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REPLY

Decoding "decolonising" in decolonising *living* and *writing* integration: commentary of the special issue on decolonising refugee paradigms

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ABSTRACT

I begin with a personal reflection on *living* and *writing* integration. I then consider the longevity of the concept of integration and the newness of revisiting it through a decolonial lens. This lens allows a shift from the analysis of integration *per se* to that of the conditions for its enduring survival, transformation, or demise. The Special Issue embraces a progressive approach to decolonising integration that advocates for its realignment towards rights and equity, and for the adoption of intersectional and relational approaches. It shows how colonial histories and geographies render traditional approaches to integration unsuitable; how discourses on integration create colonially infused hierarchies of those deemed "integrable," "unintegrated," or "non-integratable" Others; and how grassroots spaces of integration can become decolonial spaces. I conclude with a reflection on the need to decode "decolonising" in *living* and *writing* integration.

Introduction: *living* and *writing* integration

In the late 1980s, as a young international student, I went to Canada on a postgraduate scholarship to study and research the process of adaptation and integration of Latin American refugees living in Canada. I used Berry's acculturation framework (Donà and Berry 1994, 1999) that distinguishes four strategies for adaptation: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. The model foregrounds the perspectives of people who move. For migrants, refugees, sojourners, and others crossing national and cultural borders, to adopt an integration strategy means to choose to maintain both elements of the culture of origin (language, food, friendships, etc.) and incorporate those of the host society. The framework conceptualises integration as distinct from assimilation. The latter one refers to accommodation into another culture by shedding one's own cultural heritage and taking on host society's socio-cultural features. Separation describes the holding on to the culture of origin while limiting absorption of host society's socio-cultural values and features. Marginalisation occurs among those who

distance themselves from both the culture of origin and that of the host country. As I engage with the informative contributions to the Special Issue on integration many years after I first encountered the term, I marvel at the longevity of the concept in academia (despite its many criticisms, including those of Berry's framework), and its ongoing popularity among policymakers.

Integration holds deep personal, intellectual, and political significance for me, as it encompasses both living and reflecting upon integration. I have spent my adult life far from Italy, the Southern European country of my birth and upbringing – living as an international student in North America, a humanitarian worker in Eastern Africa, and a migrant in the UK, among other places. This journey leads me to ask myself: "Am I integrated?" I am also intrigued by the heuristic potential of integration: "Does the concept of integration help me make sense of the migrant life I have experienced?" and "Does it illuminate my academic work on the lives of refugees, displaced individuals, and asylum seekers?"

My migratory journey differs significantly from that of forced migrants, particularly in terms of the reasons for leaving and my ability to return to my country of origin. However, like the forcibly displaced, I have faced the processes and challenges of integrating into the places I have lived. Additionally, my academic and activist work has involved engaging with internally displaced people, asylum seekers, and refugees across continents – through conversations, research, hosting, volunteering, and advocacy. It is from this complex positionality, of both living and reflecting on integration, that I engage with the diverse and insightful contributions in this Special Issue (SI).

The SI integrates theoretical concerns and empirical studies, and it covers a variety of topics, ranging from intercultural dialogue in universities to refugee-led social enterprises. Europe is the geographical focus of the SI, with integration frameworks examined across countries located both at the centre (e.g. Germany) and margins (e.g. Turkey) of Europe. Special consideration is given to the island of Ireland, both Northern Ireland and the Republic, where the editors, Ulrike Vieten and Fiona Murphy, are respectively located. The cross-border collaboration proves fruitful for understanding integration paradigms across borders and for unpacking integration in a remarkable place with its own colonial history in Europe. Beyond Europe, the SI offers a thoughtful analysis of integration in refugee camps in Kenya, where refugees are simultaneously subjected to the refugee policies of the host country and placed under the international protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The SI also recognises that displacement experiences are manifold and diverse, and that they differently influence how integration unfolds for refugee women, refugee social entrepreneurs, refugees who live in camps, volunteers, and others. Thus, in its entirety, the SI raises important issues about integration paradigms that are both timely and timeless in their relevance.

