



Gill, J. (2018). Decolonizing literature and science. *Configurations*, 26(3), 283-288. <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2018.0023>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1353/con.2018.0023](https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2018.0023)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Johns Hopkins University Press at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/698843> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Decolonizing Literature and Science

Josie Gill

University of Bristol

In 2015, students at the University of Cape Town began to protest about the presence of a statue of colonialist Cecil Rhodes on their university campus. The ensuing Rhodes Must Fall movement, which called for the decolonization of university education in South Africa, soon spread to the United Kingdom and the United States, where students began to demand changes to both university curricula and wider institutional cultures. The Rhodes Must Fall movement based at the University of Oxford defines their decolonizing mission as being to “challenge the structures of knowledge production that continue to mould a colonial mindset that dominates our present.”¹ They cite three ways in which this can be achieved: through “tackling the plague of colonial iconography,” “reforming the Euro-centric curriculum,” and “addressing the underrepresentation and lack of welfare provision for Black and minority ethnic . . . academic staff and students.”² The *Why Is My Curriculum White?* Campaign, also in the United Kingdom, has focused on the humanities, in particular on subjects like English, history, and philosophy, with students calling for more recognition of the racial thinking behind some Enlightenment philosophy, and for the expansion of the range of non-Western thinkers studied in the curriculum.³ The call to decolonize has recently also spread to science:

¹ <IBT>“About Us,” Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, accessed November 24, 2017,

<https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/about/>.</IBT>

² Ibid.

³ See Mariya Hussain, “Why Is My Curriculum White?,” National Union of Students, March 11, 2015,

in March 2017, Kings College London held a conference entitled “Can Science be Decolonized?” which aimed to “confront Eurocentrism in science and evaluate how colonialism and imperialism have shaped scientific inquiry—and if, or how, its influence can be ‘decolonized’ by looking at knowledges outside of a western context.”⁴ The decolonization movement as a whole questions the integrity of the academy and challenges academics as producers and reproducers of knowledge to consider how that knowledge—and the methodologies adopted for acquiring it—might be exclusionary, exclusive, and indifferent to inequality and justice. Using language that is deliberately confrontational and direct, the movement challenges the more comfortable institutional language of diversity, which, as Sara Ahmed has shown, operates to obscure and deny the possibility of racism, which is instead “treated as a breach in the happy image of diversity.”⁵

These calls for what amount to “alternative facts” have occurred at a moment when academic expertise across the humanities and the sciences is coming under attack in the political sphere: in 2016, Donald Trump sought to create momentum in his US presidential election campaign through the denial of the relevance of expert knowledge, while in the United Kingdom, the then justice secretary, Michael Gove, claimed as part of his campaign

<https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/why-is-my-curriculum-white/>. See also Akwugo Emejulu, “Another University Is Possible,” *Verso Books* (blog), January 12, 2017,

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3044-another-university-is-possible>.

⁴ Can Science Be Decolonised Facebook page, accessed November 24, 2017,

<https://www.facebook.com/events/238901166580094/>.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 153.

for Brexit that people in Britain “have had enough of experts.”⁶ In response to Trump’s election, a worldwide March for Science was held on April 22, 2017; the movement was, “inspired by a growing concern about the lack of science in policy and need to speak out”⁷ and called for a “science that upholds the common good, and for political leaders and policymakers to enact evidence-based policies in the public interest.”⁸ While the movement seeks to improve the relationship between science, scientists, and the public, it is clear and also understandable that the space for debating the nature of facts might begin to close down in the face of an anti-science political sphere. Thus one of the challenges for decolonization scholars and activists is to make a case for alternative, decolonized forms of knowledge that can be taken seriously and differentiated from the deliberate and misleading denial of scientific fact by the likes of Trump.

What has this to do with literature and science studies? It seems obvious that the current moment in which the nature of scientific fact is being questioned should concern scholars whose work is dedicated to exploring the narrative aspects of science and the relationship between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. Contemporary literature and science scholarship is far removed from the deconstructionist approaches that prompted the culture wars of the

⁶ Henry Mance, “Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove,” *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>. In 2012, Trump tweeted that “the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” Tweet cited in Frank Swain and Sam Wong, “What Donald Trump Has Said About Science—and Why He’s Wrong,” *New Scientist*, August 4, 2016.

⁷ “Our History,” March for Science, accessed May 16, 2018, <https://www.marchforscience.com/our-history>

⁸ “Our Mission,” March for Science, accessed May 16, 2018, <https://www.marchforscience.com/our-mission>

1990s, the mode of critique that Bruno Latour contends is characterized by the belief that “facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language.”⁹ Many literature and science scholars would support Latour’s view that the postmodern critique of science has led to “dangerous extremists . . . using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives,”¹⁰ a concern that seems only too real in the context of Trump’s views on climate change. Literature and science scholarship today tends to approach science on its own terms through critical modes that, while situating science in its historical context and exploring the impact of literary narrative upon it, often do not evaluate or critique scientific concepts themselves, but search instead for common ground between literature and science. Given the nature of contemporary debates, it is hardly surprising that literature and science scholars have sought to work with, rather than against science, to (in Latour’s terms) add reality to matters of fact, rather than subtract from it, incorporating scientific ideas into literary methodologies and creating projects that are increasingly interdisciplinary.¹¹

