Article

Colonial logics as public secrets of international student mobility

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Abstract

This paper contributes to international student mobility's ethical reimagining by stressing what continues to be foreclosed by that imagining – that is, the depth of the task's complexities. To do so, it outlines international student mobility's colonial roots (as a phenomenon) and applied roots (as a field) and discusses how both shape, and are shaped by, its field-imaginary. It then uses the concept of "public secrets" to name the obvious, yet often forgotten, colonial logics underpinning the field of international education, and international student mobility in particular. It suggests these public secrets are one reason why the field's critical interventions have failed to have more concrete impacts. It then specifically discusses the problematic binaries which underpin the field, especially the term "international student," as examples of such public secrets. Finally, it discusses three common responses critical internationalization scholars and practitioners might use to respond to this provocation: (1) further/different critique; (2) proposed solutions (e.g., new vocabulary), and disinvestment (e.g., new grammar).

Keywords: international students, international student mobility, critical internationalization, international education, coloniality, field-imaginary

Introduction

International education has been described as "one of the most depoliticized educational discussions and analyses in educational discourse," historically neglecting inequality, marginalization, exclusion (Rhee, 2009, p. 56), and coloniality (Takayama et al., 2017). Early research on the internationalization of higher education and international student mobility (ISM) - that is, students who crossed national borders to attend school - was uncritical, undertheorized, and instrumental (Brooks & Waters, 2011; King & Raghuram, 2013; Lee et al., 2006). However, the study of internationalization has since shifted in the Global North[1] academy. The term "critical internationalization" appeared in 2015 (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015), the *Critical Internationalization Studies Network* convened in 2018, and a "critical turn" brought critical internationalization perspectives to the forefront (Beck, 2021; Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020; Stein, 2021a; Yang, 2020). Critical ISM research specifically – a subfield previously dominated by geographers and sociologists (Riaño et al., 2018) – now enjoys increased engagement from education scholars.

Yet despite a decade of critical work from educational scholars, little has changed *practically* for ISM, and "more sustainable and reciprocal models" (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020, p. 326) have yet to materialize. The colonial, ecologically unsustainable, and otherwise harmful logics rooted in Western supremacy which organize the internationalization of higher education have proven very difficult to disrupt (Stein, 2019; 2021a).

This paper highlights one possible explanation for the limited impact of critical scholarship on ISM: these problematic logics are also deeply embedded within critical ISM's field-imaginary, or its "disciplinary unconscious" (Pease, 1990, p. 11). A field-imaginary refers not to a field's "foundational texts or canonical knowledge" but rather its "implicit investments, assumptions, as well as disavowals that are rarely stated or acknowledged and, as a consequence, rarely questioned" (Stein, 2021b, p. 398). Because these investments, assumptions, and disavowals are so naturalized and taken-for-granted, they can be difficult to surface; even examinations of field-imaginaries are themselves bound by unconscious attachments informed by one's disciplinary education and socialization (Stein, 2021b; Wiegman, 2012). Still, due to the orienting power of field-imaginaries, their analysis is necessary – even if inevitably partial.

Analyzing field-imaginaries is one way to challenge scholars' tendency to believe the knowledge they produce is a neutral reconstruction of the social order as it exists, rather than a reflection of both reality *and* the experiences and position of the researchers themselves (Kincheloe, 2005). By interrogating the

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[1] We follow Dados and Connell's (2012) use of Global North/South to highlight enduring patterns of uneven geopolitical power relations, mobilities, and epistemic injustices, despite its oversimplifications. Our paper focuses specifically on ISM as it has developed in the Global North.

field-imaginary of ISM, we aim to disrupt the "transparency of the intellectual" (Spivak, 1988, p. 280). This is especially important in contexts that require an anti-colonial critique to destabilize not just the narratives of Western supremacy and exceptionalism, but also the assumption that scholars are free of those legacies despite being trained and employed by Western supremacist institutions. Thus, challenging the field-imaginary of ISM is about challenging epistemological privilege and inviting both ourselves and our colleagues to recognize our implicated positionality, and to consider what other options might be possible (Aman, 2017).

To contribute to this project, we focus specifically on the ways in which ISM's field-imaginary is evidenced, and constantly reproduced, by its foundational vocabulary, such as the term *international student* itself. As Beck wrote, "internationalization practices have been constructed around definitions, and the definitions have served to legitimize anything and everything related to the notion of 'international'" (2021, p. 142). Whether consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or due to a perceived lack of alternatives, ISM has long utilized Eurocentric, depoliticized terms which disguise and justify its inherent inequities, and even critical internationalization scholarship continues that practice. Even if we[2] are aware of their contradictions and use them provisionally, they legitimize harmful practices while allowing us to sidestep difficult conversations.

