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**Special Issue on
Decolonising Knowledge Production
in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts**

**Numéro spécial sur
Décoloniser la production des savoirs
dans les sciences humaines, les sciences sociales et les arts**

**Guest Editor / Rédacteur invité
Munyaradzi Mushonga**

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The *Journal of Higher Education in Africa (JHEA)* is published by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Senegal. The Journal publishes research articles, think pieces and critiques on contemporary issues on higher education in the continent with special emphasis on issues of research and policy. The journal accepts contributions in English and French from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

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Editorial: Decolonising Knowledge Production in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts in Africa

Munyaradzi Mushonga*

Introduction

The current global system is characterised by a profound imbalance in the distribution of resources and opportunities, particularly between richer and poorer countries, as well as within those countries themselves. This imbalance is equally evident in the architecture of knowledge production, which was the subject of a colloquium in 2024 hosted by the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies (CGAS), Faculty of the Humanities, University of the Free State (UFS) under the theme ‘Decolonising Knowledge Production in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts (HSSA): Reflecting on a Decade of the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences in South African Higher Education’.¹ The colloquium provided an opportunity to reflect and take stock of the state of the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts within the broader knowledge production architecture governing the South African higher education landscape. The articles in this volume examine the embedded Eurocentric knowledge monopolies and enduring legacies from a decolonial theory perspective, as well as the challenges of combating the resulting inequalities and racial hierarchies.

The idea for the colloquium is traceable to four key moments. In about May 2024, I shared a 30 November 2015 Library Genesis letter titled ‘In Solidarity with Library Genesis and Sci-Hub’ (Barok et al. 2015) with members of the CGAS WhatsApp Group. In this letter, the authors bemoan the superprofits the publishing giant Elsevier was making through parasitic practices that exploited authors and reviewers. This provoked discussions about the asymmetries in the production and dissemination of knowledge between the Global (minority) North and the Global (majority) South, as well as the academic capitalism and parasitism therein.

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The second moment arose when Professor Hussein Solomon shared, in the same group, an article by Savo Heleta and Pedro Mzileni in which they ably demonstrated that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was reinforcing bibliometric coloniality in South Africa. Their analysis showed that the DHET's list of accredited journals was dominated by journals from Europe and North America, a matter that the DHET ostensibly sought to address in its own Charter, which stated that knowledge production in Africa and on Africa must be responsive to local contexts.

The third moment was when Professor Stephanie Cawood shared, in the same WhatsApp group, an article published in *The Guardian* in which the author, Arash Abizadeh, argued and demonstrated that giant publishers – Elsevier, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, Springer Nature, and SAGE – operated a lucrative scam, bleeding universities dry while achieving profit margins that rivalled those of Google. The fourth and final moment was when the Dean of the Faculty of the Humanities, Prof. Mogomme Masoga, out of the blue, called the CGAS to say that if we could host a conference on decolonising knowledge, he could underwrite the funding. The rest, as the old adage goes, is history.

The Charter for Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts and the Relevance of Decoloniality

The Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences, hereafter the Charter, was launched in 2011 by the then Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr B.E. Nzimande, with the express mandate to place the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts on a more equal footing with the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines. The Charter recognised the supranational inequalities in knowledge production, in which STEM disciplines and ways of knowing tend to be privileged, attaining higher status and being better-resourced than HSSA disciplines. The Charter therefore made a valiant attempt to address some of these systemic asymmetries in higher education and to redefine the importance and role of HSSA for a democratic and equal South African society. Crucially, the Charter noted that the rewards system in the South African higher education sector was skewed against scholars working in the fields of HSSA, including in the National Research Foundation's (NRF) recognition system. Writing in the Foreword to the Charter, Dr Nzimande stated:

I commissioned this Charter initiative and its Report because I was convinced that we needed a robust post-Apartheid Higher Education system and because the Humanities and the Social Sciences have or ought to have a major role in defining its character, its excellence and values... My suspicion that the humanities and social sciences were being neglected and becoming weaker was what prompted me to appoint ... the Task Team to look into how the social sciences can be strengthened (DHET 2011: 5).

The Charter, therefore, became the departure point for some of the papers in this Issue. It must be said that the Charter prefigured or anticipated the 2015–16 #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF) movements in South Africa. Many of the critical issues and systemic asymmetries at higher education institutions, raised in the 2011 Charter, would become the burning issues of the Fallist movements. They placed and brought decolonisation debates in HSSA at South African and African universities squarely to the fore.

The twenty-first century has witnessed a resurgence of decolonial thought, positioning HSSA as a leader in re-humanising and re-worlding knowledge production. This shift challenges the prevailing STEM-centric narratives that often marginalise HSSA disciplines. This is why Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) posits that ‘modern’ education continues to operate along what he calls ‘abyssal lines’ or ‘abyssal thinking’, which tends to divide disciplines into ‘relevant’ and ‘irrelevant’. The disciplines that are deemed relevant are grouped under the acronym STEM, which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, while those that are deemed ‘irrelevant’ vacillate between ‘unstable’ acronyms – HSSA (Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts), SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities), SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, Arts for the People and the Economy), HASS (Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences), or NAIL (Narrative, Analysis, Interpretation and Literacies).

Yet it is not the acronym that matters most, but the need to move beyond abyssal thinking that has constructed some disciplines as more relevant than others. Reciprocal and convivial conversations, as well as a symbiotic relationship between STEM and HSSA disciplines, are important for achieving a better and shared understanding of the material and social world. There is no separate world or reality for STEM and HSSA disciplines, and ignoring the real-world perspective of either is living in a fantasy. In *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, Amos Tutuola (2014) offers a theory of general ecology by showing that nothing is static and that everything is an interaction, including life itself. The humanities and social sciences offer this variation to underscore the point that randomness outweighs essentialism,

fixity and determinism. To achieve reciprocal and convivial conversations among STEM and HSSA disciplines requires a new kind of post-abyssal thinking anchored in post-abyssal epistemologies, methodologies and pedagogies (Santos 2007). In the twenty-first century, the time has arrived to decentre STEM while simultaneously recentring HSSA disciplines until the centre itself disappears.

Increasingly, the language of higher education has adopted business and corporate metaphors, in which students are seen as clients and post-secondary education is expected to serve a utilitarian, vocational function. This is problematic in HSSA fields where many areas of study do not naturally lend themselves to a specific vocation, raising questions about 'relevance' in the name of 'graduate attributes'. The sooner we realise that universities are not for-profit entities and should not be turned into large markets or corporations, and that the one-size-fits-all formulaic prescriptions of the Bretton Woods Institutions is not the solution to the challenges confronting higher education – the better. Such mindsets risk rendering HSSA fields increasingly fragile, forgetting that they are largely responsible for facilitating higher-order human thinking, critical analysis, creativity, and the development of big ideas and ways of interpreting the world, rather than merely training for a vocation. A humanities, social sciences or liberal arts education is not only essential for the job market but also for leading more fulfilling lives and for becoming responsible citizens of the world.

Broadly speaking, neoliberal arguments position higher education as a private good, with the warped idea that 'the student is the main beneficiary of the degree [and therefore] should bear a larger part of the costs of providing it', while decolonial arguments see higher education as a public good with 'overwhelming externalities that contribute to the public good/greater good, namely civic citizenship and engagement, greater tolerance, strengthening of democracy' (Mushonga 2025: 180–1) among other benefits. It is probably this neoliberal and extractivist thinking that has turned the higher education environment into a marketplace with corporate management styles or 'punitive managerialism' that hides behind a discourse that emphasises economic efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, quality and competitiveness while perverting the real and original meaning of these (Mushonga 2025: 177). Increased corporatisation of universities in South Africa and around the world remains the single most important challenge for higher education in the twenty-first century, hence the need for decoloniality.

The Biography and Geography of Knowledge

The idea of the biography and geography of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017, 2018) is central to the pronouncements of the Charter. It emphasises the situatedness of knowledge within specific contexts, that is, drawing from immediate contexts and without turning away from reality. It is probably the best way for universities to dodge what Lewis Gordon (2011) calls disciplinary decadence. Knowledge is never produced in a vacuum; it is always the product of particular bodies located in particular geographies, shaped by particular histories and animated by particular interests. The Charter highlights the relegation of HSSA scholarship, which is often treated as an appendage to STEM disciplines, evaluated according to a rewards system that prioritises innovation and economic utility over critical thinking and the embodied production of meaning.

The insight that knowledge has both a biography and a geography is foundational to decolonial critique. It exposes the fiction of zero-point epistemology, the claim that objective, neutral, unsituated, disembodied and uncontaminated knowledge is possible. As Grosfoguel (2013; 2015) has shown, the monopolistic and oligopolistic production of knowledge has been concentrated historically among mainly White males of five Western countries – Britain, France, the United States, Germany and Italy – thus ensuring the invisibility, if not the erasure, of women, including White women from these countries, as well as scholars from Africa and the Global South. This has been compounded by the dominance of Western colonial languages – English, German, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Italian (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Mignolo 2021). Broadly, this has left Africa dependent on Western knowledge systems and values, what Paulin Hountondji (1990) characterised as ‘indices of scientific dependence’.

Crucially, as Melber, following Santos (2007), reminds us in this Issue, we must not confuse the idea of epistemologies of the South with geography. While there are partial overlaps between the epistemological South and the geographical South, ‘epistemologies of the North also flourish in the geographical South ... but also because the epistemological South is also to be found in the geographical North’. This is a salutary caution against an oversimplified geographical determinism in our decolonial thinking. Decolonising knowledge production is therefore not merely a matter of redistributing epistemic authority across a map; it is also a matter of dismantling the colonial matrix of power (CMP) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Grosfoguel 2015; Mignolo 2021, 2023) that organises knowledge production globally.

In the publishing industry, African publishers find themselves in a precarious position, exacerbated by the widespread characterisation of African journals and their publishers as predatory – a situation compounded by the burning desire of many African scholars to publish in international, credible journals in search of academic validation. As Heleta writes in this publication, a Eurocentric order of knowledge and a northbound gaze remain dominant factors shaping thinking about academic knowledge, institutional priorities, and the credibility of platforms for dissemination of research and knowledge. This is further compounded by what Zeleza and Olukoshi (2004a) describe as the perilous state of publishing and libraries across the African continent.

Some Key and Tormenting Questions in Knowledge Production in HSSA Disciplines

A major problem we all face in life is the failure or inability to ask the right questions. If the right questions are posed, solutions will be within reach and within our historical experiences. I wish to add that asking the right questions must also go together with asking unsettling or tormenting questions as the best way to get to the bottom of any matter. It is the precondition for any serious intellectual and political transformation. In the realm of knowledge production, both Francis Nyamnjoh (2019) and Lewis Gordon (2015) argue that asking the right questions is the first step in not only decolonising the university, but is also the only way to build a ‘questioning humanity’. That is why Frantz Fanon opens and concludes his tour de force, *Black Skin, White Masks*, with a prayer-cum-question that is simultaneously a challenge and a provocation: ‘O my body, make of me always a man who questions!’ (Fanon 1967: 7–8, 231–2).

Probably one of the most unsettling questions, challenging us to reconsider the foundations of our disciplines, was posed at the colloquium. It came from Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who posed it during a Facebook discussion on Elisio Macamo’s presentation on the notion of ‘Sovereign Reason’:

What if the very ideas of the ‘Social’ and the ‘Human’ were conceived in modernity against that which was considered ‘non-social’ and ‘non-human’, that is, that which was rendered ‘native’ and ‘Black’; how do we then resort to ‘Social Sciences’ and ‘Humanities’ in an effort to make sense of the condition of those they wrote out of the ‘Social’ and the ‘Human’, in the first instance? This question came to my mind as I listened to Professor Elisio Macamo’s provocative seminar on ‘Sovereign Reason: Issues in African Studies’. Prof. Macamo pushed for radicalisation of critique and formulation of new questions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022: Facebook discussion).

This question highlights the scepticism surrounding the bodies that produce decolonial knowledge, as they were often never intended to carry epistemic value. It is in the spirit of asking the ‘right and unsettling questions’ that the questions in Table 1 are offered, not as a neat inventory of problems awaiting bureaucratic solutions, but as a living, breathing, tormenting archive of intellectual restlessness. These questions have been distilled from a close reading of the articles in this publication, while a good number of them were posed during the three-day colloquium. To varying degrees, each contributor to this volume attempts to address one or more of these questions. The questions have been sorted into seven thematic clusters, each capturing a distinct register of the decolonial imagination, and each with an overarching italicised question in brackets (see Table 1). These questions serve as a kind of epistemic North Star for the articles in this volume and for the academy in general.

Table 1: Some key and tormenting questions in knowledge production

Theme I: The architecture of epistemic injustice and the datafication of knowledge (<i>Who owns knowledge, and who pays the price?</i>)	
1	How do we level the publications playing field between the Global North and Global South, including funding disparities, and how can the share of knowledge production from the Global South be substantially enhanced?
2	Who produces knowledge, and for whom? Who controls what has been produced? And who has access to the final product?
3	Who uses any particular kind of knowledge, for which interests, and for what and whose purposes?
4	Where does knowledge come from, or how do we know what we know?
5	Is zero-point epistemology – objective, neutral, unsituated, disembodied, and uncontaminated knowledge – even possible?
6	Can non-Europeans, or more specifically, Africans, think?
Theme II: Bibliometric coloniality and the publishing industrial complex (<i>The scam hidden in plain sight?</i>)	
7	How can we transcend the politics of ‘publish or perish’ in HSSA fields, and overcome the skewed publication and recognition system between STEM and HSSA disciplines?
8	Is the inclusion of African and underrepresented regions into dominant Euro-American indexes a genuinely transformative and decolonial solution, or does it extend and legitimise those platforms? Is an adjustment of criteria the answer? Or is inclusion itself complicit in coloniality?

Theme III: Coloniality, the university, and the colonial matrix of power <i>(When was the university colonised, and what will it take to decolonise it?)</i>	
9	To what extent do HSSA disciplines remain trapped in Euro-American-centric thought and practices, and how can they be liberated from the colonial matrix of power (CMP)?
10	What is the best way to exorcise the ghosts of coloniality from the higher education landscape?
11	When, exactly, was the university colonised?
12	What would a decolonised university look like, or how can we exit the Euro-American epistemic-cum-existential prison?
13	What would undisciplinary and post-disciplinary knowledge futures look like?
14	What is the most important point of departure in decolonial work?
15	Can a decolonial idea be executed through a colonial language? Can the coloniser's tools dismantle the colonial knowledge system, and what does it mean to use them in the attempt?
16	What remains of the human subject in an age when reason is enacted by information machines, and who will define the threshold between the calculable and the incalculable, between what is deemed worthy and what is deemed dispensable?
Theme IV: Neoliberalism, corporatisation, and the marketised academy <i>(Who turned the university into a corporation?)</i>	
17	What are the implications of increased academic managerialism in higher education?
18	To what extent is the rhetoric of vocationalism, framed around 'graduate attributes', helpful or harmful for HSSA disciplines?
19	Why has corporatisation continued largely unabated in South African universities after the Fallist movements? Does it represent sectoral pushback or an intensification of neoliberal materialities?
Theme V: The Fallist movements (RMF & FMF) – legacy, limits, and betrayal <i>(Did RMF and FMF movements change anything – or everything?)</i>	
20	What lessons do we learn from the 2015/16 RMF and FMF movements?
21	To what extent did the Fallist movements interrogate hierarchies of knowledge production, and how have they reshaped debates around curriculum, access and institutional culture?
22	What theoretical and pedagogical insights emerge from the Fallist movements for ongoing transformation, and to what extent have institutional responses addressed, diluted or reconfigured the core demands of student activists?
23	Are students achieving better results in the post-#RhodesMustFall era?

Theme VI: Curriculum, identity, and the politics of recognition <i>(Whose knowledge counts, and whose life improves?)</i>	
24	How has the HSSA curriculum responded to calls for decolonisation?
25	To what extent is decolonising knowledge production centring gender?
26	Does identity matter in decolonial knowledge production?
27	Does symbolic decolonisation – renaming streets, acknowledging female role models, etc – translate into material improvement in the lives of the marginalised?
28	How do we recognise otherness without othering?
Theme VII: Building the decolonial university from the ground up <i>(What does it take to start afresh?)</i>	
29	How does one start a university in Africa? What institutional arrangements make the most sense, and what academic programmes are appropriate?
30	What does decolonisation mean in a new university like Sol Plaatje University – what must it decolonise, how, and what dilemmas does it face in the 21st century?
31	Did we jump too quickly into the global condition of postcoloniality, and along the way, sidestep the complex processes of decolonisation that needed to take place first?
32	What kind of university do we want and can afford?
33	Which way forward for the humanities, social sciences, and arts in the 21st century?

Theme I speaks to the fact that at the foundation of decolonial thought lies a diagnosis – the global knowledge system is not neutral. It has a geography, a biography, and a balance sheet, and all three are skewed. This cluster of questions interrogates the structural scaffolding of that injustice, from the economics of publishing to the politics of language to the challenge of artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance and the datafication of knowledge. Theme II highlights how academic publishing has become one of the most lucrative and least scrutinised extractive industries of the twenty-first century. The cluster of questions zeroes in on the mechanisms by which Euro-American publishing giants, indexing systems and accreditation bodies reproduce coloniality, and on the adequacy of ‘inclusion’ as a remedy. Theme III demonstrates that the university is not innocent as it was built, in large measure, to serve colonial modernity – to produce, classify and legitimise certain knowledges while erasing others. This cluster asks the hard ontological and historical questions about the university as an institution: how it was colonised, what it would mean to

decolonise it, and what a genuinely decolonised African university might look like? Theme IV captures the fact that the corporatisation of higher education is not a side-effect of globalisation, but a political choice, and a deeply consequential one. This cluster interrogates the entanglement of neoliberal managerialism with the decolonial project, asking whether the university can be decolonised while being simultaneously corporatised. Theme V speaks directly to the 2015–16 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, which shook South African higher education to its foundations and sent reverberations around the world. The questions in this cluster ask what the movements achieved, what they left unfinished, and what has been done or undone in their wake. Theme VI argues that decolonisation is not only an epistemological project but also a material and existential one. The questions here seek to bridge the gap between changing the names of streets and buildings and changing the conditions of life for those who live, walk, and struggle in those spaces. It asks whether symbolic recognition translates into substantive transformation. Theme VII offers Sol Plaatje University as a rare laboratory – a post-1994, post-apartheid institution built from scratch, with the explicit mandate to be different. The questions here draw on that experiment to ask the practical, institutional and philosophical questions that attend the project of building a genuinely decolonised university in Africa.

This long list of questions speaks to the irreplaceable importance of interrogation in the search for academic justice and the resolution of life's problems. Yet, this is not an exhaustive list of questions on the decolonial imagination. They are, rather, an invitation to think harder, question more fiercely, and refuse the comfort of easy questions and answers. The following section attempts to address some of these questions.

Towards Decolonised Knowledge Production in HSSA: A Bird's Eye View

The articles in this volume are a mixture of theory clarification and problematisation, on one hand, and theory and empirical grounding on the other. They also straddle the thematic classification in Table 1. Together, these articles constitute a sustained, multi-pronged decolonial engagement with the higher education landscape in South Africa in particular, and the African continent and the Global South in general.

Henning Melber, while acknowledging the good intentions of the Charter, including its African Renaissance approach, takes issue with its failure to question inherited structures, systems, and institutions,

and its apparent comfort with working within the colonial template, thereby confirming what Fanon (1967) calls ‘repetition without change’. He argues that while epistemological changes are a great step in the decolonisation of knowledge, they fall short of full decolonisation when cultivated within ‘the inherited structures of dominance, privilege and discrimination’. Melber draws the attention of readers and leaders in the higher education environment to the challenges that lie beyond epistemological decolonisation, proposing how to exit the Western epistemic prison. He also raises the fundamental point that decolonisation is more than epistemology – it must trouble the systems, structures and institutions that Mignolo (2021) calls the ‘colonial matrix of power’, put in place by colonial modernity. Melber also addresses an aspect that is normally avoided by many scholars: the idea of being an ‘implicated subject’. Despite falling on the privileged side of modernity, he insists on the need to dismantle ‘the past and present of White supremacy’ in tandem with ‘a self-critical interrogation’, notwithstanding being ‘privileged by such past’. He cautions against taking ‘the means to an end for the end – and [therefore] fail in our efforts towards true decolonisation’, concluding with profound cautionary reflections that draw on the work of Long, Dabashi and Fanon.

Savo Heleta makes a great intervention through the innovative decolonial grammar of ‘bibliometric coloniality’. By this, Heleta refers to the systems and structures of domination of global academic publishing by scholarly indexes and academic bodies based in Europe and North America, such as Scopus and Web of Science, and publishers such as Taylor & Francis, Routledge, Macmillan, Lexington Books, Springer Nature, Wiley, Sage Publications and Elsevier, under the guise of credibility, universality, internationality and reputability, with dire consequences for scholarly indexes and academic publishing bodies in Africa and the Global South. Highlighting this bibliometric coloniality in a separate piece with Mzileni, they write:

Our analysis shows that the DHET’s lists of accredited journals propagate and value academic journals based in the Global North as credible platforms for dissemination of knowledge, while erasing the African continent and Global South. This way, the DHET is directly reinforcing global bibliometric coloniality and contributing to the maintenance of Euro-American epistemic hegemony. We argue that South Africa, as Africa’s top producer of scholarly output, should lead the process of dismantling bibliometric coloniality and promoting African knowledge platforms (Heleta and Mzileni 2024: 1).

The major consequence is the entrenchment of Euro-American hegemony in knowledge production and dissemination, and the marginalisation of the African continent – in short, the solidification of the coloniality of knowledge. Heleta's article also illuminates the linkages between this hegemonic academic publishing, on one hand, and the neoliberalisation, commodification and corporatisation of universities in the higher education and research ecosystem on the other (see Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004a, 2004b; Mamdani 2007, 2008; Mushonga and Hudson 2020; Mushonga 2025). Just like Melber, Heleta does not only mourn this entangled bibliometric coloniality, but also goes further to suggest how to exit the Euro-American epistemic prison, thus providing the needed decolonial critique and praxis. From a decolonial standpoint, inclusion or 'decolonial washing' is not the solution, as it will only serve to solidify and entrench Euro-American hegemony to the detriment of Africa's call for epistemic justice and freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Instead, Africa should seek to dismantle these neocolonial and neoliberal monopolies while reconstituting comprehensive scholarly indexes, publishing bodies and university presses.

In the article 'Critical theory of the pedagogy of "Fallism" and its praxis', Wandile Kasibe makes several critical points based on his experiential involvement with both the RMF and FMF movements as a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT). He situates the Fallist movements within the broader socio-economic and political environment of South Africa, noting that the RMF movement drew inspiration from radical thinkers and activists such as Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Bell Hooks, as well as from movements and philosophical traditions such as Black Consciousness, the Black Radical Tradition, and Pan-Africanism. Wandile makes a compelling case for viewing the RMF movement as a 'Fallist' philosophy with broader revolutionary and practical implications – not only for the decolonisation of knowledge but also for the socio-economic and political decolonisation of society.

'Fallism' encompassed a remarkable range of movements: #RhodesMustFall (UCT), #FeesMustFall, Decolonise Wits, Decolonise Law (UCT), Open Stellenbosch, Black Students Movement (Rhodes University), #KingGeorgeMustFall (UKZN), #KrugerMustFall (City of Pretoria), #OutsourcingMustFall, and #PatriarchyMustFall, among others. At the global stage, 'Fallism' resonated across #RhodesMustFall (Oxford and the Caribbean), #RoyalMustFall (Harvard), #LeopoldMustFall (Queen Mary University, United Kingdom), and the renaming and removal of oppressive symbols of the slave-owning Confederacy in thirty US states, the District of

Columbia and Canada. The global footprints of ‘Fallism’ are written all over the shore – a collective struggle and not a ‘one-man show’. Kasibe does well to demonstrate that the RMF was not only a student movement, but that it also involved academic, administrative and support staff, an aspect generally lost in most discourses. He argues that ‘Fallism’ presents itself as ‘an anti-colonial-capitalist vanguard theoretical framework that inclines towards a socialist model with a Black Nationalist and Internationalist posture’.

Mogomme Masoga turns his critical gaze on statutory bodies such as the DHET, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), arguing that these bodies stand in the way of a truly decolonised South African university – the rallying cry of the 2015–16 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. He sees these bodies as gatekeepers or apostles of coloniality, in which ‘the post-Fallist period has coincided with an apparent acceleration of corporatisation, evidenced by the rise of managerial discourse, third-stream income imperatives, performance-driven academic labour and executive remuneration structures increasingly comparable to those of corporate CEOs’. Like Melber, Masoga cautions against decolonisation being absorbed into institutional policy frameworks without altering underlying power relations, arguing that the aspirations of the Fallist movements find themselves betrayed by accelerated corporatisation and marketisation. Mobilising decolonial theory and critical pedagogy, Masoga teases out ‘the intellectual and political claims of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF) movements’ and argues for seeing these as both ontological and epistemic critique, beyond episodic protest, including recognition of their global impact as wider transnational decolonial discourses and practices. Masoga, like Mpfu, make a compelling case against the commodification of higher education and neoliberal managerialism, laying out a clear vision of a truly decolonised African university.

