

# Decolonizing the Curriculum? Unsettling possibilities for performance training

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**ABSTRACT – Decolonizing the Curriculum? Unsettling possibilities for performance training –** This essay problematizes the term ‘decolonization’ as applied to university dance and performance curricula. It does so via Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s (2012) argument that colonization is rooted in a worldview that positions beings as exploitable things. Addressing efforts to foster diversity within studio training, choreography, and scholarship, the casualization of labor within university departments is also examined. The essay considers the structure of the university as both a colonial and corporate entity, signaling its relationship to the precarity of neoliberalism. The paper concludes by suggesting that arts and humanities scholarship and teaching create opportunities for alternate ways of living and interacting beyond neoliberal, neocolonial paradigms.

Keywords: **Decolonization. World Dance. Neoliberalism. Casualization of Labor. Precarity.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Décoloniser le Programme d’Études? Possibilités troublantes de formation a la performance –** Cet article problématise le terme ‘décolonisation’ appliqué aux programmes de danse et de performance universitaires. Il le fait via l’argument d’Eve Tuck et K. Wayne Yang (2012) selon lequel la colonisation est enracinée dans une vision du monde qui positionne les êtres comme des choses exploitables. En s’attachant aux efforts visant à favoriser la diversité dans la formation, la chorégraphie et l’érudition en studio, la précarisation du travail au sein des départements universitaires est également examinée. L’essai considère la structure de l’université comme une entité à la fois coloniale et corporative, signalant sa relation avec la précarité du néolibéralisme. L’article conclut en suggérant que l’érudition et l’enseignement des arts et des sciences humaines créent des occasions de vivre et d’interagir au-delà des paradigmes néolibéraux et néocoloniaux.

Mots-clés: **Décolonisation. Danse du Monde. Néolibéralisme. Précarisation du Travail. Précarité.**

**RESUMO – Decolonizar o Currículo? Possibilidades para desestabilizar a formação em performance –** Este ensaio problematiza o termo *decolonização* aplicado aos currículos de dança e performance no ensino superior. Para tanto, utiliza o argumento de Eve Tuck e K. Wayne Yang (2012) de que a colonização está enraizada em uma visão de mundo que considera os seres como coisas passíveis de exploração. Também examina os esforços para promover a diversidade na formação, coreografia e conhecimento em estúdio e a precarização do trabalho nos departamentos universitários. O ensaio reflete sobre a estrutura da universidade como ente colonial e empresarial, apontando sua relação com a precariedade do neoliberalismo. O artigo é concluído ao sugerir que o conhecimento e o ensino das artes e das humanidades criam oportunidades para maneiras alternativas de viver e interagir para além de paradigmas neoliberais e neocoloniais.

Palavras-chave: **Decolonização. Danças do Mundo. Neoliberalismo. Precarização do Trabalho. Precariedade.**

On December 4, 2017, United States president Donald Trump eroded the protected, public status of national monuments Bears' Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante (Smith; Milman, 2017). Trump's order drastically shrunk the monuments' protected spaces. These spaces had been previously safeguarded under the Antiquities Act, designed largely to protect sites of importance to Native Americans. While represented as a shift from federal to local control, this move undermined Native sovereignty as well as opening formerly public land to mining, oil extraction, ranching, and recreational off-roading. Even in a week of turbulent US and international news, this executive order stood out for its cruelty and its callous disregard for the environmental consequences of political actions.

This order also signaled the enduring nature of American imperialism, its operation through extractivist and expansionist industries, and its economic underpinnings. In other words, this proclamation was fundamentally and unapologetically colonialist. Such initiatives, alongside others such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, signal the intersections between the degradation of the environment, capitalist exploitation, and a disregard for Native sovereignty in both the United States and the Americas more generally. Colonialism, far from forming a mere historical background for political life in the Americas, remains a key aspect of its political formations<sup>1</sup>.