To unpack the implications of ISM terminology, we first briefly resurface ISM's colonial roots (as a phenomenon) and applied roots (as a field) – both of which shape, and are shaped by, its field-imaginary. We then turn to the notions of *coloniality* and *imperialist forgetting* to theorize why these foundational terms remain influential. Next, we apply this lens to our own compromised positionality to examine the complexities of ISM's vocabulary. Finally, we address how critical ISM scholars and practitioners might respond to this provocation.

International student mobility's colonial roots

Despite abundant descriptions of higher education having "always" been international (e.g., Altbach, 1985; Beech, 2017; Knight, 2014; Reisberg & Rumbley, 2014; Rizvi, 2011; Scott, 2000), most Global North authors trace ISM back only to the medieval period. The medieval European university model is offered as the original source of higher education (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Lee et al., 2006), and the fact that "early European universities used an international language – Latin" (Altbach, 1985, p. 7) is used as proof of their international orientation. Eurocentric examples of the travels of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Carl von Linné, and

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[2] This paper uses "we" to refer to critical internationalization scholars as a loose group, without formal affiliation but sharing an axiological orientation towards internationalization of education. We co-authors consider ourselves to be implicated in the critique we level here.

Emanuel Swedenborg (Dolby & Rahman, 2008), or the journeys of so-called explorers James Cook, Vasco da Gama, and Christopher Columbus (Stier, 2004) are cited as evidence of mobility. The "grand tour" of Europe is also said to have created the tradition of voyage as "cultivation" in the late Middle Ages (Taïeb & Doerr, 2017).

However, these accounts ignore that scholars have long travelled throughout what is now India, China, and the Middle East, concentrating in institutions such as Nalanda and cities such as Takshila and Sarnath. Students travelled from Greece and Rome to study in Alexandria, Fez, and Baghdad, while European universities (including Bologna and Padua) drew students from Asia and the Middle East (Gürüz, 2008; Rizvi, 2011).

Similarly, although colonialism in the 17th and 18th centuries significantly influenced human mobility (Dolby & Rahman, 2008; Kramer, 2009; Rizvi, 2011; Walker, 2014), its role is typically underplayed in overviews of ISM. There is a tendency to position nation-states and universities as passive actors in historical ISM (Reisberg & Rumbley, 2014), obscuring the ways colonialism shaped modern educational relations (Madge et al., 2014). The historical mobility of students from colonies to study in imperial core countries (Wallerstein, 2004) was meant to ensure both an educated administrative class (sympathetic to the interests of imperial powers) and a way for the colonial elite to maintain their class distinction through a Western education (Bhabha, 1994; Bu, 2003; Rizvi, 2011). Mobility, like education more generally, functioned as a social technology to differentiate classes (Rizvi, 2011) and, in some examples, enabled the enslavement of traveling students from West Africa such as when two Princes of Annamaboe (in present-day Ghana) were sold into slavery by a British captain entrusted to take them to England to study (Walker, 2014). Even as colonies sought independence from European empires, educational mobility was part of emancipation efforts in which local elites were encouraged to travel to Western imperial powers and bring education "back home" to advance their countries' nationalistic aspirations (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Walker, 2014).

Another enduring flow of student mobility from this era was a version of the European grand tour for (primarily white) students at newly founded US institutions to complete their "finishing" in the "Old World" (Taïeb & Doerr, 2017). These tours continued until the 20th century (de Wit, 2002). Travel from Europe and the USA to colonies also established rationales which resonate today. Europeans (and, shortly after being established, white settler nations) "developed a sense of ownership, entitlement, curiosity, adventure, and moral fervour about their 'non-Western' colonies" (Taïeb & Doerr, 2017, p. 37).

This sense of ownership and entitlement only grew during the 20th century. Before World War II, capitalists such as John D. Rockefeller promoted ISM to help expand American influence, specifically Protestant

Christianity and capitalism, around the world (Bu, 2003; 2012; Kramer, 2009). Dawood (2019) argues Rockefeller saw mobile students as "foot soldiers" in his campaign to achieve global American dominance (p. 900). These neocolonial efforts expanded further during the Cold War, when capitalist countries developed aid programs that funded ISM to ensure former colonies were friendly to Western business and political interests (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016; McChartney, 2016; Oakman, 2010). ISM in this era was animated by a "deep paternalism" that assumed Westerners were modern and non-Westerners were backwards and in need of support (Piccini, 2020, p. 699), in the process rebranding a longstanding colonial pattern as "development."