William Mpfu offers the decolonial theory/perspective as a philosophy of liberation capable of birthing a truly decolonised university in Africa, one that is ‘locally rooted and globally relevant and present’. He ably demonstrates how the current university in Africa functions as an implant – a Euro-American model that is fundamentally imperialist and colonial – thus exposing the darker side of Western modernity (Mignolo 2018, 2021). Drawing from Enrique Dussel (1985), Mpfu unpacks the relevance of the philosophy of liberation for Africa and the Global South, showing how it can be deployed by the formerly colonised through ‘speaking back’ and ‘writing back’ to Empire (Ashcroft et al. 2003), by openly mocking, resisting and destabilising the Euro-American

westernised and colonial university. He then unpacks the key features of a decolonised university in Africa, namely: multilingualism through the co-existence of African languages with Euro-American languages; human diversity with peoples from different geographies, cultures, biographies and religions; epistemic diversity and inclusion with different races, genders and positionalities as opposed to the Euro-American intellectual monologue; and convivial spaces and architecture without barriers to access and free of provocative statues, landscapes, ceremonies and rituals. Further features of a decolonised university include the removal of market tendencies, where students are treated as clients/consumers and education as a commodity; the valuing of all forms of life on Earth, including plants, animals, the environment and nature; and the university as a home, not only for the routinised academic, but also for public intellectuals, activists, practitioners and other thinkers concerned with life on Earth.

Pamila Gupta offers readers a nuanced and complex entry into decolonial studies by calling us to see decolonisation both as ‘a subject and object of analysis’. She calls on us to understand that with the end of colonialism comes optimism, frustration and uncertainty simultaneously; how personal things can be read to understand colonialism as an individual form of possession, and the fallout of decolonisation as one of dispossession; the stakes involved for those departing and the resentments they carry when forced to leave a place called home; the shifting moral landscape that comes with decolonisation and an inability to articulate colonial loss for some; and, finally, a focus on who and what remains – less as a form of failure or ruin, but rather potentiality. Gupta is critical of current scholarship on decolonisation that appears to focus exclusively on knowledge decolonisation to the exclusion of political and economic emancipation. She asks provocatively whether decolonisation has pushed studies of postcolonialism out, posing the telling question: ‘did we perhaps jump too quickly into the global condition of postcoloniality and along the way, somehow sidestep the complex processes of decolonisation that needed to take place prior to this shift?’

Gupta offers a five-pronged approach to the study of decolonisation: a combined historical and anthropological perspective; a closer look at the materiality of decolonisation; a recognition of decolonisation’s collective and individual traumas; a viewpoint that goes beyond the singular nation-state to involve multiple colonies and governmentalities; and a turn to more creative source materials to access invaluable experiences of decolonisation. Gupta approaches decolonisation as an old concept that has acquired a new kind of life – as two sides of the same coin.

Jesmael Mataga makes an original contribution to the decolonial discourse using Sol Plaatje University (SPU) as ‘a critical framework for understanding how a born-free South African university navigates intense pressures of transformation while simultaneously building its academic identity’. Deploying his personal experiences as the founding Dean of the SPU School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mataga admits that ‘the prospect of building a university without the colonial/apartheid blemish was both challenging and exhilarating’. Established by the ANC-led government in 2014, SPU is one of only two post-1994 universities, alongside the University of Mpumalanga (UMP). SPU was mandated to serve as an engine of local development and growth in the economically underdeveloped and marginalised Northern Cape Province. It was positioned as a ‘developmental university’ (Coleman 1986) and, to some extent, it has evolved into an ‘anchor institution in place-based development’.

The article also shows how SPU navigated the thorny issue of language, building African languages and in particular Setswana, the dominant language in the Northern Cape, into degree programmes. True to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (2023) powerful declaration that translation is the language of languages, SPU translated some English texts into Setswana – gigantic steps towards the kind of decolonised university for which Mpofo forcefully argues. Mataga deploys methodological triangulation (Turner et al. 2017) – government reports, institutional documents, a range of primary and secondary sources, together with an autobiographical, reflexive approach – to bring the story of SPU to life. The article zeros in on the Humanities and Social Sciences, examining how these disciplines provide fertile ground for analysing how political mandates are translated into academic practice and how a new curriculum addresses the challenge of decolonisation.

Conclusion

The quest for a decolonised higher education environment is urgent and complex. As we move forward, it is essential to recognise the interconnectedness of HSSA and STEM disciplines, fostering a more inclusive and equitable knowledge landscape that prioritises the voices and experiences of the Global South. Yet this might seem impossible without asking the right questions, and those questions are often tough, tormenting, and unsettling. Thanks to these questions, the resurgent and insurgent decoloniality of the twenty-first century has gifted us with what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the ‘second-sight’ (Hudecki 2020; Boxill 2023) in which the ‘Negro’s double-consciousness is a positive thing, giving the Black subject a kind of view on the world that is not available to others’

(Hudecki 2020: 22). This second-sight is precisely what the papers in this volume deploy, each in its own way, to illuminate the deep structures of epistemic injustice that continue to organise higher education in South Africa and beyond, and to point towards paths of genuine decolonial transformation.

The papers in this volume collectively contribute to the ongoing decolonial discourse, offering insights and strategies for decolonising knowledge production in the humanities, social sciences, and arts. They resist the reduction of education to specific disciplines and subjects, insisting that the university is not a for-profit entity and that education is a public good. They argue collectively that decolonisation is more than epistemology – it must trouble systems, structures, and institutions; it must be ontological as well as epistemic; and it must engage the material conditions of knowledge production alongside its conceptual frameworks. As Fanon reminds us, the body that questions is itself at stake. It is in that spirit that this volume is offered to the scholarly community.

Note

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Beyond Epistemology: Challenges and Pitfalls in Decolonising Knowledge Production¹

Henning Melber*

Abstract

An ambitious initiative to reform tertiary education in South Africa recommended a 'transformative plan towards a post-imperial and post-colonial relationship to the world of knowledge'. However, while Eurocentrism is mentioned as an obstacle, neither epistemology nor the institutional structures of higher learning are questioned in principle. This reflects the limits of system-immanent approaches. In contrast, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns on campuses indicated that further serious efforts were required. Epistemological changes are a step in the aspired direction, but it is argued that they fall short of decolonisation if the structural constraints in a society reproduce the former class- (and gender-) related patterns of dominance. The mission remains unaccomplished if a 'decolonial' or 'post-colonial' epistemology is cultivated in the inherited structures of dominance, privilege and discrimination. Positionalities matter. This article summarises the underlying patterns of Eurocentric dominance and its pitfalls, with the aim of highlighting the challenges beyond epistemological decolonisation.

Keywords: Epistemological decolonisation, knowledge production, global asymmetries, African positionality, Eurocentrism, Western dominance

Résumé

Une initiative ambitieuse visant à réformer l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique du Sud a recommandé un « plan transformateur vers une relation post-impériale et post-coloniale au monde du savoir ». Toutefois, bien que l'eurocentrisme soit mentionné comme un obstacle, ni l'épistémologie ni les structures institutionnelles de l'enseignement supérieur ne sont fondamentalement remises en question. Cela reflète les limites des approches internes au système. En revanche, les campagnes #RhodesMustFall et #FeesMustFall sur les campus ont montré que des efforts supplémentaires

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sérieux étaient nécessaires. Les changements épistémologiques constituent une étape dans la direction souhaitée, mais il est soutenu qu'ils restent insuffisants pour une véritable décolonisation si les contraintes structurelles d'une société reproduisent les anciens schémas de domination liés aux classes (et au genre). La mission demeure inachevée si une épistémologie « décoloniale » ou « post-coloniale » est développée au sein de structures héritées de domination, de privilège et de discrimination. Les positions sociales comptent. Cet article résume les schémas sous-jacents de la domination eurocentrique et ses pièges, dans le but d'attirer l'attention sur les défis au-delà de la décolonisation épistémologique.

Mots-clés : Décolonisation épistémologique, production de connaissances, asymétries globales, positionnalité africaine, eurocentrisme, domination occidentale

Introduction

On the initiative of the South African government's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), a *Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences* mapped an ambitious plan for reform of tertiary education in the country. It recommended a 'transformative and far reaching' Implementation Plan for 'redefining the landscape of institutions' (Republic of South Africa 2011: 17). An African Renaissance programme was designed to 'reflect on the past, present and future of the continent' with the aim 'to define a dignified, post-imperial and post-colonial relationship to the world of knowledge' (Republic of South Africa 2011: 19 and 25). However, while Eurocentrism as a factor affecting the transfer of knowledge is mentioned, epistemology is not identified as a significant marker, and neither are the institutional structures of higher learning questioned in principle; rather, they are treated as a matter of quantitative expansion. While the Charter is a showpiece of reformist intentions, it also reflects the limits of system-immanent approaches.

This article does not engage with the declared reform aspirations of this Charter. Suffice it to say that the subsequent protest movements culminating in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall campaigns on the campuses were an indication that serious further efforts were required to achieve true emancipation. While #RhodesMustFall signified the hidden and less hidden forms of a perpetuation of colonial mindsets, #FeesMustFall was a reminder that visual adjustments in daily life and mnemoscope are not enough. Epistemological changes are a step in the aspired direction but fall short of decolonisation if the structural constraints in a society reproduce the former class- (and gender-) related patterns of dominance. This goes beyond the colour of the skin. What is at stake is the decolonisation of the university (Gopal 2021).

While such a pointer does not dismiss the need for epistemological decolonisation, it serves as a reminder that the mission remains unaccomplished. If a 'decolonial' or – in the case of South Africa 'post-1994' – epistemology (whichever way it is understood) is cultivated in the inherited structures of dominance, privilege and discrimination, it covers up the perpetuation of social (in the sense of socio-economic) injustice. Ndlovu and Woldegiorgis (2024: 1) have illustrated the 'neoliberal labyrinth', with reference to South Africa, in which 'the epistemic freedom of academics within higher education across the Global South is imperilled'. In a related perspective, Serunkuma (2024: 10) highlights the 'Tragedian entrapment of an African scholar' as a decolonial dilemma, when their participation in the 'global knowledge commonwealth' is an integral part 'of the revolving doors and constantly mutating infrastructures of colonialist hegemony and control'.

This is not confined to African scholars serving as 'showpieces' of global open-minded interaction, creating the misleading impression of equal partners. When it comes to the advocacy of fundamental social alternatives in support of transformation, it is a dilemma facing scholars in academia generally: 'One of the tricks that Western modernity plays on intellectuals is to allow them only to produce revolutionary ideas in reactionary institutions' (Santos 2018: 3). This is one of the pitfalls of demanding epistemological decolonisation. It plays out in institutions, confining and limiting true social transformation.

Having painted such a bleak picture, one should not conclude that self-critical reflections on positionality and knowledge production do not matter. Rather, we need to understand and accept them as a necessary point of departure – positionalities matter (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg 2021). The following section presents an overview of the underlying patterns of Eurocentric dominance and its pitfalls, with the aim of highlighting the challenges beyond epistemological decolonisation.

Universities, Knowledge and Decolonisation

A programmatic conclusion by Adebayo Olukoshi and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza to a volume they co-edited for CODESRIA 20 years ago is as relevant today as it was then:

the fight for the African university must be seen as a collective struggle ... Part of this struggle will involve a reform of the university that is anchored on the evolution of a knowledge society that is at once rooted in the African context ... whilst simultaneously engaging with the rest of the world in line with the ideal of the university as an international centre for the advancement of science and scholarship (Olukoshi and Zeleza 2004: 617).

This puts true ownership at the core of the need for change, not only in higher learning, but as an integral and substantial element of decolonisation, self-identity and self-determination after the end of direct foreign and White minority rule over African societies. As experienced, this did not mark the end of White supremacy, both in structures and mindsets. A wide range of Black academic voices in South Africa have testified to this (Khunou et al. 2019). As aptly described in the Foreword by Zine Magubane (2019: iv), these voices ‘are about resilience, struggle, self-actualisation and survival ... how to endure the unimaginable indignity of having one’s intelligence, integrity and selfhood questioned at every turn’. They resolutely document determination to occupy spaces ‘and make them better for everyone – Black, White, LGBTQ, rich, poor, male and female’.

They are an integral part of efforts to follow and learn from Black intellectual thought, represented in a volume aptly titled *African Voices: In Search of a Decolonial Turn* (Zondi 2021). Spanning the long history of African knowledge, the chapters engage with the ideas of Mahmood Mamdani, Ibn Rushd, Ibrahim al-Koni, Chinua Achebe, Bernard Magubane, Marcus Garvey, Archie Mafeje, Molefi Kete Asante, Steve Biko, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Taha Hussein, Wangari Maathai, Claude Ake, Ali Mazrui, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Isaac Bangani Tabata, and Adebayo Adedeji.

In contrast to these genuine African efforts to mentally decolonise, my own limited contribution, as someone socialised in a Eurocentric context dominated by White supremacy, is to offer some reflections on what I consider to be a shared task for all in the process of liberation from a colonial history and present. I have done so also by engaging with the colonial legacy in my country of birth (Melber 2024). This is a process, in which dismantling the past and present of White supremacy must go hand in hand with a self-critical interrogation. It needs an awareness of what it means to be privileged by such a past, in the sense of ‘implicated subjects’ who ‘occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes’ (Rothberg 2019: 1).

However, such implications are by no means only a challenge for those socialised in a White supremacist world as ‘Europeans’ – they also affect those from groups who were formerly colonised, who have entered institutions and careers that are influenced, if not impregnated, by the colonial structural and mental legacies. This includes the spheres of higher learning in the African continent. These challenges have led to significantly

different individual approaches to positioning oneself within hierarchies and to the reproduction of asymmetric power in the transfer of knowledge. Korang (2006: 443), for instance, has described an apparent cleavage with regard to the understanding of 'African Studies': 'a line dividing those who denounce the "posts" and reject their Africanist validity from those who, if they do not embrace the "posts" wholly, are nevertheless willing to negotiate an Africanist accommodation with the protocols of critical and cultural understanding'. He ends with the olive branch that there is no need for an exclusivist choice between segregation in the particular and dilution in the universal: 'Obligation to "migrancy" – or the universal – and loyalty to "home" – or the particular – need not be mutually exclusive' (Korang 2006: 464). This understanding can provide a sustainable platform for exchanges by scholars from different backgrounds and social strata, aware of their respective implicated subjectivity, but in agreement of the need for changes in support of dignity, decency and equality, also in terms of recognition of the diversity of knowledges relevant for individuals and societies.

The West and the Rest

When Europe expanded into the rest of the world, it exported the local hierarchical concepts of knowledge and development and established these as universal. These concepts were largely internalised by those at the receiving end, both domestically and internationally, and have survived and remained effective in the global asymmetric power relations. These notions of knowledge and development have perpetuated hegemonic Western perspectives and are reproduced in the established forms of knowledge production and international collaboration.

'Knowledge is power' remains a popular slogan to motivate learners. Knowledge has different aspects: it can be liberating and emancipatory, but it can also be oppressive, intimidating and domesticating. Like development, knowledge is not neutral; nor is it value-free. Who uses which kind of knowledge for which interests and purposes? One cannot uncritically affirm and praise knowledge production (and knowledge dissemination and transfer) without examining the nature and intention of the created knowledge, its production and application.

The world is hierarchical and characterised by asymmetries. These impregnate the reproduction of societies and institutions as structures of power and interest, but also of contestation. Knowledge and development are among the important tools and instruments in the execution of power – and its contestation. Which knowledge and development is applied and what are its visions? Hegemony looms, as Walter Mignolo (2011) points

out, when universal knowledge in the singular serves as the reference point for a darker side of Western modernity, rather than the pluriversity of knowledges. Imperial knowledge represses colonised subjectivities. Structures of knowledge were built on a foundation of humiliation and marginality, as a 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2016: 492).

This is a significant part of the challenge. As Hana Horáková alerted, we need to 'trouble problematic narratives and discourses that are pervasively shared in the West, as well as within Africa', deconstruct discourses to challenge and stop 'gatekeepers of knowledge ... viewing the exogenous and endogenous models of knowledge production as monolithic (...) to move the debate beyond the binary of Western knowledge vs. local, or indigenous knowledge/worldviews' (Horáková 2016: 46). This would contribute to eroding orthodoxy and fundamentalisms in their diverse forms of articulation, impacting social and political realities in all parts of our world.

Mind the Gap

Scholars from the Global South are, in the main aware of and sensitised by the history of how marginality and degrading hierarchical North-South structures also penetrate academic discourses and paradigms. But a word of caution on the currently popular currency of decolonising development needs to be added.

Scholars and educators are part of the formal socialisation processes in societies, which means they are instrumental in shaping these through the way they operate. De-Coloniality, as Walter Mignolo and others insist, is a project that transcends but does not eradicate Western universal rule. As he explained in an interview, this transcending 'requires actors and institutions, and actors and institutions conserve, expand, change the structure of knowledge but within the same matrix: the colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2017). Similarly, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) maintains: 'The reality is that colonialism was never an event. It has always been a power structure with far-reaching consequences.'

The same can be said about the notion of 'development'. As Arturo Escobar already observed:

Whether in political science or sociology, economics or political economy, development has been debated without questioning its ontological status. From modern theory to dependency or world systems; from 'market-friendly development' to self-directed, sustainable, or eco-development the qualifiers of the term have multiplied without the term itself having been rendered radically problematic (Escobar 1977: 501).

Challenging such dogmas means questioning the normative legitimacy of a point of departure that has been taken as granted for far too long. For example, if internationalism exercises a power of definition over others and imposes values, norms, mindsets, and views on the rest of the world, it is of dubious value. So-called progressive political-philosophical ideologies and perspectives, rooted in Western trajectories, are by no means secure scaffolding. They all too often lack self-critical reflection questioning the mindset in which they are moulded.

The impact of the era of Enlightenment and the violent expansion of central Europe to the rest of the world is not past. It has left not only scars and festering wounds, but also a legacy. Gurminder Bhambra (2022: 236) pointed at the challenge:

How are we, as academics, scholars, social scientists and historians, complicit in the variable valuation of lives and experiences – at the very least, in our failure adequately to address the omissions and silences in those discourses and understandings that we know to be inadequate and inaccurate? And what can we do about this? The histories we use as the basis from which to develop our concepts make a difference to the adequacy and efficacy of those concepts. This requires us – and here the us is social scientists in particular – to be more alert to questions of history and historiography and both to the political economy and demographic diversity of who gets to produce knowledge of our past and the ways in which it shapes the possibilities of the present.

Challenging Eurocentric Epistemology

Being European, of Northern descent, or of any other background does not predetermine our worldview and convictions, even though cultural and religious factors, gender, and pigmentation (and the privileges accompanying the social positioning of many scholars in the Northern Hemisphere) should not be dismissed lightly when forming identities and mindsets. Whiteness, as much as White supremacy for that matter, has a factual side anchoring and protecting privileges. However, primary experiences and socialisation do not preclude processes of learning, change, adaptation, and repositioning. A continued supremacy of American–European social sciences does not offer scholars any excuses to abstain from joining counter-hegemonic narratives and strategies from within the dominant spheres of influence and knowledge production. True alliances should, in principle, be able to overcome boundaries and pursue shared values, and to question our preconceived ideas and values moulded by Eurocentric and ethnocentric, indeed often anthropocentric, perceptions that guide – often unconsciously – our interactions and, by extension, our scholarly endeavours.

One should not overlook or ignore the fact that there have always been challenges to this, even from within the belly of the beast. The European Enlightenment, for instance, embraced ambiguity, on the one hand establishing a rationality, which promoted a pseudo-scientific belief in mono-causal, linear progress and development as an all-embracing concept to explain and master the world, while at the same time, providing the tools and instruments for emancipation based on questioning this claim. The era of Enlightenment established a smokescreen to cover Eurocentric dominance through claims of universality, but the legitimising humbug of such claims was questioned not only by those raised at the receiving end of such an introvert, self-centred mindset, but also by some who were socialised within the system and supposed to be an integral part of its reproduction.

What Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called the *Epistemologies of the South* is not confined to a geographically determined entity:

Given the uneven development of capitalism and the persistence of Western-centric colonialism, the epistemological South and the geographical South partially overlap, particularly as regards those countries that we subjected to historical colonialism. But the overlap is only partial, not only because the epistemologies of the North also flourish in the geographical South ... but also because the epistemological South is also to be found in the geographical North ... in many of the struggles waged there against capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (Santos 2018: 150f.).

Emancipation from hegemony, power, and subjugation is a collective effort that crosses boundaries and is internationalism in practice. Admittedly, this is easier said than done. The controversy over efforts triggered by students at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at London University to diversify their reading lists for courses (Sabaratnam 2018) is a recent example of how initiatives towards diversification are meeting obstacles and ideological blinders by gatekeepers anxious to protect empirical nostalgia. Widely misinterpreted in the public sphere as the intended abandonment of European and Western social history and philosophy, it was denounced as cultural warfare and a betrayal of Europe's values and foundations. Meanwhile, adding other perspectives to the trajectory of Western thoughts and their expansion into the rest of the world simply enriches knowledge and provides a broader context when looking over the edge. If a hegemonic discourse is at risk because of 'narrative expansions' (Crilly and Everitt 2021), it speaks not for the strength of the hegemonic discourse. As argued by Wilson (2022), 'we cannot take library collections – how they are developed, described and discovered – at face value. We need to confront the biases that exist within those collections and, often, ourselves.'

The Case of Publishing

Publishing in Africa by truly African publishing houses (and not branches of international publishers, which seek to benefit from tenders for the local school textbook market) has been a subject of deep concern for many decades (see Gibbs and Mapanje 1999; Mlambo 2007). Unfortunately, and notwithstanding remarkable efforts by committed individuals (Suriano 2021), little has changed in terms of the existing asymmetries, despite some exciting new local initiatives taken on the continent (Bgoya and Jay 2023).

Notwithstanding a few remarkable exceptions and the persistence of initiatives such as the African Book Collective, the acquisition, publication, and distribution of especially academic works by publishers on the continent remain an uphill battle. Commercially, textbooks and, to some extent, fiction secure a minimum level of operational survival, though not always, as the latest sad example of Weaver Press in Zimbabwe shows (Mushakavanhu 2024). African markets for scholarly works remain small, and distribution networks are often inefficient. Even worse, scholars conducting research on subjects relevant to local markets tend to prefer publishing with internationally renowned publishers to gain the kind of recognition that promotes their academic careers, and these publishers unashamedly exploit their centrality to the fullest. The book prices, calculated for a limited number of university libraries, mainly in the Western and Northern world, speak for themselves. However, the exploitation, including the self-exploitation, of scholars who work unpaid as editors, reviewers and authors, is even bigger in the journal segment of these companies, who unashamedly exploit the desperate need to achieve credits by publishing with them.

What is required is a fundamental turn around, both in research collaboration and funding (Melber 2016, 2019; Dodsworth 2019; Dannecker 2022). If reducing asymmetric power relations in knowledge production and dissemination is to become more than lip service in Western institutions, Northern research foundations could, for example, include as a prerequisite to funding that locally accumulated knowledge has to be published locally. Publishing in African countries should be given the same if not even more recognition. Northern publishing houses should not be eligible for printing subsidies, while publishing with African institutions should qualify for financial support. Unfortunately, while there is a lot of talk, there is little or no visible implementation.

Such selectivity is also reproduced in African universities, where publishing in internationally renowned Western journals is considered more of an achievement than publishing locally and helps promote one's career. The turn

around therefore requires an effort to decolonise; it is not a case of only pointing fingers at the Northern hegemony but also challenging the Southern agencies that continue to reproduce such distortions. A recent survey of the lists of journals accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) disclosed the continued 'bibliometric coloniality' (Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Publishing in a journal on the accredited list attracts a subsidy paid to the academic's university, part of which is then transferred into the scholar's account to fund their further research. This makes it an attractive incentive and shapes preferences for where to publish, which also impacts further career promotions. The selectivity of journals on the list 'is a manifestation and perpetuation of the unequal geopolitical relationship that South Africa has had and continues to have with the Global North' (Heleta and Mzileni 2024: 15f.). It reproduces the Western epistemic hegemony, notably not imposed but self-inflicted. Heleta and Mzileni (2024: 17) therefore suggest: 'Strengthening existing scholarly publishing infrastructure and developing new scholarly indexes and platforms must be a key item on the agenda of higher education ministries, science bodies, and academies on the African continent and elsewhere in the Global South.'

Knowledge Divides was the subtitle of the *World Social Science Report 2010* (UNESCO and International Science Council 2010). Benefiting from inputs by two executive secretaries of CODESRIA, Adebayo Olukoshi and Ebrima Sall, it provides sobering evidence to the fact that the current international system tends to reinforce the dominance of the North. In as much as economic disparities were integral parts of the unequal development on a global scale (re-)produced since the days of colonial-imperialist expansion, the world of science and knowledge production displays similar characteristics of global inequalities in the knowledge economy.

