Roundtable on Decolonising the Curriculum and Pedagogies

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It was urgent for us, as organisers of the second conference of the SEPC dedicated to new directions in the fields of Anglophone postcolonial and Commonwealth studies in France, to organize a roundtable on “Decolonising Curriculum and Pedagogies.” The call to pluralize and decolonise the university is no less pressing in France than elsewhere in the Global North. Given the recent witch-hunt by French members of Parliament and representatives of the government against “decolonials,” “Islamo-leftists,” and “postcolonialists,” as well as the rise of far-right intimidations and attacks on campuses, it appears crucial for us not only to take a stand, but also and perhaps even more urgently so, to articulate decolonial positions and options concerning the forms and contents of our teaching and research. The fact that the mass media have colonised the discussion and imposed its narrative has led to serious confusions about what postcolonial, decolonial, and the struggle against Islamophobia are. They maintain a degree of ignorance that is all the more dangerous as they are politically active and carry weight. The following is a transcript of the roundtable discussion on how pedagogies and curriculum are in formation and dis-formation in departments of Anglophone literatures and cultures in France. The participants included Claire Gallien (Université Montpellier 3), Jaine Chemmachery (Sorbonne Université), Fiona McCann (Université de Lille) and Sandeep Bakshi (Université Paris Cité). Alexandra Poulain (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle) curated the discussion. We have also incorporated a selection of queries and responses, arising from the discussion.

Structurally speaking, French universities are currently faced with the neo-liberal dismantling of the public university and casualisation of working conditions, the rise of fundamentalism, including secular fundamentalism, Islamophobia, discriminations of gender and race, and not only the existence of these discriminations but also the refusal to recognize them as such – a form of what I would call programmed disavowal.
In the present context of democratic crises and the ecocide provoked by modernity as a colonial project of conquest, extraction, and consumption, the forces of domination and oppression are stifling the voices which contradict, displace, and try to replace this morbid condition with alternative modes of thinking and living.

3 With every attempt at bringing structural change, a greater force and violence is deployed against dissent and dissensual thinking. In France for instance, we have been witnessing a witch-hunt from both left and right against academics voicing concern, raising awareness about, and combating the reinforcement of systemic racism and Islamophobia. The Macronist state and its supporters of the right and far-right are now targeting academics in the social sciences and humanities who are working on postcolonial, decolonial, and intersectional research and pedagogies.

4 Considered deviant, suspicious, “un-Republican,” they face constant threats of being reported. A ‘List of the 600 leftists and accomplices of radical Islam corrupting the French university’ was published on the online media Le Site (21.02.2021) and the French Higher Education Minister Frédérique Vidal has commissioned an investigation to be carried out by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique against academics suspected of “Islamo-leftism.” The CNRS has refused and responded saying the category does not hold any scientific truth and is pure propaganda. The systemic silencing has now been reinforced by the law with senators multiplying proposals of amendments to the law “for the reinforcement of the principles of the Republic,” calling for the prohibition of the practice or the expression of Islam in the universities, in sports, even in all the public space.

5 The space for critical thinking, for dissensus, for reinvention is literally besieged and it is my understanding as part of the university community that a vast majority of the staff and students consider universities as Zones à Défendre (“zones to defend”) against the attacks of neo-liberalism, and neo-colonialism. Inspired by the decolonial options offered by Walter Mignolo (“de-linking”), Arturo Escobar (“relational design”), and Stefano Harney and Fred Motten (“under-commons”), a variety of research and pedagogical practices may be invested in order to reclaim and reinvent our research and teaching spaces.

6 De-linking should not be confused with separating and Mignolo's delinking option has nothing to do with Emmanuel Macron’s “separatism” buzz-word. With an ear to the debates that have taken place in the panels preceding this roundtable, I think we still need some clarification with the terms we are using. “De-linking” is not delinking from all and everyone. In reality, decolonial studies have incessantly warned against essentialism and advocated relationality. Epistemic and artistic delinking is a pre-requisite for destituted knowledges, ontologies, and arts to be brought back to the present, not as resurrections of an “original” past but as the adaptive “returns” analysed by the anthropologist James Clifford. The objective of his book, Returns, Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century, was to detail how “many native people [...] have held on, adapting and recombining the remnants of an interrupted way of life. They reach back selectively to deeply rooted, adaptive traditions: creating new pathways in a complex postmodernity.” Delinking is necessary for re-emergence and is concomitant with relationality.

7 In other words, the point I would like to highlight in my brief reflection with you is that the university, and to talk more specifically, the French university, has become a zone à défendre, in particular in these Covid-19 times, with the acceleration of the privatization
of the higher education system, the digitalization and atomization of teaching, replacing collective learning in the classrooms, and with censorship and various projects to criminalize free thinking. An interesting shift in terms used to refer to online teaching has occurred between the first and second/third lockdowns in France. During the first confinement the term used by the government and in public media was “deteriorated” (“dégradé”) teaching, while during the second and third confinements, the two terms used are “présentiel” (in-person) and “distanciel” (remote) teaching – implicitly considering “présentiel” teaching as a mere option and presenting remote teaching as equivalent to in-person and in-situ teaching.

To be clear, reimagining the university as a zone-à-défendre is not a conservative project of returning to an idealized past. As a matter of fact, the university of the past was also a place of epistemic violence, with its own forms of social, racial, and gender discriminations, and would hardly serve as a model for the future. Reconceptualizing the university as a zone-à-défendre consists in responding to atomization with relationality, to privatization and consumption with collective spaces, to hegemonic thought with critical thinking, and thereby creating a space with inclusive and situated thinking.

In my own teaching practices, I have experimented with two methods of engaging with structures of power, first in making them visible, and second, in imagining other spaces that would be more conducive to collective critical thinking. The first was an experimentation with the lecture (cours magistral) format. Without presuming that my option should be accepted by all colleagues, I have been thinking of a design where I would feel comfortable teaching a “cours magistral” without feeling that I am reproducing relations of power that discourage all forms of interaction and collective thinking. Where the practice becomes decolonial is when the discomfort of a given teaching environment is used as a starting point for reconfiguration. Considering knowledge as transmission and as process rather than as packaged deliverable, the “cours magistral” format became problematic for me. My experimentation in re-inhabiting the space of the lecture (cours magistral) consisted in circulating a draft paper of the lesson one week in advance and setting the reading of this paper as homework. The lecture (cours magistral) session was then divided into three moments: one, a warming-up activity, based on an iconographic document related to the topic covered in class; two, a longer discussion based on the students’ feedback and their questions; and three, a summary of the take-away from both my draft paper coupled with their feedback.

