Transforming Pedagogy: Tensions, Barriers and Opportunities for Decolonizing the Model

of Higher Education in Western Universities

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Abstract

Western higher education pedagogy is fundamentally shaped by colonial legacies, with the dominant "banking model", conceptualized by Freire, reinforcing hierarchical, decontextualized and exclusionary forms of knowledge transmission. In response, a growing body of literature explores decolonial pedagogies aimed at challenging these frameworks. However, their implementation faces significant challenges that limit their transformative potential. This thesis employs a narrative literature review guided by an explorative scoping approach, to investigate the suggested pedagogical strategies, and the corresponding tensions and barriers. The review identifies four categories of decolonial pedagogies, namely 1) relational pedagogies and student agency, 2) place-based and community-centered learning, 3) reflexivity and critical consciousness, and 4) creative and arts-based pedagogies. These provide a useful toolkit for educators seeking decolonial reform. However, five key barriers persist: 1) the coloniality of academic institutions, 2) the coloniality of knowledge, 3) the emotional burden of decolonial work, 4) the lack of diversity in faculty and student bodies and 5) neoliberal pressures that shape educational priorities. These findings reveal a central contradiction: Decolonial pedagogies offer transformative potential, but are often restricted by the very structures they seek to dismantle. This risks superficial reform and disproportionately burdens marginalized individuals. While institutionalization may expand reach, it often lacks the ethical grounding needed for genuine transformation. Future efforts should embrace the complexity of decolonial work, and prioritize relational, bottom-up initiatives. Such gradual transformation from within may currently represent the most viable path forward.

Keywords: Decolonial pedagogy, higher education, structural barriers, institutional resistance, critical consciousness, decolonial ethics, narrative literature review

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Introduction

In recent decades, the call to decolonize higher education, particularly in western universities, has received increasing attention[1]. My previous essay "Why We Should Decolonize the White, Western University" (Wichert, 2024b) explores the contributions of different influential authors in this context, and argues that the white, western university does not only perpetuate epistemic injustice[2], but actively reinforces the status quo and thus upholds the hegemony of the global north through oppressive power structures. It does so through the predominant pedagogy, which has been conceptualized by the Brazilian author Paulo Freire in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", first published in 1968 (Freire & Macedo, 2014). In what Freire calls the "Banking Model of Education", teachers are perceived as the sole holders of knowledge who deposit information into passive students, reinforcing hierarchical relationships, discouraging scrutiny of supposedly universal and objective information and thus suppressing critical and independent thinking[3]. As an alternative approach, Freire introduces "Problem-Posing Education" that facilitates an interactive learning process in which students and teachers collaborate to create and exchange knowledge through dialogues and experiences. This model fosters independent thinking and encourages students to critically engage and ultimately transform their lived realities.

Since then, there has been an increasing number of contributions to the decolonization of the western university. However, critics have pointed out that the discourse has paid a lot of attention to addressing external injustices, such as historical exclusion or systemic inequality

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[1] It is noteworthy that, while a more widely spread interest in intellectual decolonization may have emerged rather recently among northern academics, this movement already existed in the Global South much earlier (Moosavi, 2020 citing Behari-Leak, 2019; Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Mignolo, 2014, pp. 586–588; Thiong'o, 1986, p. 89, 95)

[2] 'Epistemology' is the study of knowledge, and thus determines what we consider to be 'valid' knowledge and how it is produced. Consequently, 'epistemic injustice' refers to marginalization within processes of knowledge production (Fricker, 2007).

[3] See Wichert (2014b, pp. 5-6) for a more detailed explanation of Freire's critique of the "banking model", and how it inhibits wider efforts of decolonization and liberation.

(Hayes et al., 2021). While this is a necessary step that is long overdue, and still remains insufficiently addressed by most institutions, the discourse tends to neglect the internal structures of knowledge production and dissemination that sustain epistemic colonialism. Furthermore, the majority of efforts that do address these internal structures have focused on the curriculum, targeting the material content and its purpose, which usually involves diversified syllabi to include readings by thinkers from the global South (Bhambra et al., 2018; Enslin and Hedge, 2024; Shahjahan et al., 2022). As stated by Maryluz Hoyos (2023):

> "Even though there might be overlap between the decolonial content and the decolonial processes of teaching and learning, decolonial praxis (...) distinguish[es] classroom interventions in pedagogy and curriculum. (...) decolonial content through the curriculum incorporates knowledges, perspectives, and non-Western epistemologies, while decolonial processes of teaching and learning involve challenging practices that perpetuate power imbalances." (p. 18)

This highlights the challenge of addressing coloniality[4] through educational practices, instead of just discussing it intellectually. Freire's idea of praxis, namely combining theory, values, reflection, and action is essential here: Learning is not simply about theorizing, but must lead to real-world action, which in turn should be guided by reflection (Freire, 1969 as cited in Hayes et al., 2021). Changing *what* is taught, without addressing *how* it is taught, and examining the power dynamics at play in the classroom, will likely remain superficial (Enslin & Hedge, 2024). Instead, decolonial (teaching) practice requires "true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed" (Ibid, p. 897), and includes "engaging with rather than thinking about historically marginalized groups" (Mignolo & Walsh as cited in

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[4] In this context, coloniality refers to the persisting power structures and hierarchies established during historical colonialism that continue to shape knowledge and institutions today.

Hoyos, 2023, p. 20). The need for reflexivity (critically examining one's own positionality and biases), relationships, values, and norms is emphasized as a key component of this process.

Therefore, scholars, educators and activists have emphasized the need for a more holistic decolonization of higher education that addresses the pedagogy itself[5]. Beyond the mere curriculum design, 'pedagogy' refers to the instructional and relational teaching and learning practices (Shahjahan et al., 2022). That also includes assessment[6] and feedback methods, classroom interactions and dialogues, student-teacher relationships, and underlying power dynamics.

Previous research reveals a diversity of strategies proposed and/or implemented across the globe, that seek to address the grievances put forth by Freire. However, there is a notable lack of literature that systematically addresses the specific challenges involved when implementing these strategies. Although several authors mention challenges in passing, or as part of broader discussions[7], these studies rarely dedicate focused and sustained attention to the complex tensions and barriers associated with the different dimensions of decolonizing higher education. Few exceptions provide a more specific and categorized analysis of the challenges faced by decolonial efforts in institutional settings[8]. Nonetheless, the majority of their analyses are concerned with the challenges arising from decolonizing the curriculum or the institution itself, and rarely explore the specific implications for pedagogy.

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[5] E.g. Andreotti et al. (2015), Bhambra et al. (2018) and Davis et al. (2018).
[6] Although mainstream educational discourse tends to treat pedagogy as separate from assessment, the mentioned strategies include methods of both decolonial teaching and assessment. From a critical, decolonial standpoint it becomes clear that assessment is pedagogy: Scholars argue that colonial and neoliberal-capitalist logics tend to be most deeply embedded in grading, standardization and concepts of merit (Castillo-Montoya & Madriaga, 2024; Godsell et al., 2024). It shapes how students approach learning, defines what is valued and legitimized, and thus should be addressed alongside the corresponding teaching practices (Castillo-Montoya & Madriaga, 2024; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008).
[7] See Hoyos (2023) and Shahjahan et al. (2022).
[8] See Davis et al. (2018), Naseem (2024), Stein et al., (2021) and Regmi (2025).

Furthermore, while several studies identify overlapping concerns (e.g. lack of institutional support or the coloniality of epistemology), each contribution also highlights distinct challenges and perspectives. This is partly due to many papers focusing on challenges related to one specific academic discipline (e.g. Kulago et al., 2021 and Kvangraven & Kesar, 2022) or geographical context (e.g. Du Plessis, 2021 and Garcia & Shirley, 2012), or examining one particular group of barriers in the first place (e.g. the risk of superficial or performative decolonization by Moosavi, 2020 and Lau & Mendes, 2024). Such studies are extremely valuable, since context- and discipline-specific approaches to decolonization are crucial. However, if brought together, these divergent insights could offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the different tensions and challenges associated with implementing decolonial pedagogy in western, higher education.

