Golden Hind in Deptford.
- **Robert Blake** (1598 – 1657) was an admiral who served under Oliver Cromwell throughout the English Civil War. He fought the Dutch to secure the trade triangle between the Caribbean, West Africa and England. Cromwell was responsible for trafficking the first waves of enslaved people to and from the Caribbean; installing the plantation system in Jamaica; and the massacres in Drogheda (1649).
- **Horatio Nelson** (1758 – 1805), was a naval flag officer whose leadership is credited with a number of decisive British victories, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815). Nelson spent a large part of his career in the Caribbean and developed an affinity with the slave owners there, using his influence to argue against the abolitionist movement in Britain.
- **The fourth statue** is understood to be a 'representative' figure, rather than a specific person, from the period when the building was constructed. It shows a modern admiral, with sextant and binoculars." (Goldsmiths website)

Due to its location close to Deptford's Royal Naval Dockyards, the connection to the transatlantic slave trade remains to this day and was only publicly acknowledged because of the GARA occupation.

The focus of the library's decolonisation work was also in answer to the Goldsmiths Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Strategy's (LTAS) first objective to 'liberate our degrees' (Goldsmiths). This objective was put forward by the SU to the Pro Warden for Education and is central to the library's social justice commitments. The library created a dedicated web page to promote the work of the initiative, explaining the rationale and motivations behind it. The intention is conveyed from the opening lines: 'As part of the Library's strategy, we will engage with the aims of LTAS commitment to 'Liberate our degrees'.

- We will work to diversify our collections, to de-centre Whiteness, to challenge non-inclusive structures in knowledge management and their impact on library collections, users, and services
- We will take an intersectional approach to our liberation work to encompass the many parts of a person's identity

We are doing this work to decolonise and diversify our collections as part of an effort to ensure the library collections speak to all voices, particularly those that are traditionally underrepresented in curricula and on reading lists. We want to work in a collaborative way with our users in identifying the subject areas that do not address their experiences and identities, and where the canon excludes them' (Goldsmiths)

### **Liberatemydegree book collection**

The fledgling bookmark project eventually led to the group's first piece of work: to identify the excluded voices and lived experiences, and to highlight Global South scholars missing from curriculum reading lists. The aim is to capture book suggestions from students and staff to address what they see as gaps in the collection, addressing the lack of diversity and inclusion of underrepresented or marginalised voices and histories. Suggestions can be made via a dedicated email address on the Liberate our Library webpage which goes directly to the acquisitions team for purchase. These titles then go on to form part of the *liberatemydegree* collection. The MARC records for the books have a 500 'liberatemydegree' note field, making them all searchable as a full collection in the discovery layer. A member of the library staff and artist, Lizzie Cannon, designed a bookplate which is used for all the print titles, making them easily identifiable as a part of the collection. The bookplate depicts the image of a group of fists raised in protest with the wording 'This book was purchased on request as part of liberate our degrees'. The suggestions are logged in a spreadsheet with the academic department of the requester as well as any comment they may have shared about the suggestion. To date, staff and/or students from almost all academic departments have contributed to the growth of the collection. Most pleasingly, some of the books went on to be included on reading lists.<sup>i</sup>

### **Information literacy through a decolonised lens**

A further and extremely important strand to the decolonisation work is led by the Academic Support Team through information literacy and academic skills workshops. A series of what came to be called 'Resistance Researching' workshops began in 2019 'designed to help students think more critically about how we find and why we use information from a social

justice perspective'. In the 'Critical Approaches to Information Gathering' workshop, the objectives are to:

- Empower participants to understand why all the books they need aren't shelved in one place, to critically assess bias in library systems, and to proactively seek multiple perspectives in information gathering, by:
- Examining the socio-historical construction of library classification systems in order to understand how bias is built into them.
- Identifying a range of library search tools and techniques to effectively find resources.

In the 'Open Access for Resistance Researching' workshop, the objectives are to:

Explore how alternative publishing practices and platforms such as Open Access and social media can extend academic engagement and promote open and inclusive scholarship. This workshop shows how an ethos of OA can contribute to 'decolonisation', gain an understanding of how mainstream academic publishing privileges certain voices, and critically evaluate academic social platforms such as, ResearchGate, Academia.Edu and Mendeley. (Goldsmiths)

In February 2021, as part of the UK's LGBT+ History Month celebrations, the Library organised a 'Resistance Researching: LGBT+ History Month' workshop to highlight LGBT+ library resources. The aims of workshop are to equip attendees with the skills to:

- Look critically at the language we use in libraries to organise and categorise LGBT+ resources.
- Identify a range of library search tools and techniques to effectively find resources.
- Know more about our specialist LGBT+ resources. (Goldsmiths)

