Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit

INTRODUCTION

PROJECT OUTLINES

Make decolonising a part of the curriculum that all students and faculty especially in first year engage in (not just interns), opening a critical pedagogy where it is acceptable to speak from lived experience and make visible the frameworks we work/ live in.

Provide key tools applicable to every module to disseminate decolonising from something only interns do to an assessed (and therefore materially supported) opportunity which all students and faculty have. Design assessments in a way that makes space for lived experience - through archives, and autotheoretical critical reflection.
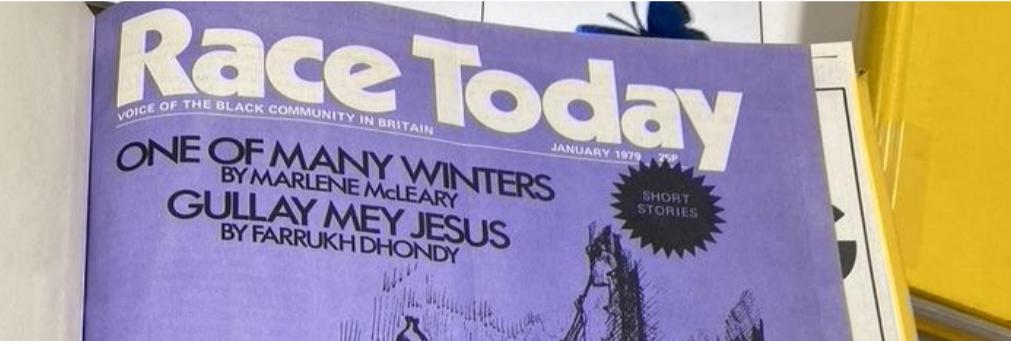

From discussing how the *hostile environment* policies impact current students to exploring the many archives Durham Holds we have been exploring the material and pedagogical changes which can help to decolonise English Literature. Assessing what other universities have already done and then considering how specifically a toolkit can be adapted for the resources Durham already has.

Case Study: Intro to the Novel
Updating the project undertaken by the 2021 intern in which she examined how far the lecture modules on the course featured a diverse Authorship.

Alongside updating these statistics, we will be altering her methodology to recognise that whilst diversity can be a key proxy for decoloniality, often in pedagogical decolonisation we might look to critical tools to aid in the decolonisation of works of literature that might not be immediately perceived as decolonial.Therefore, doing an in depth analysis of Introduction to the Novel thinks critically about whether such a seminal module has also been critically decolonised. Looking at its secondary criticism and crucially the focus of the exam questions to gauge whether the teaching has lent toward decoloniality in these novels, which are often incredibly empirical.

OBJECTIVES Decolonising reading lists is a start but it is perhaps naïve to attempt to decolonise our curriculum in isolation; we hope to include some further talking points for your seminars and to think about when trying to decolonise your module.

As Tuck and Yang assert - decolonisation is 'not a metaphor', it requires material changes and consciousness of the ways in which colonisation continues to be practices within structures.

The NCTE recommends pedagogical changes for decolonisation including:
- Diversifying materials, content and assessment (*more archival, autotheoretical, zine, podcast, journal, presentation, drama work (see Kent).*
- Teach to learning outcomes that address power and social justice (*engage the archive or form curricula about contemporary issues of colonisation i.e. reading more Palestinian literature*).
- Involve students in the creation of knowledge content and curriculum (Include critical pedagogy as part of assessed curriculum i.e. 5% end of module reflection).
- Embraced diverse language use (*dissertation on books not just written in English*).
- Involve oneself at the institutional, local, state and national levels to advocate for equality.

Overall these encourage student and faculty to think not just about what they are learning but how they are learning it and what happens with the work they produce opening questions of who gets access to resources - especially those on decolonisation. We hope that not only will reading lists continue to diversify so that we can uproot minority authors who write without a proximity to whiteness and empire. Furthermore we place an emphasis on criticism and literary theory that seeks to decolonise all texts within literature. To pivot our analytical lens to one that is principally decolonial and self aware of its own subconscious biases towards white supremacy and white normativity.