Therefore, this research aims to examine such diverse observations in a single, focused review, by answering the following research question: *What are the varying tensions and barriers that arise when implementing strategies to decolonize the pedagogy of higher education in western universities?* In order to answer this question, I will first explore the foundational subquestion: *Which strategies to decolonize the pedagogy of higher education on western universities have been suggested in the literature, including exemplary cases of implementation?* By first reviewing these strategies, I aim to provide sufficient context for the following analysis of the corresponding implementation challenges, which pays particular attention to how tensions and barriers manifest in the context of teaching and assessment practices.[9] The outcomes of this study can inform future research in the field, and guide efforts of activists, educators and/or other

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[9] It is noteworthy that some of the tensions and barriers evident in the literature are initially presented in the context of decolonizing higher education in general, or even the curriculum or institutional structures in particular, rather than the pedagogy. However, those included in this paper have either similar, or distinct but relevant implications for decolonial teaching and assessment methods.

university staff in their efforts of decolonizing pedagogy in higher education. By examining the challenges and opportunities in addressing global structures of coloniality through localized pedagogical practices, this research illuminates how systemic change can begin in everyday-spaces.

First, the next chapter will provide a detailed description of my research method, including a reflection on my positionality as a researcher. This is followed by the findings of my two-part narrative review. My discussion reflects on these findings, highlighting key contradictions and offering potential pathways for future decolonial efforts. Finally, I address the limitations of this thesis, suggest directions for further research, and conclude by summarizing the contributions of this work.

Methodology

Narrative Literature Review

This research employs a narrative literature review, guided by an explorative scoping of the state of the arts. The latter consisted of a preliminary literature review and informal discussions with scholars in the field, and provided an understanding of the current state of research on decolonizing higher education in western universities, identifying efforts to specifically decolonize pedagogy as a highly relevant topic. Moreover, the conversations with scholars provided additional nuance and depth, helping to plan my narrative review and refine its focus in order to ensure relevant outcomes and increase academic rigor.

A narrative literature review is particularly suitable for this research, as it allows for a more flexible, critical and thematic synthesis of diverse sources (Chambers et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2022; Sukhera, 2022; Tynan & Bishop, 2023). It aligns with decolonial values by

challenging rigid epistemic boundaries[10], resisting extractive or reductionist practices, and prioritizing contextualization of, and relational engagement with, the respective knowledge (Ibid.). In order to ensure transparency and rigor, I defined the specific thematic focus, which is explained in further detail below. My process followed the four steps for narrative reviews suggested by Gregory and Denniss (2018): "Step 1: Define Topic and Audience", "Step 2: Search and Re-Search the Literature", "Step 3: Be Critical", "Step 4: Find a Logical Structure".

The specific topics defined in step one are firstly, the different strategies of decolonizing the pedagogy of higher education in western universities, and secondly, the corresponding tensions and barriers. When talking about western universities, I am referring to universities in 'western' societies (those either located in, or with historical and cultural ties to Western Europe, including North America, Australia and New Zealand), or any other universities that employ the same knowledge system and pedagogy[11]. My target audience are educators who seek to decolonize their teaching practice, university bodies/committees for decolonization of education, activists, and scholars doing research within the field.

The second step constitutes my actual process of reviewing the literature, which was guided by several themes identified in the explorative scoping. In the first part, I focused on decolonial teaching and assessment strategies related to the following themes: critical consciousness and critical thinking, transformative education, teacher-student relationships and hierarchies, active learning processes, collaborative or reciprocal knowledge production, student independence and agency, the integration and acknowledgment of emotions, contextualization, art-based/creative methods, nature and place-based education, Indigenous or traditional

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[10] E.g. predetermined and fixed inclusion and exclusion criteria of traditional methods like systematic or scoping reviews.

[11] Even in the Global South, most universities have adopted the knowledge system of the north, shaping 'western' higher education, which is perceived as the highest standard due to internalized biases and structural colonial legacies (Santos, 2018, Introduction).

pedagogy, epistemic disobedience and refusal, resistance to or critical engagement with the status quo, reflexivity, positionality, transparency, and accountability.

For the second part of the review, relevant themes were: resistance of students (e.g. anxieties about grades and discomfort with confronting their own positionality), practical challenges (including feasibility in larger classrooms etc.), differences across disciplines (e.g. social versus natural sciences), neoliberal pressures (such as university rankings, funding, hiring practices and expectations on scholars resulting in a lack of time and resources for decolonial efforts), the risk of tokenism/box ticking (e.g. through top-bottom policies without intentionality of individual educators), the risk of extractivism/need for context specific approaches, and the overall need for underlying ethics and reflexivity.

Step three entails my analysis of the narrative review findings and the following discussion below. To increase academic rigor, I used a research diary for documenting "road-markers" within my research "path", as suggested by Gregory and Denniss (2018, p. 896), which helped to trace the developments of my review process while conducting my analysis and interpreting the results. In step four, I structured my findings by grouping them into thematic sections to enhance clarity and allow for a deeper understanding.

Critical Reflections on My Positionality as a Researcher

Before presenting my findings, it is important to consider ethical implications specific to my particular method and topic. Therefore, in this section I acknowledge and critically reflect on my positionality in relation to this work. This is a crucial step when engaging with research on decolonization, which suggests that knowledge production is never neutral, and thus calls for reflexivity and contextualization. The social locations I will recount here both consciously and unconsciously influence my research process. Given that academia itself is built on historical

colonialism and its legacies, recognizing my own position in this structure allows for a better understanding of how my social identity shapes my assumptions and informs the questions I ask, the sources I consult, and the conclusions I draw.[12]

I am a white, western, cis-gendered, able-bodied and heterosexual woman, who was born and raised in Bremen, a city in the north of Germany. I grew up in an upper-middle class family, with both my parents having a university degree and stable incomes throughout my life. While I am not religious per se, I am culturally christian and have my own faith, and I am still learning what that means for me. My understanding of my German identity is vague, and shaped by attempts of German society to take responsibility for our country's recent history of the Holocaust and the first and second World War. This does not only involve education and reparations, but also navigating collective feelings of guilt – ideally resulting in accountability – and individual feelings of shame, which in turn can lead to avoidance or denial as a form of protecting one's self image. In my social circles, a strong, German national identity has been largely associated with the latter. Additionally, Germany has a history of colonialism in African Countries and Pacific Islands, which is often forgotten alongside the Holocaust and remains largely unaddressed, with its legacies still influencing society today (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2023). Lastly, over the past three years I have been following my Bachelor degree 'Global Responsibility and Leadership' at the University of Groningen, in the Netherlands, which means that I am writing within a western university in the Global North.

These identities, and likely more that I am not aware of, intersect and result in a position of immense privilege. In terms of my research, this means that I have not experienced the effects

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[12] The following reflections are inspired by Bianca C. Williams' (2016) "introductory monologue" approach in "Radical Honesty: Truth-telling as pedagogy for working through shame in academic spaces" (p. 71).

of systematic oppression and colonization that many marginalized communities have. Therefore, some of the complexities within the topic of decolonization may not be immediately visible to me. Consequently, my role is to listen to, and amplify marginalized voices, which in itself is a form of privilege, and should not be necessary in an equitable and just academic landscape. Furthermore, I am acutely aware of the contradictions in attempting to decolonize my own work, while being subject to the academic expectations and norms of my university[13], which I am reinforcing through my engagement. Despite my commitment to a critical approach, I must recognize that my perspective remains limited, as I am strongly influenced by the colonial structures I aim to challenge. This acknowledgement is not meant to 'excuse' the biases I may bring to this topic, or relieve me of my responsibility to actively reflect on and minimize the potential misrepresentation and harm they can result in, but rather seeks to emphasize the limitations of this process.

Lastly, my research topic calls for a discussion of Tuck's and Yang's (2021) contribution in "Decolonization is not a Metaphor". They argue that decolonization is a material process that goes beyond symbolic gestures or diversification, and ultimately aims to dismantle settler colonialism and return indigenous land and life. This warns of the tendency to metaphorize decolonization instead of demanding structural change. In response, Bhambra et al. (2018) offer a valuable reflection:

"Whereas dispossession might be the 'truth' of colonialism, it is not its entirety. Taking colonialism as a global project as the starting point, it becomes difficult to turn away from the Western university as a key site through which colonialism – and colonial knowledge in particular – is produced, consecrated, institutionalised and naturalised." (p. 11)

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[13] E.g. objectivity, formality, writing structure and format etc.

