

CAITE

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

# Decolonising DMU

## Glossary of Key Terms

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This resource provides an overview of key concepts associated with developing an anti-racist institution. Each of the terms presented here represents a social concept. As such, they are each what are sometimes called 'essentially contested' concepts. In other words, there are multiple, competing, and even conflictual or contradictory definitions available for them. In this glossary, we attempt to provide the most general overview we can of how each term is used and understood today. The aim is to make the definitions clear and accessible, to aid people who are unfamiliar with, or uncertain of, some of the terminology commonly associated with decolonising projects. If you are interested in a particular term, or find it confusing or troubling, please do research it further!

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## **‘Race’**

In colonial-era pseudo-science, ‘races’ were thought by many Europeans to be distinct ‘biological’ groupings, with specific attributes, abilities and limitations. European colonialists – Cecil Rhodes, for example – tended to frame their ‘Whiteness’ as indicative of intrinsic ‘superiority’, representing their own societies as having the highest form of culture and intelligence, while non-Europeans were represented as ‘inferior’ or ‘backward’. Visual markers of ‘race’ included perceived skin colour and bone structure, and this race ‘science’ overlapped with the pseudo-science of phrenology (predicting traits and behaviour based on skull shapes), and laid the groundwork for the pseudo-science of eugenics. This biological understanding of race continues to inform racist views that some groups – Black British people, or British Pakistanis, for example – are somehow intrinsically ‘inferior’ to White groups. But the prevailing understanding of ‘race’ today is as a ‘social construction’. This means that race is the attribution of a set of imagined social characteristics to a group, based on markers like skin colour, names, clothing, and so on. It has been shown that, biologically-speaking, it is possible for a White British person to have more DNA in common with, say, a Black Nigerian person, than with some other White British people, so the ‘biological’ theory of race has been thoroughly debunked. This validates the social constructionist concept of race. ‘Race’, in this sense, is the product of a social process whereby we are trained to believe that certain attributes are associated with certain identifiable groups of people; the process is often called ‘racialisation’. Black people are racialized as Black, while White people are racialised as White; neither inherently ‘is’ a particular ‘race’, and the existence of many ‘mixed race’ or ‘biracial’ people in most societies, who may be racialized differently in different contexts or by different individuals at different times, illustrates the instability of racial categories. Importantly to say that race is socially constructed, is not to say that it’s somehow not ‘real’. Race is as real as people believe it to be, since this informs how they treat one another, and how they experience their lives. In some discussions ‘race’ is placed in inverted commas, to highlight its contingent and socially constructed nature, while acknowledging the force of its social reality.


## **Racism**

Like all ‘-isms’, racism is partly a system of beliefs. These beliefs vary according to context, but can include a commitment to a ‘biological’ concept of race (see ‘Race’, above), and to a scale of cultural and intellectual superiority and inferiority among ‘races’. However, in common with many other ‘-isms’ (think of ‘capitalism’, for instance), racism is such a powerful set of beliefs that it also constitutes a relatively stable set of social structures, relatively independent of individual people’s conscious adherence to its tenets. In other words, a society, an economy, or an institution – like a university – can be racist, even if many individuals within that social structure do not consciously hold to racist beliefs. This is because, like other forms of social organisation (think of ‘patriarchy’, for instance), racism structures society to benefit some and harm others, irrespective of individuals’ wishes. It may be helpful to keep in mind that racism, like other forms of systemic violence and oppression, can therefore be both structural, or ‘objective’ (existing independently of individuals’ thoughts and wishes), and direct or ‘subjective’ (manifested in the conscious and / or deliberate behaviour of individuals and groups).

## **Anti-racism**

In a majority-White society it is possible for most or all White people – irrespective of other social inequalities, like class, gender, or disability – to maintain a position of relative privilege (see ‘White privilege’, below) inasmuch as they may benefit from racist social structures even without consciously or proactively contributing to them (see ‘Racism’, above). Given this situation, it is argued that simply ‘not being racist’ is ethically inadequate. As the pioneering Black feminist Angela Davis famously put it: ‘In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist’. In a majority-White society, this means actively joining






efforts to abolish the racist social and economic structures that primarily benefit White people, and which cause detriment to people of colour – Black and Asian people in the UK, for example. In majority-White societies like the UK, anti-racism is a practice of belief and action aimed at destroying racist institutional structures and cultures (see ‘Racism’, above), rather than merely attempting to remain somehow ‘neutral’; White people are never in a position of ‘neutrality’ in this kind of society, since they are always benefiting (if only relatively) from its racist structure, whether they like it or not.

