

# Objectivity in Research: From Eurocentrism via Decolonisation to Transmodernity

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## Résumé :

À la fin des années 1960, la plupart des colonies sont des nations indépendantes. Cependant, les conséquences de ce changement sur l'ordre mondial n'ont que peu modifié l'attitude « coloniale » des universités du monde occidental. Cet article est un essai personnel et réflexif d'une doctorante d'origine indienne travaillant en Belgique. Comme les universités du monde entier, la KU Leuven où l'auteure mène ses recherches joue un rôle important dans ce que Michel Rolph Trouillot appelle « la production de l'histoire ». Engagée par le département d'histoire pour une recherche sur l'éducation missionnaire en Inde indépendante, elle propose de mettre en lumière dans cet article son engagement pour décoloniser cette « production du savoir », non seulement en raison du renforcement de l'eurocentrisme à l'université pendant la pandémie, mais aussi à cause de l'approche que l'auteure a dû adopter pour mener ses recherches.

**Mots-clés** : Décolonisation, académique, histoire orale

## Abstract :

By the end of the 1960s, most colonies had become independent nations. However, the resulting changes in the world order have done little to modify the 'colonial' attitudes of universities in the Western world. This article is a personal, reflexive account of an India-born doctoral researcher in Belgium. Like universities around the world, KU Leuven, the university where the author conducted her research, plays a key role in what Michel Rolph Trouillot calls 'the production of history'. Hired by the Department of History to research the role of missionaries in education in independent India, she discusses her struggle to decolonise 'knowledge production' - not only due to the university's Eurocentrism during the pandemic, but also because of the ivory tower approach that the author had to take towards her research.

**Keywords** : Decolonisation, academia, oral history

## 1. Introduction

"Why don't Moroccans have a closed society like the Jewish people in Antwerp and then we can stop worrying about them?".<sup>1</sup> This shocking yet unsurprising comment was part of a recorded conversation between a professor and a teaching assistant at the University of Antwerp (Belgium)

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in the summer of 2022. While the university was quick to condemn and distance itself from these statements, the rigid Eurocentrism in education and lack of diversity in educational institutions in Europe are striking.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it can be said that by and large, universities have been reluctant to change. As an example, only a fifth of universities in the UK are decolonising their curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

Belgium is no exception. Vinay Lal observes this Eurocentric outlook in many disciplines.<sup>4</sup> Meera Sabaratnam of the School of Oriental and African Studies University of London defines Eurocentrism as the perception that Europe is “historically, economically, culturally and politically distinctive from the rest of the world”.<sup>5</sup> One can argue that most of the disciplines taught in universities are influenced by Western thought, incorporating - intentionally or otherwise - the concerns and prejudices inherent to them. At the peak of colonialism, there was a fear of the native and thereby, engaging with the “Other”. The emergence of several social science disciplines, as we know them today, have a direct link to the growth of European colonial powers. It is therefore imperative that in both their study and practice, the social sciences and the humanities reflect awareness of - and sensitivity to - non-Western thinking and cultures.

While the general theme of the journal’s issue is objectivity in research, this article will argue that decolonising academia is the only way which can lead scholars on the path of objectivity. The call to decolonise universities in Belgium - and across the world - has gained considerable traction in recent years following the Black Lives Matter protest, which originated in the US and spread to other parts of the world, in the summer of 2020.<sup>6</sup> As Tuck and Yang emphatically state, “Decolonisation is not a metaphor”.<sup>7</sup> Decolonisation starts with the acceptance of colonialism as a global project to study the institutionalised whiteness in Western educational institutions. Universities in the colonies were founded and financed to further the colonial agenda. Therefore, decolonising academia demands a major shift in vision and goals to facilitate, among others, a diverse and inclusive student and faculty demographic, and a reframing of curricula objectives. In this essay I will use my positionality to discuss the continuing Eurocentrism of disciplines and hence the need for their decolonisation.