These are also reflected in global university rankings, journal impact factors, and other metrics that claim to measure the relevance of knowledge produced and disseminated. They are indicative of the hierarchies. In the field of publishing and dissemination, a handful of international – mainly British, American and German owned – publishing companies are in firm control of the internationally recognised book market and journals, in which visibility is essential for an academic career. The vested interests and networks rooted in a Northern hemisphere ensure that 'certain voices do not command attention' (Briggs and Weathers 2016: 470). International bibliometric databases document the bias as 'indicators of marginality and instruments of marginalisation' (Keim 2008: 28). In a world of search engines applying 'algorithms of oppression' (Noble 2018), Southern voices remain marginalised, if not ignored.

What about the several South African university presses and other publishing houses that contribute significantly to academic debate by publishing African scholars? What about the considerable publishing activities by CODESRIA, both in the book and journal sectors? What about a publishing house like Langaa in Cameroon, which has played a significant role in scholarly publishing this century? And the list does not end with these few examples.

‘Epistemic power’ has a more pronounced meaning nowadays, as new information technologies and media reinforce comparative advantages for those who wield knowledge as power. If those in command in the Northern and Western hemispheres are serious about partnership and emancipation, they must scrutinise not only how knowledge is power, but also how power is effective in terms of knowledge – not least in the definitions and framings applied. Knowledge in its current dominant forms includes epistemic violence. ‘Unfortunate, but undeniable’, states Ahsan Kamal (2020: 73), ‘the Academy is the North.’

Decolonisation: More Than Epistemology

We must remain aware that decolonisation is a work in progress and requires more than merely focusing on curricula, textbooks, and other substantial aspects of knowledge transfer. Addressing racism in certain institutions is obviously necessary but it is not sufficient; we have to tackle institutionalised forms of racism in a much more general sense, understood as the fundamental transformation of societies. This must embrace not only all forms of discrimination and othering but also the material aspects of transformation.

The removal of the Rhodes statue from the campus of the University of Cape Town was (like many similar interventions elsewhere) a legitimate initiative, despite some controversial militancy of related protests. It is a step to restore pride and human dignity over racist supremacy endured for generations. But do the students, who pass the site where Rhodes stood on upper campus, achieve better learning outcomes than before the Rhodes statue was removed? If those living on the Cape Flats study with no access to electricity and find it difficult to make ends meet, their environment has not significantly improved. Material limitations, at times bordering on destitution, prevail. When food insecurity rates among South African students range between 11 and 38 per cent and they dream of starting the day with a breakfast (Pongweni, Caliz and Ellis 2025), something is utterly wrong. This does not strengthen the foundation for knowledge production and cognitive empowerment. The #FeesMustFall protest was, therefore, a logical follow up in their demands in support of the ability to learn.

The point is even more fundamental: does the beggar on a street, which had its Apartheid name replaced by that of an African freedom fighter, now enjoy a better life? Or does the woman battling to provide a decent upbringing for her children find a degree of comfort in the names of female role models in the public sphere when there is little material support? These pointers are not meant to be polemic but a word of caution: if we lose sight of the fundamentals that shape societies beyond symbols (while symbols do, of course, matter), we might mistake the means for the end – and fail in our efforts to achieve true decolonisation. Yes, students on the upper campus at UCT might feel more empowered as they pass the spot where Rhodes stood before their protest, but they remain hungry.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018: 42) advocates bringing about a pedagogy of unlearning ‘as part of epistemological decolonisation which results in the removal of that colonial/Eurocentric hard disc of coloniality together with its software’. However, this is easier said than done given the complexities of existing power structures – and more often than we realise, our own affirmative involvement is determined by the mere position we occupy and the role we execute, whether we like it or not. Therefore, it is necessary to throw a spanner in the current spinning wheel of popular demands to decolonise the software without targeting the basic hardware – not to obstruct, but to point at the pitfalls and traps.

Wahbie Long in the Department of Psychology at UCT warns us of the all-too-uncritical affirmation of postcolonial theory (or rather, theories). As he observes, ‘decolonisation seals us within a colonial imaginary in which the binaries of coloniser and colonised, White and Black become impossible to displace’ (Long 2018: 21). For him, ‘decolonisation activists, by and large, do not seem to take issue with the instrumentalisation of their education. Instead of a materialist reading of the asymmetries of academic life, they support a decolonisation agenda that centres on the notion of epistemic violence.’ Such discourse, however, ‘forms the ideological superstructure of an identity project’. The focus on epistemic violence risks neglecting the underlying dimensions of material facts and realities. By denying appreciation of the mind of others, such theory ‘cannot provide the moral vision we need’ (Long 2018: 21 and 22).

Conclusion: The Fight for Epistemic Justice

Long refuses to reconcile ‘to a theory whose practices would rehumanise some by dehumanising others’, a process in which ‘identity becomes the basis for political mobilisation as the possibility of universal comradeship disintegrates’. Such an approach, however, has certain consequences:

‘Whether unable or unwilling to frame their struggle in terms of the universal values of dignity, security and equality, protestors have opted for the particulars of White privilege and Black pain, practising a form of identity politics’ (Long 2018: 22). This replaces universal values with specific ones and is ultimately in the way of alliances of like-minded people willing to change the world towards epistemic justice for all.

Hamid Dabashi (2013) is among the many who criticise dominant forms of Western knowledge executing the power of definition. Challenging the uncritical admiration and celebrity status of almost exclusively European thinkers elevated to the commanding heights of universal philosophy and history, he wonders ‘what happens with thinkers who operate outside the European philosophical pedigree?’ and points to ‘a direct and unmitigated structural link between an empire, or an imperial frame of reference, and the presumed universality of a thinker thinking in the bosoms of that empire’. While his further challenges do not present simple answers to a complex reality, they invite further fruitful and stimulating (controversial) exchanges (Dabashi 2015). After all, as Pankaj Mishra (2014) maintains, ‘that old spell of universal progress through western ideologies – socialism and capitalism – has been decisively broken’, since ‘Europe no longer confidently produces, as it did for two centuries, the surplus of global history’ (Mishra 2015).

Concerns of this kind offer a useful sensitisation – namely that the awareness of the asymmetric North–South (or any other given) power relations does not eliminate the risk of perpetuating epistemic distortions and injustices by blending out contradictions, challenges and other relevant but ‘bulky’ or inconvenient approaches, even within the settings of groups who claim to oppose hegemonic thinking. Their repositioning might risk entering new pitfalls: As Hamid Dabashi warns with reference to the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, such philosophy does not protect from falling prey to ‘the discrete charm of European intellectuals’ (Dabashi 2009). But the same is true the other way around: cultivating the anti-European/Western counter narratives is no guarantee of effectively dismantling and removing the disparities of power.

These cautionary reflections resonate with Frantz Fanon’s emphatic conclusion in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he stresses a willingness to open one’s mindset as a form of genuine humanism and true universalism: ‘I want the world to recognise, with me, the open door of every consciousness’ (Fanon 1967: 232). A search for emancipatory interaction therefore requires a paradigm shift towards the plurality of experiences, practices, knowledges and theories. This requires transcending not only geographical borders but also the plurality of the other confines we have internalised, while paying

respect and giving recognition to diversity in efforts to seek and establish common ground. Unfortunately, this leads to another challenge: how do we recognise otherness without othering?

A serious approach to epistemic decolonisation as a transformation of mindsets and widely accepted paradigms, must start with us. We have all been colonised. Socialised in unequal societies based on hierarchies, we have internalised fundamentals that contribute to the reproduction of these societies. This does not mean that we are predetermined. We have choices. As scholars we are supposed to analyse and reflect. And knowledge is indeed power – it depends only on which knowledge is used for what power. This requires self-critical exploration and reflection, and a change in perceptions and in our subsequent approaches to what we do and how we do it. We need to interrogate the knowledge we acquired and apply, and question if knowledge is indeed wisdom. We need to change attitudes and behaviour; we need to listen more often than talk as a necessary step of interrogating and ultimately transforming the concept and definition – as well as substance – of knowledge. Unfortunately, this is not the form of a class-based social struggle, which would transform the socio-economic fundamentals of material inequality. But scholars offering anti-hegemonic concepts and thoughts that resist epistemic dominance and violence can add to and promote an awareness, which can then motivate further emancipatory practical engagements.

Note

1. This is a considerably revised and enlarged keynote address presented at the Colloquium 'Decolonising knowledge production in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Arts: Reflecting on a decade of the Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences in the South African Higher Education', organised by the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State, 27–29 August 2024.

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Bibliometric Coloniality in Africa: Challenges, Drivers and Strategies for Resistance

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Abstract

This conceptual paper critically engages with bibliometric coloniality, a concept that refers to the systems and structures of domination of global academic publishing by scholarly indexes and academic bodies based in Europe and North America. These indexes serve as gatekeepers of academic credibility, relevance and visibility. Due to the domination of journals from the Global North and the absence of African journals in major scholarly indexes, most academic journals from Africa are marginalised and remain largely invisible on the global stage. The article offers a decolonial critique of the challenges linked to bibliometric coloniality and Euro-American hegemony in knowledge production and dissemination. It highlights and synthesises key directions and options for addressing, resisting and/or dismantling global bibliometric coloniality. The article also explores how to begin tackling the challenges and hegemonies linked to bibliometric coloniality on the African continent, whether inclusion in dominant indexes or the development of an African scholarly index should be prioritised, and where to find resources and funding for the development of comprehensive scholarly infrastructure and platforms in Africa.

Keywords: Bibliometric coloniality, academic publishing, coloniality of knowledge, decolonisation, Africa

Résumé

Cet article conceptuel propose une analyse critique de la colonialité bibliométrique, un concept qui renvoie aux systèmes et structures de domination de l'édition académique mondiale par des index scientifiques et des institutions académiques basés en Europe et en Amérique du Nord. Ces index jouent le rôle de gardiens de la crédibilité, de la pertinence et de la visibilité académiques. En raison de la domination des revues du

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Nord global et de l'absence de revues africaines dans les principaux index scientifiques, la plupart des revues académiques africaines sont marginalisées et demeurent largement invisibles sur la scène mondiale. L'article propose une critique décoloniale des défis liés à la colonialité bibliométrique et à l'hégémonie euro-américaine dans la production et la diffusion des connaissances. Il met en lumière et synthétise des orientations clés et des pistes pour faire face à cette colonialité bibliométrique mondiale, y résister et/ou la démanteler. L'étude examine également les moyens d'aborder les défis et les formes d'hégémonie liés à la colonialité bibliométrique sur le continent africain, en s'interrogeant notamment sur la question de savoir s'il convient de privilégier l'inclusion dans les index dominants ou le développement d'un index scientifique africain. Elle s'intéresse également aux ressources et aux mécanismes de financement nécessaires au développement d'infrastructures et de plateformes scientifiques complètes en Afrique.

Mots-clés : Colonialité bibliométrique, publication académique, colonialité du savoir, décolonisation, Afrique

Introduction

Bibliometric coloniality is a recent concept. It was introduced in 2022 by Mills and Branford in the conclusion of their paper about academic publishing in Nigeria. They argue that 'across the global science system, a rich diversity of academic publishing cultures and research practices is under threat from bibliometric coloniality'. They further add that in this environment, research ecosystems, such as the one in Nigeria, have been put under immense pressure, with many academic journals and publishing houses struggling to operate, often 'caught between invisibility and being branded as "predatory"' due to their exclusion from dominant commercial bibliometric indexes (Mills and Branford 2022: 856). The concept of bibliometric coloniality was expanded in the book *Who Counts? Ghanaian Academic Publishing and Global Science* by Mills et al. (2023), with authors arguing that the concept refers to domination of global academic publishing by a small number of corporations and academic bodies based in Europe and North America, who serve as gatekeepers of academic credibility and relevance, as well as the tools of exclusion and invisibility of most African journals. Heleta and Mzileni (2024) have further built on this concept in their study about bibliometric coloniality in South Africa, showing the complicity of the country's Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and universities in accepting the coloniality of knowledge and Euro-American epistemic hegemony as the way the world is. They also link bibliometric coloniality to the concept of coloniality and the ways in

which the Euro-American power structures and systems – including higher education, academic research and the academic publishing industry – built over centuries of European colonialism and United States-led neocolonialism since the Second World War (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo 2020) continue to shape and ‘affects various aspects of the lives of [formerly] colonised subjects, including their ways of knowing, seeing and imagining the world’ (Ndlovu 2018: 99).

Despite these important scholarly works, there is limited scholarship on bibliometric coloniality. At the time of finalising this paper in January 2026, a search for ‘bibliometric coloniality’ on Google Scholar returned a total of 32 publications; aside from the above-mentioned publications, other publications mentioning bibliometric coloniality largely did so in passing, referring to the key contributions above. However, while bibliometric coloniality is a new concept, linked to the neoliberalisation, commodification and corporatisation of universities and global academic publishing, the problems and challenges it focuses on have been studied long before this concept emerged in 2022. For example, scholars have been focusing on the coloniality of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Ndlovu 2018), politics of and inequities in knowledge production (Afolabi 2022), academic and intellectual imperialism (Alatas 2003), academic dependency (Ajani 2020), gatekeeping in the academic knowledge economy (Soler, Erdocia and Savski 2023), decolonising academic publishing (Grydehøj et al. 2023), challenges facing African academic publishing (Mills, Kitchen and Sidi-Hida 2024), and global and regional disparities in dominant journal citation indexes (Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016; Tennant 2020; Mills 2022; Asubiaro and Onaolapo 2023; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024).

This conceptual paper engages with the existing literature on bibliometric coloniality and other relevant critical and decolonial scholarship on Euro-American epistemic hegemony, global coloniality of knowledge, politics of knowledge, and inequities in knowledge production and dissemination to map out key issues, concerns, and debates. The paper offers a decolonial critique of the challenges associated with bibliometric coloniality and Euro-American academic and corporate hegemony in knowledge production and dissemination. Decolonial critique and epistemic decolonisation refer to a ‘political and normative ethic and practice of resistance and intentional undoing – unlearning and dismantling unjust practices, assumptions, and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces, networks, and ways of knowing that transcend our epicolonial inheritance’ (Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo 2020: 271). In addition, decolonial critique allows us to critically engage with the Euro-

American epistemic fundamentalism and the hierarchies of knowledge production and dissemination, and imagine and work towards a pluralistic, non-hegemonic global knowledge project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). Beyond, or perhaps in addition to, the decolonial critique, this paper begins to think about how to tackle the challenges and hegemonies associated with bibliometric coloniality on the African continent. The goal is not to offer immediate solutions, as this requires comprehensive engagement, thinking, research and analysis by many; rather, the goal is to build on the existing scholarship, highlight and synthesise key directions offered by scholars interested in or writing about resisting, addressing, tackling and/or dismantling global bibliometric coloniality, and offer recommendations for further research. The paper is structured as follows: the first section critically engages with colonialism and coloniality and their impact on knowledge production and dissemination on the African continent. The next section discusses the unequal global landscape of academic publishing. The third section explores some options and choices in the quest to tackle and dismantle bibliometric coloniality, and the last section concludes the paper.

Colonialism, Coloniality and Knowledge Production

Power and knowledge were key in the making of the modern world, built on the European colonisers' models, priorities and visions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023). Sardar (2008: xvi) explains that the European colonial conquest, science and knowledge projects 'went hand in hand'. After the colonial conquest across the African continent, European colonisers imposed educational institutions and curricula modelled on those from the colonial centres (Alatas 2003; Mamdani 2016; Maringe and Ojo 2017; Afolabi 2022; Heleta and Phiri 2023), a development that Alatas (2003) calls academic imperialism. The colonisers and their educational institutions and scholars assumed that their institutional models, curricula and knowledges were superior, while those of the colonised were inferior (Sardar 2008; Grosfoguel 2013; Mamdani 2016; Maringe and Ojo 2017; Afolabi 2022). Through prioritisation of colonial agendas and propagation of White supremacist notions and fallacies, education and knowledge production in Africa have been 'muddled, supplanted and ultimately made subservient to the orthodox Western education forms and structures established by colonial authorities' (Afolabi 2022: 94).

While formal colonialism ended in Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, the model of the world imposed by European colonisers continues to be sustained through the military, economic and geopolitical power and influence of Europe and the United States, as well as through the

coloniality of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023). Coloniality of knowledge is a key aspect of the global system of neocolonial control, hegemony and domination (Alatas 2003; Sardar 2008; Ndlovu 2018; Ajani 2020; Cochrane 2022). Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo (2020: 271–2) argue that the goals of both colonialism and coloniality in reference to education and knowledge production and dissemination have been and remain the ‘subjugation and subjection of people, societies, and experiences [in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South] for the purposes of accumulating knowledge, wealth, and power that serve, directly or indirectly, White Western hegemony’. Coloniality of knowledge ‘includes politics of knowledge generation, as well as questions of who generates which knowledge and for what purpose’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015: 490). The key aspect of the colonial project, and the subsequent neocolonialism and coloniality, has been the ‘desire to control the minds and ways of knowing of the “colonial subalterns” in order to sustain and prolong the very project of colonisation’ (Ndlovu 2018: 96). Afolabi (2022: 97) argues that the colonial subjugation, and the coloniality of knowledge since the formal end of European colonialism in Africa, have led to ‘debasement and near extinction of African knowledge systems’.

The imbalances and inequities in knowledge production and dissemination between the Global North and the rest of the world stem from global power imbalances (Cochrane 2022) and the domination of academic discourses and knowledge production by Euro-American institutions and knowledge platforms (Ajani 2020). These institutions and platforms control and influence global flows of academic knowledge, and the credibility and visibility of platforms in which the knowledge is published (Alatas 2003; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Linked to colonial conquest, coloniality and global White supremacy, the racial economy of knowledge continues to accrue most benefits to the countries and institutions in the Global North due to the Euro-American hegemony and coloniality of power and knowledge (Sardar 2008). This is the outcome of centuries of colonial, racist and White supremacist subjugation and imposition of Western and White norms, values and worldviews on much of the world, and the erasure and invalidation of other knowledges, ideas, worldviews and ways of knowing in Africa and elsewhere (Alatas 2003; Alatas 2006; Sardar 2008; Grosfoguel 2013; Ndlovu 2018; Ajani 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; McKenna 2024).

In addition to, or perhaps on top of, the impact of colonialism and coloniality, African higher education systems, institutions, academics and scholars remain at the receiving end of the ‘hegemonic neoliberal capitalist-driven globalisation and the notions of a global economy of knowledge, which is assumed to be decontextualised and universal’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni

2021: 78). Despite the claims of universality, the neoliberal discourse and policies represent White, Western and Euro-American-centric worldviews and visions aimed at controlling, regulating, exploiting and extracting from the rest of the world (Luke 2010). Importantly, neoliberalism has built on the structures of European colonial conquest, subjugation, and exploitation across much of the globe (Boughey and McKenna 2021; Heleta 2023). Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue that neoliberalisation and the notions of the global knowledge economy, conceptualised in and for the benefit of the Global North or the West, have been used to entrench and maintain colonial and neocolonial practices of control and influence in all spheres of life across the Global South, including in higher education, academic research and publishing.

Key components of this have been the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and other neoliberal impositions, which have been promoted and imposed across the Global South by international financial institutions (IFIs) over the past few decades. These impositions have further impoverished African higher education and research ecosystems, already long marginalised, undermined and subjugated by European colonisers, as well as neglected by African post-independence governments (Mama 2007; Heleta and Phiri 2023). For decades since the 1980s, African governments have been pressured by IFIs to prioritise basic education at the expense of higher education and research under the impositions of SAPs. These policy prescriptions have led to systematic neglect of higher education across the African continent, undermining the capacity of already struggling universities to conduct research and develop new knowledge (Mama 2007; Mamdani 2009; Salmi and Bassett 2010; Boughey and McKenna 2021; Heleta and Phiri 2023). While the policy assumptions underpinning structural adjustments and higher education have been debunked and discredited (Salmi and Bassett 2010), the neoliberalisation of higher education remains the norm in Africa. This has led to cuts in public spending on research and higher education, the propagation of market hegemony, and the commodification and commercialisation of the sector (Maringe and Ojo 2017; Boughey and McKenna 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Heleta 2023). As it will be discussed in more detail in the next section, all this is relevant for a critical discussion about bibliometric coloniality, as colonial impositions and erasure, coloniality of knowledge, and the neoliberal impositions and discourses continue to maintain a highly unequal global political economy of knowledge production and dissemination (Cochrane 2022; Mills 2022; Soler, Erdocia and Savski 2023; Asubiario, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024).

The Unequal Global Landscape of Academic Publishing

Global academic publishing is defined, shaped and structured by platforms, parameters and infrastructure developed and controlled by corporations, conglomerates, institutions and academic bodies based in the Global North. They – and particularly the dominant indexing databases such as Scopus and Web of Science – influence, shape, control and gatekeep the geography of scholarly credibility (Tennant 2020; Amutuhair 2022; Asubiaro and Onaolapo 2023; Grydehøj et al. 2023; Mills et al. 2023; Soler, Erdocia and Savski 2023; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026). Most of the largest and most dominant academic publishing companies and/or platforms are based in Europe and North America. Web of Science and Scopus, the most influential commercial bibliometric indexes, are based in Europe (Bol et al. 2023; Mills et al. 2023; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Most of these academic publishing corporations and platforms are also driven by profits, relying on free academic labour through peer reviewing, the publish-or-perish culture in neoliberal academia worldwide, and the public funding for academic research that often ends up behind paywalls controlled by these corporations, or is made accessible through expensive open access publishing models (Pirie 2009; Puehringer, Rath and Griesebner 2021; Amutuhair 2022; Mills et al. 2023). African universities, scholars and most academic journals based on the continent continue to be systematically marginalised and exploited by this academic publishing model and the pressures it creates. African scholars, in particular, find themselves at the margins of the Euro-American-centric knowledge economy (Kamola 2012; Afolabi 2022; Amutuhair 2022; Heleta and Mzileni 2024; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026), exploited for the benefit of dominant global academic publishers (Puehringer, Rath and Griesebner 2021), while at the same time having to negotiate a ‘global knowledge system dominated by “Northern” journals and global publishing conglomerates’ (Mills et al. 2023: 2).

This highly unequal and exploitative global landscape of academic publishing, scholarly indexes and journals ‘is shaped by history, empire and regional income inequalities’ (Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024: 1484). As highlighted by Soler, Erdocia and Savski (2023: 167–8), ‘how academic knowledge is developed and validated is an inherently political-economic question, determined by the social conditions of those involved in the process’. All this is linked to the broader global structural inequalities and inequities, linked to colonialism, neocolonialism and coloniality, as

well as the long-propagated racist notions and fallacies about European and Western intellectual and academic superiority and the inferiority of much of the rest of the world (Grosfoguel 2013; Kessi, Marks and Ramugondo 2020). The domination of Europe and the United States, on one hand, and the exclusion and erasure of much of the rest of the world, on the other, is amplified by academic publishers and scholarly indexes based in the Global North, which operate as key tools of the Euro-American-dominated hegemonic project (Mills 2022; Heleta and Mzileni 2024), the neoliberal global knowledge economy (Kamola 2012; Boughey and McKenna 2021; Heleta 2023; Soler, Erdocia and Savski 2023), and academic or knowledge capitalism (Peters 2019; Boughey and McKenna 2021). These tools continue to sustain the global coloniality of knowledge and the unequal political economy of higher education and knowledge production (Mills 2022; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026).

Platforms for cultivation, curation and dissemination of scholarly knowledge, and the indexes that make that knowledge visible and perceived as credible and reliable 'are neither physically nor epistemically neutral. They are situated' (Abimbola 2023: 337). In their research, Heleta and Mzileni (2024) analysed major global bibliometric indexes to ascertain where the journals that they index are located. Their focus was on Scopus, Web of Science, the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Their research, focusing on journals indexed in 2023, found that journals from the Global North overwhelmingly dominate the Web of Science, Scopus, IBSS, and the Norwegian Register. The DOAJ, on the other hand, has had half of the journals indexed in 2023 located in the Global South. Their research also focused on the number of indexed journals from the African continent, finding that Africa is largely absent from all these indexes, registers and directories. African journals represented only 0.35 per cent of all journals indexed in Web of Science in 2023; 1.22 per cent in Scopus; 1.33 per cent in IBSS; none in the 'high-level' list of journals in the Norwegian Register; and 1.8 per cent in DOAJ. Most of the indexed African journals were from South Africa, and this means that much of the African continent is completely absent from these indexes and platforms. Other research has explored global and regional disparities in dominant bibliometric indexes and found similar patterns of exclusion of academic journals from the Global South and particularly the African continent (Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016; Tennant 2020; Asubiario and Onaolapo 2023; Mills et al. 2023; Asubiario, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Kanyika and Kim 2025).

