

Jan Etienne (Ed)

FEMINIST SCHOLARS'  
EXPERIENCES IN  
DECOLONISING THE  
ACADEMY

Race, Class, and Identity in Narrative

Gender Studies

Collection Editors

**JAN ETIENNE**

**&**

**REHAM ELMORALLY**

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**Dedication:** This book is dedicated to Linda, Ursula, and Gillian, and those other stalwart, decolonial feminist activist supporters who believe in global social justice and the struggle for a better social world.

First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781915734082 (pbk)  
ISBN: 9781915734105 (ePDF)  
ISBN: 9781915734099 (ePUB)

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Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy  
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design  
Typeset by Newgen Publishing UK

Lived Places Publishing  
Long Island  
New York 11789

[www.livedplacespublishing.com](http://www.livedplacespublishing.com)

# Abstract

This book brings together the decolonising experiences of a diverse group of feminist scholars who demonstrate how perspectives on race, class, gender, social identity, sexuality, and disability impact lives and play a critical role in informing decolonising activism in higher education. The contributors explore the importance of (and the challenges they face, in) decolonising higher education in the modern-day neoliberal university.

**Readership:** Scholars and students interested in understanding the ways in which Black and decolonial feminist scholars are influencing decolonising programmes in the university sector.

## **Key words**

Black feminist, Womanist, Decolonial feminist, Decolonising, Critical race theory, Intersectionality, Neoliberal, Social justice, Collaboration

# Lead author's message

The book is written for scholars everywhere and is inspired by the work of feminist education activists at the sharp end of higher education campaigns for equality, justice, and inclusion.

The key aims of the book are:

- To encourage the development of Black and decolonial feminist approaches to help shape decolonising programmes in higher education.
- To promote practical understandings of Black Feminist Thought when using decolonial feminist approaches in higher education.



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# Acknowledgements

I would like to first express my deep appreciation to the hard-working, committed decolonial feminists, Black feminists and womanist contributors writing in this volume. I owe a debt of gratitude to members of the Womanism, Activism, Higher Education Research Network for your loyal support and energy, in reclaiming the decolonising narrative in higher education, using a Black feminist lens. Thank you to Linda Millbourne, Ursula Murray and Gillian Klein for your lifelong belief in fairness, justice and equality in all areas of higher education and for giving me a constructive, invaluable start in a journey to influence change.

Immense appreciation to Reham ElMorally, for your expertise, reliable support and careful proofreading of the final manuscript.

In particular, I extend much gratitude to Pauline Stephenson, Lloyd Gardner and Christina Howell-Richardson for observing intuitively from the sidelines and for reminding me of the reasons why collaborative work of this type matters. The struggle goes on and you guys certainly gave me food for thought. Most interestingly, your selected assertions and at times, measured silences kept me grounded.

Long may this unique Black feminist mission to decolonise the higher education Academy live on.

I thank our future readers and look forward to active discussion and engagement with the learning outcomes.

Finally, I thank David Parker and other colleagues at Lived Places Publishing for your patience and tireless support throughout the life of this project.

**Jan Etienne (Ed)**

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# Learning objectives

- Understand the role of decolonial feminism in decolonising agendas in higher education
- Understand the value and usefulness of Black feminist text in shaping decolonising initiatives
- Understand how to explore the role of identity and its usefulness in developing decolonising strategies
- Examine and widen understandings of how to promote, practical, inclusive learner support when designing decolonising programmes
- Critically assess and seek to understand ways of sharing decolonial feminist thinking with senior management
- Analyse and understand the relevance of Black feminist research in higher education decolonising programmes
- Explore understandings of decolonising strategies in meeting well-being needs
- Critically analyse own understandings of decolonial feminisms in the context of decolonising and the British higher education Academy.
- Analyse and understand the impact of responsibility for delivering equality (and diversity measures) on the Black female teacher
- Understand the nature of personal accountability in decolonising work in higher education

# Introduction to chapters

Theme 1: Understanding Black and decolonial feminist perspectives in anti-racist, decolonising work in higher education

- In Chapter 1, Jan Etienne considers Black feminist and Black womanist practice in the context of lived experience – concrete experience as a criterion of meaning – and introduces us to the journey to uncover the usefulness of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000). She discusses intersectionality and the nature of developing knowledge when the world was focused on the murder of George Floyd. Learning objective: Understand how far Black feminism can assist us in bringing feminist voices together to tackle institutional change and work towards decolonising higher education.
- In Chapter 2, Joao Tinoco explores the use of dialogue as a means of assessing knowledge claims and the value of using key text readings in decolonising work reflecting sexuality and “belonging”. He discusses the Black feminist writings of Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands – La Frontera* (Anzaldúa, 1989). Learning objective: Understand the value of Black feminist text in the higher education decolonising curriculum.

