

## Decolonial Practices in Higher Education from the Global South: A Systematic Literature Review

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### Abstract

*Higher education institutions have been complicit with the ongoing coloniality project that reinforces and perpetuates inequities, dismisses interests, knowledges, alternative discourses, and world views different from Western European thought (Bell, 2018; Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Harms-Smith & Rasool, 2020). Education is rooted in colonialism, which raises doubts about the feasibility of universities implementing a decolonial agenda (Dhillon, 2021). To contribute to the conversation about decolonial praxis and the documented efforts in the literature on how to enact a decolonial rehumanizing agenda, this paper presents a systematic literature review of works from the Global South that attempt to disentangle universities from colonial practices in higher education. The works reviewed describe a variety of practices from pedagogical practices, curriculum changes, and institutional connections with marginalized communities that make visible knowledges, languages, and perspectives traditionally excluded from universities.*

Keywords: decoloniality, decolonial higher education, decolonial practices, Global South

### Resumen

*Las instituciones de educación superior han participado activamente en el persistente proyecto de colonialidad, el cual consolida y perpetúa las desigualdades, menospreciando intereses, saberes, discursos alternos y cosmovisiones ajenas al pensamiento europeo occidental (Bell, 2018; Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Harms-Smith & Rasool, 2020). La educación tiene sus raíces en el colonialismo, suscitando interrogantes sobre la posibilidad real de que las universidades adopten una agenda decolonial (Dhillon, 2021). Con el objetivo de enriquecer el diálogo en torno a la praxis decolonial y cuerpos blancos, sino también por su (parcial) ausencia. Además, esta investigación resalta el aspecto poco teorizado de las iniciativas documentadas en la bibliografía sobre cómo abordar una agenda de rehumanización decolonial, el presente artículo ofrece una revisión sistemática de investigaciones provenientes del Sur Global que buscan desligar a las universidades de las dinámicas coloniales presentes en la educación superior. Las investigaciones examinadas detallan una diversidad de enfoques, que van desde prácticas pedagógicas, modificaciones curriculares, hasta vínculos institucionales con comunidades en situación de marginalidad, visibilizando saberes, idiomas y perspectivas*

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*tradicionalmente marginadas en el ámbito universitario.*

Palabras claves: decolonialidad, educación superior decolonial, prácticas decoloniales, Sur Global

### **Resumo**

*As instituições de educação superior têm sido cúmplices do projeto de colonialidade em curso que reforça e perpetua desigualdades, bem como ignora interesses, conhecimentos, discursos alternativos e visões de mundo diferentes do pensamento europeu ocidental (Bell, 2018; Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Harms-Smith & Rasol, 2020). A educação tem raízes no colonialismo, o que levanta dúvidas sobre a viabilidade das universidades implementarem uma agenda descolonial (Dhillon, 2021). Para contribuir com a conversa sobre a práxis decolonial e os esforços documentados na literatura sobre como implementar uma agenda reumanizadora decolonial, este artigo apresenta uma revisão sistemática da literatura de trabalhos do Sul Global que tentam desvencilhar as universidades das práticas coloniais no ensino superior. Os trabalhos revisados descrevem uma variedade de práticas desde práticas pedagógicas, mudanças curriculares e conexões institucionais com comunidades marginalizadas que tornam visíveis saberes, linguagens e perspectivas tradicionalmente excluídas das universidades.*

Palavras-chave: decolonialidade, educação superior decolonial, práticas descoloniais, Sul Global

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### **Introduction**

Historically, in nations in the Global South, universities were originally established to serve colonial powers, and played a role in molding their elite to consolidate hegemonic structures and reproduce patterns of exclusion and domination (De Carvalho & Flores, 2018; Cortina & de la Garza, 2015; Gnecco-Lizcano, 2016; Hargreaves, 1973). Within this context, universities are part of a larger system of colonial structures to which they are bounded and by which they are permeated (Snaza & Singh, 2021). Mbembe (2016) posited that universities are “*large systems of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties*” (p. 30); meaning that universities are complex mechanisms that continue to shape society through institutionalized authority with the potential to perpetuate coloniality’s power structures.

In the history of higher education in former colonized countries, a colonial university has been defined as one that operates within frameworks that are foreign in origin and that pays “greater attention to its standing in the eyes of foreigners than the relevance of its activities to the needs of its own country” (Hargreaves, 1973, p. 26). However, universities continue to be colonized by scientific systems and knowledge that assume truth as a privileged device in which Eurocentrism is naturalized; a process that stems from the way they are embedded in geopolitics of knowledge (Restrepo, 2018). In the current context of global agendas in education and the debates around internationalization of education, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) has pointed to the tensions between two conflicting agendas, to further the project of modernity which seeks to establish “global universities,” and the demand for completing the “incomplete project of decolonization predicated on deracialisation, de-hierarchisation, decorporatisation, and depatriachisation of knowledge and education” (p. 77). This means that coloniality within the realm of higher education institutions perpetuates a system that prioritizes the interests and standards set predominantly from Euro-American-centric modernity. This perpetuation of colonial power structures within universities hinders the development of localized knowledge and inhibits the decolonization process in academia.