Based on this sentiment, I have previously argued that "addressing the ways in which the white, western university perpetuates epistemic injustice and inhibits wider efforts of decolonization and liberation is ultimately also a contribution to the fight against settler colonialism" (Wichert, 2024b, p. 2). Implementing decolonial pedagogy in western universities aims to transform students into 'agents of change' that "model and inspire broader social transformation including material projects of decolonization" (Inczauskis, 2023). While I recognize the risk of engaging in academic discourse that distracts from substantive material change, this thesis aims to counteract that by identifying challenges for implementing such pedagogies, and offering insights to support wider transformation. With these reflections in mind, I will now present the findings of my literature review.

Literature Review – Part 1: Current Decolonial Strategies

In order to examine the tensions and barriers of decolonizing the pedagogy of western higher education, we first need to gain an overview of the corresponding strategies. Therefore, this section will identify the different decolonial teaching and assessment practices that have been theorized and suggested in the literature, such as exemplary cases of implementation. While these often intersect, combining different components like relationality, reflexivity, and community engagement, they can roughly be grouped into four different categories based on their specific aims and targets within the broader context of decolonizing pedagogy: 1) relational pedagogies and student agency, 2) place-based and community-centered Learning, 3) reflexivity and critical consciousness, and 4) creative and arts-based pedagogies.

1) Relational Pedagogies and Student Agency

Relational pedagogies are deeply rooted in Freirean principles, emphasizing mutual exchange, critical consciousness, and co-creation of knowledge. The active rejection of the "banking model" is central to this approach, with teachers refusing to act as experts who pass down information to passive students. Instead, they are facilitators of a respectful, reciprocal learning process in which students play an active role as knowledge producers and assume responsibility for their learning, enhancing independent thinking and critical reflection (Parker et al., 2017; Inczauskis, 2023). This disrupts traditional hierarchies, redistributes power dynamics, and fosters democratic engagement, highlighting student agency and creating an inclusive and collaborative classroom that integrates diverse knowledge systems (Ibid.).

Practical strategies include (student-led) talking circles and discussion rounds (Louie et al., 2017; Millner, 2023; Parker et al., 2017), emotional and spiritual dialogue (Ali et al., 2019), storytelling (Cheang & Suterwalla, 2020; Mabingo, 2015), and classroom designs that include all participants as legitimate knowledge producers and create a safe space for engagement (Autar, 2017). One notable concept is "hospitality dynamics", which reimagines the conventional host-guest relationship in the classroom, calling for humility and openness of educators (Lau & Mendes, 2024). The use of approaches like "Collaborative Online International Learning" (COIL) and community engagement projects further promote relational values by connecting students across countries and connecting academic work to real-life social issues (Castro Romero & Capella Palacios, 2020; Inczauskis, 2023). This allows students to view themselves as part of the global community in a shared struggle for justice.

Closely tied to relational approaches are strategies that enhance student agency through curriculum co-creation. In order to fully overcome the "banking model", students need to be

active participants, not only during class discussions, but also in shaping the various elements of teaching and assessment. For instance, strategies include participatory syllabus design, a (partially) open selection of readings, and group assignments that are aimed at the common good (Inczauskis, 2023).

As mentioned above, decolonial pedagogy also includes assessment methods, which are increasingly understood as a crucial tool for transformation. Relational and agency affirming practices include peer-, or self-assessment and student collaboration in rubric design (Eizadirad, 2019). Talking circles and relational dialogues can also serve as assessment formats, as they emphasize active participation, shared accountability and socio-political engagement (Louie et al., 2017; Shahjahan et al., 2022).

While these strategies largely rely on relationship-building within the classroom, the following section explores pedagogies that extend this approach to the broader local community and students' physical environments. Although such place-based and community-centered practices can be seen as a form of relational pedagogy, it is worth exploring the ways in which they connect knowledge production to local contexts.

2) Place-Based and Community-Centered Learning

A dominant theme in decolonial pedagogy literature is the shift away from abstract and decontextualized learning, with authors emphasizing the significance of 'place' and 'community' as foundational aspects of knowledge production. Such place-based and community-centered pedagogies challenge the "banking model's" assumptions of universality, and expert-dominated, unilateral knowledge transmission. Instead, they emphasize context, enhance relational accountability, acknowledge different ways of knowing and disrupt the colonial separation of academic knowledge from everyday life (Dache et al., 2021; Pipe &

Stephens, 2023; Sabati et al., 2021; Gahman & Legault, 2019; Verlinghieri & Middleton, 2020). This is achieved by recognizing the importance of physical space and cultural geography, relocating learning from abstract, institutional spaces to land, local communities and histories (Ibid.).

A foundational principle of decolonizing pedagogy is the recognition and integration of non-Western knowledge systems[14]. By situating knowledge production within community spaces and on the land itself, place-based and community-centered approaches seek to center Indigenous and other marginalized epistemologies, where land and community are crucial for being and knowing (Louie et al., 2017; Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2021; de Carvalho & Flórez-Flórez, 2014). For example, land-based pedagogy, most commonly used in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, employs methods like storytelling, smudging[15] and land acknowledgments in order to explore indigenous relationships with the land and reframe nature as a relational teacher rather than a neutral resource (Louie et al., 2017; Le Grange, 2016).

Community-based learning further expands on this by positioning students as co-learners with local community members, facilitating reciprocal engagement and promoting critical reflection (de Carvalho et al., 2016; Shahjahan et al., 2022). Some courses have used intercultural exchanges and co-taught modules with non-academic knowledge holders (Castro Romero & Capella Palacios, 2020; de Carvalho et al., 2016). Intercultural universities in Latin America have embedded indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous leadership in their pedagogy, supported by national legislation (Cortés, 2017; Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2021). For instance, the Latin American "Meeting of Knowledges" project invites community knowledge

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[14] Not to be confused with the mere inclusion of non-western knowledge in the curriculum, which is crucial but not sufficient by itself.

[15] Smudging is a ceremonial, North-American Indigenous practice that involves burning sacred herbs to cleanse a space, person, or object, and ask for spiritual guidance (Louie et al., 2017).

holders from Indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, and African diasporic backgrounds to lead workshops and co-teach university courses, regardless of conventional academic qualifications (de Carvalho & Flórez-Flórez, 2014). The so-called "Calle"[16] methodology from the U.S. introduces students to the political and spiritual importance of space in marginalized communities, encourages sensory engagement and fosters critical historical awareness (Dache et al., 2021). Similarly, the "Two-Eyed Seeing" initiative in Canadian engineering programs promotes epistemological pluralism by teaching students to engage with both Indigenous and western ways of knowing simultaneously (Seniuk Cicek et al., 2021). Instead of adapting Indigenous knowledge to fit into western frameworks, this strategy preserves both epistemologies and creates mutual engagement.

Corresponding assessment methods recognize lived experience, community knowledge, and students as knowledge producers. This can be achieved through participatory and reflective practices. Shahjahan et al (2022) propose to evaluate students' socio-political engagement and community connections, with learning being demonstrated through collaboration with local stakeholders, critical reflections on positionality, and ethical responsibility in community-research.

These contextually grounded approaches enhance students' understanding of the politics of knowledge production. For example, Sabati et al. (2021) describes how student involvement in place-based ethnographic work and co-production of knowledge with local communities encourages critical reflections on their positionality, the constructed nature of scientific paradigms and the resulting responsibilities when engaging with marginalized knowledge. This kind of reflexivity emerges as a distinct theme across decolonial pedagogy literature, which I will further explore in the following.

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[16] Spanish for 'street'.

3) Reflexivity and Critical Consciousness

In line with Freire's critique of the "banking model", reflexivity-centered pedagogies reject the idea of students as passive recipients of neutral, objective information. Instead, they invite students to examine how power, privilege and coloniality shape knowledge production, and reflect on their own positions within it. This involves interrogating the personal and collective positionalities of both students and teachers in regard to historical and contemporary colonial structures, recognizing complicity, and shifting towards responsibility (Hayes et al., 2021; Shahjahan et al., 2022). Such practices target the deeply internalized assumptions of traditional western education by fostering critical consciousness and encouraging ethical, political and emotional engagement with ongoing structures of domination.