Some issues at stake bear resemblance with those I encountered as a young student, most notably concerns about indicators of (successful) integration (e.g. McGinnity et al. 2020; Zincone, Caponio, and Carastro 2006), about the imaginary of the host society (Schinkel 2017; Spencer and Charsley 2021), and thus who integrates to whom or what, and about the ways in which state-driven integration initiatives promote or undermine real-life experiences of integration (Hadj Abdou 2019; Phillimore 2012). It is worth noting that despite ongoing criticisms, integration as a lived experience, policy and academic category has survived for decades and appears to continue to do so. Why? A decolonial lens makes it possible to address this question by expanding the gaze from the

analysis of integration *per se* to that of the *conditions* for its enduring survival, transformation, or demise.

This Special Issue makes an original contribution to the growing body of scholarship on decolonising migration studies (e.g. Schinkel 2018, 2023). The novelty of employing a decolonial approach to examine integration frameworks lies in its ability to shift the focus from merely assessing integration's features, applications, and consequences to analysing the colonial histories and conditions that underpin its existence. It scrutinises the influence of the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) in knowledge production and policy development and evaluates its impact not only on (primarily post-colonial) individuals who have crossed borders, but on societies as a whole (Donà 2023). A decolonial perspective on integration reveals the colonising politics embedded in integration frameworks – within policymaking, real-life contexts, and the production of knowledge.

Decolonising integration frameworks also means to expose the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000) as it describes the living legacy of colonialism in forms of social discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation that outlived formal colonialism and became integrated in succeeding social orders.

Integration is colonial in its origins – as it was developed toward the end of the "formal" colonial empires to "protect" white European society from mixed blood colonial subjects (Sharma 2020). Informed by a decolonial approach, the papers in this Special Issue raise relevant questions about the colonial formation of integration, offer detailed evidence of the workings of coloniality of power, question the relevance of integration in the present and call for transforming integration frameworks in the future.

A progressive approach to integration: realigning rather than dismantling

Theoretical debates on integration have persisted for years. Defenders of the integration framework argue that it remains a useful analytical tool and that its applicability does not preclude the development of independent, non-normative analytical concepts (Klarenbeek 2019; Penninx 2019).

In contrast, decolonial scholars, starting from the premise that integration is a colonial concept, advocate for decolonising integration paradigms, albeit with differing views on how best to achieve this. Schinkel (2018) argues against migrant integration, contending that it has failed both "as a political way to describe the process in which migrants settle, and as a concept in social science to analyse such processes" (2). This radical stance calls for dismantling the systems that generate knowledge about integration, including migration studies itself (Schinkel 2023).

The paradigm of integration, with its ties to assimilation politics and multiculturalism, raises questions about citizenship and statehood. Favell (2022) asserts that the concept is harmful because integration policies are designed not to support the mobility and well-being of individuals, but as a project for maintaining the nation-state system. Furthermore, as these policies are fundamentally concerned with upholding borders, any challenge to borders must also be grounded in an understanding of the underlying logics that create division and distrust among the different "losers" of borders and empire (Favell 2022).

Other scholars take a different approach to decolonising integration, seeking to understand migrant and refugee inclusion in a non-Eurocentric manner, and replacing

integration with non-Western concepts, such as *buen vivir* (good living) from Latin America and *ubuntu* (I am because we are) from Africa (Bauder et al. 2023).

This Special Issue contributes to these recent, growing, and ongoing debates on decolonising integration by embracing a progressive, rather than radical, approach. Instead of dismantling or replacing integration with an entirely different set of concepts, this Special Issue seeks to decolonise integration paradigms through societal transformation rooted in activist work. The progressive orientation of the Special Issue calls for a realignment – a repositioning of integration frameworks to be more closely aligned with liberal values of rights, diversity, voice, and equity.

Before discussing this progressive approach more broadly, I examine some key themes that emerge from the contributions, which outline the building blocks of the Special Issue's progressive decolonial outlook. These themes reveal how colonial histories and geographies render traditional approaches to integration unsuitable; how discourses on integration create colonially infused hierarchies of those deemed "integrable," "unintegrated," or "non-integratable" Others; and how grassroots spaces of integration can become decolonial spaces. I then consider how a vision for new politics of inclusion and participation – one that incorporates rights-based approaches, diversity, equity, and voice – can be understood as decolonial.