Even though decoloniality invites us to not conflate education with formal instruction in institutional spaces, there is a need to study universities as spaces that maintain the legitimacy of knowledge and reproduce colonial patterns of power (Ortiz-Salgado & García-Carmona, 2018). Empirical, theoretical, and historical works have documented the colonial character and history of universities in the Global South (Cubides Sánchez, 2020; Díaz, 2019; Ferreira de Souza & de Oliveira, 2022 Mejía, 2018; Ortiz-Salgado & García-Carmona, 2018; Portillo García, 2019).

Coloniality has been conceptualized as the persistence of unequal colonial power structures and the legacy of domination even after the formal end of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Coloniality in higher education institutions

is evidenced in their complicity with the ongoing coloniality project that reinforces and perpetuates inequities, dismisses interests, knowledges, alternative discourses, and worldviews different from Western European thought (Bell, 2018; Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Harms-Smith & Rasool, 2020). Coloniality has dehumanized people and broken relations not only among human beings, but also between humans and the non-human world (Escobar, 2010).

Calls to decolonize the university are present in the literature, not only in the Global South (Castro-Gómez; 2007; Cobbing, 2021; Fomunyan et al. 2020; Geldres-García, 2020; González Ponciano, 2017; Mbembe, 2016; Restrepo, 2018; Valenzuela-Baeza, 2021), but also in the academy in the North (Dei, 2016; Fellner, 2018; Hendrick & Young, 2018; McNamara & Naepi, 2018; Nakata et al., 2012; Stein, 2021). The literature presents the creation of Intercultural or Indigenous universities in Latin America as a response to demands from Indigenous movements and a radical attempt to decolonize the university by breaking away from Western universities (Contreras Castro, 2014; Cupples & Glynn, 2014; Dietz & Mateos, 2020; Krainer et al., 2017; Martínez Martínez, 2022; Padilla, 2021; Restrepo, 2014). Furthermore, it has been argued that Western universities and their disciplines are not prone to a decolonizing agenda due to the complicity of the neoliberal university in the creation of colonial knowledges and hierarchies (Dhillon, 2021). Despite these tensions, actors and movements attempt to challenge and disrupt coloniality in education within the grounds of higher education institutions.

To contribute to the conversation about “rehearsals in decoloniality” (Bell, 2018, p. 259) and the documented attempts to enact decolonial practices on the grounds of traditional Western universities, this work presents the results of a systematic literature review on strategies and interventions used to unsettle colonial practices in higher education institutions in the Global South. The term “Global South” is frequently used as a geographic term to allude to the countries that are located in the Southern hemisphere, those with common challenges such as poverty, social inequality, political instability and history of experiencing exploitation. However, Global South in this work is not used interchangeably with Third World countries or limited to geographical location, but rather refers to the recognition of a common history of colonialism and marginalization among the marginalized population of the world in order to challenge global power relations (López, 2007; Miraftab & Kudva, 2015).

The following section covers the theoretical underpinnings that guide this work, followed by the methodology, and finally the findings that describe decolonial practices in higher education institutions (HEIs), the challenges, and conditions that have enabled actors to implement them. Through this review, I acknowledge the concerted efforts of practitioners and researchers in subverting and challenging coloniality in higher education. However, this review is constrained to publications written in English and Spanish which ignores works written in other languages and those that use alternative forms of sharing decolonial practices.

## **Decolonial Theory**

For the analysis of decolonial practices in higher education reported in the literature from the Global South, I draw from decolonial theory developed from the stance of Latin American scholars, intellectuals and activists. Coloniality is one of the core concepts proposed by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano in the 1990s. The concept of coloniality emerged in response to the local histories of countries in the periphery still suffering the effects of colonialism (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 112). To better understand decolonial theory, I unpack concepts that are fundamental to its understanding. First, coloniality needs to be distinguished from colonialism. Colonialism is conceived as a process (Vergès, 2021) and a practice of domination (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) resulting in the triad of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. Coloniality survives colonialism and reproduces the defeat and inferiorization of the colonized (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). This means that even though colonialism came to an end with the independence of former colonies, the practices of domination and oppression still persist and impact the present.

Decolonial practices have roots with Indigenous People, collectives and movements in Latin America (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). As a theory, it has been developed by a group of intellectuals, activists and scholars from Latin America who have problematized modernity from the perspective of the subaltern (Restrepo & Rojas, 2010). Other scholars from the Global South have also engaged with epistemic injustice, cultural imperialism, and questioning structures of power and

marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems, but not all of them have used the label de/colonial. For example, Césaire is often associated with decolonial thought, even though he did not use the specific term decoloniality; or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who has criticized the colonial legacy in Africa.