However, what has become an increasingly comfortable and institutionalized academic interdisciplinarity does not necessarily address the demands made by the decolonization movement for the inclusion of different kinds of academic facts and different ways of knowing. As Kanta Dihal pointed out in the previous special issue, literature and science studies has not been as adept at confronting its past and present Western bias and

⁹ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,”

Critical Inquiry 30:2 (2004): 225-248, at p. 227.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 237.

racial prejudices as other related fields such as science fiction studies.¹² Some literature and science scholars might ask why they need to engage with questions of race, racism, and Empire, or consider decolonization to simply mean engaging with the work of writers of color and/or examining non-Western science and its impact on various literatures of the world, engagements that postcolonial scholars might be better placed investigate. Yet what the decolonization movement calls for—and where I believe that it might inform our approaches to, and understanding of, the field of literature and science—is an analysis and acknowledgment of the critical role of the institutions in which we are situated in shaping the knowledge we produce. Both literature and science scholars and decolonization scholars are concerned with the constitution of and relationships between disciplines, in how some knowledge is variously ordered and valued in relation to other forms of knowledge. Literature and science scholarship has not, however, examined fully the question Caroline Levine asks in her 2015 book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*: “How has scholarly knowledge depended on certain organising forms and how might self-consciousness about this change arguments which scholars make?”¹³ The organizing forms Levine points to include the privileging of time and period in historicist criticism, and she writes that “despite the fact that many—if not most—of us practicing literary criticism have a distaste for nationalist and imperialist agendas . . . the institutional patterns of nineteenth and early twentieth century English departments persist.”¹⁴ Institutions rarely form part of literary scholars’ attention, Levine contends, yet the organization of literary studies (and I would

¹² Kanta Dihal, “On Science Fiction as a Separate Field,” *Journal of Literature and Science* 10:1 (2017): 32-36, at p. 34.

¹³ <IBT>Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015),</IBT> p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

argue literature and science studies, in which periodization still dominates) is coterminous with the social life of institutions and patterns developed in the era of colonization. Put differently, while literature and science scholars have focused their attention on examining and often challenging the boundaries between humanistic and scientific disciplines, they have perhaps paid less attention to the naturalized containers and boundaries that constitute the organization of literary studies itself.

Scholars of decolonization, on the other hand, make institutions, and their own place as scholars within them, central to their inquiry into structures of knowledge, and it is to such scholarship that we might look to understand how what we do in our institutions matters to the world outside. To take one brief example: in 1992, Stanford professor of Afro-American studies Sylvia Wynter wrote an open letter to her colleagues entitled “No Humans Involved.” “No Humans Involved” was the phrase that, it had emerged following the acquittal of the police involved in the beating of Rodney King (which sparked the Los Angeles riots), was used by public officials to describe cases involving the breach of rights of young, jobless, black men. The purpose of Wynter’s letter was to draw a direct link between the public officials’ conception of the human (a conception from which young black men were excluded), and the classificatory logic of the academy, where, she argues, the “present order of knowledge” determines “the issue of ‘race.’”¹⁵ To bring racial thinking to an end, Wynter argued, we need to end “the prescriptive categories of . . . knowledge, as disseminated in our present global university” through a reconceptualized understanding of the human.¹⁶ Wynter argued for an intellectual realignment of focus on “the poor and the oppressed” to replace the attitude of “today’s intellectuals,” who “whilst they feel and express their pity, refrain from

¹⁵ <IBT>Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1:1 (Fall 1994): 42-73, at p. 55.

¹⁶ Ibid.

proposing to marry their thought with this particular variety of human suffering,”¹⁷ and she called for a renewed order of knowledge that would “pose the questions whose answers can resolve the plight of the Jobless archipelagoes, the N.H.I.”¹⁸

What would it mean for us, as literature and science scholars, to examine the institutional structures and orders of knowledge which we reproduce in our work, and to understand how this connects to the humans for whom we feel pity but might keep separate from our intellectual thought? To think of truth not only in relation to science and fiction but in terms of the political realities and contexts in which we work? Addressing such questions is one way in which we might begin to decolonize our discipline. I do not have any immediate answers, but one place we could start is interdisciplinarity, which is one of the dominant organizing forms with which we work, one that is fully endorsed and promoted at an institutional level and has become as much an indicator of the health of an institution as diversity. Yet much like diversity, interdisciplinarity often elides more difficult, radical questions about knowledge and organizational structure, instead bringing together *existing* disciplinary methodologies that rearrange knowledge rather than fundamentally questioning what we examine, how, and why. A decolonized approach to interdisciplinarity might involve questioning the impact of this academic form on today’s social reality: what kinds of problems or topics get prioritized for interdisciplinary treatment, and why? It might also involve an acknowledgment that interdisciplinarity emerged through ethnic studies, black studies, and women’s studies in the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s as a means of critiquing power in the face of disciplinary mechanisms that reproduced certain relations of power.¹⁹ The challenge

¹⁷ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sarah Mesle, “‘America’ Is Not the Object: An Interview with Kandice Chuh, President of the American Studies Association,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2017,

for us, as literature and science scholars, is not only to find a way to position ourselves critically in relation to the priorities and truths set out by science in an era of scientific denialism, but to avoid a singular, inward turn to literature as a means of addressing the nature and status of truth. We must also turn to ourselves, our departments, our learned societies, and our institutions, as a way of creating the democratic, demystified, decolonized scholarship that we need.

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/america-is-not-the-object-an-interview-with-kandice-chuh-president-of-the-american-studies-association/#!>