This brief section only highlights some of the often-overlooked colonial roots of ISM; space does not allow for a full excavation of ISM's colonial grammar. It remains largely invisibilized, and more work to counter the romanticization of ISM's past is needed (Stein, 2021a). For now, we turn to a similarly brief genealogy of ISM's roots as an applied field.

International student mobility's applied roots

ISM falls within a subset of institutionally-driven activities described as "academic mobility," frequently viewed as the "face" of internationalization (Knight, 2012). Maldonado-Maldonado described the "classical" definition of ISM as "the physical deployment that individuals undertake to obtain some kind of academic experience in a higher education institution of another country" (2014, p. 128). This relates to Knight's (2012) conceptualization of internationalization which separates "at home" activities (e.g., curriculum) from those which are "abroad/crossborder" (e.g., mobility of people), as well as Lee et al.'s conceptual distinction between migration (explaining the phenomenon of studying abroad), and internationalization (explaining the "primary educational intention") (2006, p. 547). However, the field's early lack of empirical and conceptual research resulted in a dearth of conceptual frameworks (Lee et al., 2006).

This historical under-theorization is partially explained by ISM's roots in comparative education, a field with deep ties to colonial education efforts in the early 20th century (Takayama, 2018). But also significant was ISM's emergence as an *applied* field, where practitioners and administrators were initially the primary authors (Kramer, 2009) and audience (Dolby & Rahman, 2008). As recently as two decades ago, its literature consisted mainly of "marketing strategies…economic measurements…pedagogical evaluations…and psychological assessments" (Collins, 2008, p. 400). Most ISM practitioners then viewed their work as positively contributing to not only to the student experience but also larger issues of human rights and "cultural relativity" and "tolerance" (Stier, 2010), while administrators were motivated and/or bound by institutional neoliberal forces. Critique thus developed slowly.

This is not to say that critiques of ISM did not exist before the early 2000s. However, education scholars and administrators (particularly those in, or from, the Global North) typically become aware of critical perspectives much later than students (particularly those in, or from, the Global South) and scholars studying issues of migration and mobility (which occurred primarily outside the discipline of education) (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). Still, even beyond education, ISM was a "neglected field" compared to the mobility of other groups (e.g., immigrants and refugees) (King & Raghuram, 2013, p. 127).

This changed as ISM grew, both in the number of border-crossing students and in its importance to academic programs, institutions (Brooks & Waters, 2011), and national immigration/economic systems. As ISM became central to strategic plans and policy agendas (Reisberg & Rumbley, 2014), it also became the site of high-profile "new developments and unintended consequences of internationalisation" (Knight, 2014, p. 77). As a result, it was elevated to a "key field" within migration research (Riaño et al., 2018). Although its study within education remained "predominantly applied" as recently as 2014 (de Wit, 2014, p. 91), this changed alongside internationalization's critical turn.

International student mobility's critical turn

While the neoliberal focus on "profit over justice" (e.g., McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018) is perhaps most frequently cited, critical research has highlighted a range of concerns with ISM over time. For example, scholars have illustrated ISM's intertwinement with (neo-)colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, reproducing uneven relationships and historic patterns of inequity across the globe (Adnett, 2010; Kramer, 2009; McCartney, 2020; Ploner & Nada, 2020; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004; Shultz, 2013). Others have highlighted ISM's lack of ethical guidelines (Hellstén, 2017; Ilieva et al., 2014; Shultz, 2013; Waters, 2018), its unsustainability and lack of reciprocity (Ilieva et al., 2014), and its role in state (im)migration regimes (Brunner, 2021; 2022).Critical scholars have also stressed its reliance and reproduction of the epistemic hegemony of the Global North (de Wit, 2014; Stein & Andreotti, 2016; Mwangi et al., 2018), complicating efforts to see otherwise (Stein & Andreotti, 2017). Furthermore, researchers continue to demand more critical attention to the global political economy of ISM and its representation, symbolic capital (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015), and relationships to global crises (Joose & Heleta, 2017).