While several of the teaching strategies mentioned above are useful tools in this context, there are additional methods, including assignments like reflective or standpoint essays, growth-journals and autoethnographies, all of which foster intellectual and emotional decolonization by linking personal histories to broader social structures[17] (Adefarakan, 2018; Phillips & Archer-Lean, 2019; Ralph et al., 2023; Godsell et al., 2024; Wernicke, 2021). different Meanwhile, variations of reflective practices are shaped by regional contexts: Scholars in Australia and Canada mainly focus on relational reflexivity tied to Indigenous communities, while those in Europe and the U.S. often draw on critical whiteness studies and power analysis to disrupt dominant identities (Davis, 2010; Nakata et al., 2012; Shahjahan et al., 2022).

Building on reflexivity, some scholars advocate for "affective and embodied pedagogies of refusal" (Zembylas, 2021). As suggested by Zembylas (2021), refusal is not simply resistance, but an affirmative pedagogical practice that cultivates emotional disinvestment from colonial

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[17] In one example, history students wrote reflective essays on the meaning of freedom, connecting historical events to personal and contemporary understandings of the concept (Godsell et al., 2024). This encouraged intellectual self-reflection and brought up themes like the tension between collective and individual liberation.

norms and desires, and commits to alternative futures. Teachers are encouraged to facilitate emotional confrontation with discomfort, vulnerability, solidarity and hope as modes of learning, emphasizing anti-complicity and deep ethical engagement (Hayes et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2021).

4) Creative and Arts-Based Pedagogies

While this final category shares key goals with the previous sections, such as critical reflexivity, contextualizing knowledge, and validating marginalized epistemologies, it constitutes a distinct set of creative, expressive and embodied practices. These arts-based pedagogies respond to the dehumanization of the "banking model" by centering emotions, imagination and embodied experience in the learning process. This further challenges the emphasis on textual, rational, and individualistic forms of learning. Rather than treating students as passive recipients, they rely on their active participation by drawing on creativity and lived experiences as valid tools for knowledge production. Especially students of historically marginalized groups can profit from using creative and culturally diverse ways to demonstrate insights that may not be easily conveyed through conventional academic mediums (Freeborn, 2024; Hoyos, 2023).

The corresponding practices include diverse creative outputs like dance, theatre, poetry and visual art (Freeborn, 2024; Hoyos, 2023; Mabingo, 2015). For example, tools like Photovoice, drawings or community artifacts allow students to reframe social issues through their own lived experience or involve narratives that disrupt dominant representations and center marginalized groups (Carolissen et al., 2017; Kessi, 2017). Theatre-based education has been applied in both teacher education and community contexts, and can disrupt academic norms and center marginalized voices (Dénommé-Welch & Montero, 2014). Such pedagogies increase accessibility, emotional engagement and emphasize the legitimacy of unconventional, non-verbal forms of knowledge (Freeborn, 2024).

Assessment methods within these pedagogies are committed to flexibility, creativity, and student voices. Students may be asked to submit plays, letters or visual art-works (as mentioned above) instead of traditional essays (Carolissen et al., 2017; Godsell et al., 2024; Kessi, 2017). Godsell et al., (2024) provides a particularly compelling example, where history students had to create a play based on a specific historical moment. Through this performative project, students explored and presented historical events in ways that connected their intellectual understanding with emotional engagement, and increased relatability and social relevance. Such assignments lead to deeper learning, and foster collaboration, empathy, and personal investment in the topic at hand.

Together, these four categories of decolonial teaching and assessment strategies provide a useful toolkit for educators seeking to decolonize pedagogy in meaningful and context sensitive ways. They also highlight that decolonization is not a one-size-fits-all project, but rather a diverse and evolving combination of struggles shaped by geography, discipline and social identities. Nevertheless, their implementation is often met with diverse barriers, and creates complex tensions. In order to achieve a transformation of higher education pedagogy, we need to gain a better understanding of these real-life challenges, rather than focus on perfecting decolonial pedagogy in theory. Therefore, in the second part of my literature review, I identify the different challenges, tensions and barriers present within the literature, while using the pedagogical practices as a reference point.

Literature Review – Part 2: Challenges, Tensions, and Barriers

The majority of the challenges, tensions, and barriers mentioned in the literature can all be traced back to persisting coloniality at different levels. Colonial legacies present in todays' structures, values, and hierarchies continue to shape higher education and actively complicate the

implementation of pedagogical strategies as described above. While the resulting challenges are deeply interconnected, they can be grouped into five broad categories: 1) the coloniality of academic institutions, 2) the coloniality of knowledge, 3) the emotional burden of decolonial work, 4) the lack of diversity in faculty and student bodies and 5) neoliberal pressures that shape educational priorities.

1) The Coloniality of Academic Institutions

Western Universities, despite their evolving missions, are fundamentally shaped by their colonial past, in which they served as powerful spaces for the reproduction of colonial knowledge systems (Strout & Kerfoot, 2021). There is a striking consensus across the literature that this deeply embedded coloniality is not merely a legacy of the past, but still defines academic institutions today, resulting in structural and ideological resistance to decolonial transformation. This resistance manifests in different ways, which lead to various complexities and challenges for decolonizing higher education pedagogy.

As Dei (2016) suggests, decolonizing higher education requires fundamental changes to a system that is inherently designed to resist such shifts. Therefore, decolonial initiatives are constantly at odds with the colonial underpinnings of the system they occur in [18](Rasool & Hars-Smith, 2021 as cited in Hoyos, 2023). For example, the languages dominating academia are full of colonial histories, developed to selectively translate and appropriate Indigenous knowledges while reaffirming eurocentric worldviews (Strout & Kerfoot, 2021). Moreover, universities are not simply passive products of modernity that carry colonial legacies, but

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[18] Stein et al. (2021) effectively illustrate this paradox by referring to the seemingly impossible task of dismantling "the house modernity built" (p. 4).

actively sustain colonial structures through institutional cultures and policies, academic traditions, disciplinary norms, and infrastructure (Davis et al., 2018; Shahjahan et al., 2022).

That being said, this coloniality is perpetuated differently across geographical contexts. For example, Prah (2018) observes that educational systems in most African postcolonial societies continue to reproduce eurocentric content, practices, and norms. He points out that African middle classes and elites are deeply influenced by colonial empires, and often imagine themselves in the roles of their former masters. Consequently, academics seek external validation from western institutions. Such internalization of colonial thought has serious psychological implications and leads to feelings of cultural inferiority and disconnection from Indigenous knowledge systems (Prah, 2018). Unfortunately, this phenomenon is common among post-colonial societies. The respective universities remain dependent on western academic standards for legitimacy[19] and suffer from underdeveloped local infrastructures for knowledge production (Shahjahan et al., 2022). This perpetuates intellectual colonialism and inhibits the integration of Indigenous ways of knowing into pedagogical practices.

Regardless of the geographical context, contemporary universities usually share the same institutional design that complicates efforts of decolonization. Inczauskis (2023) demonstrates this through the example of student co-created syllabi, which tend to be undermined by departmental or state-imposed requirements like the mandatory inclusion of western canonical texts[20]. These requirements reflect an embedded adherence to eurocentric epistemologies, and create a tension between institutional demands and personal commitments to change, hindering pedagogical experimentation.

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[19] E.g. rankings, accreditations, publication metrics etc.
[20] A common example is the mandatory inclusion of Plato's Republic in introductory philosophy (Pipe & Stephens, 2023).

The insistence on complying with such formal requirements represents a broader lack of institutional commitment. Structural barriers, including rigid policies and lack of leadership support, are combined with institutional inertia and bureaucratic resistance (Shahjahan et al., 2022; Chaussée et al., 2022). Within such constraints only individual acts of decolonization are feasible, while broader transformation remains elusive (Leenen-Young et al., 2021). As a result, actual attempts of decolonization are often superficial, with non-western content and methods being added into existing frameworks without addressing the underlying logic and values (Davis et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, decolonial work that genuinely seeks to disrupt the system is rendered subversive and risky. Departments and scholars who engage in critical, anti-colonial inquiry are often marginalized and threatened, and frequently face professional repercussions, including negative student evaluations, tenure threats, and stalled career advancement (Davis et al., 2018; Dei, 2016; Opini & Neeganagwedgin, 2020). Thus, educators' attempts to transform their pedagogy is not only discouraged, but comes at a personal cost.