The reader should be made aware that this article is based on my experiences during my tenure as a Doctoral researcher at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium. This disclosure is particularly important while I question the power and jurisdiction provided to educational institutions in the Global West. In this regard, I refer to the works of Puerto Rican sociologist Ramon Groszguengel who writes on epistemic racism. He notes that

“the way we understand the world and perceive its problems is fed to us through the perspectives and experiences of a small group of white Western European men.<sup>8</sup> The foundational structures of knowledge of the Westernised university are simultaneously epistemically racist and sexist”.<sup>9</sup>

My first experience of Belgium was in 2010, when I spent a year in the country on a student exchange programme. I returned in 2016 for a Master's degree, and then joined a doctoral research programme in 2019. I was one of five non-Europeans in the department of history at the Faculty of Arts, most of whom were hired by my supervisor. Obviously, with most of my colleagues (the only black presence was the cleaning staff) coming from Western Europe, there was little research on the Global South. We were three Indian researchers in the department of whom I was the only woman.

The university's charter on inclusion states:

“On the one hand, the KU Leuven Diversity Policy Office aims to promote an inclusive culture so that people with different backgrounds and beliefs get the chance to fully develop themselves, both as students and as staff members. On the other hand, we want to promote the recruitment and (out)flow of a diverse student population by means of specific action”.

This reflexive article is written in the context of this charter. This article primarily uses autoethnography as a tool to discuss the need to first decolonise education and then debate objectivity in research. I begin with a discussion on concepts which include Eurocentrism, decolonisation, and objectivity in research. Then I proceed to criticise the insider-outsider approach where I question the level of ‘insiderness’ I possess during my research, and the role my social identity played in the field. Next, I discuss the concept of Oral History as a decolonising methodology and show how it can form the basis of a solution for bringing indigenous knowledge to the forefront. In conclusion, I propose to use transmodernity as an approach to decolonisation.

## 2. Decolonisation

In *Colossian Syncretism*, Arnold Clinton, scholar of the New Testament explains how, at its peak, Christianity had consistently denied the authority of Jewish and Arab cultures.<sup>10</sup> Even in today's post-Christian world, Christian assumptions and ways of understanding continue to influence society. This linear view is visible in the academic world too. The underlying belief is that Western thought and methods are the only means for acquiring and generating more knowledge. This dominance is under increasing challenge by indigenous activists and scholars from the Global South who are attempting to turn spaces of oppression into academic spaces of resistance.<sup>11</sup>

Before discussing the issue further, it is important to define the notion of decolonisation in education. Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak<sup>12</sup> and Frantz Fanon<sup>13</sup> thought of it as a process which is ripe with contradictions and paradoxes. Achille Mbembe notes that this process encompasses several facets of undoing and changing the colonial aspects of Higher Education. These include (but are not limited to) the architecture of university campuses, the Eurocentric academic model and, not to forget, university lectures.<sup>14</sup> Wa Thiongo's perspective on the decolonisation of language is also useful for the arguments presented in this essay. He suggested that educational institutions should move away from Eurocentric norms, giving more regard to the African perspective in curricula.<sup>15</sup>

## 3. Objectivity in Research

Gaukroger understands objectivity in three different ways. The first – and most obvious – is that objective research should be free of prejudice and bias.<sup>16</sup> This societal/social understanding of objectivity immediately raises questions about an individual's ethical and moral standards. The second understanding can well be seen as an extension of ridding research of prejudice and bias, and thus proposing that an objective study is free from all assumptions and values. However, Gaukroger argues that while bias and prejudices imply distortions to an extent, assumptions and values need not. To explain the third notion of objectivity, he focuses on how researchers arrive at decisions. To elaborate, the notion of objectivity dictates that specific procedures must be in place, and rigorously followed if objectivity is to be achieved.

There is a common assumption among the scholars of the humanities that social science accounts are in principle impersonal. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Leopold von Ranke, a German historian, argued that the job of a historian was to describe events exactly as they happened, almost as if they were seen from the eyes of God. “The strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive as they may be, is undoubtedly the supreme law”.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a historian must not make philosophical arguments; rather, he should account for specific events.

However, this begs the question: how can we implement such notions of objectivity when the subjects of study involve communities from the Global South? I often experience discomfort over the subject of my dissertation. The histories of oppressed communities and groups – women, indigenous peoples, racial, religious, and linguistic minorities – have grown in numbers. I was pleasantly surprised when I read the title of the opening of the position I was hired for: ‘Missionaries in a Colonial Context: The role of Jesuit Educational Institutions in Jharkhand, India’. The post at that time seemed tailor-made for me, a fresh graduate in Social and Cultural Anthropology. The reason for my selection was obvious: an Indian scholar is best suited to study issues related to the country.

