

Liberate our Library: doing decolonisation work at Goldsmiths Library

Marilyn Clarke

'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.'¹ – Desmond Tutu

Library work now has a role to play when it comes to decolonisation. This article outlines what Goldsmiths Library, University of London is doing, through the *Liberate our Library* initiative, to diversify and decolonise its collections and practices against the backdrop of worldwide movements for education and social justice led by both students and academics to challenge the dominance of the 'Westernised university'.²

Examples of how we are doing this work are explained using critical librarianship as our guide, whilst recognising that we are still developing expertise in this evolving field of practice. This decolonisation work also uses critical race theory (CRT) as a means to dismantle racial inequality and its impact on higher education.

Here, I would like to acknowledge the excellent and inspirational content of *ALJ*, Critical Librarianship: Special Issue (v.44, no.2) and I see this article as an ongoing companion piece.

Goldsmiths Library's liberation work endeavours to empower its users with critical thinking and study skills whilst conducting their research using hierarchical systems and resources which in themselves are in the process of being decolonised.

Decolonising a library collection and a profession must of course always begin or at least happen in tandem with the self, through a process that Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as 'decolonising the mind'.³

I choose to use the above quote by Desmond Tutu often as for me it solidifies why I do the work I do to *decolonise* the library – however one might wish to define this term. Through critical thinking, unlearning, learning and relearning, library workers are at a pivotal point where we must question what we do, why we do it, and how we must do it differently in order to disengage from the role of the oppressor and bring about social justice. It is crucial to acknowledge how 'student activism and other struggles that emerge from within institutions of higher education influence, effect and participate in wider social change'.⁴

Introduction

The university is at a critical point in time: the cry to decolonise and liberate the academy rings loud and clear across the world, from South Africa and Chile, to Québec and Palestine. Questions around knowledge production, organisation, and dissemination abound as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) grapple with the calls for social justice and change amongst its student populace, critical progressive academic and professional support staff; all often working in solidarity across the campus.

Over the last five years, students' movements from Liberate My Degree and Why Isn't My Professor Black, to Rhodes Must Fall/FeesMustFall⁵ and Goldsmiths

1. Desmond Tutu as quoted in *Unexpected News : Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) by Robert McAfee Brown, 19.

2. Cupples, J. and Grosfoguel, R. (Eds). *Unsettling Eurocentrism in the Westernized university*. (London: Routledge, 2019), 2.

3. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature*. (London: James Currey, 1986).

4. Choudry, A. and Vally, S. (Eds). *The university and social justice: struggles across the globe*. (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 4.

5. See the following for further information about the Rhodes Must Fall movement - D. Gebrial, "Rhodes Must Fall: Oxford and movements for change". In Bhabra, G. K., Gebrial, D.,

Anti-Racist Action, have been leading the vanguard in demanding social justice against the insidious effects of decades of institutional racism, based in the centuries-old tropes of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Within the grounds of the university, statues representing the faces of the Empire have been defiled and torn down, historical legacies of slavery have questioned the very foundations upon which universities were built, and efforts to decolonise the curriculum challenge and disrupt Western traditional thinking and epistemologies.

Progressive academics such as Achille Mbembe (Cameroon), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Portugal), Eve Tuck (Aleut Community, St. Paul Island, Alaska, USA), K. Wayne Yang (USA), Ramón Grosfoguel (Puerto Rica), Gurminder Bhabra (UK), and, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Aotearoa, New Zealand), to name but a few, are challenging what many of these thinkers call the 'Westernised university or institution'. They examine the impact of slavery, imperialism and colonialism on teaching practices and on the curriculum itself, seeking to decolonise the curriculum through pedagogical provocations.

So what does 'decolonisation' mean, and how do we do it? There isn't one definition, one answer or one method. For me at least, it is about unlearning what we have learned and how we have learned it. If we have learned it in the Westernised university, then we have been colonised by that way of thinking, by learning through a Eurocentric lens which relies on a Eurocentric canon. As Mbembe suggests, 'institutions must undergo a process of decolonisation, both of knowledge and of the university as an institution'.⁶ He suggests that there are two sides to the 'decolonising project'.