Theme 2: Sharing and using Black and decolonial feminist approaches in decolonising higher education

- In Chapter 3, Sue Dunn shares good practices in supporting student learning in higher education. She considers tutor

identity and how Black feminist theory in the work of bell hooks (1999) has influenced her approaches and has helped her reflect on her own mixed heritage identity in the context of her “lived experience”. How can discussions of tutor identity help raise learner and tutor confidence and at the same, meet decolonising goals in higher education? Learning objective: Understand how we build on widening participation and access programmes to develop decolonising activities in higher education.

- In Chapter 4, Beverley Hayward discusses White working-class identity and neurodiversity in approaches to Black feminist practices (hooks, 2002). She engages with an “ethic of care” and shares her arts-based teaching strategies where she promotes conversations that demonstrate the usefulness of Black feminism in decolonising programmes in higher education. Learning objective: Understand how visual arts-based approaches inspired by Black feminist thought, help demystify the decolonising programme in higher education.

Theme 3: Leading and delivering Black and decolonial feminist approaches in higher education

- In Chapter 5, Kerry Harman uses her own feminist imaginary approaches to connect with the work of Sara Ahmed (2023) and confronts the damages of neoliberalism in the British higher education academy. She employs a decolonial feminist perspective to explore “personal accountability and leadership in addressing neoliberal challenges within higher education”. The focus is on fostering transformative change to advance decolonising practices and promote Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. Learning objective: Examine strategies for encouraging senior management in higher education

to integrate decolonial and Black feminist approaches into their daily practices, enhancing institutional EDI outcomes.

- In Chapter 6, Nandita Sirker addresses leadership lessons in Black feminist approaches and cites the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977) to demonstrate the uniqueness of Black feminism in inspiring change. In a chapter focused on “lived experience”, she reflects on her research into mothering and refugee women and their access to services using the Black feminist lens of Gail Lewis and Audre Lorde. She combines critical race theory themes in an approach designed to amplify a leading role for Black feminist research in higher education. Learning objective: Understand the relationship between Black feminist research and the higher education decolonising programme.
- In Chapter 7, Jan Etienne, Yasmin Adan, and Nataliah Douglas consider an ethic of care and personal accountability in understandings of social justice (Lorde, 1989) and Black feminist activism in education. The chapter presents good practice in Black feminist thinking in decolonising programmes for social justice and well-being in higher education and demonstrates how adopting Black feminist approaches as outlined in the work of Black feminist Venus Evans-Winters (2019) and others can support good mental health and well-being in higher education. To what extent are Black female teachers carrying out decolonising work in addition to, or as part of their day-to-day duties? What lessons do they have for the higher education sector? Learning objective: Understand the nature of Black feminist approaches to an ethic of care and personal accountability in decolonising work in higher education.

- In the final chapter (8), Jan Etienne and Tanja Burkhard reflect on the global experiences of Black and decolonial feminist scholars in the context of UK higher education. The authors engage indirectly with the theme of “voice” and dialogue as a means of assessing knowledge claims in their own Black feminist qualitative studies, and refer to the work of other Black feminist scholars to highlight an understanding of an “ethic of care” in moving forward in anti-racist policy and practice in higher education. The contributors point to the works of Black British female academics, including voices such as those of Patricia Daley, Heidi Mirza, Avtar Brah, Anne Phoenix, Tracey Reynolds, and others. The need to demonstrate Black female leadership in decolonising UK higher education academies is paramount.



