

BRIDGES

A **toolkit** for **diversifying knowledge** and **tackling discrimination** through **civil society participation** in universities.

DECOLONIAL KNOWLEDGE

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D E F I N I T I O N

D**ecolonial knowledges** emerge as alternatives to the colonial hegemonic knowledge which is endemic to our global socio-political infrastructures. Nation-states are colonial states: they are an extension of colonialism because the people, lands, resources and forms of knowledge of the ex-colonies continue to be expropriated and perceived from a colonial logic.

The production of decolonial knowledges seeks to decentralize dominant colonial knowledge, confronting those paradigms that validate only a certain type of knowledge as valuable or legitimate, whether it be so-called scientific knowledge, knowledge related to political and social relations, knowledge produced and reproduced in educational and industrial settings, knowledge around family relations and care work and so on. Decolonial knowledges create multiple, plural and diverse alternatives to hegemonic forms of thinking, doing, and feeling that are mistakenly considered universal to all cultures in the world, whilst being solely on parameters and values of Western societies, which have affirmed themselves as the only valid place from which to look at the world.

For doing so, decolonial knowledges take into account lived and embodied experience as a site for knowledge production, thus questioning normative paradigms that separate mind and body, reason and emotion, objective and subjective.

This enables the politicization of the decisions regarding where we want to go, what we want to do, with whom we want to be, and to whom we want to listen. Lastly, the production of decolonial knowledges also enables new alliances that can question racism, even our own racism, in order to be able to understand and politicise our differences, taking into account that each one of us comes with a background, knowledge, and experiences that must be respected and valued.

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E L A B O R A T I O N

Colonization of knowledge

We understand the colonization of knowledge as a set of power mechanisms that position as the only valid knowledge the one produced in institutions of the Global North under the positivist scientific paradigm. These devices articulate different processes of **hierarchization of knowledge, territories, and populations following a colonial geopolitical logic**. This logic has the following characteristics:

It is based on a **univocal definition of how to produce knowledge**. The scientific method is established as non-questionable, since it is defined as systematic, objective, and neutral. It is positioned as a "disinterested" knowledge, depicted by Haraway (1988) through the metaphor of the "God's eye view" that, from above, sees everything, but is not seen.

- It generates **theories that reproduce different and interconnected systems of oppression**. Numerous feminist and anti-racist works denounce how science has contributed to the "othering" and demonisation of groups and populations, and analyse the forms of violence and domination that result from these forms of knowledge production. Mohanty (2003), for example, critiques the ethnocentrism implied in the construction of the notion "Third World Women", which is understood as poor, traditional and sexually oppressed, in contrast to the emancipated, well-educated, and progressive women of the Global North.
- It follows an **expansive logic that seeks to apply this knowledge on a global scale**. In order to describe the mechanisms by which white Europeans situated themselves as the global arbiters of knowledge and truth, Castro-Gómez (2005) coined the notion of "Zero-Point Hubris". This concept refers to the colonial logic of non-recognition of the geopolitical location where knowledge is produced. Consequently, the results generated in the global centers of scientific production are mistakenly understood as applicable to any context and situation.

These mechanisms of the colonality of knowledge, from our view, do not only affect the academic world but are also reproduced in industrial as well as in household work and care environments, establishing hierarchies of knowledge according to the parameters of the Global North.

Knowledge production: a politically embedded practice

Decolonial Knowledges are those practices that, in different ways, question both the assumptions and the effects of the colonality of knowledge (Quijano, 2000). As knowledge emerges under specific conditions of possibility, it always responds to the interests, issues, and questions of those who produce it. Unlike the univocity of hierarchical colonial logic, there is a wide diversity in the ways alternative knowledges can be generated and shared. These perspectives are critical of the supposed neutrality of scientific knowledge, through which specific truths are produced and legitimated as valid, universal and unquestionable. And, contrary to the dominant ethnocentric paradigm, decolonial knowledge formations promote an understanding of knowledge as a politically embedded practice against the different forms of domination present in the contexts under which they are produced.

The work carried out by our team was based precisely on these principles, generating spaces for dialogue in which it was possible to express the interests and concerns of those who participated. This work aims to build a collective epistemological and political practices to intervene critically on the colonial devices of Higher Education Institutions.

Experience as a valuable source of knowledge

Debates concerning Decolonial Knowledges enabled us to highlight several elements that we considered fundamental for the production of knowledge. **Experience** was claimed as a valuable source of knowledge in accordance with proposals made by feminist authors such as Joan Scott (1991), for whom experience is a site for critical scrutiny of taken for granted explanatory categories. The difficulties that migrants encounter in managing their administrative situations, for instance, sheds light on the mechanisms of **Institutional Racism** exercised by the Spanish State. Conversations with people affected by daily police persecutions due to skin color, or reflections on the distrust perceived in another person's attitude when noticing a Latin American accent, allowed us to understand the forms of **"Othering"** and their effects of systematic exclusion.