Locating Europe and beyond: unsuitable traditional approaches to integration

Colonialism is the practice of extending political or economic authority over the people or territory of another country. It describes European imperial expansion and the subjugation of Asian and African peoples. The unequal power relations between colonisers and colonised are reconfigured today as power imbalances across the global north-south divide and between (primarily) non-western sending countries and western receiving countries in refugee movements. This Special Issue adds nuance to understanding integration paradigms within the global system of nation-states.

Some contributions explore the coloniality of power within integration paradigms through the lens of the global north-south/west-rest divide, highlighting the discriminatory ways in which sovereign states exercise their right to include those not subjected to the right to exclusion. For example, Halleh Ghorashi's paper demonstrates how the colonial legacy of integrating refugees from the global south into the global north positions migrants and refugees as inherently inferior to citizens, essentially reproducing a binary between "the west" and "the non-west." Other contributions break down the global north-south divide by pointing out the existence of colonial histories within Europe itself and examining how this legacy affects integration. The post-conflict context of Northern Ireland, for instance, is an apt site for scrutinising integration paradigms through a decolonial lens. Amanda Lubit shows that in this context, the notions of nation and national identity are themselves contested, making traditional approaches to integration unsuitable.

Connecting the challenges of integration in Northern Ireland and Kenya brings to the fore the existence of sites across the global north-south divide where conditions for integration are similarly constrained by material or communal boundaries. Ogutu (2024) argues that current models, shaped by colonial legacies and capitalist interests, often overlook the fundamental rights of refugees, advocating for a paradigm shift towards a more

equitable and rights-based humanitarian approach. These two cases illustrate the value of examining integration paradigms transnationally. In Northern Ireland, the concept of the "nation-state" is divided along sectarian lines, while in Kenya, refugees are confined to camps that are segregated from local communities. The "nation-state" as a unified frame of reference for integration is, therefore, less homogeneous, and more fragmented than often recognised, rendering traditional approaches to integration unviable.

Othering the subject of integration: integrable, unintegrated, or "non-integratable"

Another theme addressed by this Special Issue is the need to unpack processes of Othering to dismantle colonial ideologies that perpetuate inequalities and injustices within refugee integration. Categorisation is used to produce the Other – the subject of integration who must be incorporated into an invisible, homogeneous, imagined Self. Papers by Engelmeier et al. (2025) and Ghorashi (2024) clearly illustrate how language is employed to categorise, order, and create hierarchical positions for the Other. These papers not only detail the coloniality inherent in the Othering process but also demonstrate how Othering establishes expectations around integration.

Engelmeier et al. identify the layered processes of Othering that international students "designated as refugees" face within institutions. Framed through a "deficit" lens, this Othering reveals the ongoing presence of epistemic coloniality. Perpetuated by professional and academic staff, as well as other students, Othering creates a space of "exclusionary inclusion" that subjugates students with refugee status, leaving them confused and marginalised. By moving away from a student deficit perspective, the authors expose the institutional barriers – both formal and informal – that hinder inclusion and integration. Similarly, in her analysis of refugee reception and integration policies in the Netherlands, Ghorashi shows how remnants of colonial legacies create Othering positions for non-western migrants and refugees, positioning them as inferior and placing cultural and emotional demands on them to assimilate into Dutch society.

In examining processes of Othering, it is also important to consider the coloniality of the term "refugee" within "refugee integration" paradigms. The figure of the modern refugee is a product of western concerns enacted by western powers following World War II (Malkki 1995). The term "refugee" became a legal category codified in Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention and a subject of humanitarianism overseen by the newly established UNHCR. Over time, the concept of the modern refugee has evolved, as people fleeing conflicts in former colonies sought protection in the colonial metropole. Immigration policies and responses to the changing conditions and flows of forced migrants have become increasingly discriminatory and exclusionary (Bloch and Donà 2019). The proliferation of immigration statuses, each carrying differential access to resources and rights, is used by state authorities to categorise and hierarchically organise individuals seeking protection, creating layered processes of Othering that define "deserving" and "undeserving" (Sales 2002) asylum seekers and refugees. These practices are both gendered and racialised, as evidenced by recent examples, including the differential treatment of white female refuges from Ukraine compared to young, brown men fleeing countries with colonial histories. The normative and exclusionary nature of integration frameworks marginalises groups in different ways, leading to certain "Others" being

deemed unintegrated or "non-integratable" based on narrow constructions of national belonging (Spencer and Charsley 2021).