I was also inspired by Arturo Escobar’s decolonial reading of design and its applicability to the university environment. A decolonial design would highlight the visible and invisible structures power has embedded in space but could also be used to rethink the way we occupy the space of the university and connect it with other spaces. In the field of the Humanities, many research and teaching projects involve partnerships with artistic and cultural scenes outside. Inside the university, redesigning space could involve reimagining ways to sit (or not to sit) in a classroom, teaching outdoors, and occupying interstitial spaces. One such experience for me was the creation of “The Decolonial, Decentring, Dissensus Reading Workshop.”

For various structural reasons, I was prevented from using existing official research channels to establish such a workshop. With other committed colleagues we designed a reading group which was cross-disciplinary, multi-lingual and open to all. The list of
decolonial texts was selected collectively at the end of each academic year and there was no participant designated for the presentation of the text. This came with certain challenges, such as taking collective responsibility for reading, and creating a space for discussion and debate which would feel safe for all participants. One objective of the workshop was to generate an awareness of relations of power, seen and unseen, and their negative impact on the elaboration of collective intelligence. This workshop was a form “redesigning” where there was an informed and purposeful attempt to practice research in other than institutionalized and marketized terms and develop alternative under-common spaces.

To be sure, these experiments did not aim to overturn the university as an institution – it would be extremely conceited, or foolish, and counter-productive to think so. Rather they aimed to preserve the Humanities and Social Sciences (and in that sense, the decolonial gesture is also a conservative one) in their most fundamental functions, namely the production of critical knowledge in a collective, integrative, and public environment and for the improvement of present and future conditions. Ultimately, as Arturo Escobar cogently reminds us, “in designing tools (objects, structures, policies, expert systems, discourses, even narratives) we are creating ways of being […] we design our world and our world designs us back.” The decolonial option in the French Humanities and Social Sciences today may not apply at the macro-level but could certainly be implemented at various micro-levels so that decolonial designs of research and teaching are experimented. If universities and faculties cannot be decolonised, critical decolonial work can still be done within these places, even interstitially; if curricula cannot be decolonised at large, still, decolonial investigations in the curriculum can be pursued, unremittingly.

Jaine Chemmachery

1. On the experience of reading some texts while being a student of colour

I remember when I first came across Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream in an academic context. I especially remember the lines describing Helena (“This princess of pure white, this sea of bliss”) and those depicting Lysander’s rejection of Hermia: “Away, you Ethiop […] Hang off, thou cat, thou burl! Vile thing, let loose, Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent” / “Out, tawny Tartar, out.”

Such terms can hardly fail to echo experiences of rejection that racialised people may have lived through or live, if not on a daily basis, yet sufficiently for this to ring a bell. I wish it was acknowledged that we, as racialised people, do not have the same lived experiences as white people, or the same reading experiences. Many years after the event, I feel I would probably have felt better, had I been told something like “this is what the beauty canon was at the time” or “there is a problematic conception of whiteness and blackness in the play that we can discuss.” These are retrospectively sentences I wish I had been told but I honestly do not remember feeling particularly upset at the time because I suppose I had interiorised the fact that this was somehow normal to find such utterances in canonical literature (?) and also because I would never have expressed discomfort before my professors at the time.

A few years ago, I happened to read The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins. The first encounter between Walter Hartright, the hero of the novel, and Marian Halcombe, one of the female protagonists, is depicted as follows: “The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window
– and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps – and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer – and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!" (Collins 24). Marian’s character is constructed as a foil to Lady Fairlie, her aptly named half-sister, who becomes the object of Hartright’s love.

As I read this, I immediately made the connection between the character being dark and her being described as “ugly.” This made me wonder why reading *Midsummer Night’s Dream* left me unaffected when I came across it in an academic context many years ago. My guess is that, just as many POC students would, I presume, I switched into my white persona at the time, silenced the critical voice in my head, and went on with my reading. Other factors can probably explain my absence of reaction at the time: not wanting to be the body that stood out – while I could not not see that I already was – not having the intellectual training to question my professors or dare de-sacralise the Bard, being already happy to be in certain (academic) places and simply wanting to “fit in.” Sara Ahmed, to whom I am so grateful for putting words on my experiences of the last twenty years or so, helped me understand that I had been navigating for years in spaces that had not been thought of for people who “looked like me.”

2. On the experience of being an academic of colour in France

As a tenured academic in France, I have had students tell me how difficult it is for them to speak in class8 – they happened to be female and/or racialised students and I am not sure this is accidental.9 Seeing how complicated it can still be for me to speak in certain academic contexts while I have been trained to do this for more than fifteen years now, I can only imagine how it must feel for these students – because I remember how it felt and still does. One can learn a few lessons from what one’s body remembers, i.e. from experiential knowledge. How can I not recognise in some of my female and/or racialised students my own position, past and present, as an observer in the room? How can I teach and do my research when I have been and keep being reminded, if only by the architecture of la Sorbonne, that this institution had not been thought of for people who look like me, in terms of gender and race? For instance, whose statues are visible, which names appear on the rooms at the library? Such names remind me that I do not completely belong here, whatever my knowledge and skills might be. I am inclined to think that if as a tenured senior lecturer, I still feel as I do, i.e. as an occasional outsider, some of my students may experience similar feelings and thoughts.