These challenges highlight the complexities of attempting to transform western universities from within. Some scholars question whether institutions that are rooted in colonial foundations can ever be fully delinked from coloniality, or whether decolonization demands building something completely new (Menon et al., 2021). Stein et al. (2022) further explore this by describing competing strategies: 1) radically replacing the system, 2) 'hacking' it to gradually create alternative spaces, or 3) 'hospicing' it, acknowledging its decline while simultaneously nurturing new possibilities. Nevertheless, each of these approaches grapples with the difficulty of disrupting embedded colonial frameworks without being able to draw on clear alternatives.

2) The Coloniality of Knowledge

In addition to institutional resistance, the enduring colonial assumptions embedded in dominant conceptions of knowledge present a core barrier to decolonizing pedagogy. Western epistemologies continue to shape not only what is taught, but how knowledge is defined, evaluated and legitimized. This influences institutional cultures, academic disciplines, and individual actors, complicating decolonial efforts.

Central to this issue is the privileging of western scientific rationalism and eurocentric paradigms, which are generally framed as objective and universal (Santos, 2018, p. 6).[21] This marginalizes other forms of knowledge, especially those grounded in oral traditions, embodied experiences, and relational worldviews (Dei, 2016; Regmi, 2015). Lau and Mendes (2024) describe this process as characterized by 'epistemologies of ignorance'[22], a concept first introduced by Charles Mills (1997), referring to the systematic disregard of marginalized knowledges and experiences in order to protect unjust power structures and privileges.

These dynamics, though pervasive, manifest differently across disciplinary contexts. Fields like science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), and economics are commonly perceived as neutral and evidence-based (Hlatshwayo et al., 2022; Kulago et al., 2021; Kvangraven & Kesar, 2022; Nicol et al., 2020), while humanities are regarded as inherently more subjective and allow for more critical engagement (Rashed & Suarez, 2024, Chapter 11). However, they often function as 'protected spaces' where educators are rarely

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[21] I have explored the implications of such frameworks in my previous essay, by exploring Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of the 'abyssal line': "[The abyssal line] separates societies in the global north from the colonized, epistemologies of the north from those of the South, and is meant to demonstrate the dichotomy between them (Santos, 2018, pp. 3). People in western societies are on the 'right' side of this line, are considered credible knowers and can participate in knowledge production. The colonized on the other hand, are on the 'wrong' side and cannot participate in knowledge production, as they are not only denied credibility, but even humanity." (Wichert, 2024b)

[22] This concept was first introduced by Charles Mills (1997, Chapter 1, pp. 18-19). See Wichert (2024b, pp. 4-5) for a more detailed explanation in the context of decolonizing the University.

required to examine their positionality or teaching frameworks (Ibid.). Therefore, most disciplines implicitly reinforce colonial standards, instead of challenging them.

Meanwhile, the dominant epistemology legitimizes the "banking model" itself. With objectivity, neutrality, and evidence-based information being held as the standard, knowledge is seen as the domain of formally trained experts (Santos, 2018, Introduction). From early childhood onwards, students are conditioned to absorb information from teachers and authority figures, rather than develop their own critical voice (Lau & Mendes, 2024). Without conscious reflection on who benefits from this framework, individuals continue to reproduce it uncritically, often without realizing the ideological impact (Davis et al., 2018; Garcia & Shirley, 2012).

As a result, students expect traditional education models (Blanche et al., 2021; Carolissen et al., 2017; Hoyos, 2023). Those unfamiliar with participatory, decolonial methods may initially struggle to accept the increased responsibility and associated uncertainty, and interpret it as a lack of structure or academic seriousness (Inczauskis, 2023). Particularly when introduced to relational or Indigenous knowledge systems, some students express skepticism or even active resistance (Ibid.). They may fear that non-western approaches could diminish the perceived value of their degrees and jeopardize their career prospects[23], especially in traditionally more rigorous disciplines (Shahjahan et al., 2022).

Moreover, educators themselves often have internalized western epistemic norms. Without institutional support or training, many retain the pedagogy they were exposed to, both professionally and throughout their own education (Hoyos, 2023; Opini & Neeganagwedgin, 2020). If they do engage in decolonization efforts, these are often superficial, and limited to diversified syllabi without adjusting pedagogical practices (Du Plessis, 2021). Moreover,

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[23] This fear carries particular weight for students from the Global South, given that they are already disadvantaged within the global system and are often required to 'proof' their adherence to western academic standards (Shahjahan, 2022).

lecturers are frequently unaware of the transformative potential of decolonial approaches, and avoid experimenting with alternative modes of teaching (Ibid.). Even those open to change may feel unequipped to translate decolonial theory into their teaching practice (Hoyos, 2023; Rashed & Suarez, 2024). This is not simply a personal limitation, but a broader structural issue, with universities failing to provide adequate training and collaborative spaces to support educators in this work (Dei, 2016; Shahjahan et al., 2022).

Such challenges are not exclusive to the Global North, as western epistemic frameworks have also been internalized in postcolonial settings (Regmi, 2025). Particularly in African education systems, this 'epistemic colonization' is further enhanced by the persistent dominance of colonial languages as the primary medium of instruction. As Prah (2018) argues, such marginalization of Indigenous African languages reinforces the epistemic norms embedded in colonial languages, and disconnects students from their cultural and epistemic roots[24]. The latter inhibits the kinds of deep, critical engagement that decolonial pedagogy requires.

Overall, the coloniality of knowledge operates as a central mechanism which poses various challenges for the decolonization of higher education pedagogy. It dictates who is recognized as a credible knower, what is considered legitimate knowledge, and how it should be taught and assessed. Through these processes, the decolonial teaching and assessment practices described above are rendered inferior and inappropriate within dominant academic frameworks.

3) Emotional Load

When pursued with sincerity, decolonizing pedagogy is not only an intellectual process, but also a personal and emotional one, requiring more than theoretical understanding. It demands

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[24] Teaching and learning in one's native language can facilitate a more relational and experiential engagement with knowledge, allowing students to draw on personal histories, community-based understandings, and culturally grounded ways of knowing (Prah, 2018). However, Indigenous African languages are often excluded due to their lack of formal academic infrastructure (Ibid.).

confronting internalized assumptions, and one's embeddedness in colonial structures. Even among individuals who are open to engage in decolonial work, this process involves emotional labor, discomfort, and vulnerability, and can be deeply unsettling.

Scholars like Inczauskis (2023) or Opini and Neeganagwedgin (2020) notes that engaging with the legacies of colonialism evokes feelings of sadness and anger, while Hayes et al., (2021) describe how pedagogies designed to expose the 'dark side of modernity' often provoke discomfort, anxiety, and resistance. Additionally, Rashed and Suarez (2024) observe that such conversations can be emotionally charged minefields, which are often met with silence and defensiveness, particularly when exploring topics like race, privilege and systemic oppression. When individuals are able to move beyond this initial defensiveness and engage in genuine self-reflection, this often reveals internalized colonial thought (Garcia and Shirley, 2012). This results in moments of tension, shame, and even disillusionment as they confront the gap between their intentions and their unexamined biases (Ibid.).

However, this emotional weight is not equally distributed, and can look differently among diverse social identities. For Indigenous or non-western educators and students, it can be profoundly disheartening to realize how colonial knowledge systems have shaped their own identities and beliefs (Garcia and Shirley, 2012). Reflecting on positionality can be retraumatizing for marginalized students, as it involves revisiting historical and ongoing experiences of oppression (Davis et al., 2018; Kulago & Wapeemukwa, 2023; Gill & Uppal, 2020). If these are not meaningfully acknowledged or supported in the classroom, it can lead to disidentification (Ibid.). Moreover, Indigenous and racialized educators are often expected to lead decolonial work, while simultaneously having to navigate their own histories of trauma

within institutions shaped by colonial expectations and norms (Davis et al., 2018; Kulago & Wapeemukwa, 2023).

