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DE_colonize uni_VERSITY. Universities as they may become.

Since the turn of the millennium many initiatives have developed that aim at the redefinition of institutions of knowledge (Waibel 2014: 105). Although these projects are situated within different geopolitical contexts and despite their varying relations to the university, they are united in claiming access to and participation in the production of knowledge.

Current projects like the Universidades de la Tierra in Oaxaca and Chiapas (Mexico), the Really Open University in Leeds (UK) or Kiron University in Berlin try to practice epistemic disobedience, that is the deconstruction or decolonization of Western configurations of relations of power and knowledge (Mignolo 2011). Epistemic disobedience can be variously understood as an attempt to give non-European intellectuals a voice (Mbembe 2016; März 2006), to invent non-capitalist and non-communist, namely decolonial systems of societal cohabitation (Mignolo 2011), or as part of a more fundamental critical examination of epistemic maxims such as ‘truth’ and ‘universality’ in the attempt to (re-)discover and canonize negated knowledge structures. Whether providing accessible education for indigenous people who are missing university certificates (Universidad de la Tierra), or teaching free online courses to refugees (Kiron University): these initiatives want to unlock the “police order” of university education.¹

In the current climate of a post-imperial and defensive nationalism with a very high potential of racism (Osterhammel 2016), these initiatives intervene in conditions of knowledge production and make a decolonial future imaginable. When this “exceptional journey into a new world has to be undertaken again”, who, then, “defines the original content, for which a new form needs to be created”, asks Achille Mbembe in his book Ausgang aus der langen Nacht. Versuch über ein entkolonisiertes Afrika (2016: 24, transl. KK). What kind of knowledge and/as original content do we have to define in order to initiate a new kind of university? Does this knowledge originate

¹ Jacques Rancière describes police order as an ensemble of strategies like administration, police repression and institutional regulation (2002). These strategies are at heart of the question of accessing university as a regulated, administered institution coated with repression. Regarding police repression at universities see Doyle (2015).
outside of the institution, or is it original in the sense of belonging to a place beyond well-trodden paths? Above all: whose knowledge is it?

With these questions in mind, the initiative DE_colonize uni_VERSITY started in 2016 at the University of Art and Design Linz in cooperation with maiz, the autonomous centre for and by migrant women. At first the initiative contributed to a loose assemblage of different university departments but now forms part of a larger network, called “OPEN UP University”. OPEN UP includes the program for MORE-students which is supported by all public universities in Austria and allows refugees to participate in all seminars as non-degree students. It also involves the University of Art and Design’s attempt to participate in the network “Scholars at Risk”. Like The Silent University, “Scholars at Risk” supports academics who are politically prosecuted and endangered in their research. The third strand – DE_colonize uni_VERSITY – is, an experimental space for discussion and action.

DE_colonize uni_VERSITY organized the workshop The Institutionalization of Anti-racism at University against the Background of Colonial Scholarliness, the public panel discussion Post/migrant art and Decolonial Knowledge with Azadeh Sharifi, Marissa Lôbo and Adriana Torres Topaga, as well as a lecture by Gabriele Dietze, who – taking the infamous events during New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne as an example – focused on the convergence of racism and sexism.

Since the initiative mainly organizes workshops, events and lectures, we may take up Mbembe’s question once more: What knowledge and whose knowledge can turn the university into a space of decolonization during a moment of right-wing populism and nationalism? Mbembe raises his question from the standpoint of an African scholar, a “location of transition and transit” (2016: 27, transl. by KK). Scholars based in Austria face this question from a location of impasse and the criminalization of transit and unwanted journey. How can we generate a situated knowledge that critically engages with Europe’s pivotal role in the creation of the geopolitical and epistemic status quo? How can we avoid confusing decolonization with neoliberal “diversity management”?

Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has critiqued the appeal of labels such as “diversity” – that “happy point of intersectionality” (Ahmed 2012: 14). Ahmed contends that when institutions use such terminology affirmatively, they leave prejudices and reservations that function on an
unconscious level untouched. Other critics argue that a selective use of cultural “diversity” for the purpose of competitiveness in the fight for “excellence” (in other words money) is not aimed at equality (Ha 2016: 163). On the contrary, these policies contribute to a racially motivated migration policy (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2016: 174): Due to the internationalization efforts of universities, global mobility of student populations has increased tremendously but is regulated, at the same time, by difference-based and highly selective requirements for visa applications. Thus, biased migration policies and the internationalization of the university sector form two sides of one coin. Hence Ahmed warns: “We might want to be cautious about the appealing nature of diversity and ask whether the ease of its incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge” (2012: 1). One might add: we should be wary of employing “decolonization” as an empty label for an institution that adorns itself with ‘colourful’ events or contributes to its annual knowledge output (Since 2002, Austrian universities are obliged to keep records of the scale and impact of their research in ways that recall Hongwei's remarks about British higher education.).

Ultimately, talk about decolonization alone won’t be enough. The task must be to generate jobs for ethnically and politically persecuted academics, to create degree courses that break with Western premises of ‘good art’, to disrupt gendered and racialized gateway economies, and to reverse the retreat into the Ivory Tower. And yet, all these efforts must include the horizon of decolonization. Through the lens of decoloniality we can at least try to approach concepts like diversity, plurality, hybridity anew. Instead of dismissing them prematurely, decolonial approaches teach us to problematize what forestalls truly subversive transformation, namely nationalism. As the cultural theorist Tavia Nyong’o notes, the continued belief in the nation undermines the subversive potential of a truly diversifying education sector (2009: 1-9). As long as the education sector remains entangled with the nation, strategies of pluralizing and diversifying will be toothless. Decolonization thus requires a return to what Homi Bhabha – although in the terminology of postcolonialism – describes as the performative moment of hybridity: the moment when the reproduction of obedient subjects, who are of value for the nation, is foiled (2004: 227). Diversity at the university level will only act as a catalyst of decolonization when the university’s subjection to nationalism becomes available for critical debate and when the incommensurable, ambivalent parts of universities emerge – not to be warded off but to be embraced as potentials of disruption.
The ambivalent and performative moments of hybridity have surfaced repeatedly in the work of DE_colonize uni_VERSITY: offers of free spaces for participation and self-organization are undermined by a lack of money (even for taking public transport), or being absorbed by mailing-list-registration-obstacles. This sort of practical knowledge forces us to reroute workshops and events, and to imagine places of learning outside the university walls.

As these moments show, the horizon of decolonial knowledge cannot be threaded on a one-dimensional line. Decolonial opens up many possible futures, as the underscores in the title of the initiative DE_colonize uni_VERSITY signal in their visual disruption of linearity. Not only does this title play with the terminologies of decoloniality, diversity and university. The name also marks the disruption of rhetorical truth claims. With reference to Édouard Glissant’s notion of an opacité that consists of omissions and opaque joints, this form turns against reductive language (2010 [1990]). The opacity of the gap allows us to sense the texture of relations between decoloniality, diversity and university, and questions their truth individually and together (cf. ibid.: 190). Thinking with the texture of relations downgrades the dimension of (re-)cognition and comprehension and introduces the dimensions of touching and feeling that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick encouraged us to consider as modes of teaching and learning (2003). Feeling and touching a texture means not just to embrace a context passively but to reach out (ibid.: 14).

Herewith the problematic one-way transmission of knowledge that Hongwei writes about in his contribution to this debate opens up to a dialogical practice. The public can be imagined as generating rather than merely receiving knowledge. The interaction between academy and public, lecturer and student becomes plural and diversely configurable within the context of fractured textures. To traverse a texture means to let go. DE_colonize uni_VERSITY does not represent a self-contained and conclusive concept, or a ticket for traveling safely towards a bright decolonial future. If anything, it is about accepting the cycle of bad news and repeating mistakes, to understand that mistakes can be positive and do not have to be unwelcome surprises (Joseph Litvak in Sedgwick 2003: 147). So, let’s conclude with Haraway and proclaim to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016).

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