RESEARCH

CRITICAL WHITENESS

Whilst helpful to introduce more texts by authors of colour or focus on poc perspectives, however, this president risks the myth of whiteness as a-racial. In conversations about race whiteness is treated as a 'norm' and not worthy of investigation despite as structuring knowledge as noted in Kent Collective: *Towards Decolonising the University*.

Muñtoz de Luna and Adkins reminds us as educators we should introduce critical whiteness in order to dismantle its *structural* presence and move towards modes of being human after whiteness - not to reinstate its power. CWS (critical whiteness studies) should be introduced alongside CRT (critical race theory): used to bolster BIPOC voices not drown them out.
- How has whiteness as a race been ignored in the texts you have studied?
- Do you only teach race in relation to texts by people of colour?
- Do you think that it might be impossible to talk about race in your module as there are hardly any texts or characters of colour?
- Does CWS change this?

N. Mirzoeff likens whiteness to a structural position, 'white sight', where white people expect to be on the audience not the stage, obscured from view in conversations on race. Similarly N Rollock in 'What is Race Inequality and What Does It Look Like in Our Universities' cites 'Being African American in a predominantly white institution is like being an actor on stage. There are roles one has to perform, storylines one is expected to follow [...]'
- How does your module feed into rhetorics of canonicity or scripts one is supposed to perform? Can you contest these?
- How can your module confront the invisibilised dominance of whiteness in most modules at Durham?

THE IVORY TOWER

One way to understand the structural ossification of white sight and whiteness in the academy is the metaphor of education as an ivory tower: disengaged from social justice concepts and gatekeeping education behind paywalls for the privileged few.

With the current paywall to publishing systems in journals this will be a long process however, it is worth asking students and yourselves questions like:
- Who gets to read decolonial research? Is it for the most marginalised or is it so the institution can continue 'as normal' with a bit more diversity?
- What happens with student's independent research? Does it have afterlives for social justice causes (by blogs, zines, social media, showcases) or is it treated as a means to an end for assessment - what bell hooks calls the 'banking model\ of education (*Teaching to Transgress*)?
- Is there more that can be done to liberate educative resources from the 'ivory tower' model of education?

Decolonising asks us to consider how we can use our privilege within institutions to create a more equitable spread of knowledge - understanding racism as structural (Tori E. Givens) and not as 'bad apples'. The Public Humanities could be an interesting way forward for this.

Having a bigger purpose & afterlives of essays: In *Stripping the White Walls* Memon and Olugboyega writes:
'The podcast format as a pedagogical tp; needs to be and has to be inherently decolonial in nature not just in its substance but also its format, language and reflections that can subvert power hierarchies around who produces and holds knowledge.' (p 99. TDtU)

ARCHIVE ORIENTATED:

Primary texts could be chosen to resonate with the diverse archives Durham already holds creating unique opportunities for *wake work* (Christina Sharpe). It would also increase skills and diversify assessment.

