

(De)coloniality through Indigeneity: Deconstructing Calls to Decolonise in the South African and Canadian University Contexts

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Abstract

The ways in which Africanisation and decolonisation in the South African academy have been framed and carried out have been called into question over the past several years, most notably in relation to modes of silencing and epistemic negation, which have been explicitly challenged through the student actions. In a similar vein, Canada's commitments to decolonising its university spaces and pedagogies have been the subject of extensive critique, informed by (still unmet) claims to land, space, knowledge, and identity. Despite extensive critique, policies and practices in both South African and Canadian academic spaces remain largely unchanged, yet continue to stand as evidence that decolonisation is underway. In our paper, we begin to carefully articulate an understanding of decolonisation in the academy as one which continues to carry out historical relations of colonialism and race. Following the work of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012), we begin the process of "de-mythologising" decolonisation, by first exposing and tracing how decolonising claims both reinforce and recite the racial and colonial terms under which Indigeneity and Blackness are "integrated" in the academy. From our respective contexts, we trace how white, western ownership of space and knowledge in the academy is reaffirmed through processes of invitation, commodification, and erasure of Indigenous/Black bodies and identities. However, we also suggest that the invitation and presence of Indigenous and Black bodies and identities in both academic contexts are *necessary* to the reproduction and survival of decolonising claims, which allows us to begin to interrogate how, why, and under what terms bodies and identities come to be "included" in the academy. We conclude by proposing that the efficacy of decoloniality lies in paradigmatic and epistemic shifts which begin to unearth and then unsettle white supremacy in both contexts, in order to proceed with aims of reconciliation and reclamation.

Keywords: Blackness; decolonisation; higher education; Indigeneity; South Africa; Canada

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Introduction

We come to the writing of this paper as a South African Indigenous scholar and a Canadian non-Indigenous scholar, reflecting on our multiple conversations of witnessing the pursuit of decolonisation in the academy. Our specific insights arise from a call to Africanise the curriculum and our previous works on the role of race and power in knowledge production, which have brought us to a point of critically interrogating if decolonising the colonial space of the university is truly possible, given our witnessing of the ontological denial and commodification of Indigeneity in both settings. We trace how this denial and commodification take place, in an attempt to, following the work of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012), “de-mythologise” the decolonisation of the academy.

Throughout the paper, we maintain that ontological negations of the Indigenous body in both the South African and Canadian contexts persist in the university, despite *and because of* decolonising claims. Specifically, in explicating the persistent westernisation of South African Historically White Universities (HWUs), as well as the nationalist rhetoric which surrounds recent commitments of Canadian universities to “decolonise” their courses and campuses, we raise important questions about the colonial underpinnings of acts to decolonise, including the continuous gate-keeping methods which define Indigenous scholarship and bodies as additive, rather than integral.

On Defining Indigeneity

Our aim is to begin to expose how commodification and erasure of Indigeneity is performed under the guise of decolonisation in the academy. Before we proceed, we feel it is important to define how we are choosing to conceptualise the term Indigeneity, specifically through the lens of critical race and post-colonial theories. These approaches also inform and anchor the suggestions we later put forward regarding the pursuit of decolonisation through the use of an African Vocabulary.

In proffering our own suggestions, we also heed Mamdani’s (2012) caution against dangerous and problematic definitions of Indigeneity that are essentialist, fixed and unchanging, as bodies and an identity that can be “known” and theorised by the white male subject in order to re-secure his place as the sole bearer of truth and knowledge. As such, we do not wish to pursue any kind of discussion of what Indigeneity “is” (or is not), particularly in relation to any kind

of “pre-colonial” or “pure” identity. Furthermore, as Martin (1992) argues, Africa has been unable to define Africa for itself, as it has continuously been subjected to definitions derived from western interventions, from colonialism/coloniality and apartheid to developmental policies that aim at fostering democracy on the continent. In this paper, we instead seek to trace what Indigeneity *becomes*, under the guise of decolonisation in the academy. The work of this paper is grounded in our argument that contemporary manifestations of decolonisation in the academy are premised on the historical realities of colonialism, apartheid and coloniality. This has particular and significant implications for how and why Indigenous bodies are included in the academy. We would like to suggest that modes of inclusion are rooted in what Sullivan (2006) calls the “psychosomatic desire”¹ of whiteness to control Indigeneity, rendering it susceptible to its manipulations. Sullivan’s (2006) position is substantiated by Tuck and Yang (2012) who describe exploitation colonisation as a project aimed at expropriating “fragments of the indigenous world” and concentrating these resources in the hands of the coloniser (Tuck and Yang 2012, 4). Both psychosomatic desire and exploitation colonisation help to support our argument that decolonising strategies in the South African and Canadian academies reduce Indigenous bodies and identities to consumable, digestible “fragments” that, in the words of Greenwood, de Leeuw and Fraser (2008, 202) “confine Indigenous peoples to circumscribed and externally defined spaces in the academy.”

Following Fanon ([1952] 1999), in this paper we suggest that Indigeneity is recognised as part of the decolonial project in the academy only to reproduce modes of being and knowing as prescribed by whiteness and coloniality. We furthermore argue that the academy maintains, reproduces and occludes epistemic erasures of Indigenous beings through their “progressive” (de)colonialising claims and strategies. Through exposing decolonising claims and strategies as mechanisms of erasure, commodification and consumption of Indigenous bodies and identities, we feel it becomes possible to understand *and then begin to disrupt* how the ontologies, contributions, knowledges and epistemes of Indigenous knowers are prescribed and delimited to commodification and erasure in service of coloniality.