Reflecting upon the relation between teaching and activism and the difficulty of approaching some topics in class, I find it interesting that I have been afraid of being labelled as the likes of “islamo-leftist” or “separatist” even before this became a thing in the French media and public space 2020 onwards. We are all exposed to this when we are working on postcolonialism or intersectionality in France but to paraphrase George Orwell, some are more likely to be, or feel, under suspicion than others. I remember a few years ago teaching *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid while a white colleague of mine did as well. I remember feeling uncomfortable because I was afraid that my students or the administration might think that I sided with terrorists and took extra care when preparing my class. In the end, everything turned out rather well (we also need to trust our students!). Maybe I was simply paranoid, and as Sara Ahmed has argued, racism does make people paranoid, but a few months ago, I heard Sandeep Bakshi speak in a seminar of gendered academia of colour and say that as a queer academic of colour, he knew that he had no right to make any mistake10 for fear of
being invalidated by his students. I could not help feeling reassured that another scholar of colour should experience similar feelings as mine but I was also perplexed by the fact that we clearly do not all relate to our work environment in similar fashion – some are (made) more insecure than others. About teaching and activism again, I often wonder if wanting equality between men and women and between all students is a form of activism or whether this should simply not be at the core of our work as educators and researchers. I cannot help being surprised (or actually, unsurprised) at how activism is framed in the media as being concomitant with the left – the compound term “islamo-gauchisme” in French shows this well – as if right-wing (or extreme-right wing) activism did not exist. Are wanting to preserve the status quo, claiming the neutrality of research (when researchers are no ethereal minds but speak from situated positionalities) and refusing to question syllabi not also forms of activism? As several scholars such as Mame Fatou Niang and Sarah Bracke have argued, the university is neither neutral nor an objective space; it is a site of power relations and a site of struggle between ideologies. The space of the classroom is not neutral either. Is acknowledging this being an activist?

I also fear tokenism. As a person minoritised in terms of gender and race, I often wonder whether I was hired for my CV and competences and/or not to literally add colour to the institution. As could be expected, I was quickly asked to work for the DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) service of my university. I initially (and idealistically) thought that such a hire could lead to structural change in the institution. I still feel that my experiential knowledge of being located on the margins – as a woman and as a racialised person – makes me particularly aware of some of the difficulties likely to be experienced by fellow colleagues and students, even if, of course, I would never claim to have comprehensive knowledge of these issues. It is only a matter of seeing things from a different angle - the minoritised position. I am also under the impression that I need to tackle these questions because I am not sure that all my colleagues – and I am saying this without any malice at all – can see what can be problematic at university: people’s behaviour being conditioned by (unconscious or conscious) bias towards certain minoritised people, the fact that despite university being “open to all,” the mastery of tacit codes favours some over those who have not been taught them, and also what a colleague of mine recently called “the whitening process” which occurs between first-year classes and Masters seminars in terms of student population. Even though I truly appreciate working with my colleagues at the “mission égalité,” I now feel that the task is immense, the way to go particularly long and sinuous, and I regularly experience fatigue when I see how such reflections about institutional change are often led on an individual basis while they should be assumed collectively. But for this to happen, there needs to be a shared desire to make the university a true site of inclusivity and social justice.

I do not want to be the only one that deals with these questions at university but I also feel that my experiential knowledge of being located on the margins – as a woman and as a racialised person – makes me aware of some of the difficulties experienced by fellow colleagues and students, even if, of course, I would not claim to have comprehensive knowledge on these issues. It is just a question of seeing things from a different angle. Still, I feel I need to tackle these questions because I am not sure that all colleagues – and I am saying this without any malice – can see what can be problematic at university. Being located in this liminal space, as a racialised person working in a university in the global North at a time when neo-liberal policies are
implemented at university and competition between global universities is strongly encouraged, I am also aware of my situation as a complicit beneficiary.

3. On decolonial pedagogies and syllabi

I have encountered enthusiasm rather than resistance from students in regard to decolonial pedagogies and I tend to discuss such pedagogies with colleagues who are open to these practices. I hope to reach out to a greater number of people in the coming years. One particularity of the French academic system is that we are very much attached to certain tasks, like the dissertation (or long essay). Such tasks require us to teach our students specific methodologies. As a result, decolonial praxis may be pedagogically experimented in classes with a looser frame and fewer constraints such as elective courses. In my experience, decolonial pedagogical practices – having roundtables rather than traditional single presentations, giving assignments such as class diaries instead of more classical ones – resulted in my students being more willing to engage in class debates but also in the creation of a more horizontal frame for class discussions, without mentioning the fact that some of the best reflexive and analytical tasks I have come across over the last few years resulted from students being offered a different frame to work and experiment with. Students also tended to draw more connections between our literary objects of study and the world outside the classroom. Breaking the verticality of the classroom is a means to create a more inclusive space and, I hope, will disrupt some of the lines of power that can otherwise be noticed.

On a higher level, decolonising the classroom would really mean questioning our methodologies and syllabi (not just by peppering traditional syllabi with “diverse” works but making the former really inclusive so that we could all relate to other imaginaries than the ones we have done for ages12), but also what is generally considered to be knowledge in academia.13 French academia may be decolonised when the teaching staff is less homogeneous, when it is no longer rare to have a scholar of colour in Shakespeare studies or in 18th century literature, when our syllabi are more inclusive, when all our students tell us that they feel more comfortable at university – and for this to happen, difficult discussions need to take place in the classroom and “problematic” works, as well as seemingly unproblematic works, need to still be contextualised and studied. A way towards decolonisation would also be for all to accept to have open discussions about the historical context in which English departments were established and about the remnants of this legacy nowadays. I am not sure decolonising university is even possible; still, we can always try to make it better. Is the point of university to foster social reproduction or to have our students think critically?

Fiona McCann

Like many of us, I have been feeling overwhelmed for some time by mixed feelings about the point of teaching and doing research in Anglophone literature in the face of total climate catastrophe. Part of this stems from feelings of powerlessness as we witness all manner of environmental disaster and destruction of biodiversity as the Capitalist death machine, in its neo-imperialist uniform, marches us all along the road to extinction. Because of these interrogations, I enrolled, and was accepted, into a diploma on “university pedagogy” offered by my university (the Université de Lille in the north of France) for the academic year 2020-2021, an experience which confirmed my worst suspicions about the ways in which certain vacuous “pedagogical innovations” are being encouraged as part of a neo-liberal repackaging of university
courses. Pedagogy, as far as this diploma was concerned, was not about developing critical thinking, and it was certainly not about developing a teaching philosophy of any sort, but rather about making sure that students are streamlined and skilled up in areas compatible with the requirements of employers and “the professional world”, whatever that is. Yet as Carol A. Taylor suggests, a “pedagogic event is not one but many. It is a multiplicity of iterations, it does not sit still, and it keeps making connections, albeit that these may be minor, unbidden and unknown” (Taylor, 93). These “minor, unbidden and unknown” connections cannot always be quantified, or evaluated, and not just because they are not time-limited to twelve-week blocks. What about affective connections – where do they fit in? Affect and emotion have no place in these discourses and practices, and neither do the importance of situated knowledges.