Yet unlike studies of migration in other disciplines (e.g., Hamlin et al., 2021), research about ISM still lacks explicit, comprehensive discussions of the foundational terms it uses to both (1) operate as a practice, and (2) make its critiques. This limits the impact that critical scholarship, or even policy critique, can have on ISM as a phenomenon. Without an examination of the foundational language and embedded discourses shaping academic discussions of ISM, it is impossible to challenge the colonial inheritance of these terms, or to escape the harmful patterns of knowing, being and relating that they reproduce (Fairclough, 2015).

Researchers – critical or otherwise – in this field are in an unusual position due to our proximity to, and complicity in, the practice of what we critique; as a result, we have a unique ability and responsibility to inform its structure. It is from this position of entanglement and complicity that we offer the following critique, focusing on what is known yet goes unsaid.

Coloniality, forgetting, and public secrecy

In an extension of Renato Rosaldo's notion of "imperialist nostalgia" (describing the colonial desire for pre-colonial encounters), Fletcher described "imperialist amnesia"[3] as the tendency for writers in a variety of contexts, ranging from popular writing to scholarly work and public policy, to either ignore the history of colonial domination in their accounts or to present a sanitized version of colonialism from which evidence of exploitation, persecution, subjugation and genocide has been effectively effaced, (in Fletcher, 2012, p. 423). While reminiscent of Spivak's (1999) notion of "sanctioned ignorance," Fletcher's (2012) concept emphasizes *forgetting*, thereby stressing (1) the existence of previous (albeit no longer accessible) knowledge, and (2) a less conscious, purposeful (albeit no less problematic) silencing. Imperialist forgetting reveals "the tendency to deny the West's complicity (and one's own complicity as Westerner) in the plight of the Third World" (Kapoor, 2014, p. 1127).

Fletcher (2012) highlights travel writing and discussions of international development as two spaces where imperialist forgetting is particularly visible. Writing about ISM overlaps both fields. Like travel writing, ISM is frequently entangled with the search for an "authentic" (educational) encounter, obscuring the role that colonialism has played in creating the conditions for an encounter to occur in the first place. For example, one study found the "most commonly selected benefit of internationalization" among English-speaking North American postsecondary institutions "was increasing students' international awareness" (Buckner, 2019, p. 325). Similarly, discussions of ISM are often embedded in larger discourses about international development. Politicians in the Global North frequently describe ISM as a rational choice by students interested in gaining a "high quality" education from a "developed" country, ignoring that the idea of Western education as especially high quality is itself a product of the history of colonialism (McCartney, 2020).

This combination of Western supremacist notions of educational quality and the obscuring of the colonial components of ISM demonstrates that imperialist forgetting is certainly present in ISM spaces. Yet Fletcher (2012) warns that *partial* forgetting – affording colonialism *selective* attention rather than complete

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[3] Fletcher's original term "imperialist amnesia" associates a medical condition with the crimes of colonialism, in the process stigmatizing those who suffer with amnesia. We embrace Fletcher's concept but instead use "imperialist forgetting" to avoid the ableism in the original term.

erasure – allows colonialism to function even more insidiously. In instances of partial forgetting, colonialism becomes what Michael Taussig called a "public secret": "that which is generally known but cannot generally be articulated" (as quoted in Fletcher, 2012, p. 434). Public secrecy defies disclosure in a paradoxical way; because "part of secrecy is secreting" and "revelation is precisely what the secret intends," exposure reinforces the fiction that something is being concealed, when in fact "the secret of the public secret is that there is none" (Taussig, as quoted in Fletcher, 2012, p. 435). Thus, public secrets are those things that go unmentioned even though all of us recognize their presence – an act of forgetting what we already know.

The acceptance of the nation-state as a given category beyond critique is one example of a public secret within education. The concept of the nation-state has a history that is concomitant with colonialism (Anderson, 2006; Chatterjee, 1993), and each nation-state has a history of its own of colonial encounters. And yet this is rarely discussed or acknowledged, even in critical scholarship. We might challenge this public secret by situating the development of the nation-state within border imperialism, or the processes "by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained" (Walia, 2013, p. 5-6) and the larger regimes of institutions, discourses, and systems entrenching controls against migrants and determining whom the state includes (Brunner, 2023a; 2023b; McCartney, 2022; Walia, 2021). This articulation helps us see that borders are not necessarily related to regulating movement but are rather "a key method of imperial state formation, hierarchical social ordering, labor control, and xenophobic nationalism" (Walia, 2021, p. 2), thus allowing and motivating us to question nation-state logics and to return coloniality to our analytical frame of reference.

