

Exploring Tensions in Decolonization of Internationalization of Higher Education

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We are doctoral students who occupy various locations and spaces in higher education. We are “settlers in diasporic communities” (Punita’s essay) and live in borderlands. Our research interests and positionalities brought us together after a CISN sub-group on race and racism meeting. In our conversations, we shared our thoughts on internationalization of higher education, the range of decolonial theories and praxis, and epistemological tensions. We write this piece as a practice of “hungry translations” (Nagar, 2017) that situates the four of us as knowledge producers in an ongoing relational dialogic process toward epistemic justice. By talking in relation to the tensions we face in our scholarly pursuit, we are in dialogue with one another without requiring transcendental conclusions or marginalizing each other’s complexities. We start this piece by replying to the prompt of how we have all arrived at decolonization in our scholarly work. What are some of the tensions we are navigating when talking about decolonization given our positionalities and the places we occupy? We conclude by reflecting together on our narratives and posing critical questions that we hope will invite our readers to reflect deeper alongside us.

“Politics of Identity and Location” by Punita Lumb, OISE, University of Toronto

Some of the tensions I have been contending with are trying to articulate my own positionality and to understand how my work is interpreted and ultimately for whom I speak. I’m not going to list all the pieces of my identity here, which in and of itself can feel like a very colonial and destructive act. I have to break myself down and rearrange myself in categories designed by colonial thought. I do, however, acknowledge that I am positioned between various contradictions of power and marginality. It is contending with all the contradictions of being both marginalized and privileged in academia along with being both oppressed and complicit in this system that I sometimes wonder, who am I speaking for in my work? Which identities and what power dynamics do I centre, mix or ignore in my work? From which place am I approaching my work, one from complicity or one from resistance, or both at the same time? I must take pause at times and work through the disorientation before getting back to my writing and research. I think exploring internationalization from a decolonial lens has heightened

this issue for me as much of this work is within a context of fixing people to places and conceptualizing their belonging based on their national identities. Being a settler within a diasporic community, and not necessarily being able to contain my identity within one national border, poses another set of contradictions and disorientation to work through. I have, however, learned to inhabit these spaces with some comfort and hope as these very contradictions also offer onto-epistemological doorways to pluriversal possibilities; and being able to tap into that is foundational to my approach to decolonizing internationalization in higher education.

“Internationalization on Incommensurate Grounds” by Milad Mohebbi, University of Iowa

There is not a week that something worrisome has not happened in Iran during the several years I have been studying in the United States of America as an international student. Multi-million-dollar construction projects have been popping up alongside individuals putting themselves on fire in public and committing suicide; the value of the rial against the dollar has dropped ten times and inflation has soared. Pollution, environmental decay, and global warming are just the cherries on top. Here in the US, I'm looking into theories, disciplines, traditions, searching for answers, anything really, that can give me some hope. From Black feminist thought to ethnic studies, liberatory and transformative education to abolitionist praxis, postcolonial resistance to decolonization, I have found wisdom from those who struggled against various systemic forces. It felt like I was finally getting closer to the “right” answers when this question struck me, “how am I different from settler colonizers who thought their ways of understanding the world were the ‘right’ ways that now needed to be unleashed upon people whose spirituality and cosmologies did not translate into their righteous ways of knowing and being?” I think about this question quite often and I wonder what does an “ethics of incommensurability” (Tuck & Yang, 2012) look like within a landscape of knowledge that is itself abound with territorialization and power? I have come to appreciate, rather than reduce, the complexities of a decolonial world-making. I have come to embrace discomfort as the necessary companion to decolonial research even when I find myself stubbornly entrenched in the metaphorization of decolonization.

“Internationalization and the Exile of the Self” by Anushay Irfan Khan, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Theories, praxis and the lived realities of internationalization have and continue to develop within the fabric of my life. My experience growing up in Pakistan – a ‘former’ British colony – followed by my arrival in Canada as an international student and, later as a woman of color navigating settler-migrant politics, continue to expose me to the politics of internationalization and continue to have profound impacts on the mind, body, and spirit. Some of these lived experiences have been forms of ‘consensual internationalization’ while others are rooted deeply in the colonial politics and realities of internationalization thrust upon the colonized body, mind, and spirit under the pretenses of an innocent ‘civilizing mission.’ Other experiences with internationalization have been carefully curated under the language of multiculturalism, equity, diversity and inclusion yet have continued to create the conditions for the soul being “disfigured” and “destroyed” (Fanon, 1963, p. 210) while also caught in the web of internationalization. It is this web of internationalization – consensual and violent, past and present – that has led to an ongoing disconnection from my Indigeneity and land – an exile from the most valuable parts of oneself (Somé, 1995 p. 97-98).

Bissoondath (2002, p. 224) describes this disconnect between the self and identity as “psychic surrender” where the mind, body and soul in exile are in constant search of self-restoration and identity (Shahjahan, 2005) while also being deeply entangled in consensual and violent forms of internationalization. How does one survive in the conundrums of internationalization when its careful ‘neutral’ exoticism is facilitated by relations between the colonizer and the colonized? When internationalization’s seemingly innocent portrayal conceals the histories and realities of ongoing violence? How do we collectively navigate the decolonial and anti-colonial while standing firmly and seeking validation from a colonial system? How does one reclaim and resist within structures of internationalization by centering identity and Indigeneity when an exile from the self has injured the mind, body, and spirit?

“Unpacking the Master’s Tools...Exploring Epistemological Disobedience” by Abu Arif, Memorial University

The land in which I am pursuing my doctoral studies and writing this text is the ancestral homeland of the Beothuk. I came to this land via a long journey that started in Bangladesh. As a racialized doctoral student, I find myself walking a thin rope when speaking and writing about applying a decolonial lens to internationalization of higher education in Western academia. In these spaces, like many other racialized bodies, I find myself as both “marginalized by” and “complicit in” the system. My initial desire to pursue doctoral studies was to contribute to the educational spaces that are trying to repair higher education by looking at the connection between knowers and their land relationship. I was encouraged by the idea that we can change the system only from within. However, in my second year of doctoral studies, I contested the aforementioned notion that is best described by Audre Lorde – “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” The critical approach is not enough to stop systemic violence. The tension between “repair” and “dismantle” the system also leads to the following question – what are the risks I face and the responsibilities I have when I am working from a decolonial lens? In other words, given the coloniality of epistemologies that operate in Western academia, what are the risks I face by being epistemologically disobedient? Moreover, if I follow the colonial convention of doctoral research, then what am I offering to the discourse on the Western hegemony of knowing and being? Despite the fear that grips me at times, it is the thought that we live in a world of too much wrong, and that one must be courageous to try to minimize these injustices, what gives me the strength to engage in decolonial thoughts.

Conclusion

As emerging scholars, we are navigating these tensions when talking about decolonization given our positionalities and places we occupy. These tensions are complex, multilayered and ongoing. In the process of earning a doctorate, we do not want to lose our most valued parts. We are committed to be there for each other as we navigate these tricky paths, and we believe in each other that we will. We conclude this post with some questions that we hope invite reflection.

1. What kinds of relationships are we nurturing with each other, with our communities, and with the lands we are inhabiting?
2. What are the risks we face and responsibilities we have when we are working on areas like decolonization, internationalization of higher education, and epistemic justice/injustice/diversity?

3. Who do we speak for in our scholarly pursuits?
4. How do we deal with epistemic injustice in our work and how do we use epistemic disobedience as a tool to navigate the doctoral journey?
5. When and how do we refuse to subject ourselves to trauma and/or become sources of trauma consumption in academia?

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