¹ The psychosomatic desire to ownership is the persistent urge to control, own and define Indigeneity/Blackness witnessed through the colonial project and contemporary coloniality. Sullivan (2006, 126) argues that this desire is witnessed in whiteness’ ability to enter Black spaces, consume Blackness and leave at their pleasure. It is further symptomatic of the desire of whiteness to reframe Black ontology, subsequently rendering the reality of race and racism obsolete.

(De)Coloniality in the South African Context

At a student leadership training programme, the deputy vice-chancellor of Rhodes University was asked about the inclusion of continental/oriental/indigenous modes of knowing and learning. Her response to this critical question, in the context of the project of decolonising the university space was, *“as a critical realist, I am of the view that we should not confuse that which is, with that which may be.”* Here we want to make the argument that the deputy vice-chancellor’s response reflects the larger historical negation of African ontologies, where African/Black scholars are gated out of the knowledge production processes through continuously being made to occupy the role of apprentice to western knowers and their epistemological frameworks. It is through this response that we can also begin to contextualise how historical, “progressive” changes to the South African education system, as well as larger approaches and commitments to decolonise and transform Historically White Universities (HWUs) and South African societies are situated within westernised contexts.

In her work titled “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” Todd (2016) demonstrates how the ontology of Indigenous bodies and scholars are erased in discussions on climate change and the environment. She uses several examples to highlight how Indigenous philosophies and ontologies are taken up, as “a well to be drawn upon” (17), in order to legitimise the white male scholar, his knowledge and place in the academy. In this paper, we expand on Todd’s argument to suggest that it is through processes of commodification and erasure that Indigenous ontologies and bodies legitimise decolonising claims. bell hooks (1992) describes how the presence of the racial Other in institutional spaces can be offered up as a sign that progressive change is happening, as long as the Other is consumed and commodified in a recognisable form. These recognisable forms often rely on stereotypes and associations with images of the “primitive” racial Other, where the presence of the racial Other is depoliticised and essentialised in order to reconfirm whiteness and power. As hooks explains, through commodification, voices of racial Others are first enabled, and then “eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (1992, 26). In the following pages, we highlight how the academy continues to invite, commodify and erase Black/Indigenous knowledges in service of “progressive” aims. We explicate the knowledge production processes which have inherent power dynamics that define the westernised university as colonial, continuing systematic oppression and silencing of the Indigenous/Black scholar. It is in explicating these power dynamics that we try to articulate how decolonisation of the

westernised university reproduces and further legitimises the university as a space for white scholars and scholarship.

We begin with the Bantu Education Act (Union of South Africa 1953), which was written with the goal of separate education, defined by racial categories in South Africa. We acknowledge that the Bantu Education Act explicitly declares its intentions to exclude Indigenous/Black bodies from the white education system in South Africa, and maintain that the establishment of HBUs—which came about because of the Act—sought to uphold the pretence of separate “development” along racial divides. We argue that the intention of enacting such legislation was not to decolonise South African education, but rather to entrench modes of coloniality and colonialism through inscribing the erasure of Indigeneity/Blackness as a legitimate knower in the academy. Through legislation that designated the role of Indigeneity/Blackness to the position of perpetual servitude to whiteness, Bantu education entrenched its power through coloniality, while commodifying Indigeneity/Blackness to serve its ends.

However, the Bantu Act was framed through the guise of separate *but progressive* development, which inevitably deprived Black/Indigenous and non-white schools of resources, financial and teaching, subsequently arresting the development of Indigenous/Black knowledge within the country. Although the Act refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Indigenous scholar/Blackbody as a knower and a producer of knowledge, and made no mention of equal distribution of resources, the Act, specifically the institutionalisation of Historically Black Universities (HBUs), stood as a sign of *progressive change* in South Africa, initiated by South Africa’s white minority. The purpose of legislating HBUs was to demonstrate the “willingness” of the apartheid state to accommodate the education of Black bodies but, we argue, to also reproduce and reaffirm the “essentialised” inferiority of Black bodies, both in education and in the colonial context, in order to further effect their erasure in higher education. The processes of invitation, commodification and erasure of Indigenous bodies and knowledges *under the guise of progress* that are inherent in the Bantu Education Act are refracted through the comments of the deputy vice-chancellor of Rhodes University, who simultaneously promotes negation and promise, leaving the Indigenous/Black body without a proper place in the academy. This begs the question: how can the goal of an ontologically and epistemologically representative intelligentsia be achieved when the leadership of HBUs implies and reaffirms that indigenous modes of knowing and being are mythical and not (yet) credible?

Further to this, we must acknowledge the similarities between Historically Black Universities (HBUs) and HWUs. By similarities, we allude to specific forms of administration, direction and structure which stifled the capacity of HBUs to define themselves either in opposition to or against the apartheid state. The University of Fort Hare subsequently becomes a prudent case in point in analysing the legislation which established Historically Black Universities. Professor Sibusiso Bengu became the first Black/Indigenous vice-chancellor of Fort Hare in 1993–1994, after more than 70 years of the university's existence. Bengu's departure from the university was the result of his appointment as minister of education in the Mandela administration. As Johnson (2013) explains, the rapid changes in leadership that took place after Bengu's departure resulted in the university being under national administration, owing to the claim that African/Black bodies cannot, *nor could they ever*, effectively manage institutions of higher learning. Placing Fort Hare under state authority and administration consequently involved the reconfiguration of the university and directed research agendas, eroding institutional autonomy and academic freedom. We want to suggest in this case that African/Black bodies in institutions of higher learning come into existence, through the deficiency narrative, *only as a way to legitimise state intervention and authority*. The events that took place at the University of Fort Hare reinforce the argument we are making that the ontological commodification (in recognisable form) and erasure that take place in and through the space of the academy act as a means of securing white settler futures because the Indigenous scholar/Blackbody becomes the site where the white settler's knowledge economy and interventions can become re-authorised.