As illustrated above, dominant scholarly indexes are highly inequitable in their geographic representation of indexed journals. In particular, they systematically marginalise African journals (Asubiaro and Onaolapo 2023; Bol et al. 2023; Mills et al. 2023; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). In addition to this, English language journals dominate these indexes, with only a small fraction of indexed journals in languages other than English (Mongeon and Paul-Hus 2016; Vera-Baceta, Thelwall and Kousha 2019; Tennant 2020; Mills 2022; Mills et al. 2023; Soler, Erdocia and Savski 2023; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024). This marginalisation of the majority of the world's journals and languages 'extends the old imperial and colonial logics' and racist notions linked to a presumed European and White supremacy (Peters 2019: 11). These practices directly contribute to the marginalisation and erasure of most of the world's knowledges, worldviews and ways of knowing, breeding epistemic injustices (Abimbola, 2023) and representing a 'hegemonic linguistic practice' (Tennant 2020: 2). Yet, this is not a recent phenomenon. Scholars have been raising concerns about the domination of journals from Europe and the United States and the exclusion of many other parts of the world in scholarly indexes since the 1970s (Narin and Carpenter 1975; Seglen 1992; Gibbs 1995; Gallagher and Barnaby 1998).

While the challenges of bibliometric coloniality in Africa are experienced by most, if not all, institutions, journals, and scholars on the continent, specific examples from Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa are briefly highlighted below. In Nigeria, even though there are hundreds of local academic journals housed largely within the country's universities, university administrators have, over the past few decades, pushed Nigerian academics to publish in 'international' journals. International, importantly, is vaguely defined (or not defined at all) when referring to journals and preferences regarding where to publish; in Nigeria, it generally refers to Europe and North America, even if the research policies and guidelines do not name them explicitly (Mills and Branford 2022). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) points out, the notion of the 'international' in African higher education and more broadly across the Global South has tended to refer primarily to Europe and North America. This has led to the emergence of 'credibility geographies', in which publishing in journals based in other African countries or elsewhere in the Global South is considered less valid and credible than publishing in journals based in the United States or Western Europe. Over the years, the validity, worthiness, and 'internationality' of academic journals have tended to be defined in Nigeria and other African countries by inclusion in dominant bibliometric indexes such as Scopus or Web of Science (Mills and Branford 2022).

Universities in Ghana expect their academics to publish in ‘reputable’ journals. The meaning of ‘reputable’ is often not unpacked and/or defined in institutional research policies. While most institutional policies do not explicitly state a preference for publishing in international journals, academics and researchers in Ghana often interpret research policies and the notion of reputable journals to mean those based in Europe and North America. This is often due to the fact that many universities promote Scopus index as a reliable guide to reputable journals in which to publish (Mills et al. 2023). In South Africa, annual lists of accredited journals provided to universities by the DHET are dominated by Scopus and Web of Science journals (Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024), and most of the country’s research output is published in these journals (DHET 2023). Publishing in accredited journals in South Africa is also linked to substantial research subsidies paid to universities and researchers for every publication in a journal on the DHET lists (Macfarlane 2021; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). This forces researchers to pay close attention to journal selection when submitting their research for publication.

Publishing research output in ‘reputable’ and ‘international’ journals is seen as one of the key aspects of neoliberal performativity in higher education. Across the world, performance management systems in higher education are informed by and closely follow neoliberal principles (Macfarlane 2021), particularly regarding research output and a focus on quantity, high impact, and Scopus- or Web of Science-indexed journals. This is also prevalent across the African continent (Mills 2022; Mills et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Publishing in journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus impacts the careers and promotion prospects of scholars and academics across the world (Tennant 2020; Macfarlane 2021; Grydehøj et al. 2023; Mills et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024), including in most African countries (Ajani 2020; Mills and Branford 2022; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026). Similarly, indexing in Web of Science and Scopus is perceived to greatly improve the reputation and global visibility of academic journals (Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024). Publishing in ‘international’ and ‘reputable’ journals, largely based in Europe and North America, is also strongly encouraged by most African institutions as this directly contributes to improvements in international rankings of the institutions (Peters 2019; Tennant 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Mills and Branford 2022; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; McKenna 2024). Utilising data from scholarly indexes and academic publishers dominated by the Global North, the rankings industry directly contributes to Euro-

American hegemony in knowledge production and dissemination, and to the marginalisation of the African continent and much of the rest of the Global South (McKenna 2024).

Most research ecosystems globally, including those across the African continent, have incorporated data from Web of Science and Scopus in evaluation of their research outputs. National higher education and science systems and higher education institutions tend to see journals indexed by these platforms as the mainstream scholarly publishing platforms, while the journals not indexed by Scopus and Web of Science are seen as peripheral and/or marginal scholarly platforms (Vessuri, Guédon and Cetto 2013; Chavarro, Tang and Ràfols 2017; Tennant 2020; Bol et al. 2023; Mills et al. 2023; Asubiario, Onaolapo and Mills 2024). Thus, in a neoliberal university in Africa and globally, academic ‘publications are not legitimate unless they ... appear in a journal with a high impact factor’ (Macfarlane 2021: 466), which in most cases means a journal indexed in Scopus or Web of Science. It is important to note that the high impact factor is not the only, or even a primary, assessment tool; any journal indexed by these conglomerates is seen by most African universities as a quality and reliable platform for publishing research, although high-impact-factor journals are preferred. In all this, thousands of African journals – and many more from other parts of the Global South – are not seen as reliable and credible platforms for publishing scholarly research by African scholars. This makes the majority of African journals largely neglected and invisible on the global stage (Mills et al. 2023; Asubiario, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024; Mills, Kitchen and Sidi-Hida 2024). Ultimately, this reinforces Euro-American hegemony on the one hand and epistemic exclusion, injustice, erasure, and coloniality of knowledge on the other (Mills et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024).

Contrary to the claims of universality, the Euro-American epistemic hegemony – which includes Global North’s domination of global scholarly publishing – and neoliberalisation and corporatisation of higher education ‘are two sides of the same coin that represents coloniality’ (Heleta 2023: 51). Academia in Africa, while the victim of all this, is also part of the problem (Afolabi 2022). Across the African continent, the ‘Eurocentric order of knowledge and a Northbound gaze’ (Modiri 2021: 47) remain dominant factors that shape and inform the thinking about academic knowledge, institutional priorities, and the credibility of platforms for dissemination of research and knowledge (Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Many in African academia ‘have a seemingly strong belief that knowledge from the world centre [Europe and North America] ... is more “authentic”’ (Ajani 2020: 41). This is reflected in everything the academia does, including the choices

of journals and academic publishers (Alatas 2006; Ajani 2020; Afolabi 2022; Mills et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Alatas (2006) argues that while much of the Euro-American epistemic and knowledge-related hegemony is structurally imposed onto the rest of the world, significant aspects of it are also willingly accepted as 'universal' by scholars, university leaders, administrators and policymakers across the African continent and elsewhere in the Global South. How to begin to challenge all this and work towards dismantling bibliometric coloniality is discussed in the following section.

Tackling Bibliometric Coloniality: Some Options and Choices

What are the options and choices for tackling and dismantling bibliometric coloniality in Africa? Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills (2024: 1487) argue that 'addressing the inclusion of local research ecosystems from regions outside Europe and North America' in the dominant academic publishing industry and indexes such as Scopus and Web of Science is important. They see this as part of the efforts to 'decolonise the global research assessment landscape' and foster a 'more equitable and inclusive research environment that recognises contributions from diverse regions, disciplines, and languages'. Kanyika and Kim (2025: 11) think that 'adjusting ... indexing criteria to better suit African contexts' could contribute to increasing the number of African journals in dominant indexes. While the inclusion of African and other underrepresented regions of the world would be a step in the right direction, particularly when compared to the historical and current trends and patterns of neglect, marginalisation and underrepresentation, is inclusion into the Euro-American indexes a transformative and decolonial solution? Similarly, is the adjustment of criteria for inclusion of African journals into the dominant Euro-American indexes a solution that the African continent should pursue? The problem with the calls to include more African journals into the dominant indexes, or to adjust the criteria and make it easier to include more African journals in these indexes, is that they seem to suggest that solutions may lie in getting a small seat at the edge of a big Euro-American table, or that African journals should be allowed to 'cut corners' to get in. While this may make Euro-American platforms and indexes look somewhat better, as they can boast about their work on inclusion, diversity and better geographic representation of indexed journals, is this part and parcel of the decolonial project? Is it enough to focus on inclusion of 'peripheral' regions, countries and journals into the dominant and hegemonic Euro-American, neocolonial, neoliberal and corporate academic publishing and indexing platforms? Is it appropriate to call for lowering of standards for inclusion so that more African journals can get in?

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021: 80) highlights that ‘one of the key demands of decolonisation of knowledge and education is de-provincialisation’ of the knowledges and knowledge platforms from a few colonial and neocolonial centres that continue their hegemony and imposition onto the rest of the world. If we see decolonisation of knowledge this way, the inclusion of African journals into the hegemonic and Euro-American ‘core’ – or the integration of Africa and the broader Global South into the Euro-American and largely corporate academic publishing game, to paraphrase Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) – is far from enough. In line with this, Abimbola (2023: 338) argues that African and other Global South scholars should not ‘give in to the notion that the Global South must come to the Global North’s table to be seen as knowers’. Rather than asking to be included in the Euro-American game (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021) in a largely tokenistic fashion, Abimbola (2023: 337) argues that ‘the periphery [Africa and the broader Global South] must claim centrality by itself.’ Similarly, Bol et al. (2023) call for disruption and dismantling of the neocolonial and neoliberal model of knowledge publication and dissemination. This requires developing, building and/or strengthening academic publishing platforms, indexes and directories in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South (Amutuhair 2022; Abimbola 2023; Bol et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). In Africa, in particular, this would entail developing a comprehensive African scholarly index (Asubiaro and Onalapo 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024; Mills, Kitchen and Sidi-Hida 2024; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026).

Inclusion is a relatively easy and quick solution. It would not take too much effort and resources for dominant global indexes to invest a small amount of funding to help strengthen a few journals from African and other Global South countries so that their statistics and maps look somewhat more ‘inclusive’ and ‘diverse’. But this would not change much, if anything, regarding bibliometric coloniality and the broader coloniality of knowledge and Euro-American epistemic hegemony. Rather, it would be largely superficial and rhetorical, resembling what some scholars call ‘decolonial washing’ (Le Grange et al. 2020). This is not to say that a truly global, pluriversal, inclusive and equitable scholarly index should not be a goal. Rather, it means that this may not be possible in a world where the Euro-American hegemony continues to dominate research, knowledge production and scholarly publishing in most parts of the globe. This is also not possible in a highly unequal and polarised world, where coloniality, neocolonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, White supremacy, extractivism and many other ills continue to ravage the lives, livelihoods, hopes, dreams, prospects and future of billions of people. All this has been interlinked with the

European colonial project, and later with the United States-dominated neocolonial project, with universities, academia, academic publishers and scholarly indexes playing a key role in colonial and neocolonial impositions, subjugation, erasure and injustices (Alatas 2003; Grosfoguel 2013; Bol et al. 2023). This is why Abimbola (2023: 338) argues that ‘to strengthen or build Global South knowledge platforms is to repair what colonialism destroyed. It is reparative.’

A key challenge facing universities, academics, scholars, researchers, journals and other academic publishing platforms across the African continent has been the underfunding of research and knowledge production by African governments over many decades (Mama 2007; Afolabi 2022; Amutuhaire 2022; Mills and Branford 2022; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta, Jithoo and Samuels 2024; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026). In 2006, under the auspices of the African Union, ministers of science, technology and higher education of African countries had committed to work towards raising national budgets for research and development (R&D) to 1 per cent of national gross domestic product (GDP) to strengthen higher education and other sectors involved in scholarly and other research (African Union 2006). Despite this commitment, and the subsequent commitments and calls to increase domestic research and development spending (African Union 2016), most African countries are nowhere near spending 1 per cent of GDP on R&D. According to UNESCO (n.d.), countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have spent on average less than 0.4 per cent of the GDP on R&D since 2010, while the countries in North Africa increased their spending during that period from 0.35 per cent in 2010 to 0.81 per cent in 2022. There are also significant differences between countries. While Egypt spent 1.03 per cent on R&D in 2022, Namibia spent 0.65 per cent, South Africa 0.62 per cent and Kenya 0.41 per cent, to name a few. The most recent available data indicate that Ghana spends around 0.4 per cent of GDP on R&D, while Uganda and Nigeria spend only 0.1 per cent (Heleta, Jithoo and Samuels 2024). Given the underfunding of higher education, science, and research in most African countries, many higher education systems across the continent face enormous challenges and often depend on foreign funders to sustain scholarly research (Omungo 2018; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta, Jithoo and Samuels 2024).

As highlighted earlier, most African academic journals are not indexed in major global indexes and directories, making them largely invisible on the global stage (Ajani 2020; Mills et al. 2023; Asubiaro, Onaolapo and Mills 2024; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). A similar situation is faced by academic journals from most other parts of the Global South (Heleta and Mzileni

2024). This is reinforcing Euro-American hegemony on the one hand and epistemic exclusion, injustice, erasure, and coloniality of knowledge on the other (Ajani 2020; Mills et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). On the African continent, the absence of an African scholarly index is a key structural and systemic problem that must be tackled by the African Union, governments, academies of science, universities and academic publishers (Heleta and Mzileni 2024). However, this is not the only challenge facing the continent and its knowledge project. The lack of funding, support, resources and infrastructure for academic research and its dissemination must also be tackled. Most African journals and publishing houses face enormous financial challenges that undermine their ability to operate, grow, and publish consistently (Mills and Branford 2022; Mills et al. 2023; Mills, Kitchen and Sidi-Hida 2024). Arguably, without first addressing these challenges, a comprehensive African scholarly index will remain a pipe dream (Asubiario, Onaolapo and Mills 2024). Apart from the limited domestic funding and other externally imposed challenges, the lack of political will to tackle and dismantle the coloniality of knowledge and Euro-American epistemic hegemony in all their forms remains one of the major barriers to achieving epistemic decolonisation (Maringe and Ojo 2017; Modiri 2021; Heleta and Phiri 2023) and dismantling bibliometric coloniality (Heleta and Mzileni 2024) in Africa.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with bibliometric coloniality as a concept and its impact on scholarly publishing and the academic knowledge project in Africa. The paper has offered a decolonial critique of the challenges linked to bibliometric coloniality and Euro-American hegemony in knowledge production and dissemination. This included a critical engagement with the ways colonialism and coloniality have impacted and continue to impact knowledge production and dissemination on the African continent; an interrogation of the unequal global landscape of academic publishing; and an exploration of the options and choices in the quest to resist, tackle, and dismantle bibliometric coloniality. Rethinking and reimagining knowledge production and academic publishing are key to the process of epistemic decolonisation (Mamdani 2016; Heleta and Mzileni 2024; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026). Yet, due to bibliometric coloniality and the prioritisation of publishing academic research in journals indexed by Scopus and Web of Science by most African universities (Mills et al. 2023), 'African scholars are [often] forced to "choose" between decolonial principles and career

pragmatism' (Asubiaro and Onaolapo 2023: 756). Promotion of Scopus and Web of Science as the indexes of choice in Africa contributes to the maintenance of the Euro-American epistemic hegemony and coloniality of knowledge (Ajani 2020; Mills et al. 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024) through validation of the Global North as the intellectual and scholarly centre of the world that the scholars from the periphery need to be part of in order to be validated and seen as knowers (Abimbola 2023; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026). These are deeply rooted, structural and systemic problems and challenges (Alatas 2003) that require the dismantling of the existing Euro-American hegemony and domination, decolonising the minds and building and/or strengthening pluralistic and non-hegemonic scholarly platforms and indexes in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South (Tennant 2020; Abimbola 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024; Gichuru and Rukooko 2026).

Global systemic and structural inequalities and inequities, combined with Euro-American epistemic hegemony and underinvestment in African higher education and research by African governments, will continue to undermine and marginalise research, knowledge production, and scholarly platforms for disseminating knowledge and research in Africa. While inclusion in dominant scholarly indexes may be the quickest solution for some African journals to achieve global visibility and recognition, this would only contribute to the maintenance of the coloniality of knowledge and Euro-American global hegemony. A decolonial solution requires a development of a comprehensive African and/or a broader Global South scholarly index (Abimbola 2023; Heleta and Mzileni 2024). Another option is to work on dismantling the existing hegemonies and corporate capture of academic publishing and building truly global scholarly platforms based on non-hegemonic values, norms, and visions, and the plurality of knowledges, ways of knowing, worldviews, and epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). Whatever the way forward may be, no change can occur without comprehensive and continuous investment in African science, higher education, and research ecosystems by African governments. Similarly, no change will happen overnight; 'challenging and re-creating systems of knowledge production will take time and effort. It will also require persistence, creativity, and ingenuity' (Cochrane 2022: 84) of many in African academia and in higher education-related policy circles.

As highlighted in the introduction, bibliometric coloniality is a relatively new and understudied concept. More research is needed to analyse, document and further unpack different practices and experiences

with bibliometric coloniality in Africa. Researchers should also continue to study the impact of bibliometric coloniality on the academic knowledge project in Africa, including comprehensive and comparative studies of the impact on different higher education systems on the continent. Similar research is also needed more broadly across the Global South. Additional research should critically explore the experiences and challenges of African and other Global South academic journals, publishers, scholarly indexes and directories, how they operate within the broader coloniality of knowledge and Euro-American and corporate hegemony, and what types of support they need to build sustainable and globally visible platforms for publication and dissemination of scholarly research. Scholars should critically explore the experiences of African scholars based outside the continent to assess whether bibliometric coloniality affects their work and to what extent they can contribute to challenging and dismantling it. Future research should also explore whether bibliometric coloniality affects academic disciplines differently in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South, and whether this is linked to existing hierarchies between so-called 'hard' and 'soft' sciences. Further research is needed to unpack in greater detail what decolonising academic publishing entails and how to go about it. Finally, additional research is needed on how a comprehensive and sustainable African scholarly index can be built, and on the types of support, resources, and infrastructure required for this.

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Foregrounding ‘Fallism’ and its Praxis Within the Context of Decolonial and Critical Theory

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Abstract

This article places the #RhodesMustFall movement in its proper context as a pivotal moment that sharpened societal contradictions around power relations. It unpacks what has been termed ‘Fallism’ within its political tradition, framing it as a decolonial response to colonial continuities and enduring matrices of power that sustain the structural asymmetries underpinning the current socio-political order. In doing so, this essay argues for the dismantling (‘falling’) of these oppressive systems to enable the birth of a new political order grounded in egalitarian values. In its overarching argument, this essay navigates the complexities of race relations and what it means to be Black in South Africa today. It draws on thinkers such as Frantz Omar Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and other scholars to foreground the view that the oppressed peoples’ cry for freedom cannot be understood outside the imperative to dismantle oppressive structures and to demand that these systems fall. It is when the oppressed master the courage to call boldly for such structures to fall that the inevitability of freedom becomes a foreseeable reality. Within this realm of possibility, this essay presents ‘Fallism’ as a resuscitation of the decolonising project, laying a foundation that enabled the oppressed to demand the fall of oppressive systems, both within and beyond the university. In so doing, it argues that this ‘Fallist’ logic is central to the #RhodesMustFall movement’s scholarly contribution to the academy.

Keywords: #RhodesMustFall, Fallism, power relations, structural asymmetries, decolonising project, whiteness, Blackness, critical theory

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Résumé

Cet article situe le mouvement #RhodesMustFall dans son contexte approprié en tant que moment charnière ayant accentué les contradictions sociétales autour des relations de pouvoir. Il analyse ce qui a été désigné sous le terme de « fallisme » dans sa tradition politique, en le présentant comme une réponse décoloniale aux continuités coloniales et aux matrices durables de pouvoir qui maintiennent les asymétries structurelles à la base de l'ordre sociopolitique actuel. Dans cette optique, l'article plaide pour le démantèlement (« chute ») de ces systèmes oppressifs afin de permettre l'émergence d'un nouvel ordre politique fondé sur des valeurs égalitaires. Dans son argumentation globale, il explore les complexités des relations raciales et ce que signifie être Noir en Afrique du Sud aujourd'hui. Il s'appuie sur des penseurs tels que Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels et d'autres chercheurs afin de mettre en avant l'idée que l'appel à la liberté des peuples opprimés ne peut être compris sans la nécessité de démanteler les structures oppressives et d'exiger leur chute. C'est lorsque les opprimés trouvent le courage de revendiquer fermement la chute de ces structures que l'inévitabilité de la liberté devient une réalité envisageable. Dans cet horizon de possibilités, l'article présente le « fallisme » comme une relance du projet décolonial, en posant les bases permettant aux opprimés d'exiger la chute des systèmes oppressifs, tant au sein de l'université qu'au-delà. Ce faisant, il soutient que cette logique « falliste » constitue un élément central de la contribution intellectuelle du mouvement #RhodesMustFall au monde académique.

Mots-clés : #RhodesMustFall, fallisme, relations de pouvoir, asymétries structurelles, projet de décolonisation, blanchité, négrité (Blackness), théorie critique

A Brief Historical Background to the #RhodesMustFall Movement

'The concept of the ideological lens can be used by any framework of ideas and any conceivable thing can be viewed through it' (Sargon of Akkad 2016).¹ "'#Fallist, we are ... and we reject the rejectors of #fallism' (Mahlangu 2016).

'Rhodes' colonial architectural ideals are deeply embedded in the education system' (Matabeni 2018).

The #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement was an independent formation of students, workers and staff (administrative and academic) who had come together in strong solidarity with the resolve to subvert 'White supremacy', institutionalised racism and deeply embedded Eurocentrism at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and broader society. This movement was catalysed on Monday, 9 March 2015, by Chumani

Maxwele's radical protest and an institutional critique of the presence of the statue of the colonialist par excellence, Cecil John Rhodes, on UCT's upper campus.

On this historic day, Maxwele was joined by other students who also put their bodies on the line to sound a clarion call, which set in motion a moment of rupture that shook the university to its core. Subsequent to this protest intervention, the broader student community joined by workers and some Black staff, gathered to formalise their presence under what became known as the RhodesMustFall movement.

Their collective voices spoke sharply into the psyche of an unfolding socio-political milieu, where voices, bodies and action coalesced to form an irresistible global current that brought a necessary focus on Black pain and the injustices inflicted on Black bodies.

In its operation, the movement adopted the intersection of the three cardinal pillars as its tools of analysis as it engaged with different strata of society (Figure 1).

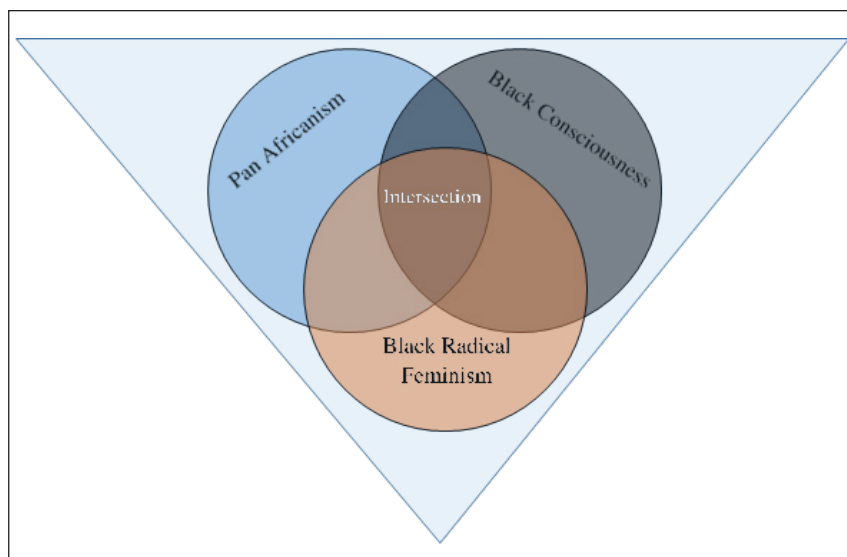


Figure 1: The intersection of the three cardinal pillars of the #RhodesMustFall movement

The RMF movement used an intersectional approach and sought to weave these cardinal pillars together to use as tools to challenge the structural inequalities that render Black bodies as less than humanity, and thus subservient to Whites. Through its unfiltered voice, the movement

questioned this assumption of 'White superiority' in a substantial way by calling for radical structural change that would eventually deepen discussions about historical injustices and the urgent need for the re-engineering and rethinking of society. In its approach to addressing these structural asymmetries, the movement invoked Frantz Omar Fanon's work on decolonisation, in which he argues that, 'in decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation' (Fanon 1963: 28). Guided by this ideological compass, the #RhodesMustFall movement navigated a volatile period, raising uncomfortable questions about the nature of colonialism and its negative effects on society today. Not only this, but it called for the solidarity of the oppressed against colonialism to fulfil Fanon's prediction when he states that: 'Decolonization unifies that people by the radical decision to remove from it, its heterogeneity, and by unifying it on a national, sometimes a racial basis' (Fanon 1963: 28).