Experience is also relevant for understanding the construction of **identity** in an environment of discrimination, as well as for the formation of political opinions. The knowledge that emerges from collective work around various experiences allowed us to identify, in this case, how the colonial logic operates. These discussions also led to critically acknowledge the ways racism, including internalised racism, is part of our cultural legacy and of our perception of ourselves as inhabitants of racist societies, thus questioning how these mechanisms work on our own subjectivity and social relations. Consequently, part of our work consists of taking initiatives to **"decolonize" ourselves** through collective inquiry.

Bodily affectivity and the ethics of care

Paying attention to personal trajectories in the production of knowledge also led us to reflect on the role of affectivity in these processes. Affectivity has traditionally been expelled from the world of epistemology. It has been associated with subjectivity and irrationality, with the feminine, with that which cannot be explained according to the white patriarchal paradigms and which does not provide valid knowledge (Alcoff & Potter, 1993). However, we understand that the affectivity elements - trust, laughter, fears - have allowed the very existence of a space for dialogue for our work. In addition, feelings of anger or powerlessness expressed within the group have also been recognized as a motor for understanding of the multiple **ways in which oppressive relationships materialize**. As Blackman & Venn (2010) suggest, the focus on bodily affectivity points to a creative potential within political projects. Nevertheless, we consider that the possibility of articulating this type of analysis requires a **space of listening and care** that is not always present in the institutional contexts of knowledge production. The epistemological aspect intersects with the ethics of care as a condition of possibility for these processes, an element that must be taken into account in the definition of Decolonial Knowledge (Fulladosa, 2017). Even more so if we recognize that collective alliances are in themselves a form of critique of the dynamics of individuation, fragmentation, and competition characteristic of ethnocentric and neo-liberal universities (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2016).

Deconstruction of ethnocentric knowledge

Working on the concept of Decolonial Knowledge also allowed us to discuss some of the **effects of ethnocentric knowledge**. Particularly, how these contribute to sustaining racist, classist, and sexist imaginaries and practices. The "cultural other", for example, is constructed both in the academy and social work practice as a generator of, and/or affected by social problems (Galaz & Montenegro, 2015). In the case of people with a migration background, this makes invisible the forms of oppression of the societies where we live (Lurbe & Santamaría, 2007). This colonial logic, by constructing differences based on fixed representations, creates asymmetries and hierarchies that justify and enable the plundering and exploitation of those categorised as "other" (Brah, 1996; Escobar, 1995; Hall, 1996). Thus, Decolonial Knowledges must contribute to the **deconstruction** of the meanings and practices that reproduce oppression. At the same time, decolonial perspectives must generate knowledges capable of creating horizons of **emancipation** and social change.

Engagement with decolonial practices within colonial institutions

A key question remains open, within the framework of the BRIDGES Toolkit: how can universities, which are historically sites of colonial knowledge production, engage with the counter-hegemonic knowledges proposed by decolonial perspectives? If the objective is that university teachers use the different tools to elicit critical approaches on colonial devices within the university, which would be the most suitable forms of communication of these tools?

To this end, several strategies were discussed: some more confrontational, others more linked to imparting information, and others to raising awareness about the dynamics of exclusion and discrimination within universities. During this process, we asked ourselves if it would be necessary to make a kind of "**translation**" that would bring these critical contents closer to people inserted in colonial institutional structures. We also explored the possibilities of using **forms of expression other than the written word** (hegemonic in the academic world) by working with pedagogical material in the form of performance or podcast (Madremanya¹; Abolition: A Black Feminist Method, for example). Or if perhaps, it was necessary to "**soften**" the **politicization** contained in the notion of Decolonial Knowledges in order to reach people who are not very familiar with these themes. These are open questions that will be the object of further discussion within the project.

However, something significant should be highlighted in this debate, since there seemed to be a sort of an **exchange of the traditional positions of enunciation within Higher Education Institutions**. While it is very common to hear in academic circles the need to generate "simpler" discourses in order to "disseminate" knowledge, in this case, a team composed of researchers and domestic workers, were asking ourselves the opposite: how to engage academic staff in the development of decolonial practices? And, furthermore, in which way this engagement can contribute to building bridges between different positionalities and critical initiatives within universities?

1. "Madremanya: A foc lent, receptes rebels" - video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ENYnwjZGpQ>

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This document is part of the BRIDGES Toolkit, a set of tools and strategies for addressing and dismantling structures of exclusion in Higher Education curricula. The Toolkit has been developed in the context of the Erasmus+ project **BRIDGES: Building Inclusive Societies: Diversifying Knowledge and Tackling Discrimination through Civil Society Participation in Universities**, whose working team consists of the following entities:

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