Perhaps because of the endurance of colonial initiatives long after the demise of official, governmental colonialism, decolonization is an increasingly visible term in performance and arts scholarship. Decolonization has largely supplanted the term postcolonial, signaling a shift from critiquing conditions generated by colonialism toward actively working against them. The term suggests that performers, writers, and scholars adopt an anti-imperialist approach to art making, education, and theory in light of the multiple crises we face today. The call for papers for this issue, for instance, describes the wide variety of projects included under the category of decolonial approaches, suggesting that a commonality may be a "new epistemological frame" that gives agency and visibility to those previously marginalized and that aim for a "geopolitical reconfiguration of different kinds of knowledge". Such an interest is not

unique to this journal: a proliferation of approaches present themselves in dance and performance studies as decolonial and decolonizing in their efforts toward inclusivity and introducing counter-hegemonic epistemologies.

In this enthusiasm over decolonialism replacing or supplementing the postcolonial critique, there is an important caution to be issued. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) argue, decolonization is not a metaphor. Tuck and Yang point out that decolonization recognizes the continued investment in settler colonialism that even participants in progressive undertakings bring with them. Decolonization, they argue, must aim to reverse settler colonialism, a far vaster, more complex, and more vexed undertaking than those aimed at inclusivity and empowerment. For this reason, they insist, “[d]ecolonization doesn’t have a synonym” (Tuck; Yang, 2012, p. 3): it is not analogous to anti-racism or other social justice initiatives.

Tuck and Yang attend to settler colonialism in particular, the breed of colonialism exercised in the Americas (as well as Australia and New Zealand), pointing out that colonialism in this context involved the theft of land from its original denizens, the forced relocation of the original inhabitants, and the ongoing impoverishment of their descendants. Settler colonialism resulted in the long-term loss of both land and sovereignty whereas metropolitan colonialism resulted in long-term international imbalances of wealth but also saw rule and land at least partially returned to the colonized. Metropolitan colonialism saw the extraction of wealth but land could more easily be claimed back in the wake of independence when colonization occurred primarily on an absentee basis. Both settler and expansionist colonialism, however, as Tuck and Yang point out (2012, p. 5), involved the reconceptualization of people, land, water, animals, and minerals as “resources” that could be reframed as economic entities (objects, chattel, workers) in the first place.

Tuck and Yang attend exclusively to the United States context and their definition of decolonization refers particularly to the “unsettling” possibilities it poses, specifically regarding land ownership. Their critique is an important one, given the tendency to overlook the American history of settler colonialism in a rush to highlight the (formerly) colonized status

of many immigrants to America, “equivocating” the vexed status of many American immigrants as both formerly colonized subjects and as colonizers/settlers (Tuck; Yang, 2012, p. 17). The implications of Tuck and Yang’s argument are that colonialism is not only material – relying upon extracting raw materials, processing them, and selling them back at a profit – but also that its worldview turns an interconnected network of beings into materials. I want to take seriously their arguments that colonization hinges on turning living beings and the physical world into economic resources, a phenomenon seen clearly in Trump’s enabling of a corporate “land grab”<sup>2</sup>. However, I also want to consider whether recognizing the epistemology that renders the living world economic things can undergird a critique of the physical, material, and economic functions of colonialism, while not relegating those affected by settler colonialism to the “asterisk” category that Tuck and Yang warn against (2012, p. 22-23). I want to consider whether treating the neoliberal system, in which profit is pursued at all cost, as an extension of colonialism is helpful to resisting both ongoing colonialisms, neocolonialism, and neoliberal wealth inequality.

Moreover, it’s worth considering whether this argument can be extended to performance, performance theory, and performance education and, if so, how. Specifically, in order to decolonize the teaching of dance in higher education, and specifically the teaching of the so-called non-Western forms, it is necessary to contend with the status of living beings as exploitable economic resources. If performance, scholarship, and performance education truly seek a decolonial approach, they need to respond to the colonial underpinnings of university structures and the ways in which some colonialist structures have worsened even while some have improved. Attention to the material conditions of these structures can contribute to a truer decolonial approach to activism, scholarship, and performance even while it is necessary to recognize that the very notion of the ‘material’ as separate from other spheres of life represents a colonialist worldview.