In hindsight, I realised that I was naive in my view. I was born and raised in one of India’s wealthiest and most industrialised states, namely Maharashtra. The community I was born into had enough social capital to help me acquire a western education in a system that I now feel compelled to be critical of. Moreover, I had neither interacted with, nor even encountered an Adivasi (a term used to describe a person from an indigenous community of India) before I commenced my research.

Fanon notes that “for the colonised, objectivity is always directed against him”.<sup>18</sup> History and other disciplines within the human sciences continue to remain tools of state power and not of emancipation.<sup>19</sup> The conviction that the social sciences must be judgement free has several supporters, the main assumption being that truthful accounts of humans are only possible if scholars succeed in ridding themselves of their preconceived notions. Therefore, applying such assumptions, objectivity can be broadly defined as a call for conducting research not just without making personal judgements, but also for making these judgements responsibly, overtly, and publicly.<sup>20</sup> As with scholars of the physical sciences, social scientists are expected to provide their readers with reliable ways of understanding the world around them. For this to reflect in their writings, social scientists are trained to put themselves in their subjects’ shoes while examining their work.

Countries affected by colonialism, and carrying the burden of its legacy, are sceptical of the argument that research is nothing but an “innocent pursuit of knowledge”.<sup>21</sup> Sinclair notes that this approach is rather predatory towards indigenous communities. In the name of research, scholars of the Global North have been responsible for perpetuating stereotypes of indigenous peoples, creating inaccurate images and unnecessarily exoticising them.<sup>22</sup> While Western researchers claim to have handed the mantle back to the native peoples, the issue remains that many scientists and researchers from the former colonies belong to the elite upper classes of their respective societies. Donahue and Kalyan called this a second order Eurocentrism, whereby non-Western scholars rely on Western European scholarship even for their critiques of Eurocentrism.<sup>23</sup>

Returning to my positionality and my use of western sources to criticise western knowledge, it also becomes equally important to acknowledge how Brahmins, the apex group in India’s caste system, have played an important role in perpetuating and promoting western forms of knowledge. Belonging to this group, I had a relatively easy access to an English and Western education without having to forego my roots. Author Renny Thomas dives into the depth of how India’s premier

institutions for Science and Technology, the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management continue to attract and admit a large number of Brahmin students, noting how they successfully retained their own cultural identity while pursuing Western knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4. Insider-Outsider Approach**

Academics from the Global South often use critical reflexivity to decolonise research. Critical reflexivity can help researchers situate themselves regarding their work, thereby addressing power dynamics prevalent in their milieu.<sup>25</sup> Being reflexive will ensure that researchers take into consideration how they view the world and the kinds of answers they are looking for. However, engaging in critical reflexivity extends beyond “confessions of privilege”.<sup>26</sup> because this can cause the researchers to absolve themselves from continuing to pursue decolonial research. This approach is not as straightforward as it may appear. In this context, I was largely self-aware about my privilege. To the Belgian professors who considered me for this position, I was the perfect fit for the job, an Indian with a postgraduate degree in anthropology from Belgium, and reasonably proficient in not just Hindi, but also French and Dutch.

The role of an insider and outsider in research has been subject to much scrutiny. Researchers have often argued that insiders have an upper hand while conducting qualitative research, particularly when the participants in the study are made aware of this.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it has also been suggested that insiders are better equipped to develop research questions as they are more aware of the lives of their participants and are, therefore, in a stronger position to conduct ethical research as they keep marginalised participants at the top of their research agenda.

Renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz questions in detail the utility of objectivity while conducting ethnographic fieldwork:

“the end of colonialism altered radically the nature of the social relationship between those who look and those who are looked at. The decline of faith in brute facts, set procedures, and unsituated knowledge in the human sciences, and indeed in scholarship overall, altered no less radically the askers’ and lookers’ conception of what it was they were trying to do [...] Indeed, given the arduous conditions of fieldwork, the ambiguity of conversation in a foreign tongue, differences of temperament, age, and gender between ourselves and our informants, and the changing theoretical models we are heir to, it is likely that objectivity serves more as a magical token, bolstering our sense of self in disorienting situations than as a scientific method for describing those situations as they really are”.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the question over the level of ‘insiderness’ possessed by the author becomes an important one in the context of increasing scholarly interest in the politics of representation. Authors like Kapoor and Sultana have critically examined those who speak, who they are speaking for and who has the right to speak.<sup>29</sup>