Coloniality, as conceptualized by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Maldonado-Torres (2016), revolves around three interrelated dimensions: the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2016). The coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) refers to the structures of power, control and hegemony that persist, and continue to be favored, from the era of colonialism stretching to the present. The coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2000) speaks of epistemicide or the destruction and displacement of alternative forms of knowledge while appropriating what is useful for “imperial designs” (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 110). The coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) refers to the dehumanization, othering, and lack of recognition of the worth of those that were colonized (Cobbing, 2021). Then, decoloniality is the opposition to the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Decolonization originally meant the undoing of colonialism by means of freeing colonies from the domination of other nation-states (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The usage of decolonization has become more common, but current conversations around decolonization need to involve Indigenous Nations and Peoples who also make emphasis on reparations of land, rights of Indigenous people, and their sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Mignolo argues that the first waves of decolonization in the Americas, Asia and Africa involved the independence of former colonies, but left the colonial hierarchies intact (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). In contrast to this political decolonization, decoloniality implies a radical project of reconstruction of structures, experiences and relations beyond the existing colonial hierarchies (Escobar, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2017) which offers possibilities for other ways of “being, thinking, knowing, sensing, and living” (Castell et al., 2018, p. 81). In this sense, decoloniality engages not only Indigenous, Black, and racialized individuals, but it underscores coloniality as a wider concern as we all live and experience the colonial matrix of power. Its purpose is to break away from the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and to dismantle hierarchies that dehumanize individuals by countering dominant discourses, knowledges, and practices (Maldonado-Torres, 2016).

As a theoretical framework and pedagogical practice, decoloniality can make visible power relations rooted in colonialism (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), illuminating how we “continue to live in the political, economic, ideological, and emotional aftermath of a world dominated by the principle of Western superiority” (Blanche et al., 2021, p. 370). In this sense, the “praxis of decoloniality”, as Mignolo & Walsh (2018, p. 1) state, does not imply claims of all-encompassing solutions or the proposal of new abstract principles, but refers to the interconnectedness between various local histories, interpretations, and practices in order to create dialogue and collaboration among those perspectives. In a complementary approach to the view of decoloniality as praxis, Menezes de Souza & Duboc (2021) consider critical reflection and rejecting coloniality through strategies that question normative elements and reinforce the importance of localized perspectives. Based on Dussel's and Kopenawa's work, these authors reflect on investing in alternatives and de-universalizing decoloniality so as not to fall into the trap of universal fictions of modernity that dismiss local knowledge. They underscore the need to remain aware of attempts to impose normativity in decolonial thought and education, emphasizing the need for context-specific approaches to a decoloniality-oriented educational agenda. Therefore, engaging in decolonial work and praxis involves understanding that it is not a singular, monolithic ideology but a diverse and multifaceted approach to addressing coloniality's consequences.

## Method

For this systematic literature review, the initial planning involved defining the topic, setting, and preliminary work. The search terms, in English and Spanish (in which I am fluent), included *decolonial higher education/educación superior decolonial*, *decoloniality*, *decolonization/decolonialidad*, *decolonización*, *decolonization*, *decolonizing/decolonizando*, *decolonize/decolonizar*, AND *higher education/educación superior*, *university*, *universities/universidad universidades*. The range for the selected articles was ten years (2012-2022) and limited to higher education, but the selection was intentional in identifying works written by authors who epistemologically and geographically are located in the Global South. This

means that after having identified the first sample of articles on decolonization of higher education, I selected those that were written by authors working in Latin American countries (Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico) and Africa (Ghana and South Africa). The search was done in databases such as ERIC, EBSCO, Scopus, GoogleScholar, as well as Dialnet, SciELO, and Redalyc, which gather scientific articles from academic journals from Latin America and the Caribbean.

To select articles, I screened and reviewed titles, abstracts, and keywords. Second, because the geographical location of the decolonial praxis was an element of analysis, only works from the Global South were selected. When this information was not explicitly stated, the affiliation of the author(s) was used to identify where the practice was implemented. Articles that did not describe an implementation were excluded. A total of 16 works out of 84 were identified. The articles selected were mostly available as open-access or otherwise made available publicly, except for three that were requested through the university library. For data analysis, I considered the objectives and contexts of the decolonial practices, the description of their implementation, how they demonstrated decolonial work at higher education institutions, and their implications. The background of the experiences and limitations, if provided, were also examined. I coded and analyzed the articles, and suggested a set of criteria that allowed me to respond to the following two questions: 1) how does the practice of decolonial projects reorient, disrupt, and challenge colonialities of power, knowledge, and being? 2) What challenges were faced, or to what do the authors credit the success of the experiences? This process was not linear-earlier steps were redefined during the process but changes were documented.

## **Results**

The findings suggest that decolonial practices in higher education are reflected in classroom strategies and pedagogies to allow for a plurality of voices, in attempts to decolonize and indigenize the curriculum, and in larger scale projects of Intercultural or Indigenous higher education institutions. Decolonial strategies and pedagogies are varied in their scope and dependent on geographical contexts and realities (Pimentel & Rocha, 2022; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021), disciplines (Blanche et al., 2021; Carolissen et al., 2017; García León & García León, 2019; Morreira, 2017), and the individuals involved (De Carvalho & Flórez, 2018; Kessi, 2017). Collectively, these practices challenge coloniality and epistemicide, the privilege of Eurocentric knowledge, and reflect the need to articulate work happening at different levels for meaningful transformation. The implementation of decolonial projects does not happen in a vacuum. Policies, support from leaders, and people committed to them make it possible to conceive and implement decolonial agendas.

However, decolonial practices in higher education face continuous challenges and pitfalls in their implementation even from well-intentioned initiatives. The possibilities offered by decoloniality for practitioners and scholars invested in social justice make it necessary to continue documenting the work to unsettle practices that perpetuate inequities in higher education. Learning from this literature can give us insight into how to shift away from epistemicide to reimagine higher education for a humanizing pedagogy that engages a plurality of voices to counter the dehumanizing of education.