## **Whiteness**


Since we now know that ‘races’ are socially constructed (see ‘Race’, above), we also know that ‘Whiteness’ is a social construction, and is not simply a physical or biological attribute like skin colour. Many Europeans who are racialized as ‘White’, for instance, may have darker skin colour than lighter-skinned Africans who are nevertheless racialized as ‘Black’. Europeans began to conceive of themselves as ‘White’ through the process of colonisation, as they sought to differentiate themselves from the societies they colonised, and through early encounters with those societies. Whiteness is a form of racialized identity that attaches imagined metaphysical characteristics (specifically, moral and intellectual superiority) to perceived physical characteristics (specifically, skin colour, hair texture, eye colour, and so on). In this sense, it can also be understood as a culture – a set of established social structures and practices believed to be inherent to particular, geographically and racially bounded, social groups. Whiteness in the racial imaginary is associated with European and / or ‘Western’ culture. In Western societies, Whiteness is a dominant culture, which privileges ‘White’ ways of seeing, doing things, and being in society over other possible ways. In other words, the views and experiences of people racialized as White in such societies are represented in majority culture (e.g. through media, politics, business, education) as being universal or generic rather than particular or specific, while the experiences of, for example, people racialized as Black, may be minimised, erased, distorted or ignored by the majority / mainstream culture. Whiteness is such a powerful social structure in Western societies, that even people who are not racialized as White may be accorded social status predicated on their perceived proximity to Whiteness, measured ‘physically’ (e.g. skin tone) or culturally (e.g. mannerisms, behaviour, patterns of cultural consumption). This system even extends to formerly colonised societies, where the majority is not racialized as White, but persistent coloniality is manifested in ‘colourism’ – the belief that lighter-skinned people are superior to those with darker skin tones.

## **White privilege**

This may be one of the most misrepresented and misunderstood terms used in contemporary debates on race and racism. White privilege does not mean that Whiteness necessarily brings more wealth, power, or ‘luck’ to White people. Privilege, in this context, simply means ‘unearned advantage’. It is a comparative term, designating a relative, rather than an absolute, form of advantage. Even White people from working-class backgrounds can benefit, as compared to people of colour from all social classes, from White privilege. Racialised policing – a problem common to majority-White societies, and to which intense attention has been drawn by the Black Lives Matter movement in recent years – provides an instructive example. An individual’s perceived Whiteness will not be a reason, in a majority-White society, for police to stop-and-search, or otherwise unduly harass them. Black people, and other racially minoritised people, on the other hand, routinely report being harassed by police in such societies, despite having committed no offence – often ‘driving while Black’ seems to be sufficient grounds for such police harassment. And class does not necessarily insulate people of colour from this racial ‘profiling’ and discrimination. There have been prominent examples, in both the USA and the UK, for instance, of very wealthy – and sometimes famous – Black people being stopped and questioned by police while driving expensive vehicles, or attempting to gain access to certain spaces, because the police officers involved found this situation inherently ‘suspicious’.








White privilege is the privilege of not having to be concerned that the way in which you are racialized will be the specific cause or motive for unequal treatment, in majority-White societies. White people – especially poorer White people – may experience intense social and economic inequalities and stresses, and suffer oppression at the hands of the state or other social groups and organisations, to a similar extent as people of colour, but their Whiteness will not be the cause of that mistreatment, in these societies.


## **White fragility**

This concept, popularised by Robin DiAngelo's bestselling book of the same name, was coined to explain common reactions to conversations about race and racism. Many people who have tried to engage in such conversations in majority-White societies have experienced a kind of backlash. People who are racialized as White in such societies, who benefit from the social supremacy of Whiteness (see 'Whiteness', above), often find conversations about race and racism 'triggering' of a range of beliefs, emotions, and behaviours. Specifically, they may intuitively seek to deny or downplay the extent of racism in their society, or the extent to which they personally materially benefit from its racist social structures. They may even become hostile and aggressive, or upset and 'hurt', by the notion that theirs is a structurally racist society, in which phenomena like White privilege (see 'White privilege', above) obtain. DiAngelo and others term this tendency 'fragility', highlighting the tenuous grip that social constructions of racial superiority have in practice, when their bases are revealed or brought into the open. White fragility is a common psycho-social phenomenon that can be triggered by the very discussion of racism and racial inequalities, and is associated with broader psychological trends, such as the desire to be – and to be seen to be – a 'good' person. Since many people in majority-White societies understand racism to be only a belief system, and do not consider its concomitant social structures (see 'Racism', above), they may interpret descriptions of their society, or their individual behaviour, as 'racist', as an attack on their moral substance as a person – as a claim that they are 'bad'; their intuitive response is then to become predictably defensive and / or aggressive and assert the reasons they or their society are, in fact, 'good' (or at least 'better' than someone / somewhere else).