In contrast, for white individuals, engaging in decolonial work involves confronting uncomfortable truths about whiteness, privilege and complicity, while also grappling with white fragility (Davis et al., 2018; Opini & Neeganagwedgin, 2020). Allen and Girei (2024) describe this process as one of "reflexive discomfort", in which educators and students must critically examine how race and power shape their positionality and their role in perpetuating epistemic hegemony. Especially in white settler contexts, dominant group positionality complicates meaningful decolonial work: Tensions emerge between serving Indigenous students' needs and maintaining dominant expectations within the classroom (Shahjahan et al., 2022; Gill & Uppal, 2020).

This emotional intensity of decolonial work complicates its implementation. With colonial epistemologies emphasizing rationality, objectivity, and emotional detachment, emotions are frequently viewed as unscientific or unprofessional (Barnett-Naghshineh & Pattathu, 2021). Moreover, facilitating emotional engagement requires time, vulnerability, and pedagogical flexibility and innovation, all of which clashes with the dominant norms and institutional structures of higher education[25]. Therefore, educators and students are expected to maintain a certain 'distance' from the content at hand.

As a result, the toll on educators is both personal and professional: Davis et al. (2018) highlight the strong feelings of fear, frustration, and emotional exhaustion that are associated with pushing against embedded norms and institutional resistance. Educators frequently face backlash from students, colleagues, or institutional leadership when emotions surface in class, risking professional consequences (Ibid.). Additionally, they are often unprepared to

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[25] E.g. accreditation standards for degree programmes.

accommodate and adequately respond to students' emotional reactions Ibid.). It requires a delicate balance between fostering necessary discomfort while preventing students or colleagues from disengaging altogether in order to protect their self-image. Due to lacking institutional support,[26] educators often pick up this extra work in their own time, without appropriate recognition or compensation (Dei, 2016; Hall et al., 2021). All this can lead to physical and mental health consequences including burnout (Kulago & Wapeemuka, 2023).

Ultimately, the emotional intensity of decolonial work is not a sign of failure or inadequacy, but a necessary part of the process. Such emotional reckoning, while painful, is essential for moving beyond performative measures and toward genuine transformation (Girei, 2024; McGuire & Murdoch, 2023). However, this cannot be the responsibility of individual, marginalized educators alone. There is a need for institutional support and collective effort across positionalities to engage with the difficult, emotional nature of decolonial work.

4) Lack of Diversity in Faculty and Student Body

Another persistent barrier to implementing decolonial pedagogy lies in the lack of diversity within faculty and student bodies across western universities. This underrepresentation is a direct consequence of systemic colonial and racist biases[27], ranging from exclusionary hiring practices to inequitable admissions, scholarship allocation, career advancements, academic recognition, and tenure systems that reward conformity to western academic norms rather than decolonial innovation (Davis et al., 2018; Dei, 2016; Regmi, 2025; Wapeemukwa, 2023). Even though institutions increasingly promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), these initiatives

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[26] Faculty evaluations of scholars add additional pressure, as they prioritize conventional metrics over decolonial efforts (Hall et al., 2021).

[27] While such biases relate to the persisting coloniality of academic institutions examined above, the resulting lack of diversity within faculty and student bodies has specific implications for implementing decolonial pedagogy, which are worth exploring in further detail.

are often largely performative and fail to address systemic power imbalances or create genuinely inclusive institutional cultures (Regmi, 2025). Educators and scholars from marginalized backgrounds are frequently placed in positions of symbolic visibility without sufficient support or meaningful influence, leading to tokenization and isolation (Davis et al., 2018; Rashed & Suarez, 2024).

Neocolonial structures of internationalization further reinforce this exclusion. Several authors argue that the predominant flow of students from the Global South to the global north reproduces the notion of the west as the intellectual center of the world (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Stein & Silva, 2020; Silva & Pereira, 2023; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2021). They note that international partnerships often favor western institutions and paternalistic models of engagement, framing non-western contexts as deficient and in need of western knowledge and intervention. This reproduces the exclusion of scholars, educators, and students from the Global South, and limits the transformative potential of global academic collaboration.

These barriers not only shape individual futures by restricting access to elite institutions and post-graduate opportunities, but also limit the range of perspectives and lived experiences present in higher education. Without a significant number of Indigenous or non-western faculty members and students who bring first-hand experiences of marginalization, relational and experience based teaching practices often lack the dialogical depth and cultural embeddedness that is necessary for meaningful decolonial processes (Lau & Mendes, 2024). Educators may unintentionally place disproportionate emotional labor on marginalized students, or create further alienation if individuals are treated as 'spokespeople' for entire communities (Regmi, 2025).

Furthermore, the lack of diversity among faculty bodies affects their commitment to underlying ethics of decolonial pedagogy. For instance, true decolonial practice requires

centering Indigenous and marginalized knowledge systems, without treating them as supplementary add-ons (Lau & Mendes, 2024; Opini & Neeganagwedgin, 2020). This demands sustained collaboration, co-creation, and power sharing with Indigenous and marginalized communities and local 'Knowledge Keepers' (Ibid.). Without such grounding, there is a serious risk of academic extractivism, with Indigenous pedagogical practices being detached from the lived experiences and historical struggles that shape them (Lau & Mendes, 2024; Hayes et al., 2021). Furthermore, having relational ties to local communities, staff members may struggle to facilitate reciprocal and respectful interactions with marginalized communities, as this requires cultural sensitivity and mutual trust (Ibid.).

In order to genuinely move toward decolonial pedagogy, universities must address the systemic biases that shape who has access to academia, who is heard within, and whose knowledge is valued. Without doing so, decolonization efforts will likely reproduce the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle, risking appropriation, tokenism and additional harm for marginalized educators and students.

5) Neoliberal Pressures

In the contemporary, neoliberal context of financial austerity, information overload, and increased competition for scarce resources, issues of social justice and inclusion struggle to gain attention (Stein & Silva, 2020). Instead, universities increasingly operate according to market logic, prioritizing competition for global rankings, quantifiable outcomes, and economic utility over transformative learning, or critical reflection (Fomunyam, 2019). Institutions, particularly in the Global South, are constrained by the need to balance internationalization pressures with a decolonial agenda (Hoyos, 2023; Knight, 2018). Thus, pedagogic experimentation is constrained

by global standards that demand conformity to narrow definitions of academic excellence (Lau & Mendes, 2024).[28]

These neoliberal standards result in the increasing commodification of education, which is framed as an individual investment for future employment (Regmi, 2025). With universities relying more frequently on corporate funding or international student fees, decisions regarding the pedagogy are shaped by profitability and market appeal (Dei, 2016). Funding cuts to initiatives that connect universities with local communities (Hoyos, 2023) and the lack of institutional recognition for decolonial practices in accreditation or legal frameworks (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2021), decreases their institutional viability. Decolonial pedagogical strategies cannot (and refuse to) compete for these market driven qualities, which fundamentally contradict their underlying values.

Several scholars warn that this metrics-driven, competitive strategy, often framed by universities as 'strategically important', poses a growing incentive to implement performative or tokenistic engagements with decolonization to attract students and funding (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Shain et al., 2021). Such institutional gestures often reflect "interest convergence", where decolonization is embraced only insofar as it aligns with market incentives, rankings or reputational gain (Ibid.). Institutions adopt superficial measures to show off their progress while preserving the colonial structures in pedagogy, curriculum and their institutional culture.

Meanwhile, market imperatives also influence how decolonial efforts are measured and rewarded. Since the neoliberal climate prioritizes demonstrable and measurable outcomes, initiatives like workshops, webinars, or pedagogical experimentation often struggle to prove their

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[28] Across different contexts, the rise of right-wing populist governments has further aggravated these pressures on higher education by freezing public investment, attacking critical and left-leaning scholarship, and reinforcing a utilitarian view in which universities strive towards economic productivity rather than social transformation (Stein & Silva, 2020).

value in the language of neoliberal assessment (Naseem, 2024). Similarly, teaching and assessment methods like collaborative grading, ungraded learning or community-based assessment are difficult to justify and implement within systems built around fairness understood in terms of uniformity and standardization (Inczauskis, 2023; Rashed & Suarez, 2024).