Operation legacy: effacing the archive to preserve an ideological image of Britain: lacunae in history and literature due to colonisation. Bringing the real voices of the colonised and colonisers to bear onto our readings and interacting with the documents is essential, as Hall and Carby write to decolonising work.
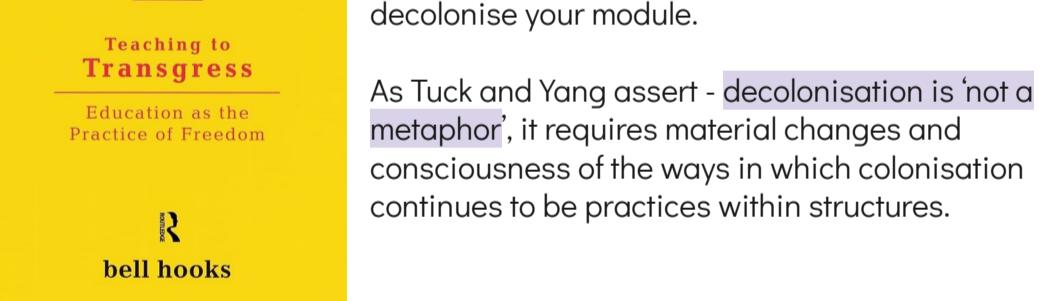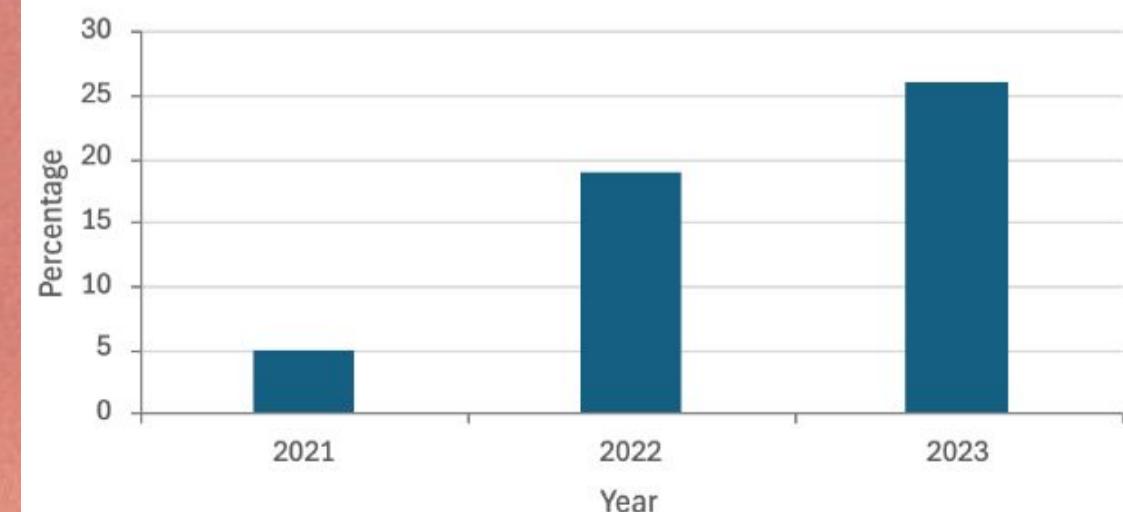
DECOLONISING THROUGH LITERATURE

CRT uses literature and linguistics to deconstruct the notion of race combining lived experience with literary analysis to autotheoretically dismantle race - this could be mirrored in opportunities for autotheoretical assessment.

Thomas Biolsi even goes as far in *Race Technologies* to call race a 'fiction' which is especially difficult to grasp because '*simultaneously [it is] the utter social constructedness of 'race (the fictional nature of race) and the social fact of race (the inescapable human consequences of race for the individual in a racist society)*'.

Key quotes:
'*Race is not a material object, a thing; it has to do not with what people are but with how they are classified. It is a practice or series of practices, a technology that calculates and assigns differences to peoples and communities and then institutionalises these differences. It is a verb not a noun. The only way to understand the complex configurations and connotations of 'race' is in the context of particular times and places. I use the word racialisation to capture the practices and processes involved in the calculations and impositions of difference, all of which have their own logic but are not eternally fixed.*' (Imperial Intimacies, Hazel V. Carby).

'*race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture, to its practices for making meaning. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation: to the losing of old meanings, and appropriation and collection and contracting of new ones, to the endless process of being constantly resignified, made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations at different moments of time*' (Race the Floating Signifier, Stuart Hall)

As Hall points out scientific conversations when talking about race can be unhelpful as it is socially constructed, writing: '*race is more like a language, than it is like the way in which we are biologically constituted.*' Therefore literature is especially useful in dismantling the fiction of race and autotheory which links theories and fictions to reality can self-reflexively unpick the racial 'logic' within our lives:
- How can you use fiction to rethink ostensibly eternal or 'common sense' categories like race? How can you link this to archives and histories (like political blackness in the UK) to challenge student's perspectives?