**Theme one:  
Understanding  
Black and  
decolonial feminist  
approaches in  
anti-racist,  
decolonising work  
in higher education**





# **Introduction**



# 1

## Thinking Black and decolonial feminist in higher education

### A Black British womanist perspective

*Jan Etienne*

What made Black women a powerful and legitimising force for mobilising both institutionally and nationally also made some of us unpopular in wider political arenas. (Mathibela, 2020, p. 134)

In the search for global social justice in higher education academies, this chapter addresses the urgency to deliver a Black feminist approach to the decolonising agenda. Today, Black and White feminist scholars can be said to be adopting a global approach to delivering change in contemporary decolonising cultural life, in a combined approach to sharing thinking and practice to further the decolonising agenda in higher education.

As Mathibela (2020) notes above, Black women are a powerful and legitimising force when mobilising. Nowhere can this be observed more starkly than in the higher education, decolonising institution. However, adopting a combined approach to a decolonising programme can also present challenging obstacles for those of us who feel it necessary to confront the absence of a nuanced Black feminist voice, one where the Black woman is not muted or diluted in a feminist frame. When we challenge this problem as womanist activists, we are considered Black feminist agitators and perceived as unpopular in a decolonising feminist frame, Black womanism challenges Black feminist approaches which continue to collude with White feminists' in marginalising the positions of Black Women. In such a feminist frame, decolonial feminism seeks to work with all feminist activists to dismantle colonial power structures and prioritise the voices, histories, and experiences of women from marginalised communities, particularly those affected by colonial legacies practice, one which has the ability to include a wide variety of perspectives from the lens of those impacted. In the context of our lived experience, (lived experience refers to the firsthand, everyday realities of individuals, particularly those from marginalised groups, which provide insight into broader systemic issues) we uncover the usefulness of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) and acknowledge its potential role in shaping strategies to promote equality, diversity and inclusion practices in higher education. In considering the valuable place of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2003) in a UK setting, it has also been important for us to begin with some opening questions. First: Who hears the voice of the White working-class, female tutor, inspired by Black feminist theory and

determined to decolonise approaches to social science teaching? Next: What can the Anglo-Asian, middle-class tutor tell us about her Black feminist-inspired practice, designed to mitigate the anxieties experienced by non-British research students attempting to navigate the structural barriers which stand in the way of their educational success?

In these current times of social conflict, conveyed via social media and impacting the lives of Black communities, it is necessary to give closer consideration to intersectionality (a framework that examines how different social identities, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and create overlapping systems of discrimination or privilege) and our various positionings in the ways in which we respond to emerging global social challenges. The “Summer of Racial Reckoning” (Burkhard, 2022) in the United States, and the nature of developing knowledges emerging when the world was focused on the murder of George Floyd, provided a collective impulse to renew our focus on decolonising work. Some of us concluded that such a major racial incident was indeed a catalyst for a new collaborative, decolonising project inside our UK university sector.

In this region, it became evident that higher education research centres in the United Kingdom were acknowledging the need to further publicly declare their intention to increase support for research on critical “race” studies, racialisation, and anti-racism. In pledging their commitment, British universities also declared their intention to amplify the research of Black scholars working on critical social theory, in particular. These institutions appear to be particularly keen to support interdisciplinary, innovative,

and publicly engaged social research on issues that concern the impact of race discrimination and social inequalities on people's lives. However, what is the reality of such support, and what is the relationship with existing efforts to decolonise higher education? More importantly, to what extent are Black and decolonial feminist scholars in the British university inspired by such developments? The contributors to this volume have much to say about their own feminist approaches to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in higher education. In sharing their strategies, they are keen to foster mutual understandings of the ways in which collaborative efforts can emerge to achieve success in delivering effective decolonising programmes in higher education.

As authors, in this collaborative volume, there are similarities in our lived experience, and as a Black, womanist, feminist scholar, working alongside my colleagues, I commit to an appreciation of the key tenets of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) (a body of knowledge and practice developed by Black women that emphasises the importance of lived experiences, intersectionality, and resistance to systemic oppression), in particular, its approach to a collective decolonial feminist (Vergès, 2021) realism. In addition, while I acknowledge that a globalised, decolonial feminist framework aimed at delivering a decolonising agenda exists, I am mindful of the struggle to ensure our diverse voices are heard. In this regard, I ask: How do different gender identities interact and share knowledges in a challenging, decolonising higher education arena? We argue that Black feminist, womanist, and decolonial ways of thinking can influence change, and we highlight the practices in our day-to-day lives as diverse feminist