Grosfoguel (2013), writing about the structure of knowledge in westernised universities, also highlights the epistemic injustices committed in the act of privileging western forms of knowing, while Almeida (2015) presents the challenge we must address in an academy which claims to be transforming and decolonising its knowledge production processes. The power dynamics inherent in the knowledge production process within the westernised university allow for bodies and voices of whiteness to be legitimised, while bodies and voices of Indigenous scholars continue to be marginalised. However, the ways in which Indigenous scholars and scholarship come to be authorised and included in the western canon must also be examined.

For example, in his attempt to articulate an African moral theory, Metz (2007)—an American scholar who has become a leading voice on African philosophy in South Africa—brings together westernised conceptions of morality, African modes of being and belonging, and Indigenous/Black epistemologies. In response to Metz’s articulation, Ramose (2007) argues that the concept of an African moral theory fails to consider let alone centre Indigenous/Black ontology because western conceptions of morality and ontological and epistemological positionings of the African tradition are at times incongruent. Metz’s theory, it may be argued, illustrates not only the conceptual misrecognitions that limit the academy in its interpretations of Indigenous/Black epistemologies, but also how Indigenous/Black epistemological theorisations become celebrated and legitimised once assimilated into western thought. The leading role Metz plays in the South African academy may also be understood as highlighting how the African/Black scholar is perpetually placed in the role of apprentice, as one who continuously learns from and reaffirms the western knower as the producer of global knowledge, even as their articulations may be riddled with misrecognitions and a failure in understanding African epistemes. This argument extends the critique of Almeida (2015), who raises the provocation of Oriental/Indigenous bodies existing merely as a means of validating western civilisations.

The argument that the Black/Indigenous scholar can only come into existence through emulating or mimicking the coloniser, or by embodying and performing in ways that have come to be expected and authorised by the coloniser, finds substantiation through the institutional cultures rampant in the South African academy. It is important to note here that this mimesis, emulation and/or performance should not be superficially read as requiring some sort of turn to “pre-colonial” conceptions of Indigeneity in the decolonial mission, as this would undermine the decolonial project. In his essay on political identity, citizenship and ethnicity in post-colonial Africa, Mamdani (2005) makes the claim that even pre-colonial identities and conceptions of being have been tainted and obfuscated by the colonial project, through the construction of custom as that which is unchanging and thus ultimately innocent and pure. In this paper, we do not seek to essentialise Indigeneity, as this would merely authorise another point of entry into the commodification and erasure of the Indigenous scholar/Blackbody, within the contemporary university. Instead, we seek to expose how mimesis, emulation and/or performance give rise to and perpetuate false conceptions of being and belonging in spaces which are premised on the erasure of Indigeneity as a fluid, embodied and rightful existence. Although mimesis, emulation and/or performance might permit some sense of power or

belonging in the university, what needs to be made clear here are the overall negations, permissions and commodifications that give rise to these positions.

In the inability of coloniality to surrender its comforts and fully understand what the decolonial moment means and requires of white settler descendants, decolonisation in western institutions acts to secure white settler futures (Tuck and Yang 2012). Similarly, we argue that to locate the South African academic landscape in a de-/post-colonial condition would be a misstep, for the South African academy, in relation to Indigeneity/Blackness, is still stuck in a colonial condition. Even in the demand that the Indigenous/Black ontological position be recognised, in this space of decoloniality, resistance and counter-hegemonic narratives are both authorised and demanded by whiteness. In current decolonising acts, we want to suggest that the South African academy remains stratified in colonial categories of legitimate (occidental) and illegitimate (Indigenous/Oriental/Black) binaries that define the university.

Decolonisation, as Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, cannot happen without the recognition on the part of the colonial/white settler that s/he remains a beneficiary of the colonial system and continues to maintain this system in the modes of oppression envisaged in the academy. In the practice of decoloniality in action, there is the reclaiming of the land, what Tuck and Yang call “re-invasion and re-settlement” (7). Re-invasion and re-settlement in the case of the South African academy signifies challenging, through scholarship, what is taught in the lecture theatres and accepted by the power dynamics of the knowledge production process. Responding to the question posed by Mamdani (1993) of whom it is that we in the contemporary university are writing for, we can begin to become more accountable to the local communities in which we work and respond better to the needs of South African students, through active scholarship that recognises the Indigenous/Black ontological position, *as well as to trace how it has been historically commodified and erased*. It is through this critical position of evaluation, re-evaluation and unearthing that the ontological annihilations committed by westernised universities in South Africa can begin to be limited and constrained, *through exposition*. Without the historical understandings of the violent epistemes that inform the current ways of being for Indigeneity/Blackness in the university, coloniality remains at the helm of “post-colonial” society, masquerading in different forms. In the wake of this oscillation that takes place through Indigeneity/Blackness not being able to make sense and meaning of its existence and landscape, we make the argument in this paper for decoloniality as a process of simultaneous exposition and reclaiming, as a means of beginning to attain emancipation.

Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and De/Coloniality

In this section, we put our position that decolonising is a project of exposition and reclaiming into practice, by beginning to expose underlying colonial thinking and implications of the White Paper 3 (DoE 1997). The White Paper 3 is a guiding policy document for institutional governance and transformation in South Africa, which largely seeks to ground and maintain institutional autonomy and academic freedom in South African universities. Here, we trace how coloniality informs and authorises decolonial claims in order to deny Indigenous/Black ontologies in the contemporary university. Lebakeng, Phalane and Dalindjebo (2006) make the argument for the need to Africanise South African institutions premised on the epistemic injustices witnessed under the guise of institutional autonomy. Maintaining historical injustices through the curriculum taught, modes of assessment and the criteria used to determine academic standards, the call to Africanise the South African academy is more pressing than ever in the wake of the student protests witnessed across the higher education landscape in 2015 and 2016.

Section 1.24 of the White Paper 3 authorises institutional autonomy, for the basis of transforming South African society, while using higher education in redefining national values and social reality, post-apartheid. The White Paper 3 (DoE 1997, 8) reads:

The principle of institutional autonomy refers to a high degree of self-regulation and administrative independence with respect to student admissions, curriculum, methods of teaching and assessment, research, establishment of academic regulations and the internal management of resources generated from private and public sources. Such autonomy is a condition of effective self-government. However, there is no moral basis for using the principle of institutional autonomy as a pretext for resisting democratic change or in defence of mismanagement. Institutional autonomy is therefore inextricably linked to the demands of public accountability (sic).

HWUs adhere to the principles of White Paper 3, section 1.24, insofar as it allows autonomous governance and direction within the university. However, what it fails to articulate/address is how institutional autonomy (as well as its limitations) acts to maintain western biases, specifically to privilege and reaffirm western knowledge frameworks. What is of principle concern for us is that the terms by which the academy in South Africa will recognise Indigenous/Black ontologies rest on the tenet of “autonomy,” which inextricably continues to link autonomy to white scholars and scholarship, and therefore ensures the erasure of the Black/Indigenous scholar.

Lebakeng et al. (2006) clarify the terms of reference which whiteness uses in order to stifle and suffocate research driven with the purpose of decolonising the South African university. It is not surprising that a key principle which ensures the university's institutional autonomy—public accountability—and defines its limitations is blatantly ignored by university administrators, in order to preserve the western knowledge economy. Ignoring the proviso of public accountability is illustrated by universities' failure to respond to the local needs and challenges of the communities in which we work. The westernised university in South Africa remains a citadel that is divorced from its locale, a reality which was obscured/erased when the National Research Foundation placed priority funding in the hands of South African university administrators for community-engaged research. An academy that is divorced from its realities leads Lebakeng et al. (2006, 72) to contend that a system premised on institutional autonomy as well as the assumption that education “appropriate for Europeans brought up in London and Manchester and Hull was also appropriate for Africans brought up in Lagos and Kumasi and Kampala” creates a condition in which decolonisation is stifled while seeming to be in progress.

If autonomy is both determined and lived through whiteness, how does the Indigenous/Black scholar ever rise to existence, or claim that her/his knowledge has a rightful place in the South African university? What we seek to primarily respond to and problematise is how the act of decolonising the contemporary South African university rests on white supremacy, authority, and its reproductions. In an interesting and yet violent turn, the commodification and erasure that Indigeneity is subjected to in the academy is premised on and reproduced through the ideas of autonomy and freedom of white bodies and scholars. False conceptions of power and the oscillation experienced by the Indigenous/Black scholar begins with how the White Paper 3 frames and preserves academic freedom and institutional autonomy of the academy, as a means of negating Indigenous/Black ontologies and epistemologies in the university. A compounding of this reality is envisaged in the oscillation experienced by Indigeneity in being denied existence in the academy, while its reality, truth and knowledge is questioned outside of the academy.

Disrupting Commodification and Negation—The Beginnings

The tensions envisaged in South Africa in the protests of 2016 between students divided along racial lines indicates the dire need to recognise Indigenous/Black ontologies, or failing to do so, await the implosion of the South African higher education sector in its entirety. What can be deduced from the student protests is the rejection of the expected and authorised mimesis,

and false conceptions of power, inclusion and belonging within HWUs. The recognition of this Indigenous/Black ontology advanced in this argument speaks to the fundamental paradigm shift that needs to take place, if there is to be epistemic justice in the contemporary academy. Epistemic justice highlights how we can begin to affirm the ontological positions of the Black/Indigenous scholar. Through reimagining the curriculum prescribed in the westernised university in South Africa, HWUs and HBUs can begin to advance the objectives of White Paper 3 (DoE 1997), which speak to the social redress of South Africa through education. In the commodification and annihilation of Indigenous/Black ontologies, the contemporary South African Indigenous/Black scholar becomes a pariah, through her/his inability to navigate and belong to the South African landscape—a landscape defined by western epistemic impositions, through colonial domination and continued subjugation, manifesting as coloniality. In this way, the Indigenous/Black ontology becomes an oscillating being and cannot situate itself in an historical account of the Indigeneity/Blackness it seeks to claim.