## **White supremacy**

White supremacy is the social structure that presently obtains in all majority-White societies – and arguably at a global level too (as a consequence of European colonialism) – wherein White people benefit most from, and dominate within, mainstream economic, political, and cultural practices. It is importantly different from White supremacism, which – like other '-isms' (see 'Racism', above) – is a belief system, and specifically one that endorses White supremacy as a good and proper social structure. Far-right social and political movements like the Ku Klux Klan in the USA or National Action in the UK are explicitly White supremacist, and while the vast majority of White people in each country may find the beliefs and actions of those groups abhorrent and want to see them defeated, those same White people may nevertheless benefit from the social structure of White supremacy. White supremacy is the constellation of social power that emerges when Whiteness (see 'Whiteness', above) prevails and is associated with superiority. White supremacy overlaps with or internalises other social structures of inequality, domination and oppression, too. The intersectional (see 'Intersectionality', below) feminist bell hooks refers in her work to 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' as the social structure of the USA and other Western societies. This term highlights the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as three core vectors of structural inequality that overlap with and internalise one another: White supremacy helps to reproduce the class inequalities intrinsic to capitalism; capitalism, with its historical roots in European colonialism, promotes White supremacy and racism and maintains the economic forms of racialised inequality; patriarchy – the social supremacy of men and boys, and the social privilege that accrues to them in patriarchal societies – is a






core value of both White supremacy and capitalism, but is also experienced differently depending on how the women and girls (and non-binary people, and LGBTQIA+ people) subjected to it are racialized, with people of colour suffering gendered and sexualised violence and discrimination differently, and often more intensely, than White people.


## **Intersectionality**

This term was coined by the Black American feminist and legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1980s, but has much longer roots in the tradition of what Patricia Hill Collins calls 'Black feminist thought' in the USA, stretching at least as far back as the political speeches and activism of Sojourner Truth in the 19th century. Intersectionality describes the ways in which distinct structural forms of inequality, exploitation and oppression – particularly racism, sexism and misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, classism and class inequality, and ableism – overlap or 'intersect' with one another in the lived experiences of people who are subject to several of these oppressions at once. Crenshaw called particular attention to the intersectionality of oppressions at play in the treatment of working-class Black women by the US justice system. The intersectional oppression and exploitation of working-class women of colour, and LGBTQIA+ people of colour, and disabled people of colour, remain key themes in the work of other influential intersectional feminist thinkers and activists today, from bell hooks (see 'White supremacy', above) to Sara Ahmed. Acknowledging intersectionality means acknowledging a degree of complexity in systems of social oppression and structures of inequality. For example, the experiences of White women in patriarchal Western societies like the UK may be of routine, systematic sexism and misogyny. But they are different than – and perhaps even qualitatively less violent than – those of Black women in that same society, thanks to the relative advantage of White privilege (see 'White privilege', above). Consequently, intersectional feminists have come to call feminist movements led by and for White women, which have historically tended to ignore or downplay the differential lived experiences of women of colour, 'White feminism', and to suggest that such movements are inadequate to achieve women's liberation. 'White feminists', in this sense – whose 'Whiteness' extends beyond skin colour (see 'Whiteness', above) – may even perpetuate harmful racist stereotypes about women of colour (e.g. that they are inferior, weaker or 'need saving') and their cultural or social backgrounds (e.g. that those backgrounds are somehow 'more' patriarchal / sexist than are White societies and cultures).

## **Blackness and anti-Black racism**

Like Whiteness (see 'Whiteness', above), 'Blackness' does not (only) designate a skin colour / tone, but rather a set of social assumptions that are attached to a particular skin colour / tone, along with ideas of cultural or national 'heritage' or belonging – often summarised in the term 'community'. In structurally racist, majority-White societies, Blackness has historically been (and in many cases continues to be) associated with negative social and individual traits and behaviours – forms of social deviance and inferiority, including for example 'criminality' (see 'White privilege', above, for an elaboration of this example). But Blackness, in majority-White, majority-Black, and other societies, has also had a key function – particularly among people and communities racialized as Black themselves – as a location of positive social and cultural associations. The anti-colonial movements that finally toppled formal structures of European colonialism in the 20th century (see 'Colonialism and coloniality, below), particularly in African countries, but also in Black civil rights movements in majority-White countries like the USA, often mobilised 'pan-Africanism' and 'Black power' – intellectual and cultural projects that, in the face of White supremacy, asserted a unity, solidarity, and strength among the Black peoples (and in some cases other people of colour) of the world. Celebration of Black cultures and communities, Black national, political, economic, ethnic, and religious identities remains an important facet of this conceptualisation of Blackness today, and amounts to a






'reclaiming' of Blackness from its racist social construction as a category by White European colonialists. Among all the forms of racism (see 'Racism', above) that persist in the world today – including, for instance, anti-Semitism in Europe, anti-Asian racism in the USA, or racialised Islamophobia across the 'Western' countries – anti-Black racism is sometimes seen to be the sharpest, the most ingrained, or the model on which other racisms are now predicated or based. In the 'Afropessimist' literary and intellectual tradition, anti-Black racist violence is understood as fundamentally constitutive of postcolonial Western societies like the USA that were built on the enslavement, oppression, and systematic abuse and killing of Black people, making the end of White supremacy a less likely prospect. Other anti-racist thinkers and activists, it should be noted, reject such pessimistic conclusions, and highlight the psychological and social damage done to all people (including White people) by systems of anti-Black racism, suggesting that this will be the key to its downfall.