At the core of this intersectional reasoning and rationale to shift the contour lines of power lies the complex intersecting experiences of gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, mental health, race and class, among other things. Through the constant sharpening of its internal contradictions and the advocacy for the disruption of broader colonial reasoning in the academy and society at large, Zethu Matebeni (2018) brings to our attention that it 'marked the beginning of the largest wave of student protests in democratic South Africa'.

After extensive internal institutional discussions, debates and students' activism, the statue of Rhodes was taken off its plinth on 9 April 2015. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in how the university engages with uncomfortable questions and put into action the project of decolonisation, which included the renaming of buildings. The vibrant activism of students, who invigorated the call for structural reengineering, effectively challenged the existing colonial legacies embedded in urban landscapes and metropolitan cities across the globalising world. Matebeni (2018) animates this point by suggesting that it had 'galvanised an electric energy around the world that could no longer be ignored' (Matebeni 2018). It is this electric energy, as Matebeni suggests, that cuts through the conscience of our modern world, calling for the decolonisation of the tapestry of the cultural landscapes across the metropolis.

Its revolutionary fervour had invoked the writings and ideas of Frantz Omar Fanon, Steve Bantu Biko, Bell Hooks, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, Audre Lorde and many other progressive voices, whose ideas later shaped the intellectual project of the #RhodesMustFall movement.

The moment at which RMF was conceived coincided with the rhythm of an intersectional 'voice' of the revolutionary spirit of a fearless generation of students, who heeded the call to redefine the mission of their time to call into question the colonial order, its suffocating ethos and violent symbolism, thus resuscitating the politics of decolonial thinking in South Africa's body politic.

It is worth noting that RMF was never just about the removal of the statue of Rhodes, but a 'rebirth' of a much deeper critical consciousness that speaks truth to institutional power across the country's political tapestry and shifting global paradigms. It became the 'nerve centre' of the 'decolonising' project and what later became known as 'Fallism', a tool of analysis to which I shall later return. But before we discuss 'Fallism', we must ask the question: why the statue of Cecil John Rhodes?

Why the Statue of Cecil John Rhodes?

'Colonialism's deadly agenda of dispossession, dehumanisation and denial of rights live on its "elephant in the room" – the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, an ardent believer in colonialism, which has been called out by students who view the statue as a disturbing feature and a glaring reminder of African Black people's genocide, whom Rhodes had killed mercilessly in his lifetime' (Kasibe 2015)

'For Black students and staff arriving at the university, the statue was a constant reminder of how and for whom the university was designed' (Matebeni 2018).

Cecil John Rhodes spent his life sustaining the institutionalisation of the British Colonial Empire and as an ardent believer of colonialism and 'supremacy' of the White race. As reflected through the collection of his speeches, Vindex (F. Verschoyle) captures him to have told the House of Assembly during a debate on the 'Native Question' in Cape Town in 1887, that 'there must be class legislation, that there must be Pass Laws, Peace Preservation Acts, and that we have got to treat natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way to ourselves. We are to be lords over them' (Vindex 1900). He further pontificates that, 'The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise' (Vindex 1900). It is this belittling denial of Africans' rights to life and human liberties, which Rhodes stood for, that privileged colonialists' interests and championed the intergenerational transfer of wealth, sustained over centuries.

In essence, Rhodes was a capitalist and colonialist par excellence, whose socio-political and economic deals led to forced removals and genocidal acts against indigenous and native peoples in southern Africa. In the time that

he was in Zimbabwe ‘he hunted down and killed those who stood in his way as he usurped Zimbabwe’s land as his own property in racist “land grabs”, terrorising local people with scores of lynchings – which would now be recognised as acts of genocide – supporting the colonial agenda to take by force land and resources that belonged to African people’ (Kasibe 2015). As a result of this land grab, achieved through the barrel of a gun, a large part of Zimbabwe became Rhodesia, meaning “the land of Rhodes.”

When he became Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in 1890, he ‘implemented laws that would benefit mine and industry owners’ and pushed Black people from their lands to make way for industrial development. This was a precursor to the devastating Land Act of 1913. Rhodes had reduced Black people as a race to units of production for exploitative profit. It is this glaring, painful legacy that Rhodes invokes, which led to the cataclysm of 20 June 1913, when the ‘South African native found himself not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth’ as Sol. T. Plaatje writes in his classic account, *Native Life in South Africa Before and Since the European War and the Boer Republic* (Plaatje 1916).

It is the presence of the statue of such a tainted figure that plunged the university and country into political upheaval, and the time to answer the question of its removal had come. The statue has great symbolic power: a monument glorifying a man who was undeniably racist, imperialist, colonialist, and misogynist. Before it was removed, the statue stood at the centre of what is supposedly the ‘greatest university in Africa’. The presence of Rhodes, representing South Africa’s history of dispossession and exploitation of Black people, is an act of violence against Black students, workers and staff, who felt violated by the presence of this colonial symbol at the university. The statue was therefore the embodiment of the experience of Black alienation and disempowerment and, therefore, the natural starting point of protest for the movement. Matebeni animates this point by arguing that,

Statues and monuments give those with the power and resources to erect them a history. Simultaneously, h(er)stories of those powerless are wiped out because, in essence, colonial and apartheid histories were already about obliteration. Black people mostly appeared as exploitable labour, dispossessed of their lands, bodies and minds. It is thus no surprise that, with the beginning of the democratic era, colonial-infused apartheid monuments, symbols and statues had to be reconsidered (Matebeni 2018).

The removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on 9 April 2015 marked the beginning of a revival of broader, serious conversations about the decolonisation project at universities across South Africa, Africa, and globally. Since the removal of the statue, the country and the world has

witnessed the birth of students' movements at proportions previously unimagined: #RhodesMustFall Oxford (UK), Decolonise Wits, Decolonise Law (UCT), Open Stellenbosch (Stellenbosch), Black Students Movement (Rhodes University), #GeorgeMustFall (UKZN), #OutsourcingMustFall, #PatriarchyMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #RoyalMustFall (USA, Harvard), Trans Collective, and many other evolving movements whose posture is derived from the 'Fallist' approached catalysed by the #RhodesMustFall movement

In retrospect, one could safely argue that RMF became part of a long tradition of resistance against colonial and apartheid continuities, and its place in the unfolding South African history of students' movements can undoubtedly be situated alongside earlier movements. Although the RMF movement caught the attention of the world through its radical stance against colonisation, apartheid, institutionalised racism, perceived White supremacy and many other forms of oppressions, it never claimed monopoly over the struggle, but it saw its existence in the context of an unfolding history of South African student-led movements and activism. It was an idea whose time had come. Through ceaseless action(s) and robust intellectual engagement that sharply invoked renewed calls for structural asymmetries to fall, both within and outside of the university, it made a strong and compelling case for what later became known as 'Fallism'. But what is 'Fallism' and what is its praxis?

'Fallism' and its Praxis

Often people ask, 'What scholarly contribution has the RMF movement made to the academy?' And every time this question is asked, I pause to think, not because I am unable to answer it, but simply because I need to choose from the long list of things the movement has contributed to, in order to provide an appropriate answer. And one of those contributions, among many others, is the re-invigoration of 'Fallism', its praxis and political ingenuity, through which it was able to navigate its position in a volatile, politically charged space, within and outside of the university, at least in its formative stages before it gave rise to the #FeesMustFall (FMF) campaign later in October 2015.

Having been at the forefront and throughout the unfolding processes of the 'Fallist' movement, it is without any doubt that RMF will remain one of the most poignant moments in the country's unravelling history, and that of the world, in that it resuscitated the most important structural questions about societal asymmetries that continue to imprison our 'postcolonial' reality. Through its unconventional approach to South African politics, it set in motion centripetal and centrifugal political forces to shift the contours of power against the colonial presence entrenched in society. I use the term

‘resuscitation’, deliberately, to suggest that the movement was ‘born’ with a vigour and new impetus to reignite the revolutionary fires passed down from one generation to the next by those who came before us; therefore, the anti-colonial and decolonial contribution made by RMF should never be understood outside of this historical context.

Its fight against colonial continuities draws its essence from the wars of resistance and the fight for independence and self-determination waged by our worthy ancestors against European and Western colonising forces, long before we were born. This implies that RMF was part of a continuum, which sought to respond to the cries of those who came before us. To bring this into a proper context, let us invoke Amílcar Cabral, who argues that ‘we must act as if we answer, and only answer to *our Ancestors*, our *children*, and the *unborn*’ (Cabral 1969). In this passage, Cabral draws a visual image of a revolutionary struggle as a continuous sequence of the past, present and future with an intergenerational character. It is this intergenerational character of the revolutionary demands and anti-colonial posture of RMF that gives us confidence to suggest that its call for structural dismantling was a response to the cry of our ancestors, who died fighting against colonialism; and not only this, it also became a tool in the hands of the oppressed to fulfil their generational mission.

Through its aforementioned cardinal pillars, the movement succeeded in influencing the ways in which the academy thought about the production of new knowledge across South African universities and abroad.

While it remains an undisputed fact that it was through the activism of RMF that deeper questions about decolonisation, curriculum transformation and confronting institutional racism were resuscitated, it is, however, deeply concerning that since its birth more than ten years ago, there has been no substantial institute-initiated legacy project by any of the South African universities, let alone UCT, to acknowledge and preserve the important contribution made by RMF to the academy and society at large. There seems to be a conspiracy of silence. But this conspiracy of silence, and what seems to be systemic refusal to acknowledge the central role that RMF played in the broader politics that inform the tapestry of our heritage landscape, should not come as a surprise, because those who were offended by the action(s) of RMF are in charge of resources and, therefore, will use their power to silence any reference to the nobility of this revolutionary cause.

This may explain why most White people and clever Blacks are still angry at RMF and more than ten years later, they still characterise those who actively participated in the RMF activities as ‘barbarians’ who were anti-education and did not want to study. I argue that these anti-RMF critics

fail to understand the pain that gave rise to the actions of RMF activists. Not only this, but they are also oblivious to fact that some of us went on to acquire our doctoral degrees in order to contribute to the intellectualisation of our direct involvement in the struggle against colonial continuities. This ability to write about our own experiences has helped us express our side of the story and prevent our experiences from being appropriated by those who neither understand nor have any affinity for our cause.

What our detractors will not take away from us is the fact that history chose us, and we heeded the call and stood up when it was not fashionable to do so, and in so doing, we animated and injected a critical consciousness of what has been termed 'Fallism' into the body politic and ways of being in relation to the politics of our time. Perhaps the only way to respond to our detractors is to vehemently reject them with the same passion with which they rejected RMF.

We are seeking new trajectories from the complex interconnections of ideas that bridge the past and present – continuities that have now sparked demands for radical change in universities and public spaces. I now explain this 'decolonial' critique as a 'Philosophy of Fallism' that seeks to call for oppressive systems to fall. It is a philosophy in the sense that it presents a theory and guiding principle for our existence in relation to the asymmetrical distribution of power in society, and I argue that one way in which to engage this asymmetry is through 'Fallism'. Using critical theory as a tool of analysis, I seek to decolonise via the praxis of 'Fallism'.

What is 'Fallism'?

In the context of this essay, 'Fallism' is a newly invented sociological tool of analysis and a lens through which I question existing oppressive societal structures and colonial symbols that reflect essentialising colonial theories in society today. 'Fallism' is a collective effort towards decolonisation, and when applied practically in universities and public spaces, it includes the removal of colonial symbols, the fall of epistemic violence that draws its essence from the colonial matrices of power and scholarship. It constitutes the 'Renaissance of African scholarship', and while it attempts to use Africa as a point from which to analyse society, on the one hand, it also wrestles with the Euro-Western canon to find new pathways into critical scholarship on the other.

'Fallism' arises from the tradition of critical theory and is rooted in the 'Black existential reality' and the idea of speaking truth to colonial power in an uncensored 'voice'. Its dialectical approach opposes colonial epistemology, ontology and praxis. It calls for these structures to fall in

order for new structures to emerge; it deconstructs in order to reconstruct. 'Fallism' signifies what Fanon calls the 'creation of new men' (Fanon 1963: 28), new men not in a gendered sense but in the sense of 'newness', a call to reinvigorate our collective fight against all forms of oppressive structures that are embedded in society.

'Fallism' is an outcome of the Black oppressed, crying out to say that we are suffocating in this neo-colonial arrangement and status quo. It comes out of student activism at universities in a specific geography, South Africa, which has a long history of conquest and genocide from the first colonial encounters to the most recent, apartheid. It arose from the 'mother' of the 'Fallist' movement, #RhodesMustFall, which was sparked by the act of Maxwele who threw human excrement at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on 9 March 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT); and now 'Fallism' has been extended to critique current societal structures and ideologies to question whether they should 'fall'.

'Fallism' is a direct response to White 'supremacy', which presents what could be called the episteme of rupture from captivating colonial and neo-colonial tropes, which have held people captive since the 'Enlightenment'. It premises its pedagogy of disobedience and the disruption of oppressive structures with the idea of restoring the dignity of people who have been subjected to past violations, which are still being perpetuated in various guises today. 'Fallism' is not an event, but an ongoing process of creating and seeking justice, inspired by the new histories from below and alternative ways of being and seeing in the world.

'Fallism' is an organic collective activism that evolves in response to ideas and concerns of the people. A key theme has focused on decolonising university and civic public spaces, as demonstrated in #RhodesMustFall (UCT), #RhodesMustFall (Oxford University), #RhodesMustFall (Caribbean), #RoyalMustFall (Harvard), #LeopoldMustFall (Queen Mary University, UK), #KingGeorgeMustFall (UKZN), #KrugerMustFall (City of Pretoria) and many other 'Fallist' interventions that have occurred in South Africa, and in the rest of the Africa and the diaspora. It is a movement that has gathered strength to review, rename and remove oppressive symbols of the slave-owning Confederacy in thirty US states. Notable events inspired by #RhodesMustFall (UCT) included the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina state house by Bree Newsome on 27 June 2015, in the aftermath of the Charleston church massacre of 17 June 2015 – and the subsequent publicity succeeded in forcing authorities to remove the flag permanently two weeks later; the removal of statues of Silent Sam, a Confederate soldier (UNC-Chapel Hill), and

J. Marion Sims, who was lauded as the 'Father of Gynaecology' but who repeatedly performed surgery without anaesthesia on enslaved women who could not consent (City of New York, Central Park); and the removal of other Confederate monuments by mayors, Mitch Landrieu who wrote *In the Shadow of Statues: A White Southerner Confronts History* (City of New Orleans, USA), and Mayor Catherine Pugh, who removed several statues under cover of darkness 'in the best interest of my city' (City of Baltimore, USA) (Pugh 2017).

The concerns of 'Fallism' move with political events, inspiring campaigns against economic injustice and societal discrimination, including #OutsourcingMustFall (university workers), #FeesMustFall (decommodification of university education), #PatriarchyMustFall (resulting from experiences of #RhodesMustFall), #AfrophobiaMustFall (after tragic incidents involving xenophobic attacks on immigrant students and workers in Johannesburg and Durban).

Around this time, a political call for the removal of the then South African state president began and was named #ZumaMustFall. However, this attracted criticism as it was seen as a direct result of the economic downgrading of South Africa to 'junk status', when White South Africans felt economically insecure and appropriated a #MustFall campaign to protect their pockets, with no thought of the plight of the majority of Black citizens. The #MustFall movement was created by students to highlight Black pain in a post-apartheid society, and this was opportunistically seized upon by White people, who were merely interested in economic self-preservation and wealth accumulation, so it was viewed extremely negatively. We also witnessed political parties jumping onto this bandwagon for political expediency.

As a political and intellectual phenomenon born of student activism, with an emerging praxis of calling for oppressive systems to fall, 'Fallism' continues a long tradition of resistance and of questioning the episteme of the status quo. It disrupts the grand narrative of a 'perfect' past and draws strength from the socio-political and academic struggles of Black people as a race, as well as those who are oppressed. Through its rubric, 'Fallism' challenges us to heed Fanon's call, 'O my body, make of me always a man who questions!' (Fanon 1963: 232).

'Fallism' stands diametrically opposed to any form of oppression that breeds social injustice, institutional racism, toxic masculinity, misogynistic tendencies, toxic patriarchy, perceived White supremacy and the institutions that maintain these socio-cultural behaviours. 'Fallism' critiques the past while being firmly rooted in the present, to dismantle and abolish these

structural oppressions with the intention of creating a much more egalitarian society. The contradiction with 'Fallism', however, is that while it seeks to question current structures, it creates new thinking and structures based on the ideas drawn from the current prevailing circumstances. In simple terms, it seeks to 'destructure' without dictating new forms, instead suggesting a future founded on African values of global humanism, which is not a new concept at all. These African values include the philosophy of Ubuntu, 'I am because we are' – drawing strength and identity from the humanity of the African community and wider society, which gives rise to the politics of care. There is a grounding in communal existence, where an individual belongs to the collective, which is reflected in the proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child'; and echoed in the statements of African women, 'Your child is also my child', indicating the adults are raising this child in community.

This extends to community governance with 'lekgotlas' (traditional gatherings) where issues are discussed, and consensus is reached, and communal land ownership, towards a politics of belonging. This is in sharp contrast to the imported European beliefs of capitalism, competition and the valorisation of individualistic consumption and ownership, which echoes in the legacy of one White settler owning thousands of hectares of land, while many thousands of Africans are dispossessed, landless and struggling to survive in a capitalist system. Figure 2 is a visual representation of the intersectional factors that have shaped the 'Fallism' movement.

At its intersecting horizons, 'Fallism' raises issues of historical justice, truth, restoration of human dignity, towards building an equitable society where the sanctity of human life is valued above profit. 'Fallism' presents itself as an anti-colonial/anti-capitalist theoretical framework that inclines towards a socialist model, with a Black Nationalist and Internationalist posture. If there is such a thing as a generational mission, as envisioned by Fanon, where he argues that 'each generation must out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it' (Fanon 1963: xxxi), then 'Fallism' would be the modality by which we call for structural dismantling, and 'Falliology' would then be the study through which we decode that mission.

Furthermore, as part of a long tradition of 'Black resistance', 'Fallism' claims no individual heroism, but began as a collective response to a systemic repressive colonial violence whose fundamental purpose was to create a system that will maintain the 'supremacy' of the Caucasian race at the expense of the colonial 'subjects'. As we have discussed, colonial 'subjects' are defined in this collegial submission as those communities and societies whose ways of life and identities have been targeted, decimated and nearly erased over time as a result of colonial conquests and acts of genocide.



Figure 2: Diagram depicting what ‘Fallism’ may mean at the epistemological and political levels

Locating ‘Fallism’ within a ‘Decolonial’ Context

The proposed ‘Fallist lens’ looks specifically at the notion of ‘decolonisation’ as a practical response to the colonial epistemology encoded in the ‘DNA’ of institutions of knowledge production, such as universities. The concept of ‘decolonisation’ is not new, but its ‘anti-colonial’ praxis and meaning evolves as it addresses the changing dynamics of the ‘post-colonial’ era.² ‘Decolonisation’ is noted here in quotation marks precisely because of its changing meaning and interpretations, and linguistic limitations. For example, I ask: how could we execute a ‘decolonial’ idea through a colonial language? And borrowing from Audre Lorde’s logic, I further ask: can the colonial master’s linguistic tool dismantle the colonial master’s systems of knowledge in universities? What does it really mean to utilise the coloniser’s tools and methods to dismantle the lingering colonial system?

In the final analysis, what would 'decolonisation' look like in a university context? Or what would a 'decolonised' university look like? It is through these questions and others similar to these, that we acknowledge the limitations of 'decolonisation' as an antithesis to colonization. Its locus of 'truth' lies in the fact that, as long as colonisation and its institutionalisation exist, a tension will persist: 'decolonisation' will always find expression in the body politic. Though 'decolonisation' may mean different things to different people, here we borrow its meaning from Linda Thiwai Smith to refer to 'a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels' (Smith 1999: 20).

Carla Wilson, engaging with Smith's work, argues that decolonisation entails 'a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices' (Wilson 2001), which have underpinned the production of a university with colonial entanglements. It proposes a new framework that would enable the disclosure of truths about the colonial foundations of European epistemology, in which Africa is still represented as the 'other', thus relegated to the margins.

'Fallism' and Critical Theory

'Fallism' has its intellectual roots in critical theory, decolonial reasoning towards realising critical pedagogy and praxis. According to Christian Fuchs, critical theory is defined sociologically as 'an approach that studies society in a dialectical way by analysing political economy, domination, exploitation and ideologies' and 'from the first, expressed an explicit interest in the abolition of social injustice' (Fuchs 2015). Stephen Eric Bronner says that critical theory questions 'all thought and practices that uphold domination and exploitation' (Bronner 1994: 3) and critiques ideology that attempts to essentialise ways of human existence, which are, as Fuchs reasons, 'historical and changeable' (Fuchs 2015).

In essence, Bronner brings to our attention the fact that 'critical theory is not a system nor is it reducible to any fixed set of prescriptions' (Bronner 1994: 2) but finds expression in Fuchs' reasoning, who argues that critical theory is 'connected to struggles for a just and fair society, it is an intellectual dimension of struggles' (Fuchs 2015). Critical theory draws on Marxist thought, which rejects philosophy as static. As Carl Marx himself argues, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (Marx 1845: xi). However, Italian philosopher and political theoretician Constanzo Preve points out that Marx draws philosophical inspiration from four 'masters' – Epicurus for

'the materialism of freedom from the doctrine of the clinamen or random "swerving" of atoms' (Balibar 1995: 7); Jean-Jacques Rousseau for 'the idea of egalitarian democracy or association based on the direct participation of citizens in the formation of the general will' (Balibar 1995: 7); Adam Smith for the notion 'that the basis of property is labour', and from his great adversary, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel for ideas of 'dialectical contradiction and historicity' (Balibar 1995: 7).

Critical theory derives from Marxist thought, and the classical Marxist paradigm foregrounds the idea advanced by Etienne Balibar (1995), who argues that 'the means of production determines the very nature of society'. This is the linear idea of the base-superstructure relationship. 'The economy is the base of all social structure, including institutions and ideas' (Seiler 2008). In this model, Robert M. Seiler argues that the 'working-class groups are oppressed by the group (in power) who benefits from profit. [And that] all institutions that perpetuate domination within a capitalistic society arise from this economic system. Only when the working class rises against the dominant groups can the liberation of the worker be achieved' (Seiler 2008). His argument draws its essence from *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels', where they bring to the fore the argument that the 'history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx and Engels 1848). To Marx and Engels,

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes' (Marx and Engels 1848).

In these passages, class is presented as the 'primary contradiction' of opposing social forces where hierarchies of the upper and the lower classes clash, within the structures of power that maintain these class strata. Underlying these layers of power is the question of capital and means of production: who produces for whom? Who controls and owns what has been produced? Who has access to the final product? These questions and others inform the characteristic of the Marxist posture and its utopia of a 'classless' society.

History records that a year after Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx was exiled to London in 1849 and lived there for the rest of his life. And that 'it was only in 1859, through Lassalle, that Marx learned of the existence of a certain economist named Rodbertus and thereupon Marx

looked up the “third social letter” in the British Museum’ (Engels 1893: 2). And ‘Much of [Marx’s] time was spent in the reading rooms of the British Museum (which then housed the British Library Collection) ... There he worked on his most celebrated book *Das Kapital*. It puts forward his theory of political economy, with its celebrated phrase “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx Reader at the British Library).

It is quite fascinating that this revolution in thought was born at the British Museum and continues in the museum’s original conception as a place of muses, where knowledge came alive through scholarship, dialogue, and the creation of new discourse. Importantly, the integration of the British Library and the Museum allowed a generative space for ideas, as well as consultation of the collections, archives and holdings. Until 1973, the British Library was part of the Museum and the major national research library.



Figure 3: The British Museum Library’s admissions register showing Karl Marx’s visit to the Library and the Museum (British Library: ‘Marx reader at the British Library’ Available at: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item106263.html> (Accessed 13 October 2018))

During Marx’s London exile, he drew ideas from the material and exposure to the British Library and Museum, together with the archives, confirmed by records, for example ‘his entry in the 1873 admissions register’ (Figure 3). It is quite interesting that Marx did his work at the British Library and Museum, but somehow subverted this paramount institution of coloniality through his imagination, creating liberating ideas.

Though Marx defined class as the ‘primary contradiction’, writing in *The Communist Manifesto* that ‘Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other – bourgeoisie and proletariat’ (Marx and Engels 1954 [1888]: 120), in South Africa, I argue that the ‘primary contradiction’ of class is actually pre-determined by race and the history of separation of peoples. Leaving this

presupposition unexplained will create an impression that Marx's context of class as the primary contradiction is a universal phenomenon when in actual fact in the South African historical context, this has not been the case, as race was used by the apartheid regime as the main determinant of one's social status. Now I discuss this phenomenon.

Race as a Primary Contradiction in South Africa

Apartheid, 'translated from the Afrikaans meaning "apartness" was the ideology supported by the National Party (NP) government and was introduced in South Africa in 1948. Apartheid called for separate development of the different racial groups in South Africa' (South African History Online) and used race as an overarching ideological framework to separate people on the basis of their skin pigmentation.