Yet articulation is rarely enough. Even when presented with compelling evidence and motivation, it is not simply a question of seeing anew or rather remembering again. As Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1999) have suggested, our forgetfulness persists because it is based in Western thought's desire to repress the barbarism of its own colonialism, which it in turn averts "by (unconsciously) projecting it onto the Other" (Kapoor, 2014, p. 1128). This identify-forming relational binary not only represses what one cannot come to terms with, but also produces a sense of superiority, benevolence, and exceptionalism only possible *through* disavowing the inherent violences of the national project (Thobani, 2007). This is especially true in multicultural settler-colonial contexts such as Canada, where both co-authors work. The challenge is that we are arguably not just attached to, but *enjoy*, colonial (and other) hierarchies because they make us feel (superficially) stable and fulfilled (Kapoor, 2014), and it is challenging to convince people to change a system which (appears to) work for them (Gordon, 1990).

Some decolonial scholars use "coloniality" to describe how that which is forgotten – for example, the spatiality of expansionism, the epistemic racism within the elimination of difference, and the epistemic violence of the geopolitics of knowledge production – "conceals the continuous epistemic, cognitive,
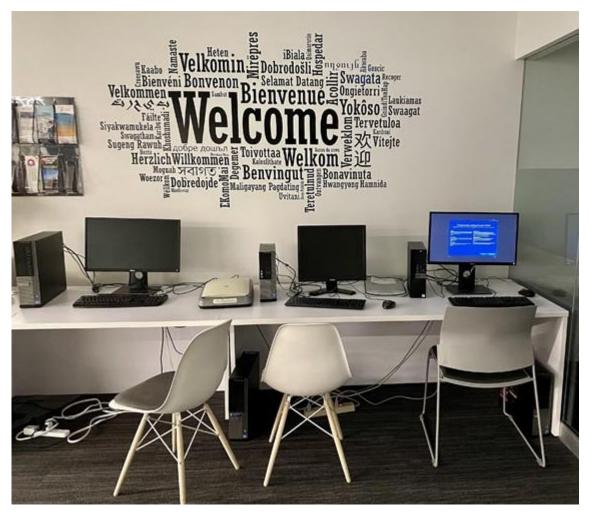
structural, economic, cultural and military violences that subsidise modernity itself" (Andreotti, 2016, p. 103; Mignolo, 2000; Takayama et al., 2017). However, this leads to de Sousa Santos' (2007) point that we are limited not only by forgetting but by an epistemic obfuscation in which modern Western thinking is a form of "abyssal thinking" *unable* to see otherwise. de Sousa Santos used the university as an example of the "well-policed monopolies of knowledge" which enforce "the deep duality of abyssal thinking and the incommensurability between the terms" of that duality (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 52). In other words, many of us are limited by the foreclosures of modern Western thinking itself, i.e., its "modern onto-epistemic grammar" (Andreotti, 2016, p. 106; Silva, 2007).

Are we ignorant or unwilling? Repressing or forgetting? Engaging with such questions from within the context of a modern Western university is fraught with paradoxes and complicated by a range of audience orientations (Andreotti, 2016; Andreotti et al., 2015). Nonetheless, imperial forgetting is threaded throughout ISM's practice and critique, contributing to a colonial grammar that is a type of public secret.

ISM's colonial grammar: Walls and winks of welcome

To offer examples, we turn to the public universities in which we co-author work. Both are in Canada, which currently recruits among the highest number *and* proportion of inbound post-secondary international students (Institute of International Education, 2024). Image 1 shows the space in a large research university where international students prepare immigration applications such as work permits or visas. Advisors employed by the university sit here while helping students navigate the state-migration regime governing their lives. In both the words adorning the wall and the more abstract bureaucratic walls they confront, international students' inclusion is implicitly conditional; the unstated expectation is that they are welcome to the extent they serve the interests of the state and institution. Their welcome is also ahistorical (premised on the purposeful forgetting of the status of the land to which the students arrive as occupied Indigenous territory) and ethnocentric (centering English and treating other languages as peripheral). Given all of this, the welcome can be read as a taunt. A public secret.

Image 1. Up against the wall of welcome

The image depicts a desk with three computer workstations. Above the desk is a white wall with a word cloud of the word "welcome" written in many languages, with English centered and in the largest font.