The first is a critique of the dominant Eurocentric academic model – the fight against what Latin Americans in particular called 'epistemic coloniality', that is, the endless production of theories that are based on European traditions.

These are produced nearly always by European or Euro-American men who are the only ones accepted as capable of reaching universality; they involve a particular anthropological knowledge, which is a process of knowing about Others – but a process that never fully understands Others as thinking and knowledge-producing subjects.

The second is an attempt at imagining what the alternative to this model could look like. This is where a lot remains to be done. Whatever the case, there is a recognition of the exhaustion of the present academic model with its origins in the universalism of the Enlightenment.⁷

Libraries are, of course, also part of the 'dominant Eurocentric academic model', engaged in maintaining 'epistemic coloniality' in its structures of knowledge acquisition (predominantly Global North), management (Dewey, LC, etc.), and discoverability (metadata, LCSH); all of which - consciously or unconsciously - are steeped in racism, prejudice, and inequalities. Along with those who teach, library workers are also engaging in decolonisation work, be that dismantling hierarchies in knowledge which use outdated classification schemes that privilege Western epistemologies, or subject headings which 'other' a person's class, gender, race, religion, and sexuality amongst other facets of identity.

Working towards social justice: establishing *Liberate our Library*

Goldsmiths sits in the South East London inner city area of New Cross. A single-site campus, it is a constituent college of the University of London, specialising in arts, design, humanities, social sciences, business and computing. It caters for around 10,000 students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. Its international student population represents over 100 countries, and 44% are from Black, Asian, Mixed or Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, including UK residents.

After a 4-month student occupation, primarily led by Muslim BAME students in the Spring of 2019 under the name of Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA), Goldsmiths launched a Racial Justice programme which encompasses many of the demands for social justice called for by the student protesters to uproot, expose, and address institutional racism. These include: appointing BAME ambassadors across all academic departments and the removal of statues from Deptford Town Hall (a university building) that have historical links to the slave trade, while openly educating staff, students and the local community about their history. Led by Dr Nicola Rollock, specialist in Race Equality and Justice,

Nişancıoğlu, K. (Eds.) *Decolonising the university*. (London, Pluto Press, 2018). And Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action Group - Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action, Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/goldsmithsanti/>. Accessed 29 June 2020.

K. Rawlinson, "Anti-racism activists end Goldsmiths occupation". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/29/anti-racism-activists-end-goldsmiths-occupation>. Accessed 29 June 2020.

6. Mbembe, A.J. "Decolonizing the university: new directions." *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 15, no.1 (2016): 33.

7. *Ibid.*, 36.



Fig. 1. Liberate our Degrees bookplate.

Goldsmiths is currently working on a number of key initiatives to address racial inequality including formulating a Racial Justice strategy, closing the degree awarding gap (currently BAME students gain fewer 'good' (1st class or 2:1) degrees than their white counterparts), mandatory all-staff Anti-Racism training, and a Racial Justice Audit examining the experiences of BAME professional and academic staff, and students. In 2018, one of London's newest art spaces, Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA) was opened, hosting exhibitions by world-renowned artists.

In Autumn 2018, the library established the *Liberate our Library Working Group* to answer to the Goldsmiths Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy's (LTAS) primary aim to 'liberate our degrees'. The working group consists of the following: Director of Library Services, Subject Team Leader, Head of Discovery Services, Digital Assets & Systems, Acquisitions, Special Collections & Archives, and Reader Services. It was also important to have the unique input of the student union (SU). To date, the library is fortunate to have the involvement of three SU officers on the Working Group: Education Officer, Welfare and Liberation Officer, and the Liberation Coordinator. By having their representation, the library can tap into the concerns of the student population whose experience of learning and teaching also relates to how they experience the library space, staff and collections. Without the direct presence of the SU sabbatical officers, the library would not fully capture the student voice, and could potentially miss their on-the-ground perspective.

The library launched the *Liberate our Library* initiative, focusing on the decolonisation and liberation of its collections and practices.



Fig. 2. Liberate our Degrees books display. Photo courtesy of Marilyn Clarke and Goldsmiths College London.