## Inclusivity in University Dance Programs

I first gathered these thoughts in response to a prompt for a conference roundtable entitled *Putting Politics into Practice: Diverse Perspectives on Decolonizing University Dance Programs*. As a member of the faculty of the University of California, Los Angeles' World Arts and Cultures/Dance program, I, alongside other professors whose dance program integrated a range of dance forms and decentralized ballet and modern dance, discussed how my department put critical race studies and postcolonial critiques into the practice of curriculum building. Tasked with describing how my department's curriculum initiated decolonizing moves, I felt it important to question the question.

Dance curricula can be inclusive; it can be anti-racist. Given Tuck and Yang's argument that colonization centers on land, air, and water turned into "resources" (2012, p. 5) and that decolonization must respond in kind, can dance and performance actually decolonize? Under what circumstances can they do so? How can the teaching of dance and its histories perform unsettling possibilities? Is colonization synonymous with the canon? In what ways does the university operate as an economic colonizing entity and how can we respond to it?

In suggesting limitations in how, and whether, dance teaching and learning can decolonize, I hope to signal how dance within an institutional context can at least trouble colonial investments, even if it may not be truly decolonizing. In order to challenge colonial practices, we cannot simply attend to inclusivity or even multi-vocality. Instead we must consider the physical, economic, and material conditions of colonial structures. Such an initiative may be more aligned with what Tuck and Yang call harm reduction but, at they point out, such endeavors retain political and ethical importance even as they may not necessarily decolonize in themselves.

When it comes to dance and undergraduate curricula, one element in particular of Tuck and Yang's provocation is crucial: the argument that freeing the mind and allowing the rest to follow is incomplete. When we destabilize the canon and introduce students to a range of dance forms, each with their different aesthetics, we are, at best, decolonizing minds.

While this move is an important one, it is also crucial to move beyond it, to respond to the specific social, political, and historical conditions in which dismantling the canon occurs.

Prior to taking up a position at UCLA, I worked for eight years in university dance departments in Britain. As a researcher who investigated the cultural history of Indian classical dance and as an American of Irish descent, I had a clear understanding of British colonialism and, thus, a sense of how my teaching could encourage students to acknowledge a colonial past in Britain. I was able to illuminate the UK's history of metropolitan colonialism and its related patterns of immigration largely through histories of South Asian concert dance forms.

After relocating to the United States, I continued to teach about Indian cultural production and British imperialism while extending this to account for history of American colonialism, primarily via histories of dance in the Philippines and Hawaii. I also extended this attention to geopolitics through tracing the effect of transatlantic slavery on cultural production, primarily focused on the United States and Brazil<sup>3</sup>. I signaled the ongoing nature of American (metropolitan) imperialism, as exhibited through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such histories linked the status of the United States as a settler colony to its position as a metropolitan colonial power but they did not delve deeply into settler colonialism itself. To fully enact a decolonizing practice, such histories would need to account for the enduring status of the US as a settler colony as well as a metropolitan one.

My efforts at providing an anti-colonial critique through course content do not expend such efforts in my department. The design of the UCLA undergraduate dance degree responds to two legacies of imperial logics. One is the presumed centrality of ballet and modern dance to dance practice. If funding and concert programming in the United States privileges ballet, university curricula favor modern dance<sup>4</sup>. In most university dance departments in the US, a concentration in modern dance is the baseline and training in 'other' practices appear as electives.