Hospitality, solidarity, and social enterprises: decolonial spaces of integration?

Another theme emerging from the contributions to this Special Issue is the delineation of spaces of integration that have the potential to become decolonial spaces. Julie Daniel's article (2024) on hospitality, emphasising the power of storytelling and participatory action research, demonstrates how fostering mutual understanding and collective belonging – framed within intercultural educational paradigms – can support integration in a University of Sanctuary. To achieve sustainable integration in multicultural contexts, hospitality must be rooted in principles of diversity and equity. Integration, however, does not come without its challenges, as Raymond et al. (2024), Julie Daniel, Maria Loftus, and Patrick Cadwell illustrate in their exploration of non-formal, volunteer-led English teaching initiatives as liminal spaces for both teaching and learning.

Lubit's (2024) contribution on solidarity among women refugees in minority spaces and communities in Northern Ireland examines how interactions among refugee women can serve as indicators of integration in a sectarian society, even when solidarity is practised within marginalised spaces. Lubit's work challenges the one-size-fits-all notion of integration, arguing for a more nuanced approach that recognises factors such as gender, legal status, and racialising dynamics. In a different context, Chatzipanagiotodou and Murphy (2025) explore refugee-led social enterprises in Turkey as decolonial sites that counter traditional extractive and exploitative labour practices. The authors advocate for a more holistic understanding of labour integration that encompasses the full human experience.

The examples above situate integration primarily at the grassroots level. Moving away from the one-size-fits-all model of state-driven integration policies, they highlight spaces of hospitality, solidarity, and refugee-led partnerships where diverse micro-level initiatives operate on shared values of equity, diversity, voice, and rights. In these informal spaces, it is possible to glimpse a decolonial praxis of integration. Are these, then, the spaces from which a vision for a new politics of inclusion and participation can be imagined? The next section draws on the themes identified above to discuss the overall mission of this Special Issue: to decolonise integration paradigms and advance a vision for new politics of inclusion and participation.

Decoding "decolonising" in *living* integration

The general aim of this Special Issue, as the editors state, is to "illuminate the nebulous, often problematic nature of integration, urging a re-evaluation of approaches and assumptions through a decolonial lens, thereby advocating for incremental systemic change." The Special Issue aptly fulfils its aim. In this section, I explore how the contributors shed light on the complex nature of living integration, which I define as the first-hand experience of refugees and the implementation of real-life policy interventions. By tracing the workings of coloniality of power in state-driven integration programmes, the humanitarian landscape of refugee camps, and sectarian communal spaces, among others, this

Special Issue reveals that integration, along with the policies and strategies governing it, is deeply intertwined with power dynamics often perpetuated by the enduring legacy of colonisation.

The Special Issue makes a valuable contribution to the literature on integration paradigms, elucidating long standing issues around integration, the indicators of "successful" integration, the nature of host societies, and how state-driven initiatives promote or undermine real-life integration experiences. Some of the papers call for the dismantling of colonial infrastructures and ideologies that foster inequalities and injustices within refugee integration processes.

Beyond a critique of integration frameworks, this Special Issue also helps re-evaluate integration approaches by foregrounding three interrelated modalities: realignment, intersectionality, and relationality. Overall, the editors and contributors invite readers to rethink integration by aligning it more closely with liberal values of rights, diversity, voice, and equity. They advocate for an intersectional approach that is both equitable and empathetic (Murphy and Vieten 2017; Vieten and Murphy 2019). Inspired by Indigenous principles of giving and receiving in balance (Yunkaporta 2019), they propose a model of integration that is relational, understanding integration as a mutual exchange: the knowledge, skills, and cultural practices of asylum seekers and refugees enrich the host society, just as the host community provides a supportive environment for newcomers. The Special Issue invites readers to reimagine integration frameworks and processes in new ways that honour the agency and voices of asylum seekers and refugees while promoting equitable relationships.

