

Decolonizing History

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

The movement to decolonize universities has many antecedents, each with their own complex history. This annotated bibliography highlights some of the most important texts published since student activism in 2014 and 2015 at University College London (UCL), the University of Oxford and across the country, pushed decolonization to the forefront of both scholarly and public debate in the United Kingdom. Over the next five years, both academics and students published widely on decolonization initiatives relating to British higher education. For UK historians, a landmark intervention was the Royal Historical Society's report, *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change* (2018), which highlighted the racial inequalities in British history departments and made a number of recommendations for action. While the books and articles included in this bibliography are not specific to the study of history or history departments, they provide important context about student activism, the experiences of staff and students of colour, and the history of the movement to decolonize education.

Student movements to decolonize UK universities

UCL, 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' 11 November 2014, YouTube video, 20:09, <https://youtu.be/Dscx4h2l-Pk> (accessed 1 September 2025).

This video, produced by students of colour at University College London (UCL) in 2014, was integral to the development of the movement to decolonize British universities. In twenty minutes, through the voices of students reflecting on their own experiences of education, the video clearly and succinctly explains how colonial thinking is infused across all levels of British education. Students reflect not only on the whiteness of the university curriculum, but also on their experiences of learning about race and imperialism at school, and how these affected the knowledge and views that many students brought to university classrooms. They discuss how these perspectives impact the experiences and the education of both students of colour and white students at UCL, and they suggest how whiteness in the curriculum might begin to be dismantled. Following the release of this video, students at universities across the UK began to ask the same questions of their own institutions. A useful accompanying text is Kalwant Bhopal's *Race and Education: Reproducing White Supremacy in Britain* (2024), which analyses the relationship between racism, whiteness and education, and provides data and evidence that corroborate the arguments made by the students at UCL.

Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: Zed Books, 2018).

On 9 March 2015, a student-led protest movement began at the University of Cape Town, aimed at removing the statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes from their campus. Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) began in solidarity with this movement in South Africa, but soon grew into an independent movement to decolonize the University of Oxford itself, including removing the statue of Rhodes at Oriel College. RFMO challenged what they called 'the spirit of imperialism' kept alive at Oxford by a 'mutually productive culture of violence, racism, patriarchy and colonialism' (pp. 21–3). This book documents the Oxford movement, drawing together the voices of those who participated in it to provide their perspectives on how events unfolded, as well as including reflections on many of the initiatives to decolonize education across Britain and the world. Unlike at Cape Town, where the statue of Rhodes was removed only a month after the initial protests, the statue of Rhodes at Oxford became a touchstone for an ensuing debate about statues and the legacy of colonialism in Britain, and as a result remains standing today. For more on the history and context of what have been dubbed 'statue wars', a useful set of essays can be found in a special issue of *Public History Review*: 'Statue Wars: Protest, Public Histories and Problematic Plinths' (2021).

Decolonizing the university

Kerry Pimblott, 'Decolonising the University: The Origins and Meaning of a Movement', *The Political Quarterly*, 91:1 (2020), pp. 210–16.

This short article by historian Kerry Pimblott provides a useful overview of the historical context of the movement to decolonize UK universities. Pimblott situates the UK movement within a transatlantic perspective, with particular focus on comparing the histories of student activism in the UK and the United States. She argues that decolonization is part of a broader struggle for social and racial justice, and that the antecedents of movements like ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ and ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ can be found in the student protests that led to the development of Black Studies in the USA. For more on that movement, Martha Biondi’s *The Black Revolution on Campus* (2012) provides a detailed analysis of the ways in which Black student protests in the late 1960s and 1970s transformed American higher education.

Jason Arday and Heidi Safia Mirza (eds), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

In 2015, the Runnymede Trust (a leading race equality think tank in the UK) published *Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*, a report that demonstrated the extent of institutional racism in British universities. This wide-ranging collection of essays is a response to that report, seeking to intervene in debates on tackling racism and decolonizing higher education. Its contributors, many of whom are people of colour, build on the findings of the *Aiming Higher* report to provide detailed scholarly analysis alongside personal reflections on their experiences working in British universities.

Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıolu (eds), *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

Published in the same year as Arday and Mirza’s book, *Decolonising the University* is another collection of essays on a similar theme. These two books therefore complement each other, and together demonstrate how prominent discussions of decolonization had become in the late 2010s. Whereas Arday, Mirza and their contributors focused particularly on laying out the contemporary ‘terrain on which we struggle’ (p. 20), Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıolu’s contributors provide important historical and disciplinary context to the decolonization movement, as well as suggestions for initiatives and strategies to make meaningful change. They also reflect on their positionality as scholars working at institutions situated in the Global North. As such, this collection engages with long-standing debates about the varied meanings of decolonization, and in particular with the argument made by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their article ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’ (2012). An analysis of the limitations of decolonization when it is viewed purely as an intellectual exercise can be found in Leon Moosavi’s 2020 article, ‘The Decolonial Bandwagon and the Dangers of Intellectual Decolonisation’.

Conclusion

It is notable that many of the most important books and articles about decolonizing British universities were published in the late 2010s. The student movements at UCL, Oxford and across the country sparked widespread discussion and debate, an outpouring of reflective essays, reports and books, and no end of social media posts, newspaper articles and websites. However, the backlash against calls for decolonization, compounded by rising white nationalism and the cost of living crisis, as well as student activists' attention turning to other crises – the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, or the curtailment of trans rights – has resulted in a loss of momentum for the decolonization movement as a whole. The titles of more recent books, such as Paul Warmington's *Permanent Racism* (2024), indicate a less hopeful mood than is evident in some of the books and articles mentioned above. Progress has been slow, and institutional support for decolonization is waning. As historian Jonathan Saha notes in his reflections on the impact of the 2018 Royal Historical Society report, '2018 was a different time'. However, the struggle to decolonize is far from over, and the work continues.

Additional citations

- Jason Arday and Clare Alexander (eds), *Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2015), <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/aiming-higher> (accessed 4 September 2025).
- Kalwant Bhopal, *Race and Education: Reproducing White Supremacy in Britain* (London: Pelican Books, 2024).
- Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).
- Kiera Lindsey and Mariko Smith (eds), 'Setting the Scene: Statue Wars and Ungrateful Citizens', Special Issue of *Public History Review*, 28 (2021), pp. 1–11.
- Leon Moosavi, 'The Decolonial Bandwagon and the Dangers of Intellectual Decolonisation', *International Review of Sociology*, 30:2 (2020), pp. 332–54.
- Royal Historical Society, *Race, Ethnicity and Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*, 2018, <https://royalhistsoc.org/racereport/> (accessed 4 September 2025).
- Jonathan Saha, 'Betterment or Backlash? Racism in UK University History Departments', *History Workshop*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/practice-history/betterment-or-backlash-racism-in-uk-university-history-departments/> (accessed 1 September 2025).
- Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1:1 (2012), pp. 1–40.
- Paul Warmington, *Permanent Racism: Race, Class and the Myth of Postracial Britain* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2024).