Another consequence of the neoliberal landscape is a chronic lack of resources for implementing meaningful decolonial pedagogy, significantly constraining its feasibility and depth. Decolonial approaches often require smaller class sizes, flexible classroom arrangements, and extended time commitments of educators, all of which is difficult to accommodate in large, resource-strained institutions (Inczauskis, 2023; McGuire & Murdoch, 2023). Resource limitations also include material infrastructure, such as the inability to rearrange classrooms or reliance on digital platforms, both of which hinder community building and alternative use of the teaching spaces (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Lastly, high teaching workloads, market-driven expectations of academic productivity, and narrow criteria for academic success reduce the time, energy, and freedom that is crucial for educators to engage in successful pedagogical innovation (Dei, 2016; Davis et al., 2018).

Overall, neoliberal pressures pose a significant barrier for the decolonization of higher education pedagogy. The neoliberal university is structurally misaligned with decolonial goals, and resists practices that are slow, relational, context-specific, and unquantifiable. Thus, there is an urgent need for a fundamental reevaluation of institutional priorities and accountability frameworks. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the barriers and tensions identified in this second part of my literature review combine to create a powerful resistance to the different strategies of decolonizing pedagogy in western higher education.

Discussion

The first part of my literature review illustrates the diversity and transformative potential of decolonial teaching and assessment strategies, from relational, place-based pedagogies to creative, reflexive and epistemologically diverse practices. Subsequently, the second part reveals that their implementation is made difficult by structural, institutional, epistemic, and emotional challenges, all of which are either directly caused by, or at least related to persisting colonial legacies. These findings are grounded in the four-step review process outlined in the methodology, which enabled both thematic breadth across the twofold review, and critical analysis in identifying patterns, tensions, and contradictions across the literature.

Overall, my review highlights one key tension: While decolonial teaching and assessment strategies offer powerful tools for transforming the pedagogy of higher education in western universities, their application and impact are often constrained by the very structures they seek to challenge. This contradiction gives rise to ongoing debates about how to advance decolonial efforts despite structural constraints. In the following section, I will discuss the implications of different pathways suggested in the literature, and explore what opportunities, however limited, might exist for transforming pedagogy from within the current system.

Contradictions in Institutionalizing Decolonial Effort

Throughout this paper, it has become clear that the momentum behind decolonizing higher education in general, and its pedagogy in particular, has been based on the activism and initiative of passionate, committed individuals. My findings highlight the disproportionately heavy burden that is currently placed on individual educators, particularly those from racialized and marginalized backgrounds. Scholars have argued that this can only be alleviated through

coordinated, university-wide efforts (Harms-Smith & Rasool, 2020; Eaton, 2024; Kulago & Wapeemukwa, 2023; Naseem, 2024). In other words, to achieve meaningful transformation, decolonial work requires robust institutional backing.

Top-down support, including concrete policies, available resources, and leadership coordination, could offer a valuable foundation (Naseem, 2024). Without it, the endurance and transformative potential of efforts to decolonize pedagogical approaches remain limited. If well designed, institutional strategies could establish clearer goals, create safer spaces for experimentation, and allow for the necessary training to equip educators with the tools to enact meaningful change (Eaton, 2024; Harms-Smith & Rasool, 2020). Additionally, institutional frameworks could potentially allow for a broader implementation and impact of decolonial work, making it less dependent on individual initiative and more ingrained in university structures.

However, institutionalization comes with significant risks. My findings emphasize that, without critical engagement, institutional efforts often remain superficial and reduce decolonization to performative and tokenistic gestures that reproduce colonial dynamics in the name of inclusion. Scholars warn that universities may adopt the language of decolonization without committing to its deeper, more disruptive implications, turning it into branding exercises, or what Dhillon (2021) calls a "currency" (Blanche et al., 2021; Hoyos, 2023; Lau & Mendes, 2024; Omodan, 2022). Marginalized knowledge systems may simply be adapted to existing institutional frameworks, or treated as 'add-ons' to dominant pedagogical practices, rather than foster a fundamental rethinking of knowledge, power, and academic rigor (Dei, 2016). This so called "add and stir" approach (Davis et al., 2018; Moosavi, 2020) not only re-centers western norms, but may potentially retraumatize individuals from marginalized communities by assigning them the responsibility for decolonial work and asking them to engage with sensitive

topics in spaces that are unprepared to respect and reciprocate these efforts (Kulago & Wapeemuka, 2023). Ultimately, institutionalization could result in a 'soft reform' that reaffirms, rather than challenges colonial epistemologies (Stein et al., 2021).

Promoting 'Communities of Practice'

These risks highlight the importance of grounding decolonization in more ethical, bottom-up approaches that are backed by genuine commitment, rather than abstract policy frameworks. Scholars emphasize the need to embraces the messiness, complexity, and inherently unsettling nature of decolonization (Allen & Video, 2024; Gopal, 2021; Hoyos, 2023; Lau & Mendes, 2024; McGuire & Murdoch, 2023; Inczauskis, 2023; Stein et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2018). They point out that genuine transformation cannot be achieved by technocratic solutions implemented through checklists or predetermined modules. Decolonial work is inherently complicated and context-specific, and should not be collapsed into one single strategy or outcome.

Instead, it should be understood as a deeply situated process of unlearning and unsettling that requires 'communities of practice', not compliance (Hoyos, 2023; Stein et al., 2021). This concept was introduced by Etienne Wenger (1998), criticizing communities of top-down compliance, where individuals implement changes because they are told to, not because they share the underlying concerns. In contrast, communities of practice in the context of decolonial pedagogy refer to a collaborative, relationship-based approach, where educators, students and staff engage in ongoing dialogue and shared learning to challenge colonial assumptions. For instance, forums or regular peer-support circles could offer places where resources, ideas, experience, or specific strategies can be exchanged. Additionally, they could provide comfort and emotional support.

Such an approach allows for the crucial preservation of decolonial ethics and underlying values. Unlike compliance based models, it involves a deep commitment to critical reflexivity, for instance through uncomfortable self-examination and the recognition of one's own complicity in systems of privilege and domination (Allen & Girei, 2024; Eaton, 2024; Zemblyas, 2018). It resists closure and avoids the temptation of implementing superficial measures and 'quick-fixes' in order to declare that decolonization has been 'achieved'. This resonates with Donna Haraway's (2016) notion of "staying with the trouble", which encourages us to remain present in the discomfort and entanglement of the process, resisting both despair and easy solutions, and engaging in situated, relational, and transformative work rather than institutional performance.

Ultimately, the idea is not only to diversify or democratize the existing system, but to radically reimagine what knowledge is, how it is shared, and who is allowed to teach and learn. That requires recognition of epistemologies rooted in place, history, and community, without extracting them for institutional gain, but engaging with them in a collaborative way that centers relational accountability and mutual transformation (Inczauskis, 2023; Hayes et al., 2021). Keeping decolonization 'hard' does not mean to make it inaccessible, but rather insists to honor its underlying ethics, and to remain self-critical and open-ended. Otherwise, we risk institutionalizing decolonization as yet another form of colonial domination, performative, professionalized and essentially meaningless.

With that being said, advocating for bottom-up, community-driven decolonial initiatives eventually forces us to acknowledge a difficult reality. The number of people who share a deep commitment to decolonial ethics and are willing to engage in its unsettling and transformative processes is limited. Ironically, this is precisely what decolonial teaching practices aim for, to

cultivate students who will eventually challenge colonial logics and carry alternative ways of knowing into other fields and their everyday lives. However, to this day, colonial frameworks remain deeply internalized across universities, both in the global north and South. Therefore, relying solely on passionate individuals or loosely organized communities of practice may not suffice to drive widespread decolonial change.

