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The Colonial Tendencies of Internationalisation

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Abstract: While internationalisation offers political possibilities for gender studies, there are limits to how internationalisation is currently understood. This paper reflects on the hierarchical thinking that underpins these contemporary understandings of internationalisation, and—drawing on postcolonial and feminist theory—offers suggestions for alternative understandings.

1 Contemporary universities have become obsessed with their place in the world, in part because of the rapid rise in importance of global university rankings. The Academic Ranking of World Universities (also known as the Shanghai Ranking), the Times Higher Education World Ranking, the QS World University Rankings and SCImago Institutions Ranking, established between 2003 and 2010, have given university administrators across the world a means to comparatively assess the quality of their institutions and, by implication, their employees. The level of international activity is a key factor in developing these rankings. The Times Higher Education World Ranking, for example, sees the internationalisation of staff and students, and the extent of collaboration with international researchers, as a crucial measurement of quality. The QS World University Rankings gives even higher priority to the proportion of international staff and students on campus, and carries out a 'global survey' of academic and employer reputation. The level of internationalisation is also an implicit component of other indicators in these three ranking schemes, for example through citations, prizes and particular publications. As a consequence, university strategic plans, in a variety of national contexts, increasingly emphasise the importance of internationalisation for the purpose of improved global rankings. However, despite its claims, the current model of internationalisation is limited in both scope and scale. The first limitation relates to how international rankings are developed, while the second relates to the people who make universities international—the mobile subjects of internationalisation. In considering a move towards the internationalisation of gender studies, I argue here that both of these limitations need to be critically examined. This is particularly important because of the ways in which they may undermine the emancipatory potential of internationalisation for gender studies.

2 In relation to the development of international reputations, league tables favour specific and quantifiable measures of university performance: numbers of citations per staff member, research income or staff-student ratios, for example. These indicators favour well-funded universities based in countries where there is easy access to substantial levels of research funding, as well as writing in a particular form (specifically, journal articles in English). They also favour universities where staff have a low teaching load, and where significant administrative support is provided for research and teaching. In contrast, these indicators do not favour universities in which staff have a high teaching load, with high staff-student ratios, with a mandate to carry out policy-related research, or contexts where others forms of publication and dissemination are encouraged. Similarly, smaller universities lacking a strong profile in scientific or medical research are at a distinct disadvantage in these ranking schemes. However, the local or national context is not taken into account when developing international rankings of universities. Space is flattened out, difference is elided, and the measures of university performance developed in the U.K. in particular are seen as neutrally global. This hierarchical way of thinking has its roots in the colonial project, which sought to create new global, regional and local geographies of privilege and power. It is reproduced in international rankings of universities, which consistently show U.K. or U.S. universities—situated in former or current centres of colonial or imperial power—at or towards the top. These moves—towards rankings, quantification and audit—privilege

already-privileged universities. Lesser-ranked universities strive to join a club where the membership rules are already decided, and not in their favour. Hierarchies that are already established are thus maintained and strengthened. Internationalisation on these terms, as Moallem pointed out in relation to women's studies, relies on the problematic 'myth of progress' that underpinned the colonial project (2006: 332–3). Similar concerns exist in relation to gender studies.

3 The second aspect relates to the people who make universities international: migrant staff and students. This conception of internationalisation valorises a particular type of mobile individual, with high levels of economic and cultural capital that facilitate the expensive business of moving to another country and setting up home there. The gendered nature of this type of mobility is rarely made explicit. There is an implicit assumption that skilled and professional migrants—such as university staff—are male (Kofman and Raghuram 2006). This assumption means that specific issues faced by female migrants working and studying in universities are rarely seen as structural, but rather as the responsibility of individuals. Beyond this, the emphasis on mobility represents an expectation of 'care-less-ness'. As Grummell et al. point out, while changes in higher education have provided new opportunities for 'mobile transnational masculinities', this also 'imposes expectations of performativity that only a care-less worker can fully satisfy' (Grummell et al. 2009: 192). Women are significantly more likely to have care responsibilities outside work (Lynch 2010: 58), which places limits on the extent of their individual mobility. In the changing landscape of higher education, internationalisation is increasingly understood in terms of the prevalence of mobile subjects, with value increasingly measured by the extent to which these subjects conform to the model of the migratory, transnational and 'care-free' academic. Any internationalisation of gender studies needs to take these specific gender politics of mobility seriously.