The researcher’s social identity also plays a key role in the field. As a doctoral scholar from an institution in the developed West, I could, arguably, claim to occupy a privileged position in the insider-outsider debate. However, such a claim is open to question. Escobar and Kapoor express scepticism because, as they note, it is scholars like me that are responsible for widening the North-South academic divide by furthering Western notions of development. This concern seems valid

to Mendes and Lau in their study of the trend towards orientalism in books and films on India by Western and Indian authors alike. The authors refer to Indra Singha who acknowledged that though Indian authors are indeed engaging with India's issues, there is also the criticism that they are writing for Western eyes.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, just like in the cultural marketplace, academia is guilty of selling exoticism. Scholars (like me, for example) with access to an education in the English language, and who could move to the West for further studies, can quickly fall into the trap of whitewashing which can be defined as "the strategic non-recognition of contributions to Western knowledge production by non-Euro-American or non-white intellectuals".<sup>31</sup> Khan and Villenas note that researchers, particularly among the diaspora, are often caught between being other(ed) enough to study people from the Global South and being different enough to grasp, but not live, the social reality of those participants.<sup>32</sup> Visser explains the complication that arose from being a young, white, male, Afrikaans-speaking, in South African, researching Black South Africans who were still impacted from the social exclusion that characterised apartheid.<sup>33</sup> From a similar perspective, I must admit that my nationality and, possibly, the colour of my skin were the only common characteristics that I shared with my research subjects.

It is also possible that I was viewed with suspicion given that I belong to a community that has shown much antagonism towards minority groups. Being a Hindu (and female), I had limited access to the largely Catholic community I was researching. On the contrary, my supervisor, a white Flemish male with a Catholic background was warmly welcomed by the subjects of the study. When we toured the interiors of Jharkhand in early 2019, it quickly became evident that I had no agency and was completely dependent on my supervisor to collect sources as well as create new networks for my future trips. Thus, in many ways *he* was the insider despite having little in common with the people. One may also attribute this welcome to the hangover from India's colonial past: a Caucasian man being regarded as superior to the native. We would visit Jharkhand one more time that year before COVID changed the course of the research, which will be addressed later.

While discussing North-South relations, the geographer Richa Nagar adopted a decolonial approach from the perspective of a feminist scholar from the Global South to discuss this scepticism. She asks, "how can feminists use fieldwork to produce knowledge across multiple divides (of power, geopolitical, and institutional locations and axes of difference) without reinscribing the interests of the privileged?".<sup>34</sup> Nagar contends that many overseas students and researchers from the Global South are not well equipped to deal with conflicts and issues that might arise while conducting fieldwork at home or somewhere in between. This is a side effect of whitewashing because non-Western students adopted Western ways of producing knowledge which, in turn, strengthens power relations in research. As "they enter the field with ideas of power relations based on Western experiences and lack of appreciation of many taken-for-granted that can contribute to critical thinking about identities and reflexivity in research".<sup>35</sup>

I have always used anthropological methods and ethnographic studies to decolonise research in this field, which was once infamous because of its armchair specialists. The early anthropologists had developed their theories of universal laws on evolution of human cultures based on second-hand data like travel accounts, records of colonial administrators and missionaries.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the ethnographer always aimed at understanding cultural patterns, but without the bias arising from the personality of the investigator.

I will not debate whether ‘detachment’ is beneficial to research or not. Instead, I argue that the work of an ethnographer – and their data – is neither partial nor objective. Power struggles always play an influencing role. During fieldwork, the power struggles among my subjects, as well as with me often intersected or clashed with the objectives of my study. For instance, most participants were men and did not always want to interact with me. The French surrealist writer and ethnographer Leiris demands that the ethnographer take a stance on the political conditions determining status of colonising and colonised culture<sup>37</sup>.