Research currently being undertaken suggests that Indigeneity/Blackness in the South African context, while intricately linked to whiteness and the yoke of coloniality, has the capacity to self-define outside the prescriptions of whiteness through the languages of Indigenous peoples of South Africa, a strategy we suggest in our previous work (Kumalo 2017). In defining the decolonial mission of the westernised university as a recognition of the Indigenous/Black ontological position, we argue for the creation of an African Vocabulary. In arguing for an African Vocabulary, there are inherent challenges—which, if neglected, would substantiate the rules of current iterations of decolonisation, including the commodification and ontological negation of Indigeneity. Decolonising the academy starts with a recognition of the ontologies of the Indigenous scholar/Blackbody, through the meaningful use of an African Vocabulary in the South African context. Institutional policies such as the Rhodes University Language Policy, which states that the university is “committed to promoting multilingualism and the intellectualisation of African languages” (Rhodes University 2014), are indicative of how decolonisation has been turned into piecemeal conversations with little effort to truly decolonise these white spaces.

An African Vocabulary should not be misunderstood as the use of African languages alone. An African Vocabulary is a lexicon that critically responds to the demand of decentring western epistemic paradigms through the use of alternative ontological frameworks in the academy. The alternative lexicon we propose through the use of an African Vocabulary entails revealing

the continued violence of the academy, therefore undermining the possibility of the African Vocabulary being co-opted into strategies that reproduce coloniality. The African Vocabulary is rooted in African epistemic and ontological positions that invite whiteness to denounce its colonial histories, its psychosomatic desire to ownership and demands the substantive study of Indigenous/Black epistemes. An African Vocabulary connotes deference when curriculating with the intention of decolonising knowledge, modes of thinking and the university. It is rooted in substantive engagements with the works of Indigenous/Black scholars (Mqhayi 1914; Plaatje [1930] 2005; Wiredu 1998), while dislodging whiteness/western modernity from the centre in spaces and societies defined as *post-colonial*.

In order to define the South African and Canadian contexts as post-colonial, we maintain that the psychosomatic desires of ownership must be explicitly identified and denounced on an ongoing basis. This means that systems of knowledge production and the knowledge economy are co-produced with consistent processes of locating and unsettling whiteness. An African Vocabulary, taken seriously, fundamentally challenges an additive approach that maintains and perpetuates (de)colonising strategies that reproduce coloniality while relegating Indigeneity/Blackness to the position of constant apprentice to the white knower.

Our proposition of an African Vocabulary begins to address the deficits instituted by white supremacy, while responding to the charge of recognising Indigenous/Black ontological positions within the university. An African Vocabulary, as we argue for it in this paper, begins by articulating the realities of the South African university through theoretical lenses, fashioned by local knowledge producers who aim to respond to the local challenges and needs of South Africa. It is further conversant with other knowledges and responds meaningfully, to deepen an understanding of how Indigeneity/Blackness conceptualises its place within the academy. In instituting an African Vocabulary, whiteness relinquishes the borders it prescribes for intellectual inquiry which maintain white supremacy through a veiled discussion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. We see the move to incorporate an African Vocabulary as having destabilising effects for white supremacy in South African universities, as well as a way to ground, reaffirm and reclaim the existence, knowledges and practices of Indigenous/Black scholars.

In the next section of this paper, we discuss the recent pedagogical and curriculum shifts in Canadian universities, following their commitment to decolonise their courses and campuses, and to be more inclusive of Indigenous voices and bodies. Following our argument on the invitation, commodification and negation/erasure of the Indigenous body/scholar in the space of the university, we begin to outline how the confluence of decolonisation and nationalism reinforces the presence, commodification and erasure of the Indigenous body in the academy as a *necessary* condition of the project of reinvestment and commercialisation of the knowledge economy, and of the nation.

Decolonising the Canadian University: A National(ist) Project

“We are pleased to launch these principles on the eve of Canada Day which is not only a time for celebration but a time for reflecting on who we are as a country and who we want to become through meaningful reconciliation,” said Paul Davidson, president of Universities Canada. (Goar 2015)

On July 7, 2015, *The Toronto Star* published a column on Canadian universities’ response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, who issued a call to action to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. After a year of planning and development, this response included a commitment from all 97 Canadian universities to a set of Principles on Indigenous Education (Universities Canada 2015) which, according to David Barnard, Chair of Universities Canada, have the explicit aim of decolonising Canadian campuses and courses. In the words of Barnard, decolonising campuses means “blending western science with indigenous knowledge, recognizing that there are different ways of knowing and learning and *integrating Aboriginal perspectives into Canadian scholarship and learning*” (Goar 2015; our emphasis). Canadian universities took up the task of becoming the nation’s leader on improving relationships with Indigenous Canadians, and their initiatives were framed, in the words of columnist Carol Goar, as a “promising way to begin the nation’s 149th year.” For the president of Universities Canada, these initiatives were inextricably linked to who Canada is, as a country, and who and what Canada and Canadian universities could become.

In this section of the paper, we again trace and expose how commitments to decolonise university spaces serve larger projects of whiteness, white supremacy and the western knowledge economy. For Universities Canada as well as for *Toronto Star* columnist Goar,

institutional commitments to decolonise the university are inseparable from the project of national and institutional pride and leadership on “Aboriginal issues.” This explicit association of academy and nation, and pride in both, draws us into interrogating how the simultaneous reproduction, legitimation and erasure of the colonial legacies which inform the project of nation-building and national innocence might also shape the decolonising project in Canadian universities, through claims to respect, “integrate” and include Indigenous scholars and their work. By making explicit how current rhetoric around decolonisation in the Canadian context is inextricably tied to the reproduction of the white knower/scholar, and to nationalist sentiments, we offer that Indigenous bodies and scholarship in Canadian universities are consumed and/or erased in order to reaffirm institutional pride and innocence. Although we cannot claim to know how Canadian universities differ in their degrees of understanding and/or implementation of the terms of decolonisation, we offer that the overarching efforts and goals of decolonising campuses in Canada remain grounded in and reproduce colonial thinking, in an “additive” model that supplements existing processes of knowledge production and exchange which reinforce and are reinforced by white supremacy.