A dedicated *Liberate our Library* web page was set up with an opening mission statement, pronouncing the following:

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

We are doing this work to decolonise and diversify our collections as part of an effort to ensure the library collections speak to all voices, particularly those that are traditionally underrepresented in curricula and on reading lists. We want to work in a collaborative way with our users in identifying the subject areas that do not address their experiences and identities, and where the canon excludes them.⁸

The library is engaging in critical librarianship to view our practices and praxis through a decolonising lens in order to expose and disrupt the offensive and dehumanising aspects of some of the systems we engage in to carry out our professional duties, e.g. historical biases based in racism in Dewey Decimal Classification and Library of Congress Subject Headings. In 2018, two blogs by library staff were written in support of the decolonisation agenda. One tackled bias in Dewey, 'Bad Dewey' by Maria O'Hara, and the other was called 'Anti-neutrality' by Laura Elliott, written after a reading of Melissa Adler's 'Classification along the colour line: excavating racism in the stacks', at the inaugural meeting of the Goldsmiths Library Critical Librarianship Reading Group. Both pieces called out the racist roots in the classification of people, placing the establishment of systems in their historical context, while serving to raise the awareness of both library users and staff.⁹

At a glance: an account of the work to date

This section presents a rundown of some of the initiative's progress since 2018. It outlines how the library collection has been enhanced by and for marginalised voices, how information literacy study skills sessions are equipping students with

8. Goldsmiths Library, University of London. "Liberate our Library". Accessed 2 April 2020, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/library/about/liberate-our-library/>.

9. Goldsmiths Library Blog, University of London; "Bad Dewey" blog entry by Maria O'Hara, 4 July 2018, and "Anti-neutrality" blog entry by Laura Elliott 13 September 2018. Accessed 2 April 2020, <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/library-blog/>.

critical thinking skills, and how the library is impacting the institution and sector with this work.

- Enhanced access to digital and print collections:
 - 3290 accesses to the *Liberate our Library* web page: 50% accessed via the library website and 11% accessed from the Academic Skills Centre workshop pages
 - 229 books bought by students and staff across most departments as *liberatemydegree* suggestions from a special budget; all print books have a specially-designed bookplate (Figure 1) depicting an image of raised, protesting fists, associated with the *Liberate our Library* initiative (Figure 2).
- Dedicated *liberatemydegree* collection tag for all book suggestions: the MARC records of these have a searchable 500 *liberatemydegree* note field, making them all searchable as a collection; 316 accesses to the *liberatemydegree* collection from LibrarySearch (Primo) Figure 3. There are no strict criteria for these suggestions. The aim is to identify excluded voices and lived experiences, and Global South scholars who are underrepresented on curriculum reading lists.
- Co-organised with Birkbeck and the University of East London, and hosted 'Decolonising the Curriculum: the Library's Role Conference' on 24th January 2020 <https://decolonisethelibrary.wordpress.com/> attended by 82 people from across the UK
- Participated in the 'Decolonising Goldsmiths: Mission Impossible?' institutional event as part of Black History Month, October 2019, where Sofia Akel launched her 'Insider-Outsider: Examining the Role of Race in Shaping the Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Students' report, and where Dr Nicola Rollock was in conversation with Nels Abbey, author of *Think Like a White Man*
- Met with academic department heads or Learning and Teaching Committee Leads to discuss our decolonisation work and work collaboratively with departments – this has led to the setting up of liberation or decolonisation working groups in some departments with Subject Librarians as members (Department of Music, Department of Social Therapeutic and Community Studies)
- Held a series of ten academic skills and information literacy workshops: *Decolonising Research Methods* led by an English for Academic Purposes lecturer. These workshops cover: The Enlightenment, History, Borders, Religion, Language, Education, Gender, Capitalism, Democracy and Progress. *Resistance Researching* workshops (a set of 4 classes) led by Subject Librarians (as outlined further below)
- Created a zines collection (January 2020):

The Liberate! Zines Collection is an ongoing project and a dedicated space for recognising the intersectionality of struggles for black, POC (People of Colour), LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex and Asexual), disabled, women and otherwise institutionally oppressed groups through listening and including the voices of the most marginalised. The zines collection at Goldsmiths will support work around decolonising the curriculum.¹⁰

- Diversified reading lists using Talisplayer (flipped classroom approach) – for example, working in collaboration with a Sociology academic to create the *Decolonising the Modern World* module reading list, as part of 'liberate our degrees'.