The second imperial logic that structures many dance departments is a Boasian collection model of dance instruction. Such programs follow the conventions of early American anthropology in which documenting

diverse ways of life was assumed to be synonymous with understanding them<sup>5</sup>. Follow this logic, many dance departments offer students a smattering of dance practices from various parts of the world in a decontextualized manner and without the possibility of pursuing ongoing or advanced training in such practices. The assumption underlying such an approach is that exposure to so-called 'world dance' forms will suffice in terms of broadening student horizons, fostering an understanding of difference, and contributing to peacefully diverse communities<sup>6</sup>. As optimistic as such approaches may be, they nonetheless retain a colonial framework in which ballet and modern dance are the norm and 'world' dance practices are the exception. 'World' dance forms also appear here as static repositories of tradition with modern dance and ballet representing innovation and virtuosity, respectively.

Faculty in UCLA's dance program responded to such conditions by shifting the curriculum so that all students no longer train in modern dance as their baseline practice supplemented by additional courses in 'non-Western', 'world dance' forms. Instead, students specialize in two of five dance practices, selecting from modern/postmodern dance, ballet, West African dance, partnering, or hip hop. Modern dance is thus decentralized in this curriculum as students need to achieve mastery within any two of the above movement languages (signaled by the completion of advanced-level courses). Elective dance forms are offered via special topics courses, the title and content of which can be amended to include dance practices that represent the expertise of those available to teach.

In this process, faculty also debated how to identify dance practices. Previously, UCLA's dance program labeled forms by where they came from. So, for instance, we had Dances of Africa and Diaspora, Dances of South Asia, etc. As a gesture toward equity, ballet was identified as Dances of Europe<sup>7</sup>. Modern and postmodern dance remained unmarked. Such a practice was clearly problematic as it reduced some dance to a symbol of culture while other dance practices operate as sets of choreographic codes, conventions, and aesthetic investments (Jeyasingh, 1990). It also ignores histories of global circulation. Although the identification of ballet as

Dances of Europe attempted to balance this association, it nonetheless reifies dance practices as aligned with geographical areas.

Our current course design retains elements of geographical definitions of dance. Some dance practices that are conventionally identified by a proper noun retain such appellations in our course catalogue so that hip hop and ballet are identified as such. Dance practices such as modern and postmodern dance and partnering are likewise unmarked. West African dance retains its geographical nomenclature, as its content includes a range of dance genres, as do some dance electives.

There are several reasons why these generalities endure. One of them has to do with the fluidity of the labor force. Most dance technique courses, in most US universities, are taught by lecturers, adjuncts, and visiting faculty. This is not the case internationally; in Britain, for example, instructors of technique classes work as part of the teaching staff of a dance program. However, a reliance on adjunct faculty is so common in the United States that it is hard to envision how a dance program would structure itself if the choreographers and scholars on faculty also taught technique courses or if performers, who were not also choreographers or writers, were included on the faculty. The latter would be unlikely without a major restructuring of North American universities as, in keeping with an overarching Cartesian logic, most of these institutions do not consider performance to be research in absence of choreographic authorship.

In addition, an assumed variability of a performance career leads us to rely on a mutability of the labor force when it comes to dance technique instruction: it's a given that dancers, and other performers, may be available for teaching at some times, while at others they will have performance commitments. It's assumed they'll commit to ten weeks of teaching but not to full-time instruction work. Fluidity of labor is not necessarily a problem if it allows for the ebb and flow of a performance career.

However, the ideal of flexibility<sup>8</sup> masks an underlying crisis within universities, especially in the United States. US universities have come to rely on adjunct labor, to the point that seventy percent of college faculty are now contingent employees (Edmunds, 2015). When we include



graduate student labor, this means that temporary workers teach an overwhelming number of courses. Adjuncts are also, increasingly, underpaid for their efforts and are exposed to increased precarity, if not outright poverty (Gee, 2017). In dance departments, as in other units, adjunct professors are assumed to be temporary, in part by choice, but their employment over multiple terms and multiple years belies this assumption.