Following Trinh (1989), we furthermore assert that decolonisation authorises “permissible” and *fragmented* forms of inclusion, voice and scholarship, in ways which continue to render the Indigenous body/scholar as the native informant in the Canadian academy. As a native informant, the native Other is both taken up as the “voice of truth,” and re-written by the white male in his own language, to reproduce and manage racial demarcations (67). Natives are assumed to represent themselves, their “true essence,” unchanged by the outside world or their interactions with others (Appadurai 1988). Appadurai argues that the racial and colonial dynamics of representation make natives “creatures of the anthropological imagination” (1988, 39). Though the admittance of “them” among “us,” the anthropological discourse that imagines and knows the primitive native is thus recycled as “the mission of civilizing the savage mutates into the imperative of ‘making equal’” (Trinh 1989, 59).

In this vein, we offer through this expository project the possibilities of understanding decolonisation *as a discourse*, and thus as an integral part of the maintenance of whiteness and power in the Canadian academy. We begin to trace how the discourse of decolonisation in the Canadian university reinforces “the adoption of Indigenous practices and knowledge, but more ... those narratives in the settler colonial imagination in which the Native hands over his land, his claim to land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe keeping” (Tuck and Yang 2012,

14). Through understanding decolonisation in the academy as a discourse, it becomes possible to understand how claims to unsettle colonialism, in their commodified form, become the mechanism by which to re-inscribe settler colonialists as naturalised and normalised owners of stolen land (read: nation), space and knowledge.

It is of utmost importance for us to note here that, because we are not Indigenous peoples in Canada, we will not offer any further suggestions on reclaiming and/or decolonising in the Canadian university context. Several Indigenous scholars, writers, poets and speakers, some alongside non-Indigenous writers, have brilliantly articulated what this entails. Instead, we wish to remain committed to the project of exposition, by highlighting how decolonisation as a discourse underwrites and recycles colonialist, nationalist thinking in the academy at the precise moment that it claims to unsettle it. We employ this approach in the Canadian university context armed with our knowledges and experiences of negotiating the academy as “Others” in an institutional space where varying degrees of submission to whiteness and western ways of thinking are a necessary component of academic integrity and belonging. However, we also strongly argue that forms of belonging, however partial or temporal they may be, are negotiated by and/or granted to racial and Indigenous bodies in the academy in vastly different ways. Negotiations of and access to space are dependent on a multitude of complex factors including (but not limited to) identified, ascribed and/or hierarchised racial group, intersectional forms of oppression and privilege, desire, consumption, as well as how these factors interact with and *separately from* how Indigenous scholars and scholarship belong and are taken up in the academy. Given these complexities, rather than attempting to capture how the space of the Canadian university is wholly negotiated and accessed by Indigenous bodies via calls to decolonise, or how it should be, we instead draw on our own familiarity, interactions, and varying degrees of complicity with power in the academy in order to expose the racial and colonial terms under which these negotiations of access are held, which we ourselves continue to witness, struggle with and take part in.

Principles on Indigenous Education Re-Visited

To a large extent, institutional approaches to making meaningful change in the lives of Indigenous peoples have not led to what we understand as decolonization and regeneration; rather they have further embedded Indigenous people in the colonial institution they set out to challenge. (Alfred and Cornthassel 2005, 611)

Universities Canada's "Principles on Indigenous Education" begins with a commitment to meaningfully address the underrepresentation of Aboriginal students in order to contribute to "Canada's long-term economic success and social inclusion" (2015, 1). The document also notes explicitly that beyond what and how Indigenous communities can contribute to the advancement of existing knowledge and ideas, defined in the text as "social and cultural imperatives" (1), a clear benefit is that successful Indigenous students will participate in and contribute (longer) to the Canadian workforce, thereby helping to meet increasing labour market demands in Canada. The goals of integration in Canadian universities are also to "strengthen Indigenous communities [and] to allow Indigenous peoples to continue to strive for self-realization" (1). In the document, there is no mention of *why* there might be underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the academy or in the workforce, nor any acknowledgement of the ongoing colonisation of Indigenous peoples and how that might preempt and/or determine the terms of their "inclusion" and "integration" in Canada and in the university. Instead, the document stipulates that becoming included in the university experience is meant to inspire and encourage Indigenous students and their communities, and to expand *their* knowledge and employability.

We begin our analyses of the Principles on Indigenous Education by pointing out how discussions of inclusion and integration both occlude and re-inscribe the terms under which the academy, knowledge, economy, and nation are assumed as white/western owned and operated. Commitments to include and integrate Indigenous bodies and knowledge(s), invited and authorised by the Principles on Indigenous Education, do as much (if not more) to re-secure naturalised, white western modes of thinking and being in the academy as they do to open them up. Furthermore, as Barnard attests, Canadian universities are willing to take up the challenge of decolonising campuses and courses via incorporating and integrating "Aboriginal" forms of knowledge and being into "Canadian scholarship and learning." The underlying distinction authorised by the principles document and furthered by Barnard is that Indigenous forms of knowledge and being need to be integrated and included in Canadian universities in part because they are inherently, historically, and traditionally *not Canadian*.