## 5. Oral History as a Decolonising Methodology

To prevent (or counter) the dominance of Western-centric scholarship over indigenous ones, Held of the Dalhousie University in Canada opines that there should be a union of indigenous and Western knowledge production.<sup>38</sup> By doing so, indigenous peoples and their perspectives are placed at the very forefront of research.<sup>39</sup> However, there are obvious downsides in merging different knowledge systems. There is a risk of a forceful assimilation of indigenous knowledge and weakening of non-Western epistemologies by overgeneralising and inappropriate contextualisation.<sup>40</sup>

This approach can also lead to what Reagan calls epistemological ethnocentrism, which occurs when scholars integrate paradigms. The Western paradigm will undoubtedly steer the direction of discourse as it holds the power to define what knowledge is, and then proceed to legitimise it. Postcolonial nations, such as India, struggle with reconciliation. The decolonisation of the Adivasis aims at “the larger historical, political and structural context of wretchedness”.<sup>41</sup> Like the Native American context, India’s Adivasi communities are victims of “social suffering: a complex of disease and unwellness, poverty and social issues often referred to as Third World conditions common in Indigenous communities”.<sup>42</sup>

The situation is, however, more complex since no direct claim can be made as to who colonised the Adivasis and who decolonised them. However, the fact remains that the Catholic church in Jharkhand indirectly contributed to the decolonisation of the Adivasis in several ways. The process of their decolonisation was often a collective undertaking implicating men and women, youth, and elders, all of whom shared the responsibilities of interrogating power structures at home to deconstruct imposed dominations, and to achieve social transformation for all.<sup>43</sup> History, as it is studied and researched in the Global North, remains a discipline that, through a concept of time, asserts to objectify the subjective, leaving no room for an understanding of subjective affirmations needed to investigate the relations between subjectivity and objective place.<sup>44</sup> Most historians of the Third World misrecognise the nature of politics so much that it is only marginally distinct from the perceptions of colonial authorities of the subaltern.

Oral history can offer a solution for making Indigenous knowledge production the dominant discourse. According to Linda Shopes, oral history is a maddeningly imprecise term: it is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition bearers, to informal conversations about the “old days” among family members, neighbours, or co-workers; to printed compilations of stories told about past times and present experiences, and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.<sup>45</sup> The Oral History Association defines the term as both an interview process and the products that result from a recorded spoken interview. Despite the flexibility inherent to such an interview method, nevertheless, it is the result of thoughtful planning and careful follow-through of the agreed upon process”.<sup>46</sup>

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Oral history can also fill the gaps in archival sources. Valk and Edvald shared how their students used oral history to fill in historical gaps and made connections to the present.<sup>47</sup> Humanising history is also a way of decolonising research. In the two short rounds of fieldwork that I was able to conduct before the COVID-19 crisis hit, I attempted to use ethnography and oral history as a foundation for creating a relationship with the community, which went beyond the scheduled rounds of interviews. Archival sources collected by my supervisor consisted of material written and compiled by Flemish missionaries. Naturally, their perception of the Adivasis and of other Indians had racial undertones and were discriminatory. With limited access to the resources routinely available to mainstream society, the Adivasis were regularly referred to as aboriginals, backward and helpless. The missionaries' perceptions about themselves were one of self-glorification. This is when we decided to include local Indian Jesuits in the interviews and unsurprisingly, we were presented with new viewpoints and knowledge.

Oral history provides underrepresented and unheard minority groups with an opportunity to share which, otherwise, they would not have been able to. On one occasion, my supervisor and I sat down to interview an Indian Jesuit who had previously overseen the development of a private English school for the local community. When my supervisor began to ask questions, the Jesuit visibly became uncomfortable. Here, before proceeding, it is necessary to provide the reader with a brief introduction to my supervisor. Tall, even by Belgian standards, this Flemish speaker has travelled several times to parts of India not frequented or visited by Westerners. He was extremely comfortable eating at street stalls and lodging in humble locations. A polyglot, he also taught himself Hindi. In short, my supervisor was not the stereotypical white foreigner. Despite this, the Jesuit priest did not want to be interviewed by him. Up until the moment my supervisor spoke to him, the interview took place in English. At that point, the Jesuit switched to Hindi and told me that he was afraid his statements would reach his non-tribal superiors via my supervisor, which would get him into trouble.

In her book on reclaiming Palestinian memory, Nur Masalha stresses on the importance of oral history for the construction of an alternative, counter-hegemonic history of the "lost historic Palestinian Indigenous life".<sup>48</sup> In the context of rural and indigenous societies, oral history is a particularly useful way to decolonise methodology. In *Palestinian identity*, Rashid Khalidi argues that modern Palestinian historiography has suffered from inherent historical biases and "[t]he views and exploits of those able to read and write are perhaps naturally more frequently recorded by historians, with their tendency to favour written records than those who are illiterate".<sup>49</sup> The primary sources for my project were no different from the indigenous communities in Malhasa's book.