The position of adjunct faculty exemplifies a late capitalist, neoliberal predicament in which costs continue to rise while workers' wages stagnate or fall. In the United States, student tuition and fees are higher than ever. When the majority of courses are taught by contingent faculty and graduate students, universities are spending less than ever on the salaries of teaching employees. The savings produced by this reduction in permanent teaching faculty does not go toward education in other forms but instead toward administration, maintenance, and services, especially those associated with recruiting and admissions (Jaschik, 2017). That is, much like a corporation, contemporary universities reduce the stability offered to their workforce and retain high costs to consumers in order to put more resources back into the structure of the institution itself. Unlike a corporation, public universities retain a dependence on governmental funds, which are shrinking, and so their retention of resources is, in part, a survival mechanism.

This exploitation of labor within the neoliberal institution reveals a colonial economic model of treating people as workers and products, not as interrelated beings. Corporate excess and public austerity likewise represents a continuation of colonial models of ownership and exploitation of resources. I do not intend this statement to pose an equivalence between capitalist exploitation of workers and the colonial theft of land. Rather, I want to attend to the marked, and widening, disparities in wealth and income that constitute the neoliberal economy as they emerge out of colonial frameworks. But I also want to call attention to the instability that characterizes this moment of late capitalism and late colonialism.

As Trump's executive order with which I opened this discussion suggests, we are witnessing a reckless extension of corporate largesse and of

extractionist and expansionist industries at the very moment our planet and people can least afford it (Klein, 2014). More resources, proportionally, lie in hands of the very few than in any time since the Gilded Age of the early twentieth century (Neate, 2017). And, yet, the instability we now confront also signals that this time is one of crisis for neocolonialism and neoliberalism. The benevolent mask of colonialism, with its fraudulent promises of equality, has been torn away to reveal the exploitative agenda that runs it.

This moment of instability, this time of political and economic crisis, offers an opportunity for re-envisioning ways of being, working, and connecting. A decolonizing approach might seize upon this instability to further unsettle it and seriously consider alternatives. Jane Desmond (2016) argues that scholarship in the humanities allows us to question whether how we live now is how we want to live. Desmond suggests, accordingly, that arts and humanities scholarship allows us to envision other worlds and other ways of being. As with our theorization, so, too, can our teaching enable us to envision other ways of existing and interacting. In rethinking our curricula, we can rethink, and recraft, our labor so as to supplant colonial models of exploitation and ownership. Decolonizing moves in dance and performance studies can seize on instability, not only seriously considering alternatives but also bringing them into being.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am aware that the history, politics, and economics of countries and regions in the Americas vary enormously. However, a history of settler colonialism is common to many nations in the Americas even as these countries' relationship to metropolitan colonialism differs.
- <sup>2</sup> I draw the term land grab from Alexander Reid Ross's (2014) collection *Grabbing Back: Essays Against the Global Land Grab*.
- <sup>3</sup> Understanding the aftermath of slavery and its influence on cultural production in my undergraduate teaching came primarily through studies of hip hop and capoeira.

- <sup>4</sup> See Ross (2000) and Foster (2011) for a history of modern dance's establishment in university curricula.
- <sup>5</sup> As such, these curricula follow the example of cultural festivals in which collection is taken as coterminous with understanding. For more on such festival structures see O'Shea (2016).
- <sup>6</sup> This is evident in, for example, the structuring logic of the 1990 LA Festival event (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, p. 203-248).
- <sup>7</sup> Prior to this classification, as Susan Foster (2009, p. 1-2) points out, UCLA's World Arts and Cultures developed out of an "Ethnic Arts curriculum, which was preceded by courses in 'Folk Arts'". Accordingly, as Foster illustrates, in the 1930s, UCLA included "Folk Dancing" courses alongside "Dancing" classes with the nomenclature changing in the 1960s to consist of 'Creative Dance', 'Ethnic Dance', and 'Dance of Specific Cultures'. Although such expansion of the curriculum sought to broaden the understanding of what constituted dance, it nonetheless retained a framework in which some practices remained tied to culture while others evoked aesthetics.
- <sup>8</sup> Anusha Kedhar (2014) investigates literal and metaphorical ideals of flexibility as a means through which South Asian dancers in diaspora negotiate the precarity associated with a neoliberal economy.

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