To what extent can the progressive rethinking of integration paradigms along realignment, intersectionality, and relationality be seen to "decolonise" integration? The Special Issue is informed by ongoing decolonial conversations within migration studies. The papers engage, to varying degrees, with decolonial literature and can be seen to adopt a decolonial lens in discussing integration. However, more work could be done in the future to make explicit what "decolonising" integration entails and how it differs from being "decolonially informed" or adopting a "decolonial lens." For example, how is a call to realign integration paradigms towards rights and equity a call to decolonise integration, rather than a mainstream liberal proposition? How does decolonial praxis – which often calls for radical structural change – align with a softer version of incremental systemic change? It is hoped that future research, building on the interesting discussions and propositions raised in this Special Issue, will shed more light on the challenging task of decolonising integration.

Decoding "decolonising" in *writing* integration

Amid the rise of the "decolonial turn" in academia, it is timely to have a Special Issue that engages with the project of decolonising integration paradigms. Rai and Campion (2022) note that while "decolonising" is rooted in colonial struggles, particularly in the Global South, its use is relatively "new" in Northern universities. "Decolonising" has become a new language and praxis in academia that requires "decoding".

The field of migration studies, in which integration features centrally, is ideally positioned to engage with questions and processes of decolonisation, given its focus on borders, diaspora, mobility, and core concepts like nation and migrant (Raghuram and

Sondhi forthcoming). However, scholars have often jumped straight into writing about decolonisation in migration studies. Raghuram and Sondhi argue that there has been limited reflection on the process of knowledge production – on who is undertaking decolonisation and from where the problem of colonisation is being addressed. Addressing this absence of discussion on who, from where, and how to decolonise migration studies is essential to move beyond rhetorical decolonisation. There is always a risk of reducing "decolonising" to a metaphor or reproducing coloniality by appropriating a Southern concept (Moosavi 2020; Tuck and Yang 2021).

While the aim of this Special Issue is not to decolonise the Northern university or migration studies as a whole, it is nonetheless pertinent to reflect on decolonising the writing of integration. In my exchanges with the editors for this commentary, there is an acknowledgment that writing about integration continues to operate within colonial institutions – such as universities, publishing houses, and journals – that enact exclusionary processes of Othering. The coloniality of power in knowledge production continues to create the Other, who may be the subject of living integration but is not necessarily the contributor, editor, or even reader when it comes to writing about integration. The papers in this Special Issue, including this commentary, are produced by academics – some of whom are migrants and refugees – based in European universities, whose work is disseminated through academic venues in the global north. This is a limitation not only of this Special Issue but of most conversations around decolonising integration taking place at present. More work is needed to decolonise the writing of integration. It is hoped that the decolonial turn will also translate into the use of multiple languages, incorporating not only linguistic translations but also amplifying the direct voices of refugees and residents through a diverse range of creative written, sonic, and visual styles. This observation aligns with recent calls to "decolonise" Northern universities by interrogating what happens "in here and within," with the aim of opening debates about the politics of knowledge and the analysis of power within academia itself (De Jong et al. 2017).

I want to conclude this commentary with a brief note on positionality and reflexivity. At the beginning of this piece, I posed a few questions about the relevance of living and writing integration for my own life. Like many migrants and refugees whose connections transcend the places they reside in, my answer to the question "Am I integrated?" would be conditional: "It depends." Integration is not necessarily a lens I would typically use to explain my transnational life; it is only moderately useful as a heuristic device. Decolonising integration must consider who is doing the decolonising, as well as from whom, how, and where the problem of colonisation is being addressed.

Commenting on this Special Issue – which is, in itself, a form of writing integration – has led me to reconsider collaboration, co-creation, and dissemination. I acknowledge that academic privilege comes with constraints that limit the scope for decolonial projects. Recently, I co-curated an exhibition called *Tallash (Trying)* – a collaboration among two Iranian artists from refugee backgrounds, a photographer, and two researchers. The project aimed to reverse the gaze on Fortress Europe and foreground the artistic perspectives of refugee artists as they live and perform integration. The exhibition was presented in a container located in a public space. This is just one example of the many public engagement initiatives burgeoning as universities rethink their roles in society. As interdisciplinary researchers, activists, and artists committed to decoloniality,

we must expand the methodologies and strategies available to us to address critical societal issues. In this regard, a decolonial praxis for both living and writing integration holds significant potential to bring about social transformation.

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