Struggling with these feelings of futility which were then exacerbated by this diploma, I nevertheless realized that the meaning I find in my teaching and in the exchanges with students is precisely what is important. A number of years ago it became clear to me that in order to make sense of my teaching and my research, in order to make them truly meaningful, by which I do not mean utilitarian but rather contributing in some small way to social justice and social transformation, then I needed to rethink “the terms of the conversations” (Mignolo and Walsh) I was having within the academy. As a scholar in postcolonial literatures often having to fight to make space for the study of texts which are neither British nor US literature, I have always worked hard to propose alternative textual content to students, but even there, there was much room for improvement. This is because it is not just primary sources that need diversifying – the same is true of theory and secondary sources. Following Arielle Azoulay (2019), I strive to move towards “potential history” which involves “unlearning imperialism” and embracing “epistemologies of the South” (de Sousa Santos), so as to listen to and learn from non-Western epistemologies and ontologies.

Informed then by my reading of the inspirational bell hooks (Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom [1994], Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope [2003] and Teaching Critical Thinking. Practical Wisdom [2010]), that of decolonial thinkers such as Aníbal Quijano (2007), Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), Françoise Vergès (2019), and that of Joan Tronto (1993) and others on an ethics of care, I began to think about how I could transform my pedagogical practices so as to render my teaching more horizontal and engage with my students in a co-construction of knowledge which relies upon a collaborative approach and which makes considerable space for non-European epistemologies and ontologies.

Philosophies of care, which have become increasingly important to me, like decolonial thinking, do not constitute so much a theory, as an approach, and are based on praxis. The ways in which personal, political, historical and social strands interweave each day and expose our vulnerability as humans is central to care thinking and practices. This vulnerability is particularly present in the classroom, for teachers and students alike, especially if teachers also accept to see themselves as learners in a reciprocal (and less vertical) relationship. The kind of vertical organization of global society which has got us into this climate catastrophe needs to give way to a more horizontal approach and surely the classroom is the place to begin.

Decolonial pedagogies call for what Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo call “epistemic disobedience” (2018) which I would see unfolding in the following ways: breaking the teacher-student hierarchy, decolonising our syllabi, radically rethinking
what should be evaluated, and why and how, focusing on exposing the fallacy of
universality that brought us colonial/modernity, and following Édouard Glissant,
actively striving towards a “pluriversity” (Mignolo and Walsh), which is necessarily
uncomfortable. The gatekeeping of sub-disciplines (in France, literature, the absurdly
named “civilization,” linguistics, translation, etc.), the worship of teaching “concours”
(another French specificity) which have little to do with pedagogy, the unique prism of
Eurocentrism, are all killing our faculty, by which I mean our university departments
and our ability to bring our students to produce their own knowledge.

28 So, I have been experimenting with new (for me) practices which involve a horizontal
approach in which all parties are in a reciprocal relationship, including the teacher:
flipped classrooms, problem-based learning, group projects and so on. But of course,
our pedagogical practices cannot be dissociated from the forms of assessment we use,
and it is particularly in this arena that we can make space for greater epistemic
disobedience, intertwining decolonial and care practices.

29 In terms of evaluation, I have experimented very successfully with creative writing,
queer performances, and a course journal which I asked students in one undergraduate
class to keep all semester long in which they made a weekly entry, as personal as they
liked and in whatever form they liked, on the issues and reading broached in class that
week. This yielded some very interesting results: a healthy mix of personal and political
reflections, some fantastic artwork, and in one case a really fabulous comic, all done by
hand, in another, a full blog beautifully and professionally presented. This was a class
on transnational feminisms in literature and the arts but in these diaries the students
linked feminisms (always in the plural) to war and the military, sexualities,
colonisation, mainstream media and its inadequacies, cinema and television, the visual
arts, pinkwashing, trans questions, reproductive rights, indigeneity, and ecology. They
were undisciplining disciplines, and they were doing it without me. I merely facilitated
the critical thinking by providing prompts and reading.

30 I am only at the beginning of this new learning curve and I still have a lot to learn, but I
will do so by both reading and experimenting and, more importantly, by making space
for affective engagements in the classroom. I may still be terrified at the state the
planet is in because of some humans’ behaviour, but I can also feel invigorated by the
ways in which our students are courageously making their own situated knowledge and
are embracing decolonial approaches to history and literature as necessary means of
understanding the current situation. In other words, I have rediscovered hope.

Sandeep Bakshi

31 Allow me to begin with a citation: “The change of epoch requires change to the terms
of the conversation. Changing the content is important but not enough” (Mignolo 2020).

32 The terms “decolonial” and “decolonising,” akin to Stuart Hall’s assessment of the term
“postcolonial,” have currently “become the bearer of such powerful unconscious
investments – a sign of desire for some, and equally for others, a signifier of danger”
Exemplifying Hall’s formulation, and as the tweets above evince, recent investments in the terminology of decolonial studies broadly conceived often obtusely attach to
trivialisation of meaning figuring perceived threats (tweet 1) alongside careful considerations of genealogies of work in the field (tweet 2). The opposition to the “decolonising the curriculum” movement (tweet 1) has not only not been apropos but has virulently scapegoated conceptualisations (tweet 2) to trivialise the topic of curriculum revamp. Not all teaching staff inhabit the leftist political arc in the universities and, as a “signifier of danger” the mobilisation, both in favour and oppositional, generates contradictory, if multiple, meanings. Given the proliferation of high-emotion charged debates in academia and extraneous to it, deploying strategies to decolnise curriculums or reflect upon decolonial pedagogy necessitates dispelling myths and misnomers that have emerged as the characteristic outcome of ongoing discussions. At the outset it makes sense to iterate that the university is not the unique site of knowledge production. The western university and the academic disciplines it birthed are subject to processes of eurocentric self-referentiality, suppressing forms of knowledge-making that do not cohere to these processes. In sum, what universities do is to validate knowledge in a sense that knowledge-making which does not constitutively participate in discursive systems of validation remains peripheral to knowledge itself. Epistemicide or the erasure of knowledge systems has a critical genealogy coterminous with colonialism and invasion, and universities reproduce the violence of epistemicide through an enactment of canon and its attendant peripheralisation.  