### **Description of Decolonial Practices in the Literature**

Decolonial practices evidenced in the literature are varied in their scope and dependent on geographical context, disciplines, and the individuals involved. Table 1 presents the contexts of those experiences and the spaces for those decolonial practices. The works provide examples of 16 decolonial projects: eight in Latin American countries including Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico; six in South Africa; and one in Ghana.

**Table 1***Decolonial Practices in Higher Education*

Authors and Year	Context	Scope of Decolonial Practice
Barraza García (2014)	Colombia	Community connections
Blanche et al. (2021)	South Africa	Teaching & Curriculum
De Carvalho & Flórez (2018)	Brazil	Community connections
Carolissen et al. (2017)	South Africa	Teaching and Curriculum
García León & García León (2019)	Colombia	Curriculum
Guapacha et al. (2018)	Colombia	Institutional project
Hallberg Adu (2021)	Ghana	Teaching
Ivanoff & Loncon (2016)	Argentina	Community connections
Kessi(2017)	South Africa	Teaching and Institutional project
Knight (2018)	South Africa	Curriculum
Morreira (2017)	South Africa	Curriculum
Pimentel & Rocha (2022)	Brazil	Community connection
Rasool & Harms-Smith (2021)	South Africa	Curriculum
Rodríguez et al. (2018)	Ecuador	Curriculum
Vilarinho et al. (2020)	Brazil	Teaching
Zárate-Moedano (2018)	Mexico	Teaching

These attempts to decolonize the university have a variety of scopes. The classroom is one of the first spaces in which decolonial practices are enacted with attempts at decolonial pedagogies and teaching (Blanche et al, 2021; Hallberg Adu, 2021; Kessi, 2017; Vilarinho et al, 2020; Zárate-Moedano, 2018). Classroom strategies and pedagogies allow for plurality of voices. Second, decolonial practices reported in the literature give account of attempts at curricular experiences founded on the decolonial turn within a variety of disciplines: community psychology (Blanche et al., 2021; Carolissen et al., 2017), literacy (García León & García León, 2019), humanities (Morreira, 2017), geography (Knight, 2018), social work (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021), and teacher education (Rodríguez et al., 2018; Vilarinho et al., 2020), and lectures open for all university students (Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016). Finally, in Latin America, institutions created spaces for Indigenous students' identities to be visibilized (Guapacha et al., 2018), and in South Africa, for Black students and faculty to tackle issues and influence institutional change (Kessi, 2017). Decolonial projects within traditional universities open up spaces for alternative forms of knowledge by involving Indigenous and marginalized communities and creating connections between communities and universities (Barraza-García, 2014; De Carvalho & Flores, 2018; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016; Pimentel & Rocha, 2022).

### **Disrupting and Challenging Coloniality in the Classroom: Pedagogy and Curriculum**

Out of the 16 texts reviewed, five focused on aspects of pedagogy and curriculum (Blanche et al, 2021; Hallberg Adu, 2021; Kessi, 2017; Vilarinho et al, 2020; Zárate-Moedano, 2018). These studies describe classroom interventions in teaching and learning practices with a decolonial approach. Mainly, this literature attempts to reshape and deconstruct

practices that reinforce the coloniality of knowledge, and tangentially, they address the coloniality of power and being. A decolonial attitude inherently challenges epistemic colonization (Maldonado-Torres, 2017), and in the literature, decolonial efforts examined knowledge production, content, existing hierarchies and domination of Euro-centric and Anglo-centric knowledge (Carolissen et al., 2017; Morreira, 2017). They recognized the voices of Indigenous, Black and minoritized students by linking knowledges and alternative forms of communication that have traditionally been dismissed within HEIs (García León & García León, 2019). Even though there might be overlap between the decolonial content and the decolonial processes of teaching and learning, decolonial praxis, as discussed in the texts (Blanche et al., 2021; Carolissen et al., 2017; García León & García León, 2019; Hallberg Adu, 2021; Knight, 2018; Morreira, 2017), distinguished classroom interventions in pedagogy and curriculum. Teaching has reinforced academic norms and practices such as individualizing and authoritarianism (Blanche et al., 2021). In other words, decolonial content through the curriculum incorporates knowledges, perspectives, and non-Western epistemologies, while decolonial processes of teaching and learning involve challenging practices that perpetuate power imbalances. Therefore, decolonial scholars in HEIs need to consider teaching as well as curriculum.

On the one hand, Carolissen et al. (2017) and Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) use participatory teaching methodologies and flexible learning methods to promote reflexivity and critical connections with disciplinary principles. For Carolissen et al., (2017), these were principles in community psychology and for Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021), these were associated with the discipline of social work. On the other hand, some of the texts show the adoption of assignments that required other forms of expressions, such as poetry, dance, art, and music. These assignments challenged the position of the essay-written style as a privileged form of intellectual expression by contextualizing writing “as a historically specific tool which has been wielded as much for oppressive as for liberatory purposes” (Blanche et al., 2021, p. 376). In Ghana, Hallberg (2021) used Wiki-editing as a form of “writing back to dominant narratives,” (p. 39) to develop students’ research skills, critical thinking, and to contribute to knowledge on Africa for global consumption. In this way, Hallberg (2021) offers a way to decolonize the classroom by challenging texts produced in the Global North and engaging students in knowledge production.

