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Deconstruct to Reconstruct? Decolonization and History of Art Teaching Practices

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of scholarly debates on decolonization in Higher Education, this paper aims to define ways in which the intellectual theory of decolonization can be translated to concrete teaching and learning practice within the sphere of the History of Art. As a discipline based on seeing and interpreting, Art History is intimately bound up with humanity's relationship to objects and cultures, and thereby to the iconography of the decolonization movement. Drawing on student demands in an Open Letter (2020), as well as changes in the History of Art curriculum at Cambridge University, this paper attempts to pin down the relevance and meaning of decolonization for History of Art as a discipline, whilst analysing the evolution of teaching in response to the decolonization movement. Finally, suggestions are made for an expansion of decolonized teaching methods, turning theory into enhanced practice.

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Whilst Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o famously called for a decolonization of the mind (1986), and Paulo Freire posited 'problem-posing' education as a 'humanist and liberating praxis' (1970, p.59), other theorists have instead seen intellectual approaches as a deflection from practical decolonial activism. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that 'to focus on decolonizing the mind, or the cultivation of critical consciousness, as if it were the sole activity of decolonization' is 'another settler move to innocence' (2012, p.19). For them, '*conscientization*' is a substitute for 'the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land' (ibid.). Against this backdrop, this paper aims to define concrete ways in which the intellectual theory of decolonization translates to teaching and learning practice within the sphere of History of Art. It will analyse the literature associated with decolonization in order to pin down its definition, exploring in particular the relevance and meaning of decolonization for Art History as a discipline. The practice of decolonization within the History of Art department at Cambridge University will be explored, using the example of the student group *Decolonise History of Art and Architecture* and the alignment or disjunction of demands in their 2020 Open Letter with recent changes to departmental teaching. Finally, suggestions will be made for an expansion of decolonized teaching practices.

'How we see a thing – even with our eyes,' Ngũgĩ says, 'is very much dependent on where we stand in relationship to it (1986, p.88). Art History, as a discipline of seeing and interpreting, is intimately bound up with humanity's relationship to objects and cultures. There are myriad iconographic resonances between decolonization practices and the History of Art, not least the symbolic power of fallen statuary such as Colston (Bristol) and Rhodes (Cape Town). As image-related iconographic

debates rage alongside other disputes such as restitution, there has been a seismic shift in the way art is viewed both individually and collectively. This is visible in the Higher Education sphere through student campaigns such as *Rhodes Must Fall* at the University of Cape Town (2015); *Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford* (2016); and *Goldsmiths Anti-racist Action* (2019), all of which included demands for the removal of specific statuary.

The History of Art therefore provides a remarkable lens through which to consider decolonized teaching practices. The rallying cry across Higher Education is now for a wholesale decolonization of curricula, a subject researched in depth by scholars (Chapman 2019; Gopal 2021; Jansen 2019; Mbembe 2016; Pimblott 2020). However, it is still unclear how this will materially impact curricula and teaching practices in the History of Art, beyond the ever-present diversification of reading lists. The establishment of the UAL *Decolonising Arts Institute*, the publication of the Association of Art History's 'Decolonizing Toolkit', and the preponderance of research days and discussion fora relating to decolonization, all point to a willingness to engage. Yet, scant research has been carried out connecting decolonization with History of Art teaching practices, though some studies touch upon the issue (Copeland et al. 2020; Grant and Price 2020; Kearney 2017; Mirzoeff 2017). The question remains: how can we decolonize not just our material, but also our teaching?

'The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people' Friere writes (1986, p.68). Using this as a guiding principle, this paper analyses the demands of the Cambridge University student group *Decolonise History of Art and Architecture*, comparing their requests to actual changes in the department's teaching and curriculum. Considering a variety of teaching and learning activities, such as research, writing, source material, application of theory, training and the scope of the syllabus, this paper will examine how a student-focused approach combined with a dialogical teaching model and the adjustment of the teaching environment can all contribute to the concrete practice of decolonization in the History of Art sphere. Acknowledging that: (a) teaching practice can be slow to change in universities; (b) students' demands will not always be reasonable or actionable; and (c) care must be taken to retain points of teaching excellence, this paper argues that there is more we can do as teaching practitioners in order actively to decolonize our teaching practice. Though this may not 'change the order of the world' as Frantz Fanon desired (1961, p.27), it should go some way towards deconstructing, and then reconstructing, the teaching of a complex discipline, whose very nature is innately, visually bound up with decolonization.

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