Reform vs. Revolution

In light of this contradiction, it is understandable that some voices demand more radical change, and call for a revolution of the system instead of relying on individual efforts to reform it from within. This tension brings us back to the 'reform vs. revolution' debate mentioned earlier[29], with Stein et al. (2022) describing three competing strategies for decolonization: radically replacing the system, 'hacking' it to gradually create alternative spaces, or 'hospicing' it (acknowledging the system's decline while simultaneously nurturing new possibilities). Based on the findings of this research, I argue that, while a combination of strategies would be ideal, transformative change from within the system may currently represent the most viable opportunity. Given the deeply embedded power structures and enduring resilience of the current academic system, hoping to overthrow it without consistent, gradual efforts from within seems unreasonable. Instead, internal change through situated, collective practices provides valuable opportunities for disrupting dominant logics.

Rather than viewing this as a compromise, perhaps we could consider it a strategy of implementing "real utopias", as introduced by Erik Olin Wright (2011). Instead of choosing between reform or revolution, Wright suggests a different approach, which I explored in a previous essay:

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[29] See "The Coloniality of Academic Institutions" above.

"Implementing grassroot, practical alternatives (...) that can exist within [the current system] (...), helps to break the perceived inevitability of the current system and make [alternative] futures more imaginable and thus achievable." (Wichert, 2024a, p. 10)

From this perspective, the most powerful action we can take is to invest in building and nurturing accessible spaces, however small or fragile, that embody decolonization in practice. Such examples do not simply advocate for change, but actively demonstrate it, to 'show, rather than tell'. This can confront individuals with their internalized coloniality and invite them to join the dialogue around decolonization.

Resistance will remain part of the process. Instead of avoiding it, we should ask how to engage with it constructively. How can we meet both ourselves and others in their resistance, hesitation, questions, and ongoing attachments to colonial logics. While the 'communities of practice' mentioned above offer a valuable approach, it is important that these spaces not only mobilize those already committed to decolonial work, but remain open especially to those still struggling with their own internalized coloniality. Consequently, impactful 'communities of practice' also require safe spaces of care and critique, where grief, doubt, failure, and learning can be shared. This involves balancing the protection of vulnerable groups while simultaneously remaining compassionate to those earnestly trying to unlearn harmful patterns. As Haraway reminds us, staying with the trouble requires "oddkin", namely unexpected alliances that hold space for discomfort, contradiction, and mutual growth. From there onward, we should encourage each other to stay engaged, to be disruptive when necessary, to protect those who are vulnerable, and use privileges we hold to open doors rather than close them.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research is subject to several limitations. Firstly, my access to academic sources was partially restricted. Some relevant articles and case studies, particularly those published in local or regional journals, were not available through my university's library system, and otherwise inaccessible due to paywalls. Additionally, many contributions in the field of decolonization are written in languages other than English, and at times are intentionally not provided in a translated version, as a form of resisting linguistic colonization. As a result, the literature I reviewed is likely biased toward more globally visible, English-language scholarship, and potentially overlooks important local insights and experiences. Similarly, the literature available through my university's library reflects a geographic bias, with the majority of the reviewed studies being situated in North America, Europe, Latin America and parts of Africa. Perspectives from other regions like Asia, the Middle East, and small Island States are underrepresented.

Secondly, the formal expectations and conventions of a bachelor thesis, including time and word count constraints, combined with the scope and complexity of the topic required a selective focus. Therefore, this study was limited to pedagogical aspects of decolonizing higher education primarily within the context of universities. However, other types of higher education institutions, such as institutes of technology or vocational colleges, could present distinct challenges and opportunities for decolonial pedagogical practices that are worth exploring in further research. Similarly, this study did not address the foundational role of primary and secondary education, which presumably apply the same colonial logics in their pedagogy and thus already contribute to the internalization of colonial narratives and hierarchies. Future research should explore to what extent decolonial pedagogies can be implemented in those earlier stages of education, and how this can support decolonial transformation across the entire

education system. Moreover, while this study briefly touches on disciplinary differences, it should be examined in more detail how the challenges and possibilities of decolonial pedagogy vary across academic fields, as their differences likely shape both implementation and resistance.

Furthermore, many of the barriers identified in the literature apply more broadly to efforts of decolonizing higher education in general (e.g. institutional inertia and persisting epistemic coloniality). Although I also identified challenges unique to the implementation of decolonial pedagogy (e.g. the emotional burden on non-western educators), there is still a need for more targeted empirical research. This may include qualitative work with educators and students, such as participatory research on community-based initiatives and case studies of experimental pedagogical projects. These types of studies could deepen our understanding of how decolonial practices are enacted and experienced by educators, students and local community members. Moreover, they could account for the gender-blindness of this research, by investigating how tensions and resistance manifests across different gender identities.

Another relevant area for future research relates to the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for higher education. With AI increasingly automating cognitive and instructional tasks, we are confronted with fundamental questions about what aspects of our current education are truly irreplaceable. This shift could, unexpectedly, offer an incentive to center decolonial values like lived experience, relationality, emotional intelligence and ethical responsibility, which arguably cannot be replicated by AI-based tools. Future studies should investigate how AI could unintentionally reinforce or challenge colonial frameworks in education, and how decolonial pedagogy could position itself within these developments.

In summary, while this thesis provides a broad overview of existing strategies and challenges related to decolonizing pedagogy in higher education, it also highlights the need for

more situated, participatory, and intersectional research including diverse institutions, regions, and voices, that pays closer attention to the lived realities of teachers and students who navigate decolonial pedagogical transformation.

Conclusion

While there is a growing body of literature that explores different strategies aimed at decolonizing western higher education pedagogy, their implementation and transformative potential is often constrained by significant tensions and barriers. This four-step narrative literature review, guided by an explorative scoping approach, first provided and overview of the suggested pedagogical strategies, and then identified the corresponding challenges, tensions, and opportunities. The literature revealed four groups of decolonial pedagogic strategies, namely 1) relational pedagogies and student agency, 2) place-based and community-centered Learning, 3) reflexivity and critical consciousness, and 4) creative and arts-based pedagogies. These provide a useful toolkit for educators seeking to transform their pedagogy by challenging the hierarchical, decontextualized and transactional "banking model" conceptualized by Freire.

The second part of the review identified the following categories of tensions and barriers: 1) the inherent coloniality of academia and western universities as institutions, 2) the coloniality of knowledge, 3) the emotional load of decolonial work, 4) the lack of diversity in faculty and student bodies and 5) neoliberal pressures that shape educational priorities. These findings reveal that the implementation of decolonial pedagogy is significantly constrained by structural, institutional, epistemic, and emotional barriers, all of which are either directly caused by, or related to persisting colonial legacies at different levels. This highlights a central contradiction: The very structures that decolonial pedagogy seeks to transform are those that restrict its transformative potential.

In light of this contradiction, scholars argue that institutionalized measures can offer crucial support. However, they must be paired with bottom-up approaches that uphold the underlying decolonial ethics and prioritize context, community, and continuous critical engagement. Rather than relying on technocratic solutions or performative, tokenistic gestures, decolonization must remain an open-ended, reflexive, and disruptive process, and, as Haraway calls it, "stay with the trouble". Meaningful transformation lies not in a single strategy, but in nurturing individual spaces where decolonial values can be practiced, embodied and expanded.

While some voices demand a more radical revolution, transformative change from within the system may currently represent the most viable opportunity. These efforts may not be able to fully dismantle the colonial underpinnings of the university, but they can serve as exemplary alternatives within the current system – "real utopias" that challenge its inevitability and make alternative futures more imaginable. Although this approach does not provide clear instructions nor guaranteed success, it avoids both performative optimism and resignation. Instead it calls for slow, collective, situated work, grounded in commitment to learn from and with each other in the messy, unfinished project of decolonization. Institutions may never be fully capable of enacting this depth of transformation on their own, but those of us inside them can unite to create something different.

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Appendix

Statement of Academic Integrity

This thesis was written semi-independently with the guidance of my supervisor, who provided thoughtful feedback and ensured the alignment with scholarly standards. Meanwhile, all analysis, interpretation, and writing was conducted independently. The use of AI-based tools was limited to the following purposes: During my narrative review process, I selectively utilized NotebookLM to help identify the relevance of (pre-selected) sources, by uploading papers and inquiring about their contents. All papers included in this work were then critically assessed by myself. Additionally, DeepL and ChatGPT were used for language clarity and grammar improvements. Finally, all arguments that are based on information from other sources are indicated as such.