Fortunately, in recent years, historians have been paying increasing attention to the idea of social history from below or from the bottom-up. This gives more space to the voices of the marginalised than the narratives of the elite. My supervisor is a case in point. We were lucky enough to be in the field for a few weeks and unlike several academics of his stature, he had no qualms over marrying anthropology and history. Despite the lockdown-imposed barriers, which prevented a logical end to this approach, my supervisor remains its staunch proponent.

## **7. Objectivity in research while being a minority student**

Although students of colour are possessors and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal education settings.<sup>50</sup> In many ways, I have always been an outsider in the culture I was

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raised in. In a linguistically and culturally diverse country like India, there is always the possibility that individuals and communities can be othered in various ways. I was the only Tamil-speaking student in school, and mine was also the only Tamil family in a Marathi-speaking apartment complex. It became evident that, despite having lived in the state for several decades, assimilation was necessary to fit in – by minimising the use of my native language, especially in public, and in the following of certain customs. It was an unspoken expectation that one must make the effort to be like the majority community. This othering was magnified when I moved to Belgium to pursue a postgraduate study in anthropology. The structural racism in the country and in its educational institutions became evident in a short time. The university has two distinct channels of opportunities for students and staff: one for native Dutch speakers and the second for non-Dutch speakers.

Being a student of colour in the system has been a challenge. The processes were long and complicated, and designed in such a way that students and researchers from the Global South are automatically excluded. Rather than embracing my brownness, I often blamed it for pushing me into a lonely space because there were few like us, waiting for legitimisation and acceptance by colleagues. For instance, non-European students belonging to countries where English is not the first language (including South Asia) are required to take an English-language proficiency test in which they must score a minimum of 70%. This test costs about USD 120. This is one of the ways universities ensure that only individuals with the means can gain access to their spaces. They also establish a precedent where minority students and colleagues must work twice as hard to gain access to the same resources as the native population. The university space consists of certain norms and rituals. In institutional contexts, they involve structures and emotions in which some people feel at home, while others are alienated, implicated in the epistemic violence in the modern/colonial division of geopolitics of knowledge.<sup>51</sup> In this way, institutions of higher education involve themselves in reproducing – and contributing to – the unequal global political economy of knowledge.

There is also the official and institutional othering and isolation of researchers of colour. I had similar experiences after I was hired as a doctoral student. The philosopher Miranda Fricker discusses how testimonial injustice is a form of exclusion where individuals' different ways of knowing are simply not considered, or often even dismissed because they are not part of the dominant legitimate knowers i.e., in the present context, they are not white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, or members of another dominant category.<sup>52</sup> In my case, the dominant category was the Dutch-speaking community. Dutch-speaking doctoral researchers are quickly exposed to teaching undergraduate and graduate students, while international students have few opportunities to do so, due to the language barrier. Delgado suggests that universities with diversity requirements develop innovative ways to include bilingualism and biculturalism not only for the students, but also for the faculty.<sup>53</sup> No such efforts have been made so far unless students themselves choose a programme in which the medium of instruction is English. As a result, researchers from the Global South are at a disadvantage compared to native Dutch speakers who have ample opportunities to develop their teaching skills. The implicit message to the international members of the department is that they must speak Dutch in order to teach. Even French-speaking Belgians are at a disadvantage in this respect. By focusing mainly on language skills, the university sends the message that non-native speaker, thus researcher for the Global South, can be considered inferior because they do not belong to the dominant group.

My worldviews as a female researcher of colour were formed from a position of privilege, as well as that of being the other. On the one hand, class and caste privilege allowed me to acquire an English

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education in my home country, which helped me to acculturate in many ways to Western values. As an international student/employee, I may not have experienced the oppression experienced by people of colour who were raised in Belgium; however, the current world order and colonial realities have exposed me to similar experiences.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, my belonging to linguistic and racial minorities, which have been largely excluded, contrast with my Western ways of being. While being aware of this reality has often brought more complications in my campus life, as well as while conducting research, as Dillard argued, instead of eradicating this paradox by trying to homogenise oneself, one can use it to achieve spaces of equity in our spaces.<sup>55</sup>