Practices of critical reflection and research in the classroom aimed to engage students in collective social action (Carolissen et al., 2017; Kessi, 2017; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021; Zárata-Moedano, 2018). For example, Kessi (2017) created linkages through research by involving Black students at the University of Cape Town in participatory action research (PAR) projects using Photovoice methods, while Zárata-Moedano (2018) used visuals and media for reflection and research on veiled racist attitudes in Mexico.

Kessi’s (2017) study described students’ use of photovoice in which they immersed themselves in their communities’ lives. Two specific photos depicted in this article highlight students’ reframing of poverty as a consequence of historical injustice and of the impact of precarious work conditions on well-being, instead of stigmatizing drug use. Kessi’s (2017) decolonial practice challenged higher education institutions in the Global South to break away from knowledge transmission, and instead, to create space for knowledge production. At the same time, Kessi’s (2017) approach emphasized students’ humanity and that of their communities when they were asked to make visible through photos and stories the assets and needs of their communities.

Similarly, Zárata-Moedano (2018), in Mexico, attempted to increase students’ awareness through reflection on the construction of national identities such as "Indigenous", "Spaniards", "Blacks" and "Mestizos" and the reproduction of privileges and disadvantages through media literacy within universities in their curricular projects. Critical reflexivity is a mechanism with the potential to prompt students to critique the contexts in which they are embedded and facilitate transformative learning. Carolissen et al. (2017) also drew from students’ photographs, drawings, communities and personal experiences to raise awareness and challenge the effects of coloniality in South Africa.

These decolonial pedagogical practices attempted rehumanization of beings and relations. Zárata-Moedano (2018) questioned systems and representations of identities making visible the legitimization and construction of symbolic racialization and inferiorization of others. Decolonial projects for teaching and learning *otherwise* reflected on relationships to engage in dialogue with others (Vilarinho et al., 2020). According to Mignolo and Walsh (2018) decoloniality is “constructed in resistance and opposition, as well as insurgence, affirmation, and re-existence (as rehumanization)” (p. 88).

Teaching and learning with a decolonial approach in mind prompted critique of contexts, awareness of positions and possible complicity with colonial projects. The process of knowledge generation, claims of superiority and hierarchy, and universality of Western knowledge (Lander, 2005; Castro-Gómez, 2007) are challenged through assignments and classroom practices that involve students to decenter knowledge production and develop critical consciousness through inquiry of contextualized local social issues (Hallberg Adu, 2021; Kessi, 2017; Vilarinho et al., 2020; Zárata-Moedano, 2018). The ultimate goal of these teaching and learning decolonial projects is to understand how the world is dominated by the discourse of Western superiority with persistent political, economic, emotional, and ideological effects in the present (Blanche et al., 2021).

Curricula at universities have also been seen as a form of decolonial response. Curriculum is viewed as “a symbolic process that reproduces existing relations of power” (Carolissen et al., 2017, p. 497). Then, a decolonial curriculum is one that attempts to “unearth the power dynamics at play in the curriculum itself, and in the pedagogy that recontextualises knowledge for learners, and begin to consciously shift these if transformation is to take place” (Morreira, 2017, p. 10). The curricular practices in the literature challenged the coloniality of knowledge by resisting dominant ideologies and drawing from local content and knowledges, which also validated their presence within the university. In this way, these practices indirectly resisted and subverted the coloniality of power and being. However, there are marked differences between decolonial curricula proposed from the Global South in South Africa and Latin America. In South Africa, scholars engaged with Africanization and the realities of Blacks in a post-Apartheid South Africa (Blanche et al., 2021; Carolissen et al., 2017; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021), while in Latin America, decolonial curricula focused on the recognition of Afro-descendants as well as Indigenous Peoples’ epistemologies and worldviews (Barraza García, 2014; García León & García León, 2019; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016).

In South Africa, the literature about curricula is centered on students, the historical context of their country and the persistent effects of colonialism in their communities. In a case study describing almost two decades of work, Blanche et al. (2021) recounted the phases of transformation of three courses in community psychology. The authors considered ideological pillars according to their global historical contexts, and placed students’ personal experiences at the center of learning and engagement with community organizations. In the same context, Carolissen et al. (2017) described four case studies of curricular changes considering reflexivity and the opportunities to explore multiple perspectives and epistemologies. Students were engaged in processes of looking inwards and outwards to create connections between their personal stories, their family, the community and broader historical and political contexts. Besides, some of the revised text shows that content in the curriculum can also serve to respond to and interrupt existing knowledge hierarchies to give more space to multiple forms of knowledge and legitimize their validity in courses (Morreira, 2017). In a similar process of reflexivity and participatory action research, Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) explained a collective process designed to transform and re-imagine the curriculum in order to empower and raise consciousness in students.