As French economist Thomas Piketty argues in his work *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, 'no government programme could be sustained without an "apparatus of justification"' (Piketty 2014). English political essayist George Monbiot notes that government programmes would be politically impossible, as 'Current levels of inequality would be considered intolerable. The destruction of the living world would be the occasion of constant protest. This apparatus of justification ... and the justifying narratives it generates allow the rich to seize much of our commonwealth, to trample the rights of workers and to treat the planet as their dustbin' (Monbiot 2016: 1).

One such justification that led to genocide and crimes against humanity was the exclusionary definition of 'Man'. Fanon reveals this psychopathic foundation of settler colonialism as follows: 'Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them' (Sartre in Fanon, 1961: 8). Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter notes that the exclusionary definitions, the first being 'Man1' arose in the Renaissance with *homo politicus* (Wynter 2003: 257–337), a political subject of the state, founded on the humanist idea of man as a rational being, and was reinvented after the colonial encounter with the Americas, giving rise to the 'profitable brutalities that attend the realisation of Man-as-human' (McKittrick 2014: 7).

This definition then evolved into 'Man2', *Homo oeconomicus*, in the wake of the nineteenth century, with the colonial episteme's embrace of Darwinism and scientific racism, translating White supremacy into 'survival of the fittest', that is of Europeans, while native races were assured of becoming extinct in the not-so-distant future.

As Sylvia Wynter explains:

[A]s Quijano rightly insists, race – unlike gender (which has a biogenetically determined anatomical differential correlate onto which each cultures system of gendered oppositions can be anchored) – is a purely invented construct that has no such correlate (Quijano 2000), it was this construct that would enable the now globally expanding West to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially ‘grounded’ their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead. That is, on Quijano’s ‘Racism/Ethnicism’ complex, Winant’s ‘race concept,’ Mignolo’s ‘colonial difference,’ redefined in the terms of the Spanish states theoretical construct of a ‘by-nature difference’ between Spaniards and the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Padgen 1982): a difference defined in Ginés de Sepúlveda’s sixteenth-century terms as almost a difference between ‘monkeys and men’ (Wynter 2003: 263).

Consequently, in the colonial era it was justified to impose a gradation of social rank where indigenous Africans were cast out of humanity as non-human, stripped of their human rights and their labour was manipulated at will to produce wealth for White bodies. In other words, Africans became defined as the ‘sub-human’ and as Homi Bhabha recounts, ‘what is often called the Black soul is a White man’s artefacts’ (Bhabha in Fanon 1986: xv).

In South Africa, this ideology of domination could be traced from the early arrivals and encounters of the Portuguese, English East India Company and Dutch East India Company, which laid a foundation for continuing settler colonialism (see Theal 1890: 9). According to Adam Barker and Emma Battell Lowman, settler colonialism is ‘a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty’ which justifies its existence by creating ‘false narratives and structures of settler belonging’ (Barker and Lowman 2015) in order to erase the indigenous population.

In the book *National Life from the Standpoint of Science*, the eminent English statistician and eugenics supporter, Karl Pearson, discusses the South African condition: ‘We shall never have a healthy social state in South Africa until the White man replaces the dark in the fields and the mines, and the Kaffir is pushed back towards the equator. The nation organised for the struggle [of existence] must be a *homogenous* whole, not a mixture of superior and inferior races’ (Pearson 1901: 47–8).

The dispossession by the colonial state was not only physical, but also cultural, linked to the colonality of gender with the erasure of indigenous gender roles and power, replaced by a heteronormative patriarchal colonial structure, which defined a dichotomy of genders (men and women), and subordinated women in all categories to men, and women were stripped of rights and defined as property. According to Fredoline Anunobi, 'While the status of women in precolonial Africa varied greatly, the impact of European colonialism was mainly to reverse or further diminish their position in society' (Anunobi 2002: 44–5). Women's agency was limited politically and economically, with the colony becoming a mirror image of the restricted European ideas of the role of women in a patriarchal society. Additionally, there was a destruction of pre-colonial social structure and family relationships by capitalism and the introduction of a migrant labour system to support White settler colonists.

In this breaking down of indigenous society by the colonists, Black people found themselves in two worlds, one that served the White colonialist, and another as part of the Black community. This dichotomy requires code-switching between the two realities, enduring the oppressive cruelty of a slave–master relationship compounded by dehumanising experiences of being Black, and then traversing back into one's own community, angered at systemic violence against oneself and people, but required to be an upstanding, responsible member of the community. There is also an expectation that one will be an obedient citizen, even if one's rights are denied by the colonial and apartheid state. This is an untenable situation, which creates ongoing cognitive dissonance and erupts unexpectedly into anger and violence if there is no liberatory political agenda to disrupt the system.

This predicament leads to a psychology of survival where one looks through the eyes of the powerful 'other' and this consciousness of power-relations overtakes one's own identity and sense of self. This is a traumatic self-negation, that William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B) DuBois explains with the idea of 'double consciousness', where Black people have 'the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others' (DuBois 1903: 3), the colonising Whites. Fanon argues further that by self-negating, 'he [the Black man] becomes Whiter as he renounces his Blackness, his jungle' (Fanon 1986: 18). He continues:

The Black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the White man. A Negro behaves differently with the White man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question ... No one would dream of doubting that

its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man (Fanon 1986: 17).

It is through this violence of colonially imposed self-erasure, that the Black person loses something of themselves as they fulfil Fanon's prediction 'for the Black man there is only one destiny. And it is White (Fanon 1986: 17).

In simple terms, Fanon uncovers the reality of power relations in the colony, with the Black native required to assume tropes of Whiteness to remain relevant within the colonial system. To maintain the colonial status quo, cultural genocide begins with people not allowed to speak their language or practice their culture, together with a deliberate psychological attack where Black people are forcibly dissociated from their own identity as they are assimilated into Whiteness by force, which is defined as a superior identity. This Black experience is in sharp contrast to the experience of the White European, first explorer, later coloniser, who travels the world to find that the definition of man is himself, the White European, a familiar fellow – an arbitrary and deliberate justification for displacement of local people and crimes against humanity committed by colonial agents. However, if assumptions are examined, the colonial logic irretrievably breaks down. Fanon discusses the importance of the idea that all men are created equal taken to its logical conclusion:

Thus the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner. All the new, revolutionary assurance of the native stems from it. For if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. I am no longer on tenterhooks in his presence; in fact, I don't give a damn for him. Not only does his presence no longer trouble me, but I am already preparing such efficient ambushes for him that soon there will be no way out but that of flight (Fanon 2001: 35).

Now that a Black person realises they, too, are human, they can speak back, and they find their voice. They can speak back to something that has been imposed on them. However, the assertion of Black consciousness and an affirmation of 'Black is beautiful', a reclaiming of human rights and identity is seen as a threat to the powers that be. This has been seen over and over again in the reprisals against people such as Steve Bantu Biko, the leader of Black Consciousness (BC) who championed and affirmed the worth of Black people and their right to self-determination, and Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe who, speaking to students at Fort Hare as President of

the Students' Representative Council on 21 October 1949, called 'for the right to call our souls our own' (Sobukwe 1949), no longer owned by White people as 'artefacts', and that the stolen land must be returned.

The apartheid government found him so dangerous as a leader of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) of Azania that he was banished to solitary confinement on Robben Island. And then there was Malcolm X, who was portrayed as a dangerous 'terrorist' by the US government and the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Malcolm X was simply calling for human rights for all, but concluded that the 'oppressed peoples must commit themselves to radical political struggle in order to advance a dignified approach to human rights' (Baraka 2017).

There is also Assata Olugbala Shakur, who was briefly a member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army, and who continues to be on the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) 'Most Wanted Terrorist' list. In the late 1990s, Pope John Paul II was asked to pressure Fidel Castro to extradite Assata and she responded in an open letter, 'Why, I wonder, do I warrant such attention? What do I represent that is such a threat?' (Davis in Shakur 1988: 3). She wrote an open letter to the #RhodesMustFall movement in March 2015 in which she shared her experience with Black student activists:

I have one message for you and your comrades. Do not be naïve about the mind of the White person – it has been taught since birth to believe in its superiority, and to believe that the African child must labor and toil so that his wealth and power can drop into his hands like rain from heaven (Shakur 2015).

The Black identity that Sobukwe, Biko, Malcolm X, Shakur and others shared with the world presented a threat to White supremacists and others in the wider society who were taught to look at Blackness and positionality as an aberration of humanity. To Black leaders, assertiveness enables a moment of rupture, disjuncture and disobedience. The disobedience that locates Blackness as a questioning 'voice', whose truth and determination arise from a historical tradition of resistance against oppressive systems designed to silence it. Black assertiveness and questioning disrupt the 'normalcy' of 'Whiteness', problematising Whiteness as a strange phenomenon that requires an investigative scrutiny.

In the account *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, communication professors Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin's describe, in the American context, the 'invisibility of Whiteness', which is in fact an instrument of power. They suggest 'by exposing the "visibility" of Whiteness, the study of Whiteness helps us understand the ways that White

domination continues' (Nakayama and Martin 1999: 22). Conceptual British artist and theorist Victor Burgin extends French philosopher Roland Barthes' concept of class invisibility to race:

White however has a strange property of directing our attention to colour while in the very same movement it exnominates itself as a colour. For evidence of this we need to look no further than to the expression 'people of colour', for we know very well that this means 'not White' (Burgin in Puwar 2004: 58).

Here, Whiteness exerts the power of classification on others, while remaining undefinable. South African psychologist and gender theorist Natasha Distiller and sociologist Melissa Steyn argue that 'Whiteness draws power to itself by refusing to be named' (Distiller and Steyn 2004: 6). In these passages, Nakayama, Martin, Burgin, Distiller and Steyn highlight 'Whiteness' as a place of privilege, authority and power, which has never been systematically interrogated or displaced from its position of power, provoking us to ask the question: Why is Whiteness not critiqued?

In South Africa, the former colony of Great Britain and the Dutch, everything is still centred on the mores and values of these former empires, everything bears the mark of Europe: language, culture, architectural designs, university curricula, the economic system, the judiciary, system of governance, legislative frameworks, etc. Fundamentally, in South Africa's new democratic dispensation, we have just changed the faces of government from White to Black, the system continues with a democracy constructed on Western norms and values; for example, the judiciary follows Roman-Dutch law, which does not take account of traditional African legal systems and customs, and a parallel system of traditional African courts, so structurally, Whiteness has not been shaken. There have been some efforts towards change, for example, to redress the imbalances of the past, affirmative action and employment equity have been instituted in legislation, but these are being challenged by Whites. Change has been slight, and not at the scale that one would expect, as Whiteness and settler colonials continue to hold the power of the knowledge economy and the colonial system remains untouched.

A conceptual shift towards reclaiming the production of knowledge has been noted by Distiller and Steyn: 'an important but still embryonic development has been the emergence of work which shifts the academic gaze from the problems that come with being "Black" and "raced" to the processes of racialization into "Whiteness" and the social location of racial privilege' (Distiller and Steyn 2004: 2). Could this status quo suggest that South Africa is indeed a 'post-apartheid' but still apartheid South Africa, meaning that we no longer live in the apartheid era but the apartheid era still lives in the 'heart' of our nationhood?

Notions of decolonisation and questioning the centrality of 'Whiteness' have emerged to shift the gaze from 'Black' to 'White'. This process of speaking 'truth' to White power is observed in French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's preface, 'Orphée Noir' (Black Orpheus), to the Senegalese poet, cultural theorist and President Léopold Sédar-Senghor's anthology of African and West Indian poets, a key early publication of the Negritude movement, where Black writers joined together to assert their cultural identity, writing in French. Sartre writes: 'Here are Black men standing, looking at us, and I hope that you – like me – will feel the shock of being seen' (Sartre in MacCombie 1964: 13); and he continues, 'today these Black men have fixed their gaze upon us and our gaze is thrown back in our eyes' (Sartre in Coetzee and Roux 2002: 149). Sartre shows us the awakening of the Black person, affirming their own identity and perspective, shedding subjective assumptions about Whiteness, and speaking back as an equal. What is striking in this excerpt is that Sartre assumes the reader is a fellow White, addressing 'you – like me' and describing 'our gaze'. Sartre positions himself individually as a White colonial, also implicated in the problem as he introspects, speaking to the conscience of a wider White society. Would a wider reflection in society catalyse processes of transformation and decolonisation?

Echoing Distiller and Steyn's problematisation of Whiteness and racial privilege in the academy, British film theorist Richard Dyer alerts us to the fact that the 'point of looking at Whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority' (Dyer 1997: 10) and as an act of resistance and disobedience it is not an easy task; as British sociologist Nirmal Puwar observes, 'it means training the eye to see the racial nature of that which has been defined as outside race, to be unmarked by race, as just normal' (Puwar 2004: 135). It is precisely in this normalcy that Whiteness has, over centuries, centralised its power. So Puwar suggests, 'in order to shift the centrifugal place of masculinity and Whiteness ... the central place of Whiteness and masculinity needs to be named and problematised' (Puwar 2004: 135). I have argued elsewhere that, 'to problematise Whiteness we need to look to the very internal structures in which "Whiteness" is rooted and established' (Kasibe 2006), and as British sociologists Vron Ware and Les Back argue in *Out of Whiteness*, 'we need to go beyond the surface appearance of Whiteness to investigate its complex and awesome internal structures' (Ware and Back 2002: 1). And since Ware and Back call for the investigation of Whiteness as a system of power, not White people per se, I want to argue that 'Fallism' could be applied as that investigative tool and institutional critique through which White supremacist ideas and

internal structures that perpetuate racial and economic asymmetries could be challenged. Those who apply it (Fallists) in their daily lives almost make a lifetime commitment and allegiance to something bigger than themselves. This allegiance is as Athabile Nonxuba, an RMF activist, puts it, ‘an oath of allegiance that everything to do with oppression and conquest of Black people by White power must fall and be destroyed’ (Kayum 2019: 149).

In an anti-Black world, therefore, ‘Fallism’ as a stricture against any form of injustice emanating from either colonialism or contemporary manifestations of slavery and oppression becomes a *sine qua non* in the process of decolonisation and re-engineering of society. It is what Thobani Zikalala (aka Iphara) describes as ‘the politics of defiance and resistance inspired by Black Consciousness, Pan Africanism and Black Radical Feminism, intersectional in orientation and Socialist in form’ (Zikalala 2022). To animate Zikalala’s point, I argue that ‘Fallism’ could become a philosophy and school of thought, an alternative tool for analysing society and generating ideas to confront colonial matrices of power and pervasive injustices that compound inequalities today.

In a nutshell, ‘Fallism’ therefore becomes one of the most progressive tools that the ‘Fallist’ movement has given to this generation, and it is up to society to use it where it deems fit. Perhaps only time will tell whether we, as the oppressed, have taken advantage of this tool to dismantle our own oppression and redress the imbalances of the past, thus freeing the next generation and the one that will come after it.

Notes

1. ‘Sargon of Akkad’, the pseudonym of a British right-wing YouTuber and political commentator Carl Benjamin, gained prominence in 2016 for criticising progressivism, identity politics and the mainstream media.
2. This term is used cautiously to refer to the period after Africa’s independence from the rule of the former European and Western empires that colonised it. The colonial traces and legacies, however, remain intact on the African continent.

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A Critical Reflection of Higher Education in the Era of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall: A South African Perspective

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Abstract

This study critically examines the transformation of South African higher education following the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements (2015–2017), which challenged racialised institutional cultures, Eurocentric epistemologies and neoliberal governance. Anchored in decolonial theory and critical pedagogy – drawing on Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, Paulo Freire and scholars of pluriversal knowledge systems – the study situates ‘Fallist’ activism within broader critiques of corporatisation, managerialism, and statutory constraints imposed by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Employing qualitative documentary analysis and narrative inquiry, the study draws on primary protest texts, student manifestos, media reports, policy documents and academic literature. Findings highlight the movements’ demands for curriculum decolonisation, free education, epistemic justice and institutional inclusivity, while revealing post-movement challenges such as intensified managerial control, audit-driven cultures and marginalisation of student agency. The study argues that while symbolic and material gains were achieved, sustainable transformation remains fragile, underscoring the need for structural, epistemic and ethical reform beyond episodic protest.

Keywords: Corporatisation of universities, curriculum decolonisation, decolonial theory, epistemic justice, #FeesMustFall, neoliberal governance, pluriversal knowledge, #RhodesMustFall, South African higher education, statutory bodies (DHET, CHE, SAQA), student activism

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Résumé

Cette étude examine de manière critique la transformation de l'enseignement supérieur sud-africain à la suite des mouvements #RhodesMustFall et #FeesMustFall (2015–2017), qui ont contesté des cultures institutionnelles racialisées, des épistémologies eurocentriques et une gouvernance néolibérale. Ancrée dans la théorie décoloniale et la pédagogie critique – s'appuyant sur les travaux de Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Paulo Freire et des chercheurs des systèmes de savoirs pluriversels – l'étude situe l'activisme « falliste » dans des critiques plus larges de la corporatisation, du managérialisme et des contraintes statutaires imposées par le Département de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Formation (DHET), le Conseil de l'Enseignement Supérieur (CHE) et l'Autorité sud-africaine des qualifications (SAQA). En mobilisant une analyse documentaire qualitative et une enquête narrative, l'étude s'appuie sur des textes de protestation primaires, des manifestes étudiants, des rapports médiatiques, des documents de politiques publiques et la littérature académique. Les résultats mettent en lumière les revendications des mouvements en faveur de la décolonisation des programmes, de la gratuité de l'enseignement, de la justice épistémique et de l'inclusivité institutionnelle, tout en révélant des défis post-mouvement tels que l'intensification du contrôle managérial, les cultures axées sur l'audit et la marginalisation de l'agencité étudiante. L'étude soutient que, bien que des avancées symboliques et matérielles aient été réalisées, une transformation durable reste fragile, soulignant ainsi la nécessité de réformes structurelles, épistémiques et éthiques au-delà des mobilisations ponctuelles.

Mots-clés : corporatisation des universités, décolonisation des programmes, théorie décoloniale, justice épistémique, #FeesMustFall, gouvernance néolibérale, savoirs pluriversels, #RhodesMustFall, enseignement supérieur sud-africain, instances statutaires (DHET, CHE, SAQA), activisme étudiant

Introduction

The post-apartheid period in South Africa has been marked by both optimism and enduring complexity in the transformation of higher education. While democratic reforms have expanded access to universities for previously marginalised populations, the sector continues to be shaped by deeply embedded colonial epistemologies, racialised institutional cultures, widening socio-economic inequalities and increasingly neoliberal governance frameworks. These tensions came sharply into focus with the eruption of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015, followed by the nationwide #FeesMustFall

(FMF) protests between 2015 and 2017. Together, these movements constituted a critical rupture in South African higher education, forcing universities, statutory bodies and the state to confront unresolved questions of epistemic justice, material exclusion and institutional power.

The RMF movement initially emerged around the symbolic demand to remove the statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes. However, it rapidly evolved into a broader critique of the colonial foundations of university knowledge systems, institutional cultures and governance structures. Similarly, the FMF movement foregrounded the material realities of financial exclusion, highlighting how escalating tuition fees, outsourcing and debt-driven funding models disproportionately marginalised working-class and Black students. Taken together, these movements challenged not only the symbolic legacies of colonialism but also the political economy of South African higher education itself (Booyesen 2016; Heleta 2016; Langa 2017).

Scholars such as Jansen (2017) argue that South African universities have failed to dismantle the structural, symbolic and epistemological architectures inherited from apartheid and colonial rule. This failure has produced pervasive feelings of alienation among Black students and staff, for whom the university often remains an exclusionary and dehumanising space. While much of the literature has focused on the racialised nature of institutional culture, less attention has been paid to how corporatised university environments – characterised by managerialism, audit cultures, performance metrics and market-driven logics – have intensified these experiences of exclusion across the sector. In this sense, the ‘Fallist’ movements can be understood not merely as episodic protests, but as epistemological and political interventions that sought to reimagine knowledge, pedagogy, governance and the very purpose of the university in society (Le Grange 2019).

At the same time, South African universities operate within a tightly regulated sector governed by statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). These bodies impose complex bureaucratic and policy frameworks that shape institutional autonomy, funding models, curriculum structures and quality assurance processes. While the Fallist movements achieved certain symbolic and policy concession – such as fee freezes and commitments to curriculum transformation – the extent to which universities can meaningfully transform remains constrained by these broader sectoral governance arrangements. Indeed, paradoxically, the post-Fallist period has coincided

with an apparent acceleration of corporatisation, evidenced by the rise of managerial discourse, third-stream income imperatives, performance-driven academic labour, and executive remuneration structures increasingly comparable to those of corporate CEOs.

This raises the following critical questions that remain underexplored in the literature: Why has corporatisation continued largely unabated in South African universities after the Fallist movements? Does this represent a form of sectoral pushback against demands for free and decolonised education or is it an intensification of neoliberal materialities shaped by global competitiveness and funding scarcity? Furthermore, to what extent did the Fallist movements themselves interrogate the hierarchies of knowledge production across disciplines or challenge the bureaucratic and regulatory architectures that govern the sector?

Recent scholarship has begun to caution against superficial or co-opted forms of transformation. Lockett and Shay (2021) warn that decolonial discourse risks being absorbed into institutional policy frameworks without altering underlying power relations. Similarly, Badat (2022) emphasises the need to engage seriously with the philosophical, pedagogical and political questions raised by student activism, rather than reducing transformation to symbolic gestures or compliance-driven reforms. This study situates itself within this critical scholarship by examining both the transformative possibilities and the structural limits of the RMF and FMF movements in a highly regulated, neoliberal higher education sector.

Guided by these concerns, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How have the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements reshaped debates around curriculum, access and institutional culture in South African universities?
2. What theoretical and pedagogical insights emerge from these movements for ongoing transformation under neoliberal and bureaucratic constraints?
3. To what extent have institutional and sectoral responses addressed, diluted or reconfigured the core demands of student activists?

The study is underpinned by critical theory, drawing particularly on Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which conceptualises education as a site of struggle, emancipation and social transformation. Critical theory provides an analytical lens for interrogating how historical inequalities, colonial legacies and neoliberal governance structures continue to shape knowledge production and institutional practices in South African higher education.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, employing document analysis as its primary method. The data corpus consists of selected student manifestos, protest statements, protest literature, university policy documents, DHET and CHE policy texts and media reports produced during and immediately after the RMF and FMF movements (2015–17), alongside relevant scholarly literature. These documents were analysed as primary data sources where possible and as secondary sources when accessed through existing scholarly analyses (for example, Le Grange 2019). Following Scott (1990) and Bowen (2009), documents were examined for authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. This approach enables a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of student activism, institutional responses and the broader governance constraints shape transformation in South Africa's higher education sector.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study draws primarily on decolonial theory and critical pedagogy, which together provide a robust and complementary lens for interrogating the epistemological, political and structural dynamics of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. These frameworks are particularly well suited to analysing the intellectual and political claims advanced by the RMF and FMF movements, especially their critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems, exclusionary institutional cultures and the broader political economy of higher education.

Taken together, decolonial theory and critical pedagogy enable an analysis that goes beyond surface-level institutional reform to examine how colonial legacies, neoliberal governance regimes and bureaucratic regulatory structures shape what universities can know, teach and become. This theoretical orientation allows the study to assess both the transformative aspirations of the Fallist movements and the structural constraints within which South African universities operate.

Decolonial theory

Decolonial theory offers a critical framework for understanding the persistence of coloniality in contemporary institutions, including higher education. Scholars such as Wa Thiong'o (1986), Mignolo (2011), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Mbembe (2016) argue that although formal political decolonisation has occurred across much of the Global South, colonial modes of power, knowledge and being continue to structure social life. In

the university context, this persistence is evident in curricula that privilege Western epistemologies, disciplinary canons and academic norms while marginalising African, indigenous and other subaltern ways of knowing.

The demand to ‘decolonise the university’, articulated forcefully by RMF and FMF activists, must therefore be understood as an epistemological and ontological critique rather than a call for symbolic change alone. It challenges entrenched hierarchies of knowledge production and raises fundamental questions about whose knowledge is legitimised, whose histories are centred and whose experiences are rendered peripheral. From a decolonial perspective, the Fallist movements represent a struggle for cognitive justice, seeking to reclaim African intellectual traditions and affirm the dignity and humanity of historically marginalised subjects within academic spaces (Wa Thiong’o 1986; Mbembe 2016).

However, decolonial theory also highlights the structural limits of transformation. Universities in South Africa are embedded in global knowledge economies shaped by neoliberal imperatives, international rankings and competitive research metrics. These conditions often constrain the scope of decolonial change, as institutions are compelled to align with global (largely Western) academic standards, even as they profess commitments to transformation. Decolonial theory thus provides a lens for analysing both the radical critique posed by the Fallist movements and the ways in which their demands are mediated, diluted or contained within existing institutional and sectoral frameworks.