Image 2 shows the area outside the international student support centre, which is next to global engagement and Indigenous student services offices at a small, primarily undergraduate university. Like the welcome wall, the tone of this space is supportive at first glance. But the prominence of a for-profit banking desk – adorned with a photograph of a person winking and statement encouraging students to "start a conversation that matters" with the bank – makes obvious the tensions in the services offered to international students. While the "global lounge" promises the intrinsic benefits of an internationalized education, the permanent, physical presence of a bank shows students what *actually* matters: not conversations about Indigenous student supports or global engagement, but financial contributions to a colonial financial institution. Again, the secret of marketized international education is normalized, by its public prominence – with a wink.

Image 2. A welcome with a wink

The image depicts the sitting area outside an office called the "Global Lounge," which contains a branded desk advertising the services of the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC). As part of the RBC display, a sign displays an advertisement picturing a young man, with the slogan "start a conversation that matters." Other signs in the sitting area indicate the location of "Indigenous Student Services" and "Global Engagement."

The welcome wall and the banking desk represent ISM's public secrets all around and within us, unfolding in everyday micro-politics within higher education (Ahmed, 2012; Ahenakew, 2016). The (not so) secrecy of these public secrets is driven by enduring investments in colonial promises, or colonial desires.

On one hand, these patterns will not change if we do not first recognize them. On the other hand, intellectual recognition alone will not necessarily lead to change; indeed, no academic argument or article can prompt this change. Responding thus requires more than convincing arguments or data. It calls for an

"uncoercive rearrangement of desires" (Spivak, 2004, p. 526). Yet paradoxically, we can only pursue this rearrangement by first recognizing the broader patterns of coloniality, e.g., hegemony, ethnocentrism, ahistoricism, depoliticization, salvationism, un-complicated solutions, and paternalism (Andreotti, 2012). The remainder of this paper highlights these grammars within ISM's field-imaginary as expressed by its vocabulary.

ISM's colonial vocabulary

Table 1 offers a partial list of some binary terms that are foundational to ISM and used routinely in academic, media, and policy contexts. It aims to remind us of the colonial baggage embedded in these terms by highlighting the centering of academics and practitioners in the Global North (the "self") in counterpoint to the peripheralized "other," notionally from the Global South.

Table 1. Foundational binaries used in international student mobility research and practice, drawn from common terms in the field of international student mobility.

Subject of binary	The (Global North) "self"	The (Global South) "other"
Students	Domestic; Local; Outbound; Study Abroad; Exchange; Citizen	International; Foreign; Overseas; Inbound; (Im)migrant
Campuses	Home; Host	Offshore; Branch; Overseas
Countries	Host; Receiving; Centre; Developed; Pull	Source; Sending; Periphery; Developing; Push

Despite being inherently relational (King & Raghuram, 2013) and Othering (Lomer, 2018), these terms remain ubiquitous, even in critical scholarship. Yet each time they are used, we – perhaps unwittingly or even unwillingly, but nonetheless inevitably – reproduce the public secret of presumed Western/Global North supremacy and the conditional extension of the "welcome" it offers mobile students.

Each of these terms can be, and has been, critiqued. However, the term *international student* demands particular attention. The concept of an "international student" originates at different times in different countries, first emerging as a coherent concept with attached meaning sometime between World Wars I and II in the USA and UK (Bevis & Lucas, 2007; Perraton, 2014). The growth of aid programs led to a dramatic expansion in the number of internationally mobile students and led to a classification crisis for states trying to govern this relatively new form of mobility. In some countries, such as Canada, that was resolved by the development of a distinct legal category initially called "foreign students," which allowed the Canadian government to allocate certain entitlements – i.e., international students were foreign nationals "with benefits" (McCartney, 2016; 2020). Within higher education, the need to classify students

as *foreign/international* or *domestic* was primarily developed to administer differential post-secondary tuition fees (Kenyon et al., 2012). Yet even from these crude, logistical perspectives, the ambiguity of the term "international" leads to complexities rarely acknowledged in the field (Brunner et al., 2023; Merabet, 2024). And while a distinction is sometimes drawn between "foreign student" and "international student" on the basis that international student is less exclusionary, the latter, we argue, is not meaningfully more inclusive as a term (see Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p. 11-12).