Following from Mignolo’s call to radically envision new terms of the conversation (2021), it behoves us to emphasise that cosmetic addition of non-euroamerican authors – the enactment of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in literary studies – does not comprise decolonising the curriculum of literary studies in the Global North universities. Decolonising the study of literature does not imply a quick and random inclusion of texts from other parts of the world notably from the formerly colonised nations. It signals instead a rigorous critique of existing eurocentric categories of knowledge formation coupled with compelling accounts of non-canonical authors of literature without eliding critical questions of privilege in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and social capital among others. In this regard, decolonising literary studies does not necessarily eschew the idea of representation of diversity but adjusts and accommodates the notion as simply one part of the labour. In terms of representation, I concur with Sylvia Wynter’s assessment of Frantz Fanon analysing “systemically negative representation” of Black communities and people of colour cultures and literatures by extension (268). The labour of decolonisation in this case does not cohere to the process of removing all representation or politics of representation/self-representation.

It is an impossible enterprise to task ourselves with decolonising literary studies without first attending to its formation in history and how the coloniality of curriculum emerged in the first place. The formal canonisation of English literary studies, as postcolonial scholars such as Ania Loomba and Gauri Viswanathan have observed, emerged alongside the history of colonisation through enactment of not just epistemic erasure but epistemicide. A return to the formation of canon is not an endeavour to seek postcolonial revenge, it is to place the canon in its historical perspective. In order to enact epistemic decolonisation we need to embrace a journey that Ngugi terms “a quest for relevance” (1981, 87). This quest for relevance, as he suggests, is the search for “a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves
clearly in relation to ourselves and to other selves in the universe” (87). Seeing the
other selves, in terms of the literary canon and canon making especially in literary
studies, demands a nuanced approach to reflect upon the historical conjunction of
colonial politics and canon consolidation as one explanatory instance of exclusions.

Formal canonisation of English literature as a discipline was coeval with the demands
of colonial administration to produce a canon of English literature for the British
Indian civil service whereby “English literature was instituted as a formal discipline in
London and Oxford only after the Indian Civil Service examination began to include a
1000-mark paper in it” (Loomba, 85). English literature became therefore a tool of
disciplinary power.

If we can provide evidence that there is nothing natural about the canon and that it
depended on discursive realisation of European colonialism – what we consider as
colonising the mind, i.e., the cognitive realm – then we begin the labour of
“decolonising.” One of the instances replicated across the globe was the imposition by
violence both physical and epistemic through wiping out literary cultures. This
historical moment was Lord Macaulay’s whimsical, sole person, unevindenced,
canonisation of Western literature. On 2nd February 1835, Macaulay delivered the
Minute on Education in India to the Parliament. He proposed the language of instruction
as English for India, which was later implemented with the discontinuation of Arabic,
Sanskrit and Persian as languages of instruction. The imposition paralleled the
destruction of local cultures, as Macaulay would, in his words, “at once stop the
printing of Arabic and Sanscrit books. I would abolish the Madrasa and the Sanscrit
College at Calcutta” so that Indians would learn the “poetry of Milton, the metaphysics
of Locke, and the physics of Newton” (section 2). We can see why the canon has been
naturalised since this contest for superiority in canon establishment does not begin
today and operates as coloniality of canon and the violence of canon-making that does
not simply work to erase knowledges but enacts an epistemicide. Such a move, in
addition, serves as an example of mis-appreciation (without knowledge of languages in
the case of Macaulay) of non-western literatures. Oyeronke Oyewumi alerts us to the
application of gender and its mistranslation from and to English in the Yoruba context.
In the field of literature Steve Chimombo also dismisses the application / imposition of
foreign aesthetic systems that “distort” Malawian oral literature and which originate in
“misunderstanding, misinformation and misinterpretation” (15).

A word on the postcolonial canon. It inevitably refuses to engage with translations
from other knowledge systems. Whilst Homer, Virgil or Sophocles, or the Bible – not
written in English as Ngugi reminds us in his memoir – operate as archival reference
for English or French literatures, teaching practices for non-western authors included
in the postcolonial canon tediously compare them to eurocentric formations of
knowledges. Critical genealogies, for instance of entrenched caste hierarchy in the case
of Arundhati Roy’s work or oral traditions in Chinua Achebe’s writings, in languages
other than English, receive scant engagement in literary critiques and teaching.

A carefully inflected turn from the what to the how of syllabus pedagogy will enable
literary scholars to undertake the task of not merely gesturing towards diversifying the
curriculum but effectuating decolonising the praxes associated with it. For instance,
addressing Shakespeare’s oeuvre occasions making pathways into texts of similar but
critical themes, so that Shakespeare’s meta-canonical status is called into question.
Relentlessly reading The Tempest (1611) in a critically analogous frame with the first
extant slave-memoir of Olaudah Equiano (1789) redresses the erasure of literary figures deemed minor(-ity) authors in canonical consideration. Similar instances of parallel examination have indeed developed in several literary syllabi across universities offering a co-reading of Jane Eyre (1847) and Wide Sargasso Sea (1966). However, it tasks literary curricula to render such an analytic of critical re-writing an integral part of pedagogies of teaching and researching, without which the “meaning(fulness)” of literature remains elusive. In other words, defying inclusion, our pedagogies of decolonising must gesture towards a decalcification of the canon to concatenate authors and themes together in a critical bind.

In terms of epistemological redress, Fanon’s conceptualisation of “decolonisation” as the veritable creation of new humanity would appear apposite. As he remarks, decolonisation “influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally” (p. 35). This modification in studies of English literature operates only when English is considered as one language among others. How other literary cultures have afforded transformations, both through representation of literary texts written in English by formerly colonised populations from Asia, Africa and the world, but also through an honest engagement with literatures in English becomes central to its concerns. All of us read Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Paulo Freire in postcolonial and decolonial studies which are part of English departments across the globe, so why do we want to consider literatures in other languages as not belonging to English departments.