## **Colonialism and coloniality**

Imperialism – the belief in, and practice of, invading and occupying, or otherwise exerting military and / or economic power over other societies – has a long history, by no means confined to the majority-White European countries, and has often been linked to colonialism; the practice of 'settling' in those other societies. But the process of European colonialism that followed the 'Age of Sail' and the great European 'voyages of discovery' (by e.g. Magellan and Columbus) in the 15th and 16th centuries was particularly important in shaping our present world order. European colonialism was driven by, and in turn further enabled, the transition from 'feudal' to capitalist socio-economic structures, and it birthed the modern concepts of race and racism (see 'Race' and 'Racism', above). In this sense, its legacies are very much alive today, as we live in a world more than ever shaped by capitalist 'markets' and enterprises (think of the global dominance of brands like Google and Apple, and their everyday presence in people's lives across the world), and where racialized inequalities and social struggles are among the highest-profile and most powerful and dynamic political and cultural movements (think of the global profile, influence, and reach of the recent waves of Black Lives Matter demonstrations triggered by the murder of George Floyd by a White police officer in the USA). While successful, often violent and long, anti-colonial struggles by colonised people's – across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas – led to the collapse of formal European colonialism (the rule of countries in those continents by and for majority-White European societies / states), the 'postcolonial' world is often said to be characterised by persistent 'coloniality' in its social structures and relations, or even by practices of 'neo-colonialism'. In other words, though the formal structure of European colonialism was ultimately defeated by the concerted action of colonised peoples, the edifice of social, political, cultural and economic norms, values, and structures it put in place often remains intact. The structural, material, economic inequalities, and exploitative social relations, between colonisers and colonised during the colonial era have, on this view, not been abolished but rather transformed into the international relations between the 'Global North' or 'the West' (the former colonisers) and the 'Global South' or 'developing countries' (the formerly colonised), on the one hand, and the racist social structures and relations within the countries of the majority-White West on the other. Coloniality thus persists in social relations of politics, economy, culture, and education (including universities – their curricula, and teaching and learning practices, as well as their hierarchies of power and privilege) in the West, and to varying degrees in the wider world.

## **Decolonising**

The process of decolonisation had achieved the formal collapse of European colonialism by the late 20th century (see 'Colonialism and coloniality', above). But the systems of political and economic control that comprised formal colonial structures were not the only forms taken by coloniality, and so this did not mark





the completion of the process of decolonisation. Influential intellectuals like Frantz Fanon, the famous anti-colonial thinker and fighter, and psychiatric practitioner and theorist, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan literary critic, noted that as formal colonialism crumbled, there would still be an ongoing project of 'decolonising minds'. In other words, the social relations of inequality, domination, and oppression that had sustained colonialism were deep-seated in cultural and psychological attachments to things like damaging stereotypes, racialized binaries, beliefs in racial superiority and inferiority, and so on. Abolition of these racist structures and practices requires the process of decolonisation to reach far beyond the formal loss by colonising states of their sovereign claims over the territories and bodies of the colonised. It also requires the transformation of social, cultural, political, and economic structures and practices that reinforce racism (see 'Racism', above) and coloniality (see 'Colonialism and coloniality', above). Most prominently in recent years, universities have faced persistent calls, led mainly by students – and students of colour in particular – to 'decolonise the curriculum'. These calls are not metaphorical, and do not amount to simple changes to 'reading lists' (which are not, in any case, synonymous with 'curricula'). Instead they are a demand to fundamentally restructure approaches to teaching and learning, assessment, university power relations and hierarchies, admissions policies, and other structures and practices, all of which have led to racially unequal access to, and experiences of, higher education in the allegedly 'postcolonial' world. Decolonising the university is a project to – as bell hooks puts it – 'redress biases that have informed ways of teaching and knowing in our society'. It is about providing a more complete, honest, accurate picture of our academic subject areas to our students, and a more equal environment and set of social relations for both our colleagues and students to work and study in. It is not necessarily a process that will reach an 'end'; like 'widening participation' in higher education, it may need to be an ongoing project for transforming the university.