

Decolonising English Studies from the Semi-Periphery by Ana Cristina Mendes¹

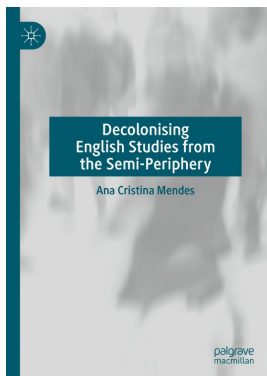
Decolonising English Studies from the Semi-Periphery de Ana Cristina Mendes

ANA MARÍA CRESPO GÓMEZ

Universidad de Almería

España

acg877@inlumine.ual.es



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*Decolonising English
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The last few years of the twentieth-first century have been in constant turmoil. After the world was ravaged by a pandemic that knew no boundaries, we witnessed an episode of racial hatred that resulted in the death of George Floyd in 2020. In the wake of his murder and the subsequent global antiracist protests, the voices for decolonisation have only grown stronger. Two recent books that cannot be overlooked prepared the ground for further research: Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo's *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (2018), and more recently Avtar Brah's *Decolonial Imaginings: Intersectional Conversations and Contestations* (2022).

To better understand how the movement to decolonise the curriculum came about, let us move our attention to a few years back on 9th March 2015, when the #RhodesMustFall movement started at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, resulting in a statue of British politician and South African coloniser Cecil Rhodes being removed. That gathered attention and captured national headlines not only in Africa but internationally, which brought other statues into question as they became increasingly controversial. Since then, educational systems have engaged in resolving the perceived discriminations embedded within schools' curricula, a shift that has only gained traction as protest movements like Black Lives Matter continue to pressure institutions. For example, a Curriculum Change Framework was implemented at the University of Cape Town for meaningful curriculum change. In addition, SOAS (the School of Oriental and Asian Studies) in London has been at the forefront of UK universities in establishing a program entitled Decolonising SOAS.

These concerns materialise in numerous books, journal articles and conferences that seek to untangle the complicated question of

decolonising the curriculum. For instance, in 2022 Marlon Lee Moncrieffe published *Decolonising Curriculum Knowledge: International Perspectives and Interdisciplinary Approaches*. More precisely, Ana Cristina Mendes contributed a chapter to a publication entitled *Decolonising the Literature Curriculum* (2022), while the *London Review of Education* dedicated a special feature to delving into the topic of decolonising the school curriculum in January 2023.

In light of this trend, and unlike the previous material, Ana Cristina Mendes' *Decolonising English Studies from the Semi-Periphery* (2023) offers new insights into decolonising the curriculum at the university level. The book results from the author's vast engagement with cultural studies in general, and although her topics of interest diverge from Salman Rushdie to diaspora studies or adaptations, we can see how in this past year she has been eager to broaden the research on decolonial studies in the classroom through various publications in outstanding journals or books.

The introduction offers a response to what it means to decolonise in the context of university education and the curriculum employing a constructivist and historicist framework. It considers the difference between a decolonised and a racist curriculum, although it points out that there might be overlaps between them. Ana Cristina Mendes voices some questions that might be asked when self-scrutinising our academic practices, which revolve around our publications' audiences, what books we read and why, and the scholars we cite. Surprisingly, as she rightfully points out, sometimes authors whose names are difficult to pronounce are overlooked by mainstream writers or academics.

Decolonising implies, as the author does, "decentring and destabilising whiteness as a socially normative and epistemic ideal issuing from a default, unmarked subject position" (2023: 3). In this postmodern society where the term post-colonial has been used and abused, it is high time the importance of decolonising the peripheral or semi-peripheral Westernised universities is stressed. Hence, it is by comprehending that the history of English studies is enmeshed with the history of the British Empire that this book begins its analysis.

The first part, "What Decolonisation Is and Why English Studies Needs It," impacts the reader with an impressive array of bibliographic references on three main axes: decolonising the university from a semi-peripheral location – Portugal; the imperial history of English Studies; and a shift in how the literary canon is taught. Hence, the first chapter, "Decolonising the University: A Turn, Shift, or Fix?" acts as a true appetiser by providing a socio-historical contextualisation of decolonial studies; asking when they started and what motivated them. Not only is the current trend contextualised, but the author does a marvellous job applying it to the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, where she is currently employed. As she rightfully points out, "in a context where economic usefulness continues to be prioritised when thinking of the purpose of a humanities education, skills such as proficiency in English are deemed instrumental and marketable" (2023: 47). This chapter familiarises readers with the bulk of publications available on decolonising factories of knowledge, focusing on English studies, which we deem relevant for graduate students wanting to delve into the topic.