Today, the precise meaning of *international student* continues to shift from one situation and one country to another (Merrick, 2013), thus containing and disguising a process by which colonial regimes reflect a market-based mode of mobility. Varying definitions of *international student* demonstrate a kind of gerrymandering in which contorted, bureaucratic lines are drawn in ways only logical to those attempting to distinguish who counts, gets charged what tuition, can work where, and pays taxes to whom – a messy mix of inclusions and exclusions.

At the same time, *international student* is also used as a colloquial pejorative term. It is evoked to reaffirm a hierarchy of desirability informed by the grammar of Western supremacy and is tied up in soft power, racism, or assumptions about language ability or cultural difference (Kenyon et al., 2012), further reproducing power imbalances (Indelicato, 2018; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004; Riaño et al., 2018). This "slipperiness" is what makes international students' simultaneous inclusion and exclusion possible (King & Raghuram, 2013, p. 131; Brunner et al., 2023), leading to an everyday practice which is both socially acceptable and dehumanizing. Such a tolerated, notionally inclusive term allows us to selectively forget the racializations, disparities, histories, and violent present which drive the need for the term in the first place.

This critique may feel little more than a technicality or an unavoidable by-product of doing comparative international research or being legible to a broad audience. But using the term *international student* (or equally *domestic student*, its antithesis in the ISM binary and doubly problematic in settler colonial contexts) is more than a description. It is a *decision* to reproduce imaginaries of the nation-state as the natural arbiter of rights and reinforce border imperialism. It risks relying on "nationality as the sole determinant of trans- and internationally mobile students, [failing] to account for the complex configuration of student identities beyond nationality" (Ploner & Nada, 2020, p. 376; see also Ploner, 2017) and reinforcing "the naturalization of homes as origins, and the romanticization of mobility as travel, transcendence and transformation" (Ahmed et al., 2003, p. 1), since terms related to travel/home and displacement/location are linked to colonial discourse (Kaplan, 1996). Even the word *student* can erase the complex subjectivity of people who hold multiple social positions beyond our post-secondary institutions (King & Raghuram, 2013; Madge et al., 2014).

Remembering and resurfacing

In a critique of *foreign* as a descriptive term for non-English languages in the U.S., Anderson (2021) urged higher education institutions to "rethink inherited epistemologies that had previously escaped critical evaluation" rather than ignore and be complicit in them (para. 8). The question we raise in response is: have such epistemologies *really* escaped critical evaluation? We have seen a long line of problematic vocabulary fade out of fashion, including the term *foreign student*, only to be replaced by others structured by the same logic. Do we, as critical scholars of ISM, not know the problem with this enduring logic already?

We need to remember that *the secret of the public secret is that there is no secret*. In other words, it is the openness and routinization of ISM's coloniality that makes it so easy to forget. If we accept that our field-imaginary continues to normalize ISM's everyday epistemic violences, then our first task is to attempt to remember and resurface the colonial grammar of ISM's field-imaginary by making "what is invisible noticeably absent" (Ahenakew, 2016, p. 333).

What does this mean for ISM's vocabulary, and for research and practices related to ISM? Taking this paper's claims seriously raises difficult questions. Should we refer to international students differently? Rename our journals and departments? Overhaul our institutional data management systems? Will changing these terms lead to material changes to ISM in practice (including, for instance, border security regimes, international tuition structures, xenophobic campus climates)? Did it when the terms were changed in the past?

Critical internationalization studies have reached what Stein calls an "impasse," prompting the question of "whether internationalization in higher education can be adequate to the task of preparing people to respond to today's numerous overlapping global challenges" (2021a, p. 11). While there are multiple responses to this question (Stein & McCartney, 2021), three are most common: (1) further, or different kinds of, critique, (e.g., Bamberger & Morris, 2024); (2) pluralizing the available "horizons of hope" through proposed solutions (such as applying critique to practice, policy, and action) (e.g., Mwangi et al., 2018); and (3) disinvestment from the model of ISM premised on colonial higher education (e.g., Grande, 2018; La paperson, 2017; Stein, 2019) and migration regimes. Table 2 presents an example of how each might apply to the challenge of our field-imaginary's colonial terms – and as the three following subsections demonstrate, each response is both strategically useful in certain contexts, yet problematic.

Table 2. Three common responses to critical internationalization studies' impasse

Type of response	Example action
Further/different kinds of critique	Critique vocabulary and/or grammar
Pluralizing available "horizons of hope" through proposed solutions	Find new vocabulary
Disinvestment from the presumed continuity of colonial ISM models	Find new grammar

Critique

This paper is an example of the first response: further critique. While the analysis here seeks to support the wider project of rearranging desires, as discussed earlier, critique alone is insufficient. Public secrets are secret because they are based in repression of what we cannot accept; *knowing* a critique (epistemologically) is different from *accepting* (ontologically) a critique.