As students develop their theoretical ability, the texts they read can be used to deconstruct notions of race outside of the storyworld - emphasising the importance, as bell hooks writes in *Postmodern Blackness*, of applying academic-oriented approaches in a social justice manner to denaturalise concepts like race.
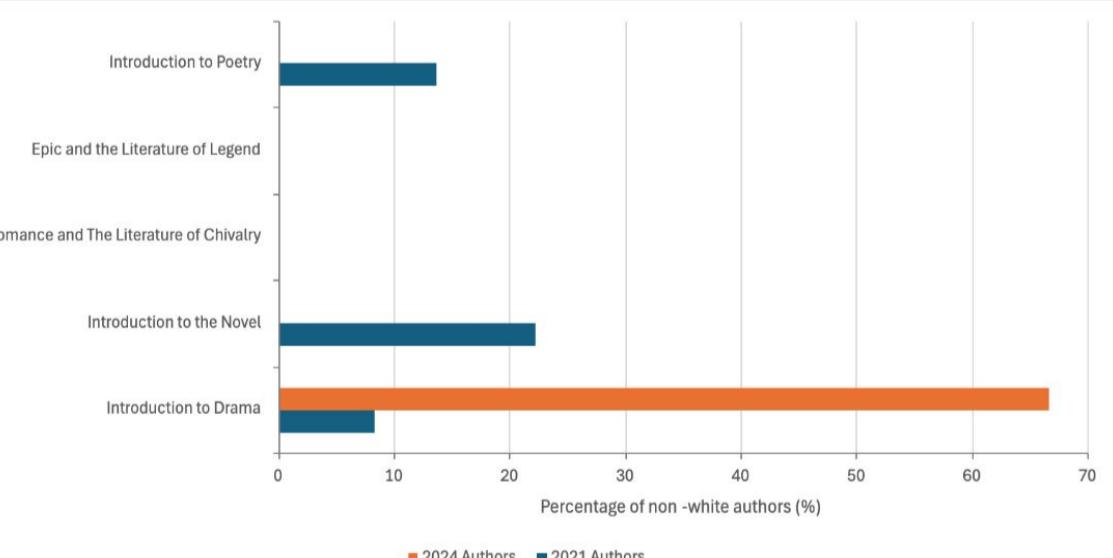
RETHINKING ASSESSMENT:

Decolonisation should be a priority in the core modules not just optional modules, and should not be limited to the more 'diverse' option choices or pushed to the end of lecture lists and seminar groups.

Ideally, faculty should have a paid amount of days to focus on and work with their students to decolonise their individual modules. This should be routinely updated. Students have asked for reading groups and a greater sense of community: these do not have to be run by academics but can be independently run by students to increase a circulation of ideas and experiences paving the way for increasingly collaborative forms of assessment used for social good. Cross pollinating seminar groups allows for independent learning, further discussion and as Ahmed Raza Memon argues in *Towards Decolonising the University* 'empowered voices in research'.

Connecting lived experience to content can allow for decolonial change within the curriculum and beyond. Students should be able to critique the frameworks they work within and speak back to the theories they learn using their lived experience 'to decolonize the classroom, one must examine oneself and one's beliefs' - NCTE

EXPECTATIONS

OUR LIVED EXPERIENCE

Olivia: Growing up in London, coming to Durham was a culture shock as was the lack of discussion about literature and academia in a social justice framework. Whilst not on the course reading, bell hooks and Mimi Khúc inspired me and made it clear that education is a powerful tool to redistribute power dynamics and rethink our assumptions about the world. Coming into this project my goal was to inject an autotheoretical critical reflection on the standpoint we come from and encourage educators to reconsider what 'a proper English degree' looks like. Before thinking about what we teach we must think of how we approach it - disseminating a critical pedagogy can hopefully make structural changes and bring attention to the unspoken assumptions about what an English course should look like and who is given authority to speak.

Chelsea: As a student of colour I wanted to study English Literature because reading books that spoke to the experiences of being a second generation immigrant and being a minority in Britain were moving; and I feel that it is so important that within the curriculum all students of colour are able to study books that speak to their experiences, as the function of literature is fundamentally representative. It was thus particularly important to me that I get involved in decolonial work. I want to be a part of something that helps students advocate for themselves and bridges communications between departments, professors and students. Speaking to my friends who are fellow students of colour, the feeling that there was a lack of understanding or thought given to these issues when collating the curriculum was shared across departments.