The second chapter, in contrast, helps trace Portugal's semi-peripheral condition and how the author's location pressures her to reflect on calls to decolonise the curriculum. She cannot but advise the reader to see decolonial movements as not only global but context-specific, which is the very aim of this book. "Excavating the Imperial History of English Studies" visits imperialism and its connection with English studies as "high" culture, as Ana Cristina Mendes defines it. Because decolonising the curriculum revolves around challenging power/knowledge relationships, the underlying power in the project of decolonising English studies from the semi-periphery is rooted in the Gramscian concept of hegemony.

Following that line of thought, she posits in the next chapter, "Interrupting How the Literary Canon Is Taught," that to decolonise the curriculum is also to revisit what is taught in the classroom, and to select and deselect texts to ponder the canon in favour of underrated authors. Finally, to decolonise the curriculum, it is proposed to rethink power relations, as they may underline inequalities as well as the hierarchical structures of professors' authority over their students.

The second part, encompassing three more chapters and entitled "What a Decolonised Curriculum for English Studies Can Look Like," considers the rich theoretical analysis and undertakes a post-custodial approach to the archive, including texts from collaborative open-access digital repositories, which enables the democratisation of knowledge and inclusive pedagogies. Another element of the book's novelty is that Ana Cristina Mendes resorts to adaptation in her quest to decolonise the curriculum in the syllabi for the subjects she teaches in English

Literature. The canon is altered via adaptations, as it is there it can be expanded or displaced, a thought the author puts into practice through dialogic forms such as "quotation, allusion, parody and fanfic [...] scrutinising the ways that adaptation undercuts the ideas that the literary work has an essence and that there is an originary literary 'source'" (2023: 151). In that sense, Ana Cristina Mendes moves on to the case studies of two novels, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)¹ and *Home Fire* (2017)². For Emily Brönte's novel, she looks at Arnold's 2011 adaptation, the first to foreground Heathcliff's African roots, although she references other adaptations (1939, 2009 and 2011). What is very convenient in her analysis is how didactic and descriptive it is for other professors to reproduce, as she includes shots from the films and a detailed analysis of her procedure.

Another point she makes is how important historical contextualisation is for correctly understanding adaptations, which she indicates earlier on in the book's first part. Revisiting tradition through adaptation is what she proposes in the analysis of *Home Fire* (Kamila Shamsie, 2017), an adaptation of *Antigone* in the course "English Literature (Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries)". For the author, instead of reading the text concerning its previous version, it should be read on its own terms as a "decolonised" text. Her proposed analysis for this text hinges on discussing issues from post-imperial to post-9/11 debates on citizenship.

The last chapter offers a description of the courses "English Literature (Eighteenth and

¹ The chapter entitled "Decolonising *Wuthering Heights* in the Semi-Peripheral Classroom" was published in the book *Decolonising the Literature Curriculum* (2022).

² In 2021 Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes published an article based on the same novel entitled "Twenty-first-century Antigones: The Postcolonial Woman Shaped by 9/11 in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*."

Nineteenth Centuries)” and “English Literature (Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries)”, a syllabus that combines theoretical and practical sessions “based on a grid of historical referents and structuring movements, with an interpretative component examining how ideas and values are constructed through the literary text” (2023: 216). Its innovation is in how she proposes a creative-critical multimodal project by adapting a primary literary reading from the syllabus that allows students to work in groups, hence stressing peer-to-peer learning. She illustrates her points with examples of how students do cross-cultural adaptation work by reading Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), then watching Michael Winterbottom’s adaptation *Trishna* (2011) and comparing it with an earlier adaptation, Roman Polanski’s *Tess* (1979).

Aware as the author is of the existing socio-cultural situation and the still conflicting pandemic, she ends her analysis with some notes on blended classroom learning-teaching. Overall, the work is articulate and fulfils the mission of decolonial studies. Despite the confusion these studies might cause, Ana Cristina Mendes excels at offering a tangible example of how decolonising the curriculum is possible, which could be replicated by other professors who wish to do the same.

Decolonising English Studies from the Semi-Periphery (2023) familiarises the readers with a rich analysis and an intrinsic understanding of how decolonial studies, adaptation, literature and the field of English studies are intersected in a complex social and political context. As it stands, this book of well-researched chapters is a crucial addition to the domain of the decolonial curriculum and builds on the recent literature on the subject.