Critical pedagogy

Complementing decolonial theory, critical pedagogy, particularly as articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), foregrounds the emancipatory potential of education when it is dialogical, participatory and grounded in learners’ lived realities. Freire’s critique of the ‘banking model’ of education – in which students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge – resonates strongly with student critiques of South African higher education, where teaching practices and curricula often remain detached from the socio-economic and cultural contexts of the majority of students.

Within the context of the FMF protests, Freirean concepts such as conscientisation, dialogue and praxis illuminate how students mobilised education itself as a site of resistance. The protests can thus be read as pedagogical acts through which students asserted agency, challenged oppressive institutional arrangements and articulated alternative visions of

the university (Pillay 2021). Critical pedagogy underscores the inherently political nature of education and calls on institutions to recognise how pedagogical practices either reproduce or challenge inequality, exclusion and domination.

Importantly, critical pedagogy also enables an interrogation of managerial and corporatised university cultures. The increasing emphasis on performance indicators, audit regimes and market-oriented outcomes often undermines dialogical and transformative pedagogies, reducing education to measurable outputs rather than human development. From a Freirean perspective, such conditions risk reproducing dehumanising educational environments that affect both students and academic staff, particularly those already marginalised by race, class and gender.

Intersection of decolonial theory and critical pedagogy

By bringing decolonial theory and critical pedagogy into dialogue, this study approaches the RMF and FMF movements as both epistemic disruptions and educational interventions situated within broader political-economic structures. Tuck and Yang's (2012) insistence that decolonisation is not a metaphor is particularly instructive here, as it cautions against symbolic or rhetorical appropriations of decolonial language that leave underlying structures intact. Their work foregrounds the necessity of material, epistemic and institutional transformation rather than performative compliance.

Building on this, Morreira et al. (2023) explore how decolonial commitments can inform concrete pedagogical practices across diverse institutional and geopolitical contexts, while Omodan and Diko's (2021) concept of Ubuntu pedagogy advances a decolonial pedagogy rooted in African relational ethics and indigenous knowledge systems. Ubuntu pedagogy foregrounds communal learning, relational accountability and humanisation, offering an alternative to Eurocentric and market-driven educational models.

The intersection of these theoretical perspectives enables a multidimensional analysis of power – historical, epistemological, pedagogical and institutional. It provides the conceptual tools to evaluate whether institutional responses to the Fallist movements have resulted in substantive transformation or whether they represent adaptive strategies that absorb protest discourse while reproducing colonial and neoliberal logics under new guises. This theoretical lens also guides the study's interpretive analysis of student narratives, policy documents and post-protest institutional reforms, particularly regarding curriculum change, governance structures and the corporatisation of South African higher education.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), which is appropriate for examining the complex, context-dependent dynamics of student activism and higher education transformation associated with the RMF and FMF movements. A qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of meanings, narratives and discourses articulated by students, institutions and the broader higher education sector, rather than measuring variables or outcomes in a positivist sense.

The study adopts a multiple-case study approach, focusing on South African universities that were central sites of mobilisation during the 2015–17 protest cycle, including the University of Cape Town (UCT), Stellenbosch University and the University of the Witwatersrand (Heleta 2016; Bosch 2017). These institutions were selected because of their historical significance, symbolic visibility and documented role in shaping national debates on decolonisation, access and transformation. The case study approach allows for contextualised analysis while also enabling cross-institutional comparison of protest dynamics and institutional responses.

Data collection methods

The primary method of data collection was document analysis, which involved the systematic examination of texts produced during and immediately after the RMF and FMF movements, covering the period 2015–17, with selective inclusion of institutional and policy responses up to 2019. Following Scott (1990) and Bowen (2009), documents were treated as social artefacts that reflect ideological positions, power relations and institutional priorities.

Primary documentary sources included:

- Student-produced texts, such as selected RMF and FMF manifestos, memoranda, open letters and protest statements issued by student collectives at UCT, Stellenbosch University and the University of the Witwatersrand between 2015 and 2017.
- Protest literature, including pamphlets, posters and publicly circulated statements associated with the movements.
- Institutional documents, such as university transformation frameworks, curriculum review reports, senate statements and official responses to the protests.
- Media reports from national newspapers and digital platforms that documented protest events, institutional reactions and state interventions during the protest period.

These documents were analysed as primary data where they directly represented the voices, positions and actions of students and institutions.

Secondary sources included:

Peer-reviewed scholarly analyses of the Fallist movements (for example, Booysen 2016; Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016, 2019; Langa 2017), which were used to contextualise, interpret and triangulate findings derived from the primary documentary data. While earlier studies by scholars such as Le Grange informed the analytical framing of this research, the present study does not rely exclusively on secondary interpretations. Rather, it engages directly with selected primary texts produced during the protest period, supplemented by scholarly literature to enhance analytical depth and credibility.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which involved iterative reading, coding, and categorisation of documents to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and silences across the data set (Luckett and Shay 2021). Thematic analysis enabled the identification of key themes such as:

1. Access, affordability and financial exclusion
2. Curriculum transformation and knowledge decolonisation
3. Institutional culture and experiences of alienation
4. Student governance and participation
5. Institutional resistance and accommodation
6. Corporatisation, managerialism and bureaucratic governance

Thus, the analysis also explicitly considers sectoral and governance constraints shaping institutional responses to the protests. Particular attention is paid to the regulatory role of statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Policy frameworks related to funding models, quality assurance, accreditation and curriculum regulation were analysed to assess how they enable or limit institutional transformation. This approach situates university-level responses within the broader governance architecture of South African higher education, rather than treating institutions as fully autonomous actors.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation by cross-referencing multiple data sources, institutional cases and scholarly interpretations (Heleta 2016). This process strengthened the credibility of the analysis and mitigated the limitations associated with reliance on a single type of document or perspective.

The #RhodesMustFall Movement: Symbolism and Decolonisation

The #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement, which erupted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015, marked a significant turning point in South African higher education. Sparked by a student-led call for the removal of the statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes from the UCT campus, the movement quickly expanded into a broader demand for the decolonisation of universities (Booyesen 2016; Heleta 2016). RMF challenged not only the visible symbols of colonial oppression but also the deeper structural legacies of racism, cultural exclusion and epistemic dominance that continue to shape academic institutions in South Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Mbembe 2016). As such, the movement articulated a critique that was simultaneously symbolic, epistemological and institutional.

The following sub-sections illuminate four key dimensions of the RMF movement: symbolism and the politics of space; curriculum reform and epistemic decolonisation; institutional culture and racial inequity; and global resonance and legacy.

Symbolism and the politics of space

The statue of Rhodes served as a powerful metaphor for the unresolved legacies of colonialism in South Africa's higher education system. Students argued, in public statements and memoranda directed to university management, that the continued presence of such symbols normalised colonial violence and alienated Black students who were daily reminded of their historical marginalisation (Nyamnjoh 2016; Bosch 2017;). According to Mbembe (2016), the university campus is not a neutral space but an 'archive of power', where architecture, iconography and institutional rituals reproduce colonial ideologies under the guise of tradition and academic excellence.

The removal of the Rhodes statue on 9 April 2015 was therefore widely interpreted as a symbolic victory for the movement. However, student leaders and scholars consistently emphasised that symbolism alone was insufficient. The act of removal was framed as an entry point into a broader struggle that would interrogate curricula, institutional cultures, language policies and governance structures within the university (Booyesen 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Bosch 2017). In this regard, RMF exposed the limits of symbolic transformation when deeper structural arrangements remain intact.

Curriculum reform and epistemic decolonisation

At the heart of RMF was a sustained call for the decolonisation of knowledge. Students and academics argued that South African universities continued to privilege Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalised African perspectives, histories and lived experiences (Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016). The curriculum was criticised for prioritising Western canons, theories and methodologies, often at the expense of local knowledge systems, African languages and indigenous philosophies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Mbembe 2016).

This epistemic critique aligns closely with Wa Thiong'o (1986) call for the 'decolonisation of the mind', which involves dismantling internalised hierarchies of knowledge and reclaiming African intellectual agency. The RMF activists demanded not only the inclusion of African authors and texts, but also a fundamental reconfiguration of pedagogical practices to promote dialogical, inclusive and contextually relevant learning environments (Le Grange 2016). As Luckett and Shay (2021) argue, meaningful curriculum transformation requires more than content substitution; it entails a critical rethinking of what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose voices are authorised within academic disciplines.

Institutional culture and racial inequity

Beyond curriculum, RMF drew sustained attention to the racialised nature of institutional culture in South African universities (Chigudu 2020: 302–12). Black students and academic staff reported experiences of marginalisation, micro-aggressions and systemic bias in hiring, promotion and academic recognition, particularly within historically White institutions (Heleta 2016; Langa 2017). The movement's demands therefore extended to calls for more representative academic staffing, anti-racist institutional training and accountability mechanisms to address discrimination and exclusion.

Some scholars have critiqued aspects of the RMF movement, cautioning against an overemphasis on identity politics and the risk of essentialism (Jansen 2017). However, Langa (2017) and Booysen (2016) contend that such critiques often overlook the lived realities of Black students and staff and deflect attention from the structural violence embedded in institutional cultures. Moreover, emerging scholarship suggests that these racialised experiences are compounded by increasingly corporatised and managerial university environments, which intensify alienation through audit cultures, performance metrics and bureaucratic governance regimes (Badat 2022).

Global resonance and legacy

Although rooted in the specific context of South African higher education, the RMF movement resonated far beyond national borders. Appadurai's (1996) theory of global cultural flows provides a useful lens for understanding how RMF ideas circulated transnationally through media, activist networks and academic discourse. His concepts of the global cultural economy and various 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes) help explain how locally grounded struggles acquire global visibility and influence.

The RMF movement inspired similar campaigns internationally, most notably at Oxford University in the United Kingdom and contributed to broader debates about colonial memory, institutional accountability and epistemic justice in higher education worldwide (Nyamnjoh 2016). In this sense, RMF can be understood as part of a wider transnational decolonial and alter-globalisation discourse that links student activism across borders in a shared struggle against Eurocentrism and neoliberal dominance in knowledge production.

Today, the legacy of RMF continues to shape debates on transformation, inclusion and curriculum reform within South African universities. While some institutions have implemented policy changes and strategic commitments to transformation, critics argue that many of these reforms have been slow, uneven and largely symbolic (Luckett and Shay 2021; Badat 2022). Students and scholars alike contend that without addressing deeper structural, governance and political-economic constraints, institutional responses risk reproducing colonial legacies under the guise of transformation.

The #FeesMustFall Movement: Struggles for Economic Justice

Emerging in October 2015, the #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement was a national, student-led campaign that sought to address the inaccessibility and commodification of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa. Although it followed closely on the heels of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement, FMF had a distinct focus on the material and economic conditions that inhibited equitable access to higher education, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017). The movement fundamentally challenged neoliberal policy orientations in the higher education sector, exposing the persistence of structural inequalities despite South Africa's democratic transition (Habib 2019; Badat 2022).

The following discussion examines the movement through five interrelated dimensions: genesis and national impact; inequality and economic exclusion; the role of the state and institutional responses; intersections with RMF and broader struggles; and enduring impact and ongoing debates.

Genesis and national impact

The genesis of the FMF movement can be traced to mid-October 2015, when students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) mobilised against proposed tuition fee increases. These protests rapidly spread to other institutions, including the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of Pretoria, Rhodes University, and the University of the Western Cape, signalling a nationwide crisis in the affordability of higher education (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017).

What initially began as resistance to fee hikes, quickly evolved into broader demands for free, quality and decolonised higher education, linking economic justice to historical patterns of racial and class exclusion (Habib 2019). As Jansen (2017) observes, FMF represented an unprecedented moment in post-apartheid South Africa, where predominantly Black and working-class students collectively challenged the commodification of education and the failure of the post-1994 state to fully dismantle apartheid-era inequalities.

The protests significantly disrupted university operations, resulting in the suspension of academic programmes, the securitisation of campuses, and confrontations with the police, thereby intensifying the national debate about the role of higher education in social transformation (Booyesen 2016; Langa 2017). Importantly, FMF exposed the everyday material struggles of students, including the inability to afford fees, accommodation and food, as well as the psychological burden of navigating historically White institutional cultures (Badat 2022).

In response to sustained pressure, President Jacob Zuma announced a zero fee increase for 2016 and later declared the implementation of free higher education for students from households earning below R350,000 per annum (Habib 2019). While widely regarded as a landmark policy shift, scholars caution that the announcement raised serious concerns regarding feasibility, sustainability and the extent to which the deeper structural critiques raised by FMF were adequately addressed (Pillay 2021; Badat 2022).

Inequality and economic exclusion

The FMF movement laid bare the contradiction between South Africa's constitutional commitment to equality and the lived realities of persistent socio-economic exclusion within higher education (Habib 2019). Despite formal access, many Black students continue to face financial constraints that undermine both entry into and success within the university system, particularly in relation to tuition fees, accommodation, food security and learning resources (Booyesen 2016).

The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), while designed to mitigate these inequalities, was widely criticised for administrative inefficiencies, delayed disbursements and inadequate coverage, reinforcing student precarity rather than alleviating it (Langa 2017; Pillay 2021). FMF thus constituted a broader critique of how poverty and inequality are reproduced through higher education financing structures, rather than merely a reaction to incremental fee increases (Habib 2019).

The role of the state and institutional responses

State and institutional responses to FMF were characterised by ambivalence and coercion. While government officials initially acknowledged the legitimacy of students' grievances, responses increasingly shifted toward securitisation, including the deployment of police and private security on campuses (Langa 2017). Violent confrontations, arrests and legal actions against student leaders raised serious concerns about the criminalisation of protest and the erosion of democratic spaces within universities (Booyesen 2016; Jansen 2017).

At the institutional level, university management adopted uneven strategies, ranging from dialogue and mediation to disciplinary sanctions and court interdicts. These divergent responses reflected deeper tensions surrounding university autonomy, governance and the limits of transformation within a market-oriented higher education framework (Badat 2022).

Intersections with #RhodesMustFall and broader struggles

Although FMF foregrounded economic justice, it was deeply interconnected with the epistemic and symbolic critiques articulated by the RMF movement. Both movements shared a common analysis of higher education as a site where racial, economic and epistemic injustices converge (Heleta

2016; Le Grange 2016). Leadership and participation often overlapped, demonstrating a shared activist consciousness linking access to education to curriculum transformation and institutional culture.

As Pillay (2017) argues, FMF should not be narrowly understood as a protest against tuition fees alone. Rather, it articulated a broader vision of structural transformation that encompassed issues of housing, language policy, gender justice and participatory governance (Booyesen 2016; Badat 2022). Both FMF and RMF highlighted the persistence of colonial and apartheid-era legacies within contemporary universities, particularly in relation to Eurocentric curricula, linguistic exclusion and racialised power relations (Heleta 2016).

Gendered forms of exclusion and violence also featured prominently in both movements. Black women and queer students foregrounded issues of sexual harassment, gender-based violence and marginalisation within activist spaces and institutional structures, expanding the movements' social justice agenda (Le Grange 2016; Pillay 2017). Additionally, demands for the recognition and incorporation of African languages underscored critiques of English linguistic dominance as a continuation of colonial epistemic hierarchies (Heleta 2016).

Enduring impact and ongoing debates

The FMF movement has had a lasting impact on higher education policy and discourse in South Africa. The introduction of free higher education for students from low-income households stands as one of its most tangible outcomes (Habib 2019). Nevertheless, implementation challenges – particularly related to funding sustainability, administrative capacity and institutional readiness – remain significant (Pillay 2021).

Scholars caution that without a coherent and sustainable funding model, free education risks becoming fiscally untenable or compromising educational quality (Habib 2019; Badat 2022). Debates have also emerged regarding differentiated funding approaches and the potential role of public–private partnerships in sustaining the sector (Bosch 2017).

Beyond funding, many of the deeper structural demands raised by FMF – such as decolonisation of curricula, inclusive pedagogy and participatory governance – remain only partially addressed (Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016). Critics argue that institutional reforms have often been symbolic or incremental, failing to confront the entrenched power relations that continue to shape South African higher education (Jansen 2017; Badat 2022).

Curriculum Transformation and Knowledge Decolonisation

Curriculum transformation and the decolonisation of knowledge emerged as central demands across both RMF and FMF. These demands reflected sustained dissatisfaction with the persistence of Eurocentric epistemologies within post-apartheid universities, despite political liberation in 1994. Students argued that higher education continued to reproduce colonial hierarchies of knowledge, positioning African epistemologies as peripheral or supplementary rather than foundational (Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2016).

The meaning of decolonising the curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum entails a fundamental interrogation of what counts as legitimate knowledge, who produces it and for whom it is produced. Le Grange (2016) emphasises that decolonisation cannot be reduced to the inclusion of African authors alone but requires dismantling epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western canons. This includes reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating African languages, rethinking disciplinary boundaries and adopting dialogical pedagogies rooted in local contexts.

This understanding aligns with Wa Thiong'o's (1986) call for the decolonisation of the mind and Ramose's (2003) insistence on epistemic justice grounded in African philosophy. More recently, decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2011) and Santos (2014) have articulated pluriversality as a framework that recognises multiple, co-existing epistemologies rather than a single universal knowledge system.

Student voices and protest literature

The analysis draws directly on primary protest texts, including:

1. The #RhodesMustFall Mission Statement (UCT, March 2015),
2. RMF: A Call for Decolonised Education (UCT Student Collective, 2015),
3. #FeesMustFall National Shutdown Memorandum (October 2015),
4. Open letters addressed to university management and the DHET published between 2015 and 2017.

These documents consistently articulated students' experiences of being 'alienated in institutions that claim to be African but teach Africa as an object rather than a subject'. Protest literature critiqued curricula that marginalised African histories, philosophies and lived realities, while reproducing colonial power relations in the classroom. As Heleta (2016) notes, these texts reveal

that students were not rejecting academic rigour, but demanding curricula that are socially responsive, historically grounded and epistemically inclusive. Knowledge, students argued, should be co-produced rather than transmitted uncritically through inherited disciplinary hierarchies.

Institutional efforts, governance constraints and corporatisation

In response, universities established transformation task teams, curriculum review committees and decolonial forums. While some reforms – such as revised reading lists and African philosophy modules – were introduced, these initiatives were constrained by sectoral governance frameworks imposed by the DHET and CHE, which prioritise standardisation, accreditation compliance and market competitiveness (CHE 2016; Badat 2022).

Critically, many scholars argue that the perceived ‘victories’ of the Fallist movements may have been followed by sectoral pushback, manifesting in intensified managerial control, securitisation and corporatisation (Jansen 2017; Badat 2022). Rather than dismantling neoliberal governance, universities increasingly embraced business metaphors, revenue diversification and performance metrics, arguably as a defensive response to demands for free education.

African-centred and alter-global perspectives

African-centred approaches advanced by Chinweizu (1987), Ramose (2003) and Wa Thiong’o (1986) continue to inform debates on epistemic justice. At the same time, the Fallist movements can be understood as part of broader alter-globalisation struggles, resisting the homogenising pressures of global neoliberal academia while challenging South Africa’s aspiration to compete within anglophone knowledge economies (Appadurai 1996; Santos 2014).

Conclusion and Future Directions

The Fallist movements represent a watershed moment in South African higher education, fundamentally challenging entrenched structures of power, knowledge and inequality. These movements articulated the frustrations and aspirations of a generation of students determined not only to reclaim access to higher education but also to redefine the very purpose, identity and social responsibility of the university in a post-apartheid society. In doing so, RMF and FMF raised critical questions about the persistence of racialised and class-based exclusion, the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and the role of universities in either reproducing or dismantling structural injustice (Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2016; Langa 2017).

Undeniably, the movements achieved significant symbolic and material victories. The suspension of tuition fee increases in 2015, and the subsequent announcement of free higher education for students from households earning below a specified income threshold marked unprecedented policy shifts in the democratic era (Booyesen 2016; Habib 2019). These moments demonstrated the power of collective student action and exposed the vulnerability of entrenched political and economic arrangements when confronted by sustained mobilisation. However, as several scholars caution, these victories were partial and fragile. The implementation of free education has been uneven, bureaucratically constrained and fiscally contested, leaving many students still vulnerable to exclusion due to accommodation shortages, delayed funding, and administrative inefficiencies (Pillay 2021; Badat 2022).

More critically, the 'Fallist' movements revealed the structural limits of transformation within a higher education sector increasingly governed by neoliberal rationalities. While universities publicly adopted the language of decolonisation and transformation, the period following the protests has been marked by intensified corporatisation, managerialism and securitisation. Vice-chancellors' remuneration structures comparable to those of corporate executives, the expansion of third-stream income imperatives, and the dominance of business-oriented discourses of efficiency, productivity, and outputs suggest that neoliberal governance has not been dismantled but, in some respects, accelerated (Jansen 2017; Badat 2022). This raises a fundamental question: Does the sector's post-Fallist trajectory represent institutional pushback against demands for free and decolonised education or does it reflect the inescapable pressures of neoliberal materialities within a globalised higher education economy?

Importantly, universities do not operate autonomously. Transformation is structurally constrained by powerful statutory bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). These institutions impose regulatory, accreditation and funding frameworks that prioritise compliance, standardisation and international competitiveness, often at the expense of radical epistemic and pedagogical reform (CHE 2016; Badat 2022). The relative absence of sustained critique of these sectoral governance mechanisms within Fallist discourse – and in much of the scholarship reflecting on the movements – suggests a critical gap that future research and activism must address.

Furthermore, while RMF and FMF foregrounded the racialised nature of institutional culture, the increasing corporatisation of universities has also produced dehumanising environments that affect staff and students across racial and class lines. Academic labour is increasingly casualised, surveilled and measured through performance metrics, while students are reconfigured as consumers rather than co-producers of knowledge. For Black academics and students, these dynamics intersect with historical and ongoing racial marginalisation, intensifying experiences of alienation and exploitation (Luckett and Shay 2021).

Looking ahead, the legacy of RMF and FMF must be understood not as a completed project but as an unfinished struggle. Sustainable transformation will require a shift from episodic protest toward long-term, strategic engagement that confronts not only institutional cultures and curricula but also the political economy and governance architecture of higher education. This includes interrogating South Africa's positioning within global anglophone academia and exploring whether 'Fallism' can be meaningfully linked to broader alter-globalisation movements that resist the commodification of knowledge (Appadurai 1996; Santos 2014).

In light of these insights, several key areas demand urgent attention:

1. *Economic accessibility*: The promise of free education must be realised through sustainable, redistributive funding models that extend beyond tuition to include accommodation, transport and living costs, particularly for students from rural and peri-urban contexts (Habib 2019; Pillay 2021).
2. *Curriculum decolonisation*: Universities must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine epistemic transformation that centres African knowledge systems, languages and philosophies within teaching, research and assessment (Le Grange 2016; Wa Thiong'o 1986).
3. *Democratic governance*: Meaningful decolonisation requires reimagining governance structures to include students, academic staff and communities as active participants in decision-making, while critically engaging the regulatory power of statutory bodies such as the DHET and CHE.
4. *Social justice and institutional purpose*: Universities must resist being reduced to training grounds for the global labour market and instead reaffirm their role as sites of critical inquiry, social responsibility and human flourishing (Freire 1970; Mbembe 2016).

Thus, the future of South African higher education hinges on whether institutions are willing – and structurally enabled – to confront the contradictions between decolonial aspirations and neoliberal governance. The conversations ignited by #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall must therefore be sustained, deepened and radicalised if universities are to become spaces where knowledge, dignity and justice genuinely flourish.

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Towards the Decolonised University in Africa: A Perspective from the Philosophy of Liberation

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Abstract

This article deploys the philosophy of liberation perspective as a lens to flesh out an image of the decolonised university in Africa. The observation is that the Euro-American model of the university is currently hegemonic in Africa, and this Westernised, colonial system of higher education needs to be decolonised. This article begins by explaining the use of the philosophy of liberation perspective as a lens, then delves into the current Euro-American model of the university, which is a Westernised university in Africa rather than an African university. Finally, the paper presents a vision of the decolonised university in Africa, which would be multilingual, boast of human and epistemic diversity, and include inclusive architecture and infrastructures as part of its landscapes and spaces. In this decolonised university in Africa, knowledge and knowledge production would be treated as public goods and services rather than commodities in the marketplace. This university would be rooted in Africa while also being globally relevant and present. It would marry local relevance with international excellence. This decolonised university in Africa would be a planetary university of the Global South, where the planet and everything on it – all of nature and life – are valued. This idea might sound idealistic and utopian precisely because liberation itself, and the futures it seeks to imagine and enact, belong to utopia.