4 These two limitations on the ways in which internationalisation is conceived in the contemporary university are connected. The hierarchical thinking that underpins both is inherently gendered—specifically around a normative masculinity. Yet this is often obscured. In the next section, I want to suggest ways in which this hierarchical, masculinised understanding of internationalisation might be re-conceived, with implications for gender studies, drawing in particular from postcolonial theory and from feminist geography. In seeking an alternative understanding of internationalisation, the work of Walter Mignolo, a literary scholar based in the U.S., is useful. Though Mignolo focuses in particular on Latin America, he introduces two concepts that are highly relevant for thinking critically about the process. The first is decoloniality; the second is border thinking. By decoloniality, Mignolo means recognising the local character and situatedness of allegedly universal knowledge: in his view, all histories and geographies are local, though some (for example, coloniality or modernity) have global designs. Recognising this pretence to universality is central to the process of decoloniality. Border thinking is the next stage in the process: it involves creating connections and linkages between those people and places that have been marginalised by 'global thinking' (for an overview, see Gilmartin 2009; for more detailed discussion see Mignolo 2000, 2007). If we apply Mignolo's critique to contemporary processes of university internationalisation, we see the ways in which particular, local and gendered understandings of quality, purpose and form are becoming a global norm. Border thinking offers new ways of practicing internationalisation. Rather than focusing on 'reputation', narrowly defined, or on the incidence of particular mobile subjects, border thinking seeks out new opportunities for collaboration (for example, around critical teaching and research), or searches for different ways to validate knowledge, such as through public debate rather than through anonymous peer review (C.K. Raju, in Olds and Robertson 2011). Border thinking also reasserts the importance of the local, not through the inversion of a global-local hierarchy, but through recognising and valuing distinct, emplaced forms of knowledge production. Mignolo's work takes on an additional resonance when placed in dialogue with recent work in feminist geography. The emphasis on the local and the everyday that underpins recent work in feminist geography (see Dyck 2005, Valentine 2007) offers a good counterweight to Mignolo's border thinking, while the concept of counter-topography illustrates how to create linkages between seemingly disparate places (Katz 2004). Taken together, these two broad critiques suggest alternative ways in which the internationalisation of gender studies could be conceived. The first is to resist the 'global designs' of narrow, Western-influenced understandings of internationalisation, in particular its assumptions about objective hierarchies, gendered understandings of mobility and 'care-free-ness'. The second is to insist on the sharing of ideas, rather than on the movement of people, as a marker of internationalisation: a sharing that does not just involve the spread of knowledge produced in the Western world, but rather involves genuine exchange and openness to alternative epistemologies (see Connell 2007 for an excellent example). The third is to highlight the importance of the local as a way to frame internationalisation. Roshanravan describes this as the politics of 'staying home', which she sees as a form of anti-imperialist praxis that involves looking afresh at the 'local' and at 'home' from the perspective of faraway others (Roshanravan 2012). Taken together, these offer new, challenging and progressive ways of internationalising gender studies.

5 While internationalisation offers possibilities for new and challenging ways of thinking about and understanding the world we live in, the form it takes needs careful scrutiny. It is important not to be seduced by the version of internationalisation promoted and extolled by 'global' universities and university ranking systems. This version is narrow, audit-driven, hierarchical and exclusionary. Instead, we should look to the prospects offered by border thinking: alternative ways of creating connections between people and places that, rather than endeavouring to impose a particular world model, instead seek ways of extending understanding in the contemporary world.

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Links to websites

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- QS World University Rankings http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings
- SCImago Institutions Ranking http://www.scimagoir.com/
- Times Higher Education World University Rankings http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/

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