Practices of incorporating valuable archives in the study of literatures do not operate as an uncritical call to authenticity (of “other” cultures); they allow referential access to knowledge systems that offer other ways of being and knowing in the world instead. In the literary field, engagement with Arundhati Roy’s fiction, for instance, necessitates addressing established archives of caste and hijras in languages and language systems other than English.

The labour of chutneyfication of language, a term Salman Rushdie deploys, functions only when there are words sparsely ornamenting English language. Rushdie or Roy as representing literatures of say India or South Asia, remain accessible through English. The caste system articulated in the fiction of Roy becomes ever more poignant if we read say Baby Kamble or Bama’s writings. However, what I’m suggesting is a total overhaul, Fanon’s fundamental modification, where excellent quality translation from other languages will make its way into literary studies in English in a more democratic manner than with the sole inclusion of Greek and Latin classics. English literature, in this regard, will gradually concatenate into global humanities, not world literatures or even literary studies. And not a few of us would delight at the demise of periodisation sutured to English history.

One other proposition is to undo the intellectual tradition always in direct reference to western thinking, and, almost always fixing the locus to the Euro-American academy, what, Linda Tuhiwai terms “the inherent dominance of Western knowledge” (100). For instance, when there’s inclusion of the non-western non-imperial language literary text, the educator must render the processes of exclusion intelligible. This is of course borrowed from the theorising of the decolonial option in opposition to coercing knowledges into a totality of experience that eschews pluri-dimensional perspectives. In the literary field, the decolonial option would enable a multiplication of co-imbricating texts, contexts, narratives, and histories in a cognate field of interpretations.
The move to decolonise literary syllabi considers the critical question of how a work of literature is produced and how we consider it as partaking in a specific reading list. In other words, it pivots on decolonising our methodology of relating to and teaching literature. It has the potential to delink the now untenable attachment of the Global North with knowledge and that of the global South with culture and cultural practices. Perhaps, the shift to decolonise literary canons enacts an epistemic reconstitution informed by a refusal to allow a singular hegemonic centre.

Alexandra Poulain

Thanks very much Sandeep for this extremely interesting talk and very specific proposals. And thanks again to all four speakers. I’m struck by the recurrence of the notion of violence in your four talks, the way in which all of you testified to your experience of violence in the university, or perhaps perpetrated by the university. On a more hopeful note, I don’t think in France this conversation would have happened ten years ago, or even maybe five years ago – so that I do think we are creating alternative spaces within the university to push for a different agenda. Let me kick things off by asking you how you conceive of the relationship between teaching and activism in your own practices.

Fiona McCann

I would say they are coterminous. I think teaching is activism. And I make no apologies for the kind of teaching that I do, which involves taking a political stand. There is plenty of space for all the other, more traditional forms of teaching; it’s the majority, right? As I have said, I have been thinking about the point of it all – you know, the world is falling apart around us. We are heading for total climate catastrophe. But the answer is teaching. And obviously, if we want to do quality teaching, this requires research. Teaching, activism and research are mutually implicated. So yes, I absolutely think that teaching is a form of activism, awakening critical thinking, and importantly, encouraging students to actually disagree with us, not to blindly follow what we have to say. For instance, this year I suggested to my students that they write a course journal where there is no wrong or right answer. It’s a space in which they can completely take issue, and some of them did, with some of the things that we talked about in the course. Some felt that I went too far and that the things that I had to say were perhaps a bit too virulent, maybe I could roll back a bit. I think that it is brilliant that they’re saying this. So yes, long story short, teaching and activism absolutely go hand in hand.

Jaine Chemmachery

Thank you very much Fiona for saying this. I actually gave a short presentation in my new research centre last week, and I was asking myself the question, “Is it possible to do what I’m doing, that is to say, teaching and doing research, without being militant about it?” And my conclusion was that we are looking at objects that are themselves political, and here, I am referring to what Ari Gautier said earlier today, that his literature is political, and that basically, we have to deal with it and accept the fact. I guess, some research and some teaching have to be political as well. And the other thing that it made me think of is that I know how some scholars of colour, especially in France, have been criticized for being too personal about their research, not theoretical enough, or simply for being too close to their objects of study. It is interesting how this question never seems to be an issue for scholars who are not people of colour.
Claire Gallien

Just a small addition to what has just been said, and I really relate to it. I just want to say that the political is everywhere. And I don’t believe that I’m the one doing political activism out there or (and this is really terrible because it’s what we hear all the time) that I am the person who is disrupting everything and bringing the political into the classroom. What I say to them is, what you are doing is political too, maintaining the system as it is, that is political too. So, I’m cautious with that category of who is political and who isn’t.

Sandeep Bakshi

I have a relatively different experience in France from when I was in the UK, because nobody actually challenged the politics there. But in France, when we are a little bit politically inclined in our teaching, then other colleagues call us out. I mean, I was hired to do both postcolonial and queer literature, and I can’t touch politics? Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar showed the interimplication of literature and politics as early as the 1970s; they wrote about literature as an ideological form. So that’s a very odd kind of energy whereby French scholars have not even assimilated what Balibar and Macherey laid out in the 1970s. The thing with activism, now, I have started thinking about the academic/activist binary, and I’ve straddled it for a long time. But I’ve stepped back from it. Because I think what I am doing with an academic job is rather different from what grassroots organizers are doing. And so, I think of myself currently as someone working on activism scholarship, and not self-labelling as activist. In fact, I’ve never called myself an activist. But when that moniker arises, I make it a point to tell people that activists live in a very different world and sit at the crossroads of organisation and mobilisation. They stick their necks out in the line of fire, basically, and don’t get paid for it. Whereas when I give academic talks or attend conferences, I still have my job. And I get paid at the end of the month. Therefore, whilst I totally understand teaching as activism, I would rather include my teaching within the frame of “teaching” activism scholarship.