Information literacy workshops offer a critical means of communicating our work. The Subject Librarian team established a series of *Resistance Researching* workshops 'designed to help students think more critically about how we find and why we use information from a social justice perspective.' Here is an outline of two of the series of workshops on offer. In the 'Critical Approaches to Information Gathering' workshop, the objectives are to:

- Empower participants to understand why all the books they need aren't shelved in one place, to critically assess bias in library systems, and to proactively seek multiple perspectives in information gathering.

10. Goldsmiths Library. "Liberate our Library".

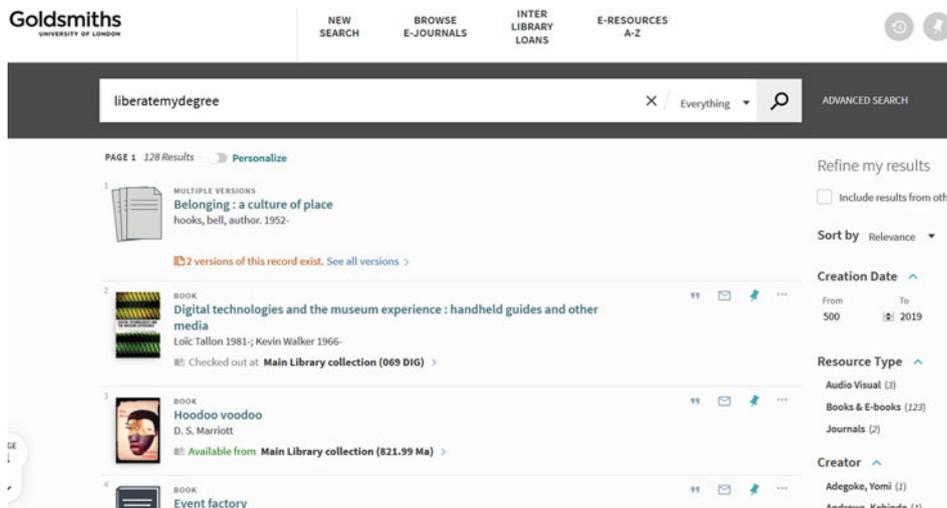


Fig. 3. Screenshot of Library Search on Primo for 'liberatemydegree'.

By:

- Examining the socio-historical construction of library classification systems in order to understand how bias is built into them.
- Identifying a range of library search tools and techniques to effectively find resources.

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

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

Doing decolonisation work in the library: going forwards with lessons learned

It must be acknowledged that the work the library team does under the term 'decolonisation' is largely driven by the individual activisms of those staff engaged in the initiative. Yes, we are working towards 'liberating degrees' and diversifying/decolonising collections, yet we are also still learning what the critical theories behind decolonisation mean and how they can be deployed on a practical level whilst recognising the socio-historical consequences of colonialism and imperialism in our praxis.

What has become clear in the process of doing this work is that it *cannot* be done in isolation from the rest of the university. It will take an institution-wide approach. The struggles for decolonisation are therefore internal and external. The core of the library's activity is the acquisition, organisation and dissemination of knowledge in the space - both physical and intellectual - of the university, so it is critical to decolonise as an institution as well. Though the work at Goldsmiths originally focused on what we could achieve as a library, it quickly became clear that the greatest and most meaningful change could only come about in collaboration with the Student Union, the academic departments and the Senior Management Team. It is through forging relationships and influence across these key sets of people that gives any credence and solidarity in doing decolonisation work; this is what we have achieved, but the journey has only just begun.

I therefore acknowledge and thank the *Liberate our Library Working Group* and the staff who are engaged in decolonisation work in solidarity across the campus at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Required reading for doing decolonisation work:

- Arday, J., Mirza, H.S. *Dismantling race in higher education: racism, whiteness and decolonising the academy*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
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Marilyn Clarke
Head of Discovery Services
Library Services
Goldsmiths, University of London
Lewisham Way
London, SE14 6NW
UK
Email: m.clarke@gold.ac.uk