### **Internal and external collaboration**

Decolonisation and liberation work cannot happen solely within the library space of the university to have meaningful impact and inspire change leading to social justice. As the people who acquire, organise and disseminate knowledge, library workers must also work collaboratively both internally and externally with colleagues and partners. At Goldsmiths, it was recognised that in order to push for institutional change, academic departments had to be part of the conversation. It is they who are also knowledge gatekeepers. What was their role in meeting the strategic goal of liberating degrees? Members of the Liberate our Library group set a goal to meet all academic heads of department or heads of learning and teaching committees in order to both share the library's decolonisation work, and to find out what they were doing to liberate degrees. For the library the purpose was not only to gather that knowledge, but also to seek to work collaboratively with departments by sharing what suggestions were being made as part of the collection diversification work, to show those teaching the disciplines what students deemed to be missing in their curriculum based on their own multiple identities and lived experiences. Without this knowledge, how would they know unless they themselves were asking the same sets of questions to themselves and to their students? These meetings proved to be fruitful all round. They showed a mixed picture, with some departments already engaged in decolonising work through diversifying reading lists and pedagogical approaches, to those at the very beginning stages looking to the library for support with alternative suggestions for reading lists. As a result of some of these departmental meetings, decolonisation/liberation groups were established with representation from subject librarians being seen as key to the work.

The importance of what the library was doing in this area was also recognised by the university's senior leadership team who viewed the liberation initiative as an exemplar of institutional good practice. In October 2019, a university-wide UK Black History Month event called 'Decolonising Goldsmiths: mission impossible?' led by Dr Nicola Rollock, a leading Black female professor, launched an internal report on institutional racism - 'Insider-Outsider' by Sofia Akel. The event was introduced by the Warden (Vice Chancellor), and a member of the Liberate our Library group gave a presentation on the work the library was engaged in towards social justice.

Externally, the decolonisation work Goldsmiths library was doing began to get noticed in the library and HE sector, leading to invitations to speak at conferences and on panels, and to write articles and book chapters. It was clear that a major force for change addressing social justice was beginning to take place across UK HEIs and their libraries. This was clearly evidenced when, in January 2020, Goldsmiths - along with library colleagues from Birkbeck, University of London, and the University of East London (UEL) - co-organised a free conference called 'Decolonising the curriculum: the library's role'. It attracted 82 people from across the UK. Presentations and lightning talks ranged from liberating reading lists to decolonising through critical librarianship, to inviting marginalised voices into libraries and tackling the attainment gap. It was most evident that libraries were beginning to really question their roles, their practices, and their profession, as well as recognising how large a role they have to play towards the advancement of the social justice agenda.

### **Diversification of the workforce and Activism**

In 2015 the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland) (ARA) published a report containing the results of a survey on staff in the UK information sectors, where 96.7% identified as white (CILIP). The picture in the US is not much different. In 2020, figures from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations AFL-CIO's Department for Professional Employees showed that 6.8% of the 300,000 librarians in the workforce today identify as black, 8.6% as Latino, 4.6% as Asian American or Pacific Islander and less than 1% as Native American (DPE, 2020). In 2016, Carla Hayden – under President Barack Obama - became the 14th Librarian of Congress, overseeing the vast collection of the Library of Congress, the world's largest library. Hayden is the first woman and the first African-American to hold the position – the first who is not a white man. Her appointment came surrounded by accusations of being unqualified, of succumbing to political correctness, of being a diversity pick, some even questioned her credentials. In January 2020, Tracie D. Hall was named ALA's (American Library Association) first female African American executive director in the organisation's history. She has put tackling racism at the forefront of her work as leader.

'It is clear that the work of dismantling racism is overdue in our society and in library and information services. Racism, bigotry, and bias threaten the reach and impact of our field and the full promise and potential of an equitably informed public. It cannot abide.' (ALA, 2020)

Hall stipulates the importance of building and nurturing library workforces that look like the communities they serve. This is all too keenly observed in the UK where many students particularly from non-white backgrounds, report on the negative impact from a pedagogical point of view of not seeing themselves reflected in the staff who teach them, as well as the front-facing student support teams. Hall emphasises the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training to ensure staff commitment in this area:



'We have to diversify the ranks of the library and information workforce. But we also have to make sure that the current corps of library workers are retrained to see the work we do through an equity lens. I cannot overstate how important that is. Today equity, diversity and inclusion are core to the work we do.' (Hall, 2020)

To change this picture requires us to be more intentional in our efforts. It is not enough to engage in EDI initiatives at a theoretical level. It is the practical application that informs implementation. The requirement of the profession is for reflective practice. The fundamental questions we must ask ourselves are what is it we need to do now, why do we need to do it and how?

## Conclusion

In summary, if libraries are to decolonise, liberate, and diversify their collections, workforces, and practices within the HE context, then the work must begin at the source or the heart of why the university exists and what it purports to do. If it is to disseminate knowledge, then that knowledge must be examined through a critical lens which means acknowledging the roots of how that knowledge has come about, how it is taught, how it is experienced, and how it is represented through the learning resources that exist in the library. The aim must be to democratise knowledge and shift away from the westernised dominance and perspective, to look to the majority world by unpacking epistemology and asking, what is knowledge, and paying attention to how indigenous knowledges have been marginalised. This work must be a collaborative learning process for all involved. It must be embraced by the institution if it is to have any meaningful, change-making, and lasting impact.

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