In South America, decolonial curricular projects questioned practices that lead to the oblivion and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples and other forms of knowledge. These projects anchored their curriculum in the recognition of human rights for Indigenous groups to guarantee intercultural practices given the history of genocide and erasure of Indigenous Peoples and other ethnic minorities in HEIs such as Afro-descendants. For example, the *Cátedra Libre de Pueblos Originarios* (Public Lecture on Native Populations) created in 2008 at Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia in Argentina developed activities and syllabi to promote visibility of native populations’ experiences and created linkages among classrooms, and within and outside the university with Indigenous communities (Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016). Other experiences in the region similarly opened up classroom spaces to encourage dialogue with other epistemologies and knowledges such as the Intercultural School of Indigenous Diplomacy, a project developed in partnership with various Indigenous organizations in Colombia (Barraza García, 2014). Another curricular change engaged in transforming a literacy curriculum in collaboration with Indigenous and Afro-descendant students to recognize the worth of their literacy practices (García & García, 2019). In these experiences, there are attempts to re-story or reconstruct colonial narratives through subaltern perspectives to offer a reinterpretation of historical events.

Harms-Smith and Rasool (2020) also argue that decoloniality of a curriculum is problematic if it ignores the material realities of ongoing coloniality such as economic exploitation, social inequality, land dispossession, cultural and knowledge



suppression, among other tangible consequences of coloniality that persist even after the formal end of colonization. Therefore, curricular practices should address not only the coloniality of knowledge, but also the coloniality of power. Transformation of higher education is complex and requires challenging paradigms beyond the curriculum (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). The following practices involve communities to transform coloniality within higher education institutions.

### **Challenging Coloniality by Building Bridges between Universities and Communities**

Within institutional decolonial practices, it is noteworthy to highlight that those that occur within traditional universities attempt to delink from coloniality by engaging *with* rather than thinking *about* historically marginalized groups (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). A relevant example from Latin America is *Cabildos Indígenas Universitarios* (roughly translated as Indigenous University Assemblies), which are spaces created by and for Indigenous students to foster community and to address their needs when moving from their territories to study in urban areas (Guapacha et al., 2018). However, *Cabildos* also serve as a platform for cultural recognition and political, social, and academic participation to make visible forms of oppression faced by Indigenous students in HEIs, while promoting resistance against oppressive systems (Guapacha et al., 2018; Muelas Calambas, 2020). In South Africa, a similar initiative was the establishment of the Black Academic Caucus (BAC) at the University of Cape Town (Kessi, 2017), which involved students and academics in order to influence issues of racism and marginalization on campus and in the curriculum. The BAC has engaged in collective action for transformation in different areas, and with networks, alliances, and partnerships, resulting in more visibility and varied decolonial efforts within the campus. Additional approaches to policy-making to address decolonization at institutions incorporate representation from staff, faculty and students (Knight, 2018).

Practices beyond the classroom attempt to disrupt and challenge universities as spaces of colonial conversations. Decolonial experiences have created links and alliances between Indigenous Peoples and traditional universities. Some decolonial experiences, organized by universities along with Indigenous communities, welcome Indigenous *mestres* (masters of knowledge) (De Carvalho & Flórez, 2018). These initiatives are not attempts of assimilation, but seek to recognize their role as knowledge holders, and engaging in dialogue with indigenous and rural communities, elevating their voices (Barraza-García, 2014; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016; Pimentel & Meneses, 2022). First, the *Encuentro de saberes* (Meeting of Knowledges) embraces Indigenous Peoples within university grounds who teach in different areas within the university, and are recognized on an equal level as other faculty members (De Carvalho & Flórez, 2018).

Similarly, the *Teia dos Povos* (Peoples' Web) at the Federal University of Southern Bahia created networks with Black, Indigenous, and rural communities countering epistemic coloniality. This is achieved through an “ecology of knowledges,” a term that the authors draw from the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Pimentel & Meneses, 2022). The mentioned network involved dialogues with Indigenous Peoples in order to articulate an emancipatory project that recognizes a plurality of knowledges within academic spaces (Pimentel & Meneses, 2022). The presence of Indigenous Peoples and communities and their participation within alternative programs in traditional universities evidence a decolonization of academic elitist spaces by entering into relationship with Indigenous Peoples in recognition of their epistemological frameworks, ancestral knowledges, and memory (Barraza García, 2014; Pimentel & Rocha, 2022). It is by working alongside with those peoples, whose knowledges have been invisibilized and distorted, that the coloniality of power and knowledge is transformed, and the ideals of decolonial work can be achieved.

Another important example is the work conducted at the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia located in Ushuaia-Argentina. This institution, along with Indigenous communities, created actions that included institutional network agreements not only within Argentina, but with universities in Latin America for the defense of Indigenous Peoples' rights, as well as publications around Indigenous issues. They also established research projects, courses, and seminars to train teachers, to develop Indigenous Peoples' capacity to defend their Land rights, for revitalization and appreciation of original languages by teaching the languages *Mapuzungun* and *Guarani* within university classrooms, as well as through radio programs, and the development of a project for water supply for their own Indigenous communities (Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016). Fostering a collaborative approach with Indigenous Peoples allows communities to continue reclaiming their cultural

identity and knowledges without having to constantly face the obstacles that academia imposes. In recognizing and uplifting Indigenous voices, these practices foster an inclusive and diverse academic environment that challenges colonial power relations.

These practices depict decolonial re-existence through “the sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 106). These initiatives move forward, reorient, and strengthen political and organizational processes by working in alliance with Indigenous communities in nations with deeply-rooted hegemonic practices and histories of marginalization and racism (Barraza-García, 2014; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016). They articulated epistemic decolonization in the academy with the emancipatory struggle of communities, organizations and Indigenous Peoples (Pimentel & Rocha, 2022).