We argue here that the presence and claims of Indigenous peoples in Canadian universities are invited, included, commodified and erased in order to further perpetuate specific sets of ideologies and values that are inherent to colonial thinking and practices of the nation. First, the ideas outlined in the Principles on Indigenous Education, particularly that "Aboriginal"

bodies, forms of knowledge, learning, and employability are enhanced through *Canadian* post-secondary education, have some merit if we are to consider (and obscure) how Indigenous peoples must be educated in and by Canadian standards in order survive in a Canadian economic, social and political climate which, nationally and institutionally, still does not recognise or authorise decolonisation as rightful claims to land, and as a challenge to white supremacy. In the Principles document, Indigenous peoples are invited into a project of decolonisation whereby they are integrated (read: assimilated) into a narrative which both selectively administers and redefines belonging and success in the nation according to western labour market standards. There are several ways in which distinctions between the “integration” and assimilation of Indigenous peoples dissolve, particularly with regard to the economic development of Indigenous communities in Canada. The dissolving of distinctions is explicitly emphasised and problematised in the 1996 second volume of the *Report on the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, Restructuring the Relationship* (RCAP 1996). Even as the volume recommends increasing educational attainment as one of the several conditions of economic development, it warns that ignoring both the dispossession and demands for expanded access to a land and resource base that has sustained Aboriginal economies, in favour of federal policies which focus on “training entrepreneurs or improving their access to capital” (751) both sustains and brings Aboriginal peoples into an individual approach to economic development “resembling that of the rest of Canada” (764; our emphasis). In practice, an individual approach not only holds Aboriginal peoples accountable for their own development, and occludes significant barriers to accessing employment including racism, accessible childcare, and geographic location, but also reproduces cycles of blame, dependence, and disenfranchisement for those who do not or who are seen to be unwilling to succeed in the Canadian economy. The individual approach thus re-authorises settler ownership and control over land, resources, and policy direction on the economic development of Aboriginal communities through the recycling of colonial thinking, which reduces (if not eliminating altogether) demands for self-governance, communal economic development and interests seen as being incompatible with *Canadian* values and economic interests.

As this section of the report goes on to say, tensions over Aboriginal economic development continue to occur because “federal policy emphasizes individual advancement and integration into the broader Canadian economy more than rebuilding Aboriginal economies and all that entails” (RCAP 1996, 771). The example of federal policy around Aboriginal economic development is symptomatic of a larger, historical nation-building project whereby the state

repeatedly and through multiple means attempts to “gradually subsume Indigenous existences into its own constitutional system and body politic” (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 598). As Corntassel and Holder (2008) also write, state policies and strategies attempting to address injustices faced by Indigenous communities fail to adequately engage issues surrounding land and resource dispossession and/or self-determination, which reinforces the power of the settler-colonial state to determine how and under what terms reconciliation is administered and achieved. Given the synergy between state policies and Universities Canada policies on the drive to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the Canadian economy, we want to suggest that the larger approach to decolonisation embedded in Universities Canada’s Principles on Indigenous Education perpetuates and is informed by national policies around decolonisation and reconciliation, as well as the colonial terms under which they are negotiated and authorised.

Battiste (2002) also outlines in “Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations” that there is an ongoing and deliberate failure of Eurocentric education systems to recognise how Indigenous knowledges contribute significantly to western knowledge frameworks, through marking the *limitations* and filling in the gaps of Eurocentric theory, pedagogies, and research. We question whether Universities Canada and their understanding of “mutual respect for different ways of knowing and recognizing the intellectual contributions of Indigenous people” (Universities Canada 2015, 1) includes a critical and formal recognition of the limitations of western, Eurocentric ways of knowing and thinking, and a resultant destabilisation of white ontological and epistemological supremacy in the academy. Here we are reminded of Coleman’s (2015) assessment that “for many Canadian settlers, Indigenous people are *too* close to home, *too* close for comfort, *too* close to the bone” (274). Coleman (2015) argues that this (fear of) proximity in the nation determines how encounters are structured, how they are interpreted and by whom, as well as what existing discourses are drawn on to set the limits of belonging, and to make each encounter (repeatedly) intelligible. Following the critiques of Battiste and taking into account how proximity becomes *necessary* to the (de-)colonising project, we offer that decolonisation as a discourse of the academy is a project of integrating Aboriginal education through an additive, “cross-cultural” approach, to the exclusion/erasure of any analysis or destabilisation of the “monopoly of Eurocentric education and how the fundamental political processes of Canada have been laced with racism” (Battiste 2002, 10). While Indigenous scholars and scholarship are to be integrated into the academy under the guise of the “cohabitation of Western science and Indigenous knowledge” (Universities Canada 2015, 1),

given the historical and colonial terms under which cohabitation has and continues to be interpreted, framed and established by the nation, we remain critical of decolonisation as involving disruption of white supremacy in the academy.

Drawing on Alfred and Cornthassel's argument of the "logical inconsistencies" (2005, 612) of decolonising socio-political institutions which require the assimilation of Indigenous peoples in order to make themselves up, we offer that inviting Indigenous peoples into the project of decolonising the academy draws Indigenous scholars and scholarship into the colonial exercise of normalising and re-authorising the place of the settler colonialist in the academy. The invitation and inclusion of Indigenous scholars and scholarship into the academy, through the discourse of decolonisation, thus become *necessary* conditions of the maintenance and ongoing superiority of western, white supremacist ways of knowing and thinking, in Canadian universities and beyond. We further suggest that invitation and presence, under the guise of decolonisation, become the mechanisms by which to obscure the continuation of the colonial project.