Cédric Courtois (CECILLE – Université de Lille)

I would like to respond to what Fiona said about the relationship with university institutions. As a member of the CAPES jury [like the Agrégation, a national examination for secondary school teachers in France], I also find that when I’m pushing for postcolonial texts, or decolonial texts, there is a lot of resistance on the part of the head of the jury, and I find this a bit disturbing. Also, I teach an M1 LEA class in Lille called “the decolonial option,” and the students seem to like it, but I am facing my own contradictions. Because I wanted to decolonise the curriculum, but maybe also methodologies. But at the end of the day, unlike you Fiona, I asked them to write an essay with an introduction, a clear thesis statement in three parts and a conclusion and a bibliography, which is something that is institutional in France. Because I’m not sure what you can do when the institution asks you to give a mark at the end of the semester. But I also ask myself, what can we do for the CAPES and the Agrégation students? Most of them will teach in secondary schools. I see that most jury members at the CAPES are reluctant to give topics relating to Australian or Nigerian literature, for instance, because they didn’t study this at university, and they would feel more comfortable with Shakespeare.
Fiona McCann

I have two really quick answers. One is that if it were up to me, I would rethink the forms of the concours [the teachers' qualifications of CAPES and Agrégation, which are based on competitive exams] completely because I think that I have never seen a system so ill-adapted to the profession of teaching as either of those concours, even though the CAPES ostensibly has a little bit of reflection on not so much pedagogy as didactics. Although I do understand the necessity for a national exam where everybody is evaluated in the same way, on the same terms, it seems to me that we could do so much better. Particularly perhaps for the agrégation which is currently over-reliant on the form and the codes and not enough on developing critical thinking. I don't think that being able to reproduce a form makes one particularly intelligent or more or less intelligent than anybody else. I certainly don't think it equips you to teach in any shape or form. That’s another debate. And secondly, in terms of marking, yes Cedric, that has been a real issue for me when putting in place this kind of movement towards a decolonial pedagogy. Marking is a real difficulty. But as long as the students handed in the work, they validated the seminar. So with one entry per week, and there was no word limit, I considered that they had done the job. The question and the difficulty then was how do you evaluate between 10 and 20. And so, I went all French and had a marking scheme, but one which I worked on with the students and on which we collaborated together so as to come up with the fairest criteria. Actually, there wasn't much pushback from them in the end. Ideally, they would have had more to say about the marking scheme. But they can only really do that, I think, after years of other people doing that with them. And then after a while, it becomes normal to elaborate the marking scheme with the facilitator, which is how I saw myself: not as a teacher, but as a facilitator. And the last thing I want to say is that I also explained to them, in order to decenter my role as teacher, and to break up the hierarchy between the teacher and the student, that we are all on a learning curve all the time. And just because I am teaching the seminar doesn’t mean that I’m better or smarter, or it doesn’t even mean that I’ve got more knowledge. I mean, I have a little bit more knowledge in the things that I’m teaching, luckily, obviously. But I’m on a learning curve, too. And I’m learning different things from them. And I’m learning things about teaching. Everybody is a learner in that environment. The supreme irony is one of the learners gets to mark everybody else, right? And that’s not fair. I haven’t managed to get to the end of that yet. Perhaps forms of self-evaluation is something that I’d like to experiment more with next year. But in the end, I will still have to come along after, you know, and see whether I agree with these evaluations. It’s all very complex.

Jaine Chemmachery

The issue of assessment is very problematic, because, of course, we are constrained by many things. From L1 (BA 1st Year) to Masters students, we are expected to teach them how to write a proper dissertation in France, with a problem statement, three parts ideally divided into three subparts, etc. So, I guess, as long as we don’t have other spaces where we can assess students differently, there is no real solution. This is also why I think it is very important to imagine other spaces where we could work differently, like workshops maybe, where things aren’t so focused on assessment.

Alexandra Poulain

Can I jump in at this stage? I see that Fiona has written in the chat, “in an ideal world, we would not need to grade the students at all” and I agree, but since we’re not in an
ideal world, the way I’ve been experimenting with those things is that I try to turn the assessment process into an opportunity for the students to produce their own knowledge. Basically, I tell them to respond to the seminar in whatever way they want to, as long as they engage with the course, academically or creatively or both. And so of course, the question is, how do you grade this sort of work? And I don’t have a perfect solution. But I think that twisting around the idea of assessment and turning it into something different, something actually meaningful and exciting for the students, is part of the answer.

Emilie Souyri (LIRCES – Université Côte d’Azur)

What jumps to my mind when we discuss pedagogy in the context of an anticolonial approach is Freire’s approach in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed. And this also connects to what has been said about decolonising. One of his first steps, I think, is implementing what we’ve been discussing theoretically in our pedagogical practices. What is really important is that we understand our positions in a different way, in a way that challenges traditional ways of thinking authority and as Fiona pointed out, we need also to be ready to learn from the students and learn from what they want to discuss. So, co-creating the syllabus with them, I think, is one way of challenging our position of power and thinking of new forms of approaching this whole problem – and understanding, also, that all forms of pedagogy are political. Grading is political because it reasserts our position of power upon the students. Involving them in grading is one way of improving the situation in which we are. But there are many things that we need to discuss, I think we need also to dare to speak with our “ingénieurs pédagogiques,” who very often have no theoretical notions about what we’re discussing in relation to decolonisation, or critical race theory, and so on and so forth; but they do have concrete ways that can help us once we have determined what our theoretical position is. I think there is a terrible lack of dialogue between those two approaches. As people who have time to read, we don’t take enough time thinking about how to translate this into our teaching practice. And the people who are reflecting on teaching practices, don’t take the time or don’t have the time to actually digest this very important and daunting corpus of texts that we have the time to deal with. So, if you haven’t had the opportunity to read Paulo Freire, I recommend, of course, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, but also Pedagogy of Hope. And, especially in the US, there have been developments in critical pedagogy that are extremely fruitful to implement in our practices. Thank you.