I am excited to be able to give recommendations to the department to aid them in critically decolonising texts that moves beyond diversity quotas; but engages with a formal criticism of the apparatuses that we uses to study literature that are ultimately impacted by Empire.

Introduction to the Novel exam paper
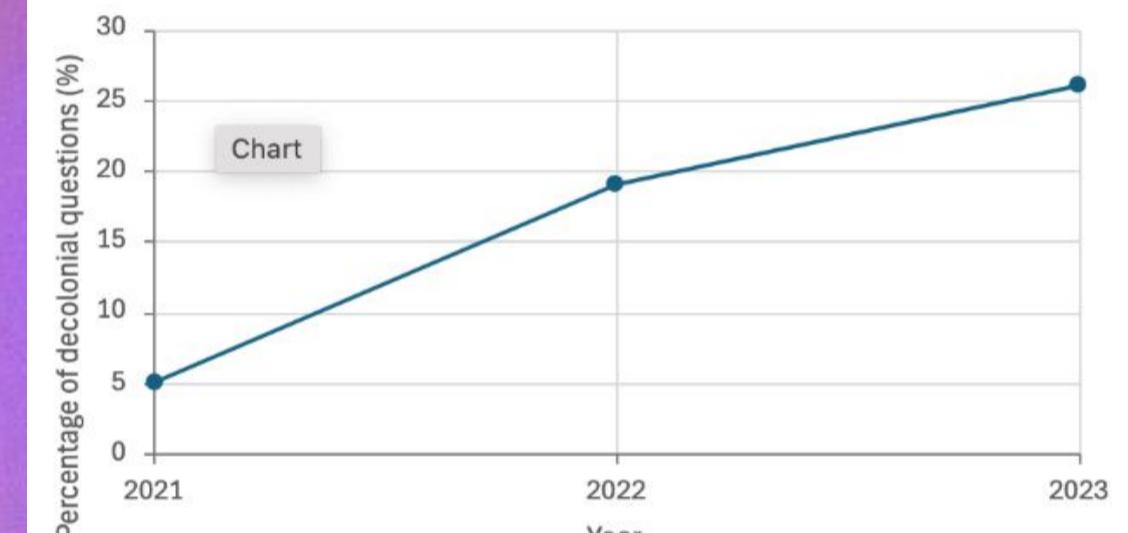
OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Addressing the reading list is key way to materially address decolonising however, it is perhaps naive to think of decolonising the curriculum in isolation from decolonising the material and social structures in Durham.

As Angela Davis famously said to be radical we must grasp things at the 'root': before we think of reading lists we should think with a disability justice and black feminist framework if students have the mental, physical capacity to do their reading. The economisation of the university, adjunctification, and the ever-increasing housing crisis in Durham are all linked to the extent to which faculty can help decolonise the curriculum.

Beyond reading lists and even the students reading them, pedagogical practices must be assessed students must be able to self-reflexively acknowledge their lived experience and the frameworks they work within.

Faculty teaching them should never have to be adjunctified and more time must be spent having conversations which relate literature to life and social justice. The paywall ivory tower model must be breached putting pressure on journals for the expensive publishing rates. The business of academia is arguably colonial - for what is the point of doing decolonial work if only predominantly white, privileged institutionally funded students get to access it. Open Access is problematic but a step forward as well as increasing dissemination of knowledge outside of the ivory tower through social media, drama, showcases, podcasts and creative collaboration.

Decolonising cannot be thought of in isolation of the material access to the university and education more broadly.

RECOMMENDATIONS
- Reconsider assessment style + content in a way that aligns with social justice afterlives
- Make decolonising the curriculum a graded (thus paid) opportunity for all faculty and students to engage in (i.e. seminar towards the end of the module to reflect upon race which counts for a part of grade)
- Introduce archival assessment, make use of the decolonial resources Durham already has!
- Advocate for structural change beyond reading lists - adjunctification, Hostile Environment Policy - or as Angela Davis says get to the 'root' of the problem - before reading lists can students and faculty feasibly handle workload - are they getting compensated for it + who gets to access this knowledge
- Consider the model of the ivory tower - how can you start to dismantle it?