On the Problem of Representation

Universities across Canada are actively stepping up their recruitment of Indigenous scholars and staff, in line with Universities Canada Principle 4: "the importance of Indigenous education leadership through representation at the governance level and within faculty, professional and administrative staff" (Universities Canada 2015, 1). We find this initiative to be important and necessary, especially given the desire to shift the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in Canadian universities, and what the presence of Indigenous faculty and staff might mean for Indigenous students.

Challenging the increase in presence of Indigenous peoples in Canadian universities is not our aim, nor our right. However, we do question the *terms* under which Indigenous scholars and staff are invited and integrated into the academy, and for what means. As Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013, 73) write, "the future of the settler is ensured by the absorption of any and all critiques that pose a challenge to white supremacy, and the replacement of anyone who dares to speak against ongoing colonisation." Similarly, we argue that claims to decolonise Canadian universities via the integration and inclusion of Indigenous scholars and scholarship are only made possible through the repetition of colonial thinking, which undergirds not only the terms under which space and knowledge become legitimised *and by*

whom, but also the terms under which access to both is granted. The “granting” of inclusion and integration by Universities Canada, however partially, is also firmly unidirectional, which remains largely unquestioned. We concur that critiques and challenges to white supremacy in the academy are absorbed into the project of settler futurity and, following Trinh, that the “native Other” is invited into a re-vamped mission of colonising Indigenous knowledges in order to preserve and justify western, Eurocentric epistemological dominance. However, we want to respectfully complicate Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández’s claim that challenges to ongoing colonisation are wholly silenced and/or ejected in the academy by drawing on our theorisation of decolonisation as a discourse. As Foucault (1981) suggests, discourse, as an instrument and an effect of power, enables the production as well as the justification of meanings, objects and subjects that are simultaneously constrained and enabled, inhibited and free-forming. He also warns that we must see modern power as more than simply a repressive force, held by particular bodies over other bodies (1984). In order for power to take hold, it must be everywhere and come from everywhere; it is also productive, induces pleasure, and is reinvigorated through relations of domination *and resistance*. What we are suggesting is that decolonisation, as a discourse and as a mechanism of power manifests and regenerates colonial “truths” via inviting, managing and containing its resistances. As Monture-Angus (1999, 83) eloquently writes, “resistance as a strategy is contradictory ... it will only draw the person deeper into individual struggles with colonialism and oppression.” Elaborating on this, and returning to hooks’s (1992) theorisation of commodification, we argue that decolonisation as a discourse repeatedly invites, commodifies and contains resistance, but also that these repetitions are obscured by the claims and promise of progress and change. We also want to carefully assert that progress is a power(ful) ideology that is taken up and re-authorised *by many*, not just the settler. The ideology of progress obscures and negates the historical and ongoing effects of colonisation that render spaces white-owned and operated, while at the same time re-legitimising them. However, progress, incited by the discourse of decolonisation, also invites and *produces* various positionalities of resistance by engaging complex desires for agency and change in the academy.

Conclusion

In our conclusion we will not offer (nor are we in any position to offer) any further insights on what decolonisation of Canadian universities might look like. We will simply state here that we support and stand behind a politics of refusal as a mode of decolonisation in the academy and beyond, brilliantly articulated by Alfred and Corntassel (2005), Monture-Angus (1999),

Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013), and several others. We will also reiterate our claim that in Canada, Indigenous scholars and knowledge(s) in the academy become necessary to the decolonising project, which reinforces the superiority and maintenance of white, western ways of knowing, thinking and being, in the Canadian academy and in the nation.

Challenging and disrupting modes of commodification and negation is key in the act of decolonising the university in the South African context. Disrupting systems that continually locate the Indigenous/Black scholar in the role of apprentice requires “re-invasion and re-settlement,” as argued by Tuck and Yang (2012, 7). However, as Nkosi (1989) also offers, in order for the white colonial settler descendent to truly embrace their African identity, they need to denounce their colonial language—constituted by culture, values and continued modes of oppression. We suggest that reinvasion and resettlement begin through embracing an African Vocabulary. However, an African Vocabulary cannot be reduced to pop-culture and hip-hop as some South African philosophers would have us believe, but is rooted in language and “modes of being and belonging” as argued by Praeg (2014, 37). An African Vocabulary as we use it here denotes a lexicon that allows the beginnings of a co-existence and co-development of Indigenous/Black and white epistemic frameworks alongside each other, by disrupting the dominance of western, Eurocentric, colonial vocabulary *as well as the meanings* (philosophical or otherwise) *attached to it*. Pursuing co-existence and co-development through an African Vocabulary is emblematic of Wiredu’s (1998, 28) suggestion which stresses that “for the time being, we in Africa have no option but to include in our projects, as a matter of urgency, a decolonizing program of pursuing the universal by way of the particular.” It is through the meaningful use and recognition of an African Vocabulary that the contemporary South African academy can begin to take seriously how Indigenous/Black ontological positions exist and make meaning of belonging and being within the university, outside of western, Eurocentric frameworks.

While South African universities might speak to African knowledge(s) as “that which *may be*,” thereby denying a space of legitimacy, in Canada, the “integration” (assimilation) of Indigenous knowledge(s) and bodies in the academy reinforces and is reinforced by the (not) “doing” of commitments to decolonisation and progress. It is through an understanding of reinvasion, resettlement and refusal that decolonisation and progress can be reconceptualised, in terms which begin to disrupt the primacy of western, Eurocentric ways of knowing, thinking and being in the world. The question of whether or not this can happen in the South African

and Canadian university contexts, given our arguments around commodification and containment, is left to be determined.

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