Likewise, the mentioned practices advocate for decolonization of knowledge (Barraza-García, 2014; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016), seeking to reconstruct power relations by fostering equal and mutual relations of respect with Indigenous People. By reconfiguring existing hierarchies, these practices strive to remake relationships and aim for cultural recognition with cultural and political conversations that emphasize different perspectives, so that Indigenous People can assert their rightful place in shaping their own futures. As Castro-Gómez (2017) argues, challenging coloniality entails not only embracing cultural differences, but also demands transforming power structures to address the root causes that have historically perpetuated oppression and inequity in the first place. The projects mentioned here that have centered the voices of Indigenous People actively aim to disrupt some of the colonial legacies. Decolonizing higher education, in the end, not only benefits Indigenous People involved in these projects, but also enriches and promotes cultural diversity, mutual understanding, and critical engagement from multiple perspectives.

### **Motivation and Possibilities to Implement a Decolonial Agenda**

Decolonial initiatives within higher education do not occur in isolation, but are part of a larger context that can drive their implementation. For example, motivation to implement decolonial practices can come from social demands. Students’ awareness and demands for decolonial programs and universities (Bell, 2018; Blanche et al., 2021; Maldonado-Torres, 2016) force higher education institutions to question their practices and implement changes that respond to student requests. In South Africa, larger social movements like #BlackLivesMatter, or student protests (Rhodes and Fees Must Fall) that questioned disciplinary knowledges and increasing social inequalities have motivated higher education institutions and educators to address issues of systemic racism in academia (Blanche et al, 2021; Carolissen et al, 2017; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). Similarly, in Latin America, Indigenous movements and their demands in the region motivated changes in policies and constitutions to recognize the plural and multiethnic character of countries and, eventually, affected educational systems (Guapacha et al, 2018; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016).

People committed to decolonial work make it possible to conceive and implement decolonial projects. It is evident in the literature how individuals engage in critical reflection of their practices. For example, Blanche and colleagues (2021) start their journey for a decolonial curriculum in community psychology by questioning and reflecting on how to engage in decolonial work within their nation and global context. Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) also described their unrest as educators with an “imperative to engage in decoloniality” (p. 60) and their willingness to experience discomfort in the process of recognizing their own participation in reinforcing coloniality. These concerns imply a decolonial attitude involving reflexivity and collective strategies to interrogate and start to transform HEIs. Along with these individual reflections, communities and collectives of individuals exposed to racism and marginalization have gathered to participate actively in decolonial research and institutional projects for transformation (Kessi, 2017; Pimentel & Rocha, 2022). Systems are colonial, but people can engage in meaningful work that seek to decolonize research, practice, and education (Fellner, 2018).

While some encounter challenges in terms of a lack of clarity of how to proceed to enact a decolonial agenda in HEIs (Knight, 2018), scholars have discussed that it is a complex and time-consuming process. This undertaking requires the development of theoretical perspectives, methodologies for implementation, reflexivity (examination of values and assumptions) and critical reflection (analysis and evaluation of experiences) as well as participatory action research

processes (Blanche et al., 2021; García León & García León, 2019; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). Blanche et al. (2021) and Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) described the long-term process required to prepare, plan, reflect on, and implement a decolonial curriculum within their programs and departments. It is clear that a decolonial agenda cannot be enacted overnight and requires clarification of objectives and guidelines, and constant interrogation of the dimensions of coloniality. Blanche et al. (2021) described a careful consideration of principles and Rasool & Harms-Smith (2021) recounted how in the initial stages, the process required time for collective reflection “to allow educators to clarify and engage with decoloniality and find a common understanding amongst ourselves” (p. 61).

Involving students and their voices as well is necessary for decoloniality to happen (García León & García León, 2019; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). The use of participatory action research to develop decolonial projects served as a methodology to enable a decolonial agenda as it challenged the coloniality of power and being. In this sense, participatory action research opened up spaces to share control, power, and expertise in decision-making for students and others that are usually marginalized in the development of curricula and teaching (García León & García León, 2019; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021).

Finally, university authorities appear in the literature as a factor that plays a key role in the conception and support of decolonial pedagogies, curriculum (Blanche et al., 2021; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021), and institutional initiatives (Guapacha et al., 2018; Ivanoff & Loncon, 2016). For example, Blanche et al. (2021) specifically point to the support and motivation of university authorities in the revision and innovation of curricula. The awareness of university authorities of decolonial approaches facilitated innovation, decision-making and, ultimately meaningful changes. Acceptance of and openness to decolonial practices from university authorities demonstrate the need to institutionalize actions and strategies, and to develop policy that clearly addresses and encourages decolonial work at different levels (teaching, curriculum, and institutional). Scholars in the literature have been able to create change both individually and through collective processes and movements; however, when there is institutional support, the challenges are alleviated and the focus shifts to raising awareness, fostering reflexivity and implementing change, rather than fighting against the institutions where these decolonial practices emerge.