Western modernism has played a key - and unfortunate - role in promoting Eurocentrism in education. Western modernism can be defined as a network of broad assumptions and beliefs that are deeply embedded in the way dominant Western culture constructs the nature of the world and one's experiences in it.<sup>56</sup> Western modernism reinforces the idea of white privilege in educational institutions in the global North. Together, it has consistently delegitimised the experiences and aspirations of people of colour. The majority of Europeans and Americans supports and pushes for Eurocentric perspectives based on meritocracy and individuality. For example, meritocracy implied that the access provided to people, regardless of their race, class, or gender, is a result of their own merit and hard work. The proponents of this notion do not believe in the privileges that come with being fair skinned, which is nothing, but white privilege based on a Eurocentric idea of intelligence.

One can attribute the continuity of Western modernism to what Michael Baker describes as a misunderstanding of modernity. He argues that the notion of modernity has not been adequately understood from outside the modern Euro-American framework of interpretation. Bhabra, a lecturer of Sociology at the University of Keele, also argues on similar grounds: "The modern world order is still widely interpreted and understood as an endogenous western European and Northern European project within the modern western intellectual tradition".<sup>57</sup>

How can historians and other social scientists be objective when the very idea of knowledge as we know it today can be traced to Western genealogy? I would go a step further and say that objectivity in research cannot be achieved until universities systematically undo themselves of the arrogance that has seeped in from centuries of practice of Eurocentric ways of knowledge creation.

## **8. Conclusion**

One must not forget that the emotional labour of decolonising often falls on the shoulders of minority students. Universities are quick to use terms, such as diversity and inclusiveness, but are just as quick to turn their backs to these principles when they are required to confront their colonial legacies and biases. In my experience, the situation is not significantly different in Belgian universities. During a recent meeting with the diversity network, a cis-male white professor argued against the university implementing policies related to diversity because he was worried about the majority being silenced. Another colleague questioned the need for decolonising curricula because, in his opinion, "Minority communities need to adjust to the majority culture and not the other way around". From the discussions presented here, and as already stated in the introduction to this article, it is futile to debate how objectivity in research can be achieved in the humanities and social sciences if they are not first decolonised.

However, this is easier said than done. I have frequently used autoethnography to simultaneously

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position myself as a person of privilege in her home country and who, as a researcher, quickly found herself at a very different starting line than her peers in a renowned Belgian university. Today's universities largely follow a set of norms and rituals that are largely aimed at a homogenous audience. For example, decrease in public subsidies for universities, increase in tuition fees, homogenising curricula, positioning institutions of higher education as profit-making entities are some of the methods adopted by universities around the world. While these methods may not matter to the dominant group, those outside it will feel alienated. This othering of certain groups and communities in universities also heightens the alienation and ignorance of knowledge production from non-European regions, thereby strengthening western methods of knowledge creation.

Despite this, universities and other educational institutions do not provide their researchers with culturally sensitive and appropriate research training. Scholars from the Global South suggest that researchers trained in Western research paradigms need to pass through a process of decolonisation for future research, which should include participation by indigenous communities. This is not to suggest, even indirectly, that one must entirely reject all Western universities and research methods. What is critical is that these need to adapt and be critically challenged for ensuring objectivity and equitable collaboration.

It is imperative that disciplines within the social sciences and humanities become more receptive to the concerns and outlooks of non-Western cultures. For this to happen, the British-Pakistani scholar Ziauddin Sardar proposes the idea of transmodernity to decolonise higher education. Sardar uses the chaos theory to describe his idea, which teaches us that complex systems like civilisations, societies, etc. can create order out of chaos. When these systems reach the edge of chaos, they evolve almost spontaneously into a new mode of existence. Therefore, transmodernity is the transfer of modernity and post-modernism from the edge of chaos into a new order. For a transmodern education, the focus must shift away from a Eurocentric model to a more inclusive and equitable paradigm.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Translated from Dutch 'Waarom hebben die Marokkanen geen gesloten gemeenschap zoals de Joden in Antwerpen dan hebben wij daar geen last van?'. S. ATILLAH and B. STRUYS, *Racisme bij medewerkers UAntwerpen over studenten: 'Het zijn altijd dezelfde'*, in *De Morgen*, 16/06/2022, online, <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/racisme-bij-medewerkers-uantwerpen-over-studenten-het-zijn-altijd-dezelfde~b628a072/>, consulted on 20/11/ 2022.

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