Solutions

Finding new ISM vocabulary is another possible response. In the case of *international student*, some have suggested refocusing our research gaze on the *driver*, rather than the *subject*, of mobility (Findlay et al., 2012; King & Raghuram, 2013). Others suggest similar shifts in mobility-related terminology, e.g., using *climate change-induced migration* rather than *climate refugee* (Hamlin et al., 2021). Might we consider, for example, using *global inequality-induced education mobility* rather than *international student* in certain cases? Another option is to emphasize the governing role of the classification itself; Merabet (2024), for example, proposes *students labelled international*. Yet another approach is offered by the "We Are All International" student-led movement, which sought to challenge the distinction between domestic and international students in the UK by declaring such categories "ridiculously unhelpful in the world that we live in" (as cited in Tannock, 2018, p. 172). These examples offer "horizons of hope" that reframing terms might unmask the secrecy of the public secret and shift our political commitments.

We do not dispute that words matter, or that language structures our reality. At the same time, these responses risk oversimplifying the structural violences produced by ISM by tempting us to believe they are enough. We may attempt to resurface inequities or challenge distinctions, but as long as harmful governing technologies such as borders and citizenship continue to structure ISM, all that can truly be offered is solidarity. New vocabulary based on colonial grammar can also produce new harms; when applied to settler colonial context, for example, "we are all international" implies a latent settler futurity, rendering Indigenous people invisible and treating the ongoing process of settler-colonialism as permanent.

Disinvestment

This leads us to the third response – disinvestment – which posits that both further/different critique and proposed solutions to an issue of *vocabulary* do little to change the underlying *grammar*. That is, we might consider systems or structures to have a dual character –on the one hand characterized by schemas that are resistant to change (here rendered as grammar), and on the other governed by the deployment of resources that marshal power and impact social relations, but have limited impact on that schematic foundation (here rendered as vocabulary) (Sewell, 1992). Disinvestment suggests that, as vital as changing language may be, it does not necessarily challenge the underlying colonial logics that shape not only ISM but our understanding of ourselves through the grammar of coloniality that we are produced by and working within. From this orientation, the goal is not to find the "right" terminology or solution, but rather to ask whether we can, or should, salvage the field and the institutions they are premised upon. There are many challenges to this response, most importantly the question of whether we are emotionally prepared to let go of coloniality as a structure and foundation of our field. Do most critical ISM scholars and practitioners *truly* want to do away with technologies like borders, citizenship, or higher education as we know it?

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the colonial roots of the field of ISM, both as a scholarly area of study and a set of applied practices, has meant that it operates with a number of public secrets. These are imperial and colonial legacies that are embedded in the field-imaginary of ISM and are so routine that even critical internationalization scholars tend to take them for granted. The result is that a decade of critique has failed to significantly disrupt the worst elements of ISM and leaves us seeking new options to challenge ISM's colonial grammar.

We are at a pivotal geopolitical point with profound implications for higher and international education, given climate emergencies, capitalist crises, and protest movements against police violence and war. Campus statues are falling and academic buildings are being renamed even as a backlash against equity efforts closes programs and empties shelves in libraries. There are important questions to be asked about the motivations behind such actions (especially those taken by institutions), such as interest convergence (Bell, 1980) and virtue-signalling (Fairclough, 2003). As scholars, we must interrogate our own motivations and not assume that we have good intentions, or that good intentions necessarily interrupt harmful systemic patterns. However, if we are able to approach this moment with sobriety and care, attending to the complexities of distinct movements bound up in similarly harmful logics, it may be time to test the pliability of ISM's vocabulary – and, in so doing, begin to consider different possibilities for its field-

imaginary.

Yet even if we do test the limits of ISM's vocabulary, we still face the challenge of changing its grammar. Attempting to change a field's grammar, rather than just a vocabulary, can quickly render us unintelligible to others (Andreotti, 2016), making it impossible for those who do not share our political and intellectual commitments to understand our critique. It is also challenging to disinvest from higher education when it is our employer and intellectual home. Yet still, we must consider: What might we have to give up? Are we willing to do so? Should we reserve the right to use problematic terms strategically, as needed, in different contexts? Are we who critique ISM prepared to acknowledge our own complicity?

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