## **Challenges to Decolonial Work**

The decolonial projects in the literature illustrate forms of resistance from individuals and communities in liminal spaces that disrupt and challenge the system at different levels. Some of the diverse practices described in the literature that attempt to disrupt coloniality expressed facing challenges in their implementation. It is undeniable that the coloniality of power, knowledge and being continue to operate within higher education institutions. The challenges faced by scholars engaged in decolonial practices in higher education institutions in the Global South report the complications in the processes of decolonial pedagogies, curricula, and institutional dynamics with communities.

Resistance and challenges come from different sources and are caused by the persistence of coloniality in higher education institutions, which affects the original intention of these decolonial practices. First, when implementing teaching and curriculum with a decolonial basis, two of the revised studies (Blanche et al., 2021; Carolissen et al., 2017) mention groups of students who were resistant to decolonial curricula, and did not necessarily welcome teaching that deviates from Western norms. The academic legitimacy of decolonial teaching, curriculum and institutions may be questioned. In the study by Blanche et al. (2021), some students responded to decolonial teaching and evaluation of learning with an “anything-goes approach” (p. 376).

The coloniality of knowledge influences not only students’ discourses, but also those of professors. Coloniality builds hierarchies, and influences curricula, pedagogical practices, and teaching methodologies (Ferreira de Souza & de Oliveira, 2022). To foster decoloniality in higher education, it is necessary to be aware of how Eurocentric ways of knowing, teaching and learning influence students’ and educators’ perceptions of the legitimacy of non-western knowledges and practices. Blanche et al. (2021) and Carolissen et al. (2017) argue that some students as well as faculty struggle to recognize multiple epistemologies as valid.

Rasool & Harms-Smith (2021) describe how initial attempts to decolonize the curriculum are affected by lack of commitment from its actors which eventually affects the aims of decoloniality to achieve transformation. On the one hand, decolonial attempts may become superficial with little engagement from stakeholders because of a lack of clarity and direction (Knight, 2018). On the other hand, resistance to decolonial practices can also come from legitimate concerns regarding careless adoption, and scholars warn against trends of romanticizing decoloniality (Carolissen et al., 2017) or adopting top-down approaches that reinforce colonial mindsets (Blanche et al., 2021).

For example, Dhillon (2021) states that leadership at higher education institutions may employ colonial mechanisms in discourses, making decoloniality a currency (Dhillon, 2021). In this sense, the use of decoloniality is problematic when it overlooks its diverse forms and dimensions beyond epistemic decoloniality (curriculum) without acknowledging its material consequences (Harms-Smith and Rasool, 2020), or being followed by any action (Kessi, 2017).

Finally, structural and systemic constraints are evidenced in the lack of material resources and support to make decolonial practices possible. Conservatism within institutions can hinder progress and a lack of reflexivity in teaching and pedagogy in certain disciplines can reproduce Eurocentric models, requiring an articulation of both content and teaching (Morreira, 2017). Projects that connect community and universities are hindered by cuts in funding to programs, research, and scholarship (Pimentel & Rocha, 2022). Decolonial projects within traditional universities face the struggle of neoliberal universities encountering entrenched and ongoing coloniality in educational systems (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). Higher education institutions in the Global South also encounter tensions as they need to negotiate between internationalization standards and demands and a decolonial agenda (Knight, 2018).

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The possibilities offered by decoloniality for practitioners and scholars invested in addressing the economic, political and cultural effects of colonialism, make it necessary to continue the work to unsettle practices that perpetuate inequity in higher education. The decolonial practices discussed in this literature review range from changing classroom practices, curriculum and institutions in order to remake relations with oneself and others by making visible knowledges, languages, and perspectives that are traditionally excluded from universities. The 16 articles included in this systematic literature review evidence how decolonial practices are contextual to geographical and political realities. Collectively, these decolonial practices challenge the privilege of Eurocentric knowledge, epistemicide, and reflect the need to articulate work happening at different levels for meaningful transformation.

A humanizing pedagogy is centered around humans, highly contextualized, relevant and socially driven (Law, 2015). In order to challenge and oppose coloniality, and the dehumanization that comes with it, decoloniality does not only subvert and deconstruct, but invites us to be in alignment with a decolonial attitude. This implies “reaching out to others, communicating, and organizing” (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 7). In the long term, the purpose of decoloniality is to imagine and build “a different world” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 88), which involves not only challenging colonial structures and mindsets, but imagining a future where diverse knowledge systems and beings are valued and respected. Decolonial attempts in higher education settings can shed light into the emancipatory potential of teaching and other institutional activities (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021), such as how the production of knowledge is challenged in pedagogical approaches, curricula, and institutional practices. For Mignolo & Walsh (2018) “decoloniality is undoing and redoing; it is praxis” (p. 120). This quote highlights the imperative to document the specific forms of disentanglement from coloniality that are taking place within university settings, and how collectives are disrupting colonial paradigms of being, thinking, and doing.

The systematic literature review revealed that the process of enacting a decolonial agenda in higher education needs to be intentional. It is clear that the process of decoloniality is not linear, nor is it homogeneous, and there is not a one size that fits all. Insights for significant transformation of teaching, curricula and institutions can illuminate what decoloniality looks like in different educational contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to continue documenting and making visible practices that are highly relevant and exemplify the different meanings of decoloniality for those who identify as living and working in the Global South. I trust that this and other exercises of analyzing the academic production of decolonial efforts will contribute by shedding light on the opportunities and complexities that decolonial endeavors mean for higher education.

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