Manon Boukhroufa Trijaud (VALE - Sorbonne Université)

I would like to return to what Sandeep said about the distinction that he makes between academic activists and activists. I agree that everything is political, and I give myself a certain leeway in the classes to give my opinion or to do some things that can be political. But I would like to stress that there are also many things that I do not say in the classroom, things that I believe are way beyond what I am supposed to say as a teacher, regardless of what I think as an individual. And this is why I would like to emphasize what Sandeep said about the difference between being engaged in one’s work and awakening the students to critical thinking, and being a political activist, which is a collective experience of struggle and very different from what we are doing individually.
Sandeep Bakshi

To return to Paulo Freire, I just wanted to say that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is one of the most significant texts in terms of applicative pedagogy, but there’s also, in terms of the autonomy of the students, his *Pedagogy of Freedom*. I think his entire oeuvre needs engagement. I think *Pedagogy of Freedom* appeared much later than *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In terms of activism and scholarship, I was actually talking about activism scholarship, and the binary between academics and activists is often fictive, because all academics are, in a way, activists as well. What I mean to say is that even when academics are writing for/with conservative quarters, they are a particular sort of activists since they mobilise against particular forms of reading or writing – say even whilst castigating decolonial scholarship.

Marilyne Brun (IDEA - Université de Lorraine)

Many thanks to all of you for sharing what you do with your students because it’s a breath of fresh air to try to think about innovative ways of dealing with our students. I have two questions. The first one is: yes, decolonial teaching works in L3, it works in Masters. My issue is, how do you get this going in L1? The other question I have is, when we try to decolonise the curriculum students are quite receptive, but I find that what is extremely difficult is to open up their vision, their perception of the world to other epistemologies in the very limited amount of time that we have with them. For them to accept that maybe time is not just linear, that time in some cultures can be thought of as a spiral or as a circle. If you have any advice, I’d really appreciate. Thanks.

Emilie Souyri

I think that one of the first things you need to think of when you’re trying to reach out to the youngest students is that you need to work as a team. You need to find at least a couple of other like-minded professors or assistant professors, so that you can have an approach that is coherent. It’s also very helpful for you to not feel isolated, in trying to shake up the way things are done. So that we can help each other co-teach, which is really fruitful, and discuss those approaches together.

Fiona McCann

I love the idea of co-teaching and it is something I think is really important. Nevertheless, it is difficult to put in place, because not everybody wants to come and double their teaching, because that’s what this would basically imply: that you double your teaching. But Emilie, that’s a brilliant point about team teaching, it is a brilliant way of, among many other things, fostering teamwork among students. I think perhaps another interesting form of assessment that we might want to experiment with is collectively handed in pieces of work. Obviously, bearing in mind that some students who are neurodiverse might not want to work in a group. I think it’s important to have different options. But given the scale of the problems that we face as inhabitants of this earth, surely, we should be trying to get our students to work together all the time. It’s only collectively that we’re going to come out of this, by which I mean, continue to exist as a species. But we can only do that with students if they see us teachers doing it in the first place. So, I love that idea.

Claire Gallien

If I can add a little point in this discussion, collective teaching with the students works very well, even with first-year undergraduates. To return to Marilyne’s question about how we present decolonial questions to year-one students: I would ask them questions
such as, “how does coloniality affect you,” and I would stop there, and that would be our starting point. “Where do you feel coloniality, where in your body, where in your environment?” And this really opens up a discussion, it opens up a space first. Because the first thing is to create a safe environment. So, of course, it may be intimate, and it may take a lot of time. But it gives grounding to the theory, so that they realise the questions we are dealing with are not something made of thin air, that doesn’t concern them, us. And sometimes, it’s really, really surprising how, once you’ve established that sort of space, then a lot of things can happen.

Alexandra Poulain

60 Thanks very much, Claire. I think that’s a brilliant question, which I’m going to use in my classes and seminars. We might wrap up at this stage, and perhaps going away with the idea of the collective that you’ve all been stressing is something that might give us a bit of hope. Thank you very, very much to the four speakers and to all participants for a brilliant discussion, and let me hand over to Christine.

Christine Lorre (Sorbonne Nouvelle / THALIM)

61 Thank you, Alex. And thank you to all of you, speakers and participants. That was a fantastic session. One thing I particularly liked is the fact that you didn’t shy away from speaking personally, which I think was necessary on this particular topic, and rarely ever happens in the profession, except perhaps with emeritus professors who do the “grand entretien” for E-rea journal, which lets you find out about where they come from, but in quite a different format. Priya Gopal, in her great lecture this morning, said that positionality is good, but truth is better. But I think they’re not mutually exclusive, and that positionality remains very important, especially on this topic of decolonisation, obviously, and pedagogy. I also very much like the fact that you reminded us that decolonisation works both ways, Sandeep, by quoting Ngugi, and Jaine, by telling us about your experience. It’s very much a dialogical process. It’s a complex process. There was much food for thought here. So, thank you again.

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NOTES


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5. To visit the online platform for the workshop, please follow the link: https://decentring.hypotheses.org/


7. “In fact, an important aspect of White privilege is having the choice to ignore the ways in which race influences and structures the opportunities that people are given (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Because of the ways in which schools institutionalise race, Black and White students may have very different experiences of education (Hurtado et al., 2008)” (Abdi 2015, 61).

8. Margaret Montoya reminds us that silence and silencing are at work in the classroom, and that silence is culturally relative and can possibly be turned into a means of resistance (2000).


10. Listen to Sandeep Bakshi – 13th session of the Decolonise Europe Lecture Series – 17th March, 4-5 pm – Amsterdam Center of European Studies – LARCA (u-paris.fr). I was particularly struck by the fact that Sandeep repeated “I know it” several times in his talk, which echoes my previous discussion on “experiential knowledge,” and that he compared his situation as a queer man of colour to that of cis women in terms of being at risk of “student invalidation.”


12. This does not mean taking Chaucer and Shakespeare off the syllabus. The argument has recently been used in some universities, officially to “decolonise syllabi,” while what was at stake was really to find a way to justify staff cuts in Medieval and Early Modern Departments.

13. I am aware of the risk of relativism but am also interested in the social and material dimensions which make it possible to produce knowledge, as well as in Sullivan’s and Tuana’s concept of “epistemologies of ignorance.”

14. Walter Mignolo observes how canon-making in literary studies instantiates the difference in the epistemic and vocational canons whereby the latter because of its oral nature becomes relegated to the peripheries of knowledge (1992, 67).

15. Macaulay’s “Minute on Education” is useful in understanding how epistemic erasure and epistemocide of other knowledges became the hallmark of colonial education across the British empire. See http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/ txt_minute_education_1835.html
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