Keywords: Decolonised university in Africa, philosophy of liberation, westernised university in Africa, Global South, planetary university

Résumé

Cet article mobilise la perspective de la philosophie de la libération comme cadre d'analyse pour esquisser une image de l'université décolonisée en Afrique. Il observe que le modèle euro-américain de l'université est actuellement hégémonique en Afrique, et que ce système d'enseignement

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supérieur occidental et hérité de la colonisation doit être décolonisé. L'article commence par expliquer l'usage de la philosophie de la libération comme grille de lecture, puis examine le modèle euro-américain actuel de l'université, qui constitue une université occidentalisée en Afrique plutôt qu'une véritable université africaine. Enfin, il propose une vision de l'université décolonisée en Afrique, qui serait multilingue, caractérisée par une diversité humaine et épistémique, et dotée d'une architecture et d'infrastructures inclusives intégrées dans ses espaces et environnements. Dans cette université décolonisée en Afrique, le savoir et la production de connaissances seraient considérés comme des biens et services publics plutôt que comme des marchandises sur le marché. Cette université serait enracinée en Afrique tout en étant pertinente et présente à l'échelle mondiale. Elle concilierait pertinence locale et excellence internationale. Cette université décolonisée en Afrique serait une université planétaire du Sud global, où la planète et tout ce qu'elle contient – l'ensemble de la nature et du vivant – seraient valorisés. Cette idée peut sembler idéaliste et utopique précisément parce que la libération elle-même, ainsi que les futurs qu'elle cherche à imaginer et à concrétiser, relèvent de l'utopie.

Mots-clés : université décolonisée en Afrique, philosophie de la libération, université occidentalisée en Afrique, Sud global, université planétaire

Introduction

This essay delves into a critical imagination of the decolonised university in Africa, and more generally in the Global South, from the perspective of the philosophy of liberation as adumbrated by Enrique Dussel (1985). The philosophy of liberation entertains decolonial fantasies of liberation; it critiques conquest and condemns the coloniality of knowledge, power and being in the Global South. The idea that the university in Africa – and specifically the university in the Global South – must be decolonised stems from the fact that the present hegemonic model is a Euro-American one imbricated with coloniality and a structure of knowledge that is fundamentally imperialist and colonial (Grosfoguel 2013). While there were other models of the university in Africa, the model of higher education that has become normalised is the westernised Euro-American one that comes with cultural imperialism and coloniality of knowledge. In his examination of the 'giant challenge of higher education in Africa', Paul Zeleza (2018) observes how the university in Africa has been afflicted by such challenges as the corporatisation of management; the casualisation of faculty members that are employed on fragile part-time contracts; the commercialisation of learning and the commodification of knowledge, which should be a public good, has been reduced to a product sold in the market place. Students have

been reduced to consumers who 'buy' learning. At the same time, academics and intellectuals have been turned into 'scholars in the marketplace' (Mamdani, 2007) who sell their intellectual and academic labour for wages and no longer pursue knowledge production and circulation as the public goods and services that they should be. Zeleza (2018) notes how the Westernised university in Africa has often been nationalist when it has pretended to advanced nation-building aspirations; developmental when it has aspired to advance national development; and neoliberal in the way in which it has attempted to respond to market aspirations and pressures of the neoliberal era of African politics and economies. In all these systemic pretensions, Zeleza concludes, the university has remained a Western institution and system on African soil, not an African university. Zeleza (2018) describes how this university suffers pressures of market control, global inequalities and immense political control that make academic and intellectual freedom difficult at best and impossible at worst.

In the case of South African universities, Robert Kriger (2016) describes how they were founded as university colleges of Euro-American universities, with the motto 'for the education of the sons of Empire' as their mantra. These universities were intended to produce young White male 'champions of Empire' and as such, they were an instrument of colonialism and a facility of Empire as their mantra. The attempt to decolonise and repurpose the university in postcolonial Africa has faced challenges: the universities were few and small in scale; there has been a shortage of financial and human resources and of committed faculty staff; the research output was low, and there was a lack of progressive leadership (Zeleza 2018). Zeleza concludes that the university in Africa faces the challenge of postcoloniality in the sense that it carries the burdens of state institutions and processes that have not yet fully recovered from the colonial systems and experiences. Grosfoguel (2013) refers to this model as the 'westernised university' in the Global South because it carries an imbrication of the Euro-American colonial and imperial project that viewed the colonised territories and peoples as objects and not subjects of history. Nyamnjoh (2012) described the students and staff as 'potted plants in greenhouses' because they are captive to the university's disciplining systems that are fundamentally colonial and colonising inasmuch as they are alien and alienating. The education in these universities is for conquest and domination, rather than for critical consciousness and liberation, or what Paulo Freire (2020) terms the 'pedagogy of the oppressed'. For Freire (2021) education for critical consciousness is as much a process of unlearning internalised inferiority and domination by the colonial culture and its accompanying institutions

of education. The university of the Global South in the postcolonial era should, therefore, be a site for unlearning and undoing coloniality of knowledge and an awakening to liberation. This essay begins by fleshing out the philosophy of liberation, as adumbrated by Enrique Dussel, and then moves on to describe the colonial university in Africa. Thereafter, it delves into the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, which became telling struggles for the decolonisation of the westernised university in Africa, and finally presents a vision of what a decolonised university in Africa might look like.

The Philosophy of Liberation Perspective

This section briefly examines the philosophy of liberation, as adumbrated by Dussel, Freire and others. The philosophy of liberation emanates from the experiences and thoughts of the oppressed people in the Global South and its territories, which include Africa, parts of Asia, and Latin America. It is, in my view, the philosophical standpoint from which to imagine a future African university.

Paulo Freire (2020) argues that liberated and liberating education will only emanate from the experiences, histories and insights of the oppressed of the Global South, not from their enslavers and colonisers. Dussel (1985), on the other hand, postulates that the philosophy of liberation springs from the periphery, even as it deploys the language and epistemic tools of the centre in Europe and North America. Dussel justifies the deployment of the linguistic and epistemic tools of Empire by arguing that when the enslaved revolted, they used the language of the master, and when oppressed women rebelled, they used macho language. The youth of the world, the oppressed of the Earth, and the condemned of world history must use the philosophy of liberation to critique their conquest and domination (Dussel 1985).

Dussel explains that the cultural, economic, and military domination of poor countries by the West was justified on the basis of European philosophies, which were presented as rational, universal truths, while peripheral people were non-beings and their philosophies were portrayed as chaotic and irrational. Dussel notes that:

Philosophy, when it is really philosophy and not sophistry or ideology, does not ponder philosophy texts, except as a pedagogical propaedeutic to provide itself with interpretive categories. Philosophy ponders the non-philosophical; the reality. But because it involves reflection on its own reality, it sets out from what already is, from its own world, its own system, its own space. The philosophy that has emerged from a periphery has always done so in response to a need to situate itself with regard to a centre – in total exteriority (Dussel 1985: 3).

The philosophy of liberation is not a disciplinary and academic philosophy, but it takes political activism and social justice seriously. The colonised, enslaved, and those who are on the receiving end of conquest and domination have no time for 'philosophy as the love of wisdom', but have all the time and energy for 'philosophy as the wisdom of love for liberation from conquest' and the dominations and exploitations that come with it. The philosophy of liberation is the body of ideas from people on the periphery who look at the centre from their locations as people whose humanity and freedoms have been denied (Dussel 1985). The philosophers of liberation are those called upon to unmask conquest and domination because they cannot do otherwise, as people who have suffered them (Dussel 1985). As such, the philosophy of liberation is not an academic discipline; it is a vocation for liberation from conquest and the exploitations that accompany it.

The philosophy of liberation is, therefore, a fitting lens through which to imagine a decolonised university in Africa, replacing the current Euro-American model that has become hegemonic in the Global South, which encompasses Africa. At an epistemic level, the philosophy of liberation enters into critical conversation with Euro-American philosophy and argues for the humanity, dignity, and liberation of the victims of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, and domination. It constitutes the insurrection of the subjugated thoughts, ideas and feelings of the oppressed who have, as their life vocation, the struggle against conquest and colonality: 'What is at stake is neocolonial liberation from the last and most advanced degree of imperialism, North American imperialism, the imperialism that weighs down part of Asia and almost all of Africa and Latin America' (Dussel 1985: 14).

Pitted against this Euro-American philosophy, which Dussel calls the philosophy of conquest and domination, is the philosophy of liberation, wielded by the oppressed, who do not think from any position of privilege, but from the darkness of the conquered and dominated peripheries of the world:

Against the classical ontology of the center, from Hegel to Marcuse – to name the most brilliant from Europe and North America – a philosophy of liberation is rising from the periphery, from the oppressed, from the shadow that the light of being has not been able to illumine. Our thought sets out from non-being, nothingness, otherness, exteriority, the mystery of no-sense. It is, then, 'barbarian' philosophy (Dussel 1985: 14).

The philosophy of liberation is an argument against conquest by those peoples of the Global South whose thoughts have been denied by Euro-American thought and who have been called non-beings, barbarians and primitives. These people are speaking back to Empire with a philosophy of liberation shaped by their experiences of conquest and domination.

Paulo Freire (2020) writes that the philosophy of liberation is the power emanating from the oppressed who can imagine the liberation of both the oppressed and their oppressors. From their powerlessness, the oppressed can imagine liberation, which their oppressors cannot do because oppression and domination capture and blind the oppressors and render them incapable of imagining another world outside the one of power and privilege. The philosophy of liberation, therefore, is a potent epistemic tool of the oppressed in their struggle against domination and the violence that accompanies it. What Quinn (2017) celebrates is Frantz Fanon's assertion that thinkers of the Global South should not imitate Euro-American thought but should develop their own ideas and activism, which might actually constitute a philosophy of liberation that presents itself as a radical alternative to embedded Euro-American thought. The philosophy of liberation erected by the activists of the Global South may be 'the will to live' that opposes what Friedrich Nietzsche mounted as 'the will to power' of conquerors, who know nothing except power and conquest (Dussel 2020). Much like Ubuntu, Black Consciousness, Afrikology and Afrocentricity, the philosophy of liberation imagines a world that is centred on the histories, experiences and knowledges of the peoples of the Global South.

Pursuantly, the philosophy of liberation is deployed here to imagine a decolonised university in Africa, freed from the imbrications of the colonality of knowledge, which Lewis R Gordon (2014) calls disciplinary decadence, where knowledge is weaponised by power for purposes of domination and subjugation of the hearts and minds of the colonised. The philosophy of liberation is undisciplinary in that it contests the disciplining and dominating effects of the knowledge as it is produced and circulated in the Euro-American model of the university, which maintains a colonial, racist and imperialist structure of knowledge that valorises White men as the thinkers and knowers for the entire planet, to the exclusion of indigenous knowledge producers of the Global South (Grosfoguel 2013). As a result, a Euro-American monologue is maintained at the expense of human and epistemic diversity in the academy. To oppose this epistemic monologue, Dussel (2013) argues for South-to-South and South-to-North dialogue in the university, leading to creative and productive epistemic friction that would unmask Eurocentrism as the racism and the colonality of knowledge that it is. In this way, Dussel imagines an academy in the Global South that boasts human and epistemic diversity, critical dialogue, multilingualism, and the pursuit of knowledge as a public good rather than a commodity in the marketplace. The philosophy of liberation envisions an academy that is awake to conquest and domination, and valorises decolonial epistemic

reparations. Because the philosophy of liberation emanates from people who have been positioned on the 'darker side' of Western modernity – and the subjection that comes with it (Mignolo 2011) – it will always be a philosophy against war (Maldonado-Torres 2008) and one that can be utilised to imagine alternative economies, politics and academies of the Global South. In other words, humanisation of the peoples and places of the Global South is the call of the decolonised university in Africa.

The Westernised University in Africa

The Euro-American model of the university has its origins in the theosophical age of the Ancient Western world. As Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) observes, at that time only religious authorities had a claim to knowledge production and circulation, and to preach was to teach. The era of the Enlightenment eroded this model by dethroning much of religiosity and instituting a knowledge system based on reason and science (Wallerstein 2004). This was also when ideas of freedom were born alongside ideas of conquest, as explorers and travellers from the West toured and 'discover' new lands for Empire, and academic disciplines acquired their genealogies and provenances. In what Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) calls the 'divorce', the humanities and the arts were separated from the sciences, and both were further split into various disciplines that remain in circulation within the Euro-American model of the university today.

In the westernised university in the Global South, the 'structure of knowledge' remains White, male, Euro-American-centric, and in many ways alien (Grosfoguel 2013). Black people, women and 'others' circulate in this model of the university as the perpetual students of the Euro-American men, who are privileged with legitimisation as knowledge sources and canonised as authorities and fathers of the academic disciplines. For the peoples of the Global South, Paulo Freire (2020) argued, higher education should not just be neutral education – it should be relevant and reparative; that is, it must respond to their history of conquest, colonisation, enslavement and domination.

In the westernised or colonial model of the university, the education system and structure of knowledge commit what are called epistemicides, a term coined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015) to describe the systematic destruction or devaluing of indigenous languages and knowledge systems. Santos (2015) observes that knowledges of the Global South and the indigenous languages that carry them are dismissed in the westernised and colonial university model as not knowledge but rather myths and superstitions that should not be taken seriously. He argues for the

resurrection and legitimisation of 'epistemologies of the South' and 'justice against epistemicides'; decolonising higher education involves giving these knowledges the respect, recognition, and legitimation they deserve. Santos (2018) notes that Euro-American knowledges in the westernised university constitute a 'cognitive empire' that forbids and prohibits the legitimation of knowledges and languages of the Global South. This cognitive empire, he argues, must be ended through decolonisation and by legitimating the knowledges and languages of the Global South in the universities of the South. Santos (2012) insists that currently the colonial university is a 'university at the crossroads', which continues to further coloniality rather than advance much-needed decolonisation and liberation.

Responding to Santos's argument, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues that the 'cognitive empire' of Euro-American knowledges in the westernised university in Africa forbids 'epistemic freedom' of Africans who are mentally and intellectually captured and dominated by Euro-American languages and knowledges. The westernised university imposes Euro-American thinkers as the only legitimate and credible thinkers on whom Africans can rely for knowledge, methods, theories and philosophies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) notes that Euro-American knowledges are legitimated as scientific while African knowledges and languages are systemically excluded as superstitions, myths and non-knowledges. Even what are purported to be African studies in the westernised university in Africa are not relevant African studies. Mahmood Mamdani (1989) argues that African studies in colonial universities in Africa are 'African studies made in the USA' because Africa is studied and understood through Euro-American theories and perspectives that distort rather than reveal African realities. Mamdani (1998) insists that African studies in this context are merely another version of 'Bantu education', which was designed by the apartheid regime to subjugate Black people and make them only literate enough to serve the apartheid system and not to liberate themselves.

This imposition of Euro-American knowledges led Ali Mazrui (2003) to observe that intellectualism had been killed in the African postcolonial era. Mazrui noted that the dominance of Western epistemologies created African intellectual dependency on the Euro-American empire, which continued to exercise indirect control of African polities and economies after the dethronement of juridical colonialism in Africa. In the view of Walter Rodney (2018), one of the ways in which Europe underdeveloped Africa was by drowning Africans in schools and universities in Euro-American knowledges and languages that educated them away from Africa and exported their imagination to Western places and interests inimical to African

liberation. As a result, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1998) argued that Africans needed to decolonise their minds and hearts because the education systems and languages used in African schools and universities were colonising and alienating for Africans. According to Mazrui (2003), African universities were not African and needed to be Africanised if Africans were to begin to imagine their own liberation. The universities purporting to be African are, according to Grosfoguel (2013), actually westernised universities on the soil of the Global South. When Kwame Nkrumah (1970) philosophised about the decolonisation of Africa in his book *Consciencism*, he concluded that westernised education in African universities and the education of African elites in Europe and America were the cause of Africans not thinking straight about the liberation and unity of their continent. Westernised education alienated Africans from Africa and turned them into agents of Euro-American coloniality and cultural imperialism.

That Africa is the continent with the most natural resources but host to the poorest people under the sun is, according to Andrews and Okpanachi (2012), because Africans and African leaders are epistemically oppressed and continue to live intellectually dependent on their former colonisers. Continents and countries develop and modernise based on the science and knowledge of their people. Africa's continued underdevelopment, according to Pauline Hountondji (1990), is the result of Africa's scientific dependency on Europe and America, whose epistemologies were never designed to free but rather to capture and dominate Africans. Africans cannot imagine possibilities beyond those framed for them by the Empire. Before Africans can attain political and economic liberation, they should imagine and attain epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), which Westernised, colonial universities in Africa fail to provide.

#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall Movements in the Westernised Universities in Africa

In 2016, South African university students spontaneously launched the #RhodesMustFall movement, which successfully protested the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus. That students in a South African university could no longer stand passing by the statue of an empire builder is a telling gesture. The students, argues Amit Chaudhuri (2016), sought to clear the university and themselves of the memory of the Empire that conquered their ancestral lands. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) insists that the students' struggle was a struggle for epistemic freedom. The statue of Rhodes was also a metaphor for the Euro-American memory and epistemology that had affixed its signature

in the university system in Africa, and the students could no longer bear it. The real reason behind the protest for the removal of the statue was decolonisation, as Rhodes was an empire builder and symbolised colonisation and subjugation. After the symbolic gesture of a student who poured faeces on the statue, the student protests spread, even as far as Oxford University in the United Kingdom, the home of Cecil John Rhodes and the Empire whose face and front he became. Silence in the face of the provocative and irritating statue of an Empire builder on the campus would itself have been negligence and violence, argues Suntosh Pillay (2016). Although symbolic and possibly ceremonial, the removal of the statue represented the struggle of the students in South Africa, specifically, and Africa generally, against the alienating effects of the westernised university in Africa (Nyamnjoh 2017). The struggle was an expression of what Choudhury (2021) calls 'Black pain' at the sight of symbols and epistemologies of Empire that continue to haunt the university spaces of what are supposed to be African universities in Africa, not westernised universities in Africa.

Following the #RhodesMustFall protests, in October 2015 students at the University of the Witwatersrand started the #FeesMustFall movement and the protests quickly spread to other universities. #FeesMustFall was the students' response to exorbitant university fees, according to Langa Malose (2017). The real reason behind the protests was that education in the colonial universities in South Africa and Africa has increasingly become a commodity that is sold to those who can afford it, and Black students and the poor majority are excluded from it. The commoditisation of education and marketisation of knowledge are a huge part of the coloniality of the westernised university in Africa and the Global South. The westernised university in South Africa was founded 'to educate the sons of Empire', and had to be liberated by African students who were descendants of those who had been conquered and dominated by the Empire. As such, both of these 'Fallist' movements were engaged in liberation struggles that were inspired by a philosophy of liberation. Dussel (1985) insists that the philosophy of liberation is a weapon of oppressed Blacks, students, women, and workers of the Global South who have been on the receiving end of Empire and its desires and fears. Godsell, Chikane and Mpofu-Walsh (2016) argue that the #FeesMustFall movement was a revolt against coloniality in the African postcolonial academy. Beyond epistemic freedom, the students demanded material and economic freedom; they demanded an end to the commodification and marketisation of education, which should be a public good. In other words, they demanded a decolonised university in Africa, liberated from colonial

memories, capitalist fees, and the Euro-American epistemologies that enveloped the university on African soil. Robert Kriger (2016) documents how the westernised university in South Africa, in particular, and Africa in general, was actualised through financing from the private sector. It is conceivable that the decolonised university in Africa may benefit from the political will of African polities and from private-sector funding. But what would the decolonised university in Africa look like? The following section of the present essay delves into an imagination of the decolonised university in Africa from the perspective of the philosophy of liberation.

The Decolonised University in Africa

The decolonisation of African countries, which began in earnest in the 1960s, focused on political independence and somewhat neglected the important project of decolonising cultures and education systems that remained colonial and westernised. Francis Nyamnjoh (2019) observes that universities made an effort to Africanise their staff but did not Africanise their curricula, pedagogical structures or epistemologies. As a result, the decolonisation of the university in Africa and the de-westernisation of curricula remain the ‘unfinished business’ of decolonisation and liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Mbembe (2016) observes that the decolonisation of the university, together with the liberation of curricula and syllabi, is feasible, except for resistance from the beneficiaries of coloniality that erect arguments about ‘international standards and grading systems’.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) posits that the decolonised university would recognise Africa as a legitimate site of knowledge production and Africans as competent knowledge producers. According to Mahmood Mamdani (2019), this would be a university that marries excellence with relevance to African communities; in other words, it would be one shaped by the values of the philosophy of liberation and its aspirations for an empowered Africa and a liberated Global South.

Perhaps the first quality of a decolonised university in Africa would be its multilingualism. African languages should be brought in to co-exist with Euro-American languages that have been made dominant and hegemonic as languages of education and science in the westernised university in Africa. Madiba (2018) notes that multilingualism would be normalised and naturalised in the decolonised university that legitimates African cultures and histories in knowledge production and circulation. Antia (2015) states that multilingualism should not be a cosmetic option

but a political necessity, that must be backed by robust language policies and regulations that allow students to choose to conduct their research and write their research outputs in African languages. Languages are part of a people's being and belonging, so Africans should be enabled to study in their own languages rather than in colonial languages that are alienating. Brian Sibanda (2024) draws on the work of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o to defend African languages as potent instruments of teaching and learning in African universities, which should be equipped with translation technologies and services that would permit the translation of students' research outputs into multiple languages for wider circulation and cultural exchange. Wa Thiong'o (2012) insists that there should be no excuse for not integrating African languages into African higher education systems, because translation remains the language of languages, enabling people speaking different languages to engage in dialogue and exchange ideas. The feasibility of multilingualism in the decolonised university would be based on the establishment of translation departments that ensure academic and scholarly works written in indigenous languages are translated into other indigenous and colonial languages, thereby allowing for intellectual dialogue and exchange in the academy (Prah 2022). Further to multilingualism, the decolonised university should be a site of human diversity. Peoples from different geographies, cultures and biographies should populate the university to legitimise inclusivity. May (2012) states that staff, students and university management should come from different races, cultures, nationalities and positionalities to enrich the university's diversity and inclusivity in Africa. This diverse and inclusive university would be the opposite of the current colonial university, which Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) has critiqued as the domain of Western men who have systemically dominated thinking as the only legitimate knowledge producers and teachers in the university.

The decolonised university in Africa should also be epistemically diverse and inclusive. People from different races, biographies, genders, and positionalities should bring with them diverse epistemologies and intellectual sensibilities. Unlike the westernised and colonial university, the decolonised university in Africa should normalise, naturalise and legitimate epistemic exchanges and dialogues. Epistemic diversity should, according to Rolin (2019), be a significant quality and character of the decolonised university of the Global South. Cognitive justice demands that there should be epistemic diversity and inclusivity and a break with the colonial monologues (Sikimic 2023). There should be epistemic diversity, multidisciplinarity, multi-perspectivity and cross-cultural comparative research in the university of the Global South (Xu 2022).

This epistemic diversity should make the decolonised university a site of creative and productive intellectual exchange that sees the world from different scientific and philosophical loci.

Over and above human and epistemic diversity, the university space and architecture should be accessible and inclusive of different needs and enable easy access to those living with different disabilities. The campus should also accommodate mental and emotional differences. African students and staff should not have to be exposed to statues and monuments that memorialise conquerors and enslavers like Cecil John Rhodes. This also applies to ceremonies and rituals that invoke memories of conquest, Empire and coloniality. In the decolonised university, Wong (2014) argues, there should also be decolonised architecture and built environments that have no physical and emotional barriers for the diverse students and staff. The built environment should promote a sense of belonging to the university of diverse human beings and the epistemologies and sensibilities they embody. There should be no part of the university space that should be haunting or alienating for anybody (Shuayb 2020). University spaces and locations should be reparative in the argument of Ariana Stokas (2023), in the sense that they must be cognitive of the emotional and affective wounds of those who have histories of enslavement, colonisation and domination.

What Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2018) calls the 'giant challenge of higher education in Africa' is the 'consumerisation of students', the 'marketisation of the university' and the 'commodification of knowledge'. The student protests of the #FeesMustFall movement were intended to free the universities from this market-driven approach and the commodification of knowledge. One hallmark of the decolonised university must be its treatment of knowledge and knowledge production as public goods and services. Knowledge should not be seen merely as an academic artefact or intellectual output; it should also facilitate social justice and serve the interests of humans, the planet, and the environments that constitute it. This is what Achille Mbembe (2021) refers to as 'thoughts on the planetary', that is, knowledge that goes beyond the anthropocentric interests of humans to the interests of the planet and the preservation, health and balance of all aspects of the environment. The decolonised university in Africa should acknowledge that it is the university of peoples and places that have suffered conquest and know the violence of Empire and its capitalist extractivism, which reduced nature to natural resources to be exploited at the expense of ecological balance, resulting in environmental catastrophes that are explained away as natural disasters. As such, the

decolonised university in Africa will be home not only to academics and scholars but also to public intellectuals, activists, and others concerned with environmental issues and global interests.

Frequently, when decolonisation of the university is discussed, the questions of the future of quality education and international standards arise. These questions, however well-meant, arise from an unfortunate space in which African people and their communities are not trusted to provide quality education, conduct rigorous research, and uphold international standards. People forget that quality and standards are not exactly products but processes that any academic, intellectual, or student can be capable of mastering. As Mahmood Mamdani (2016) postulates, the decolonised university in Africa should combine local relevance with international excellence and competitiveness – it should be locally rooted in Africa and internationally relevant and present. From a philosophy of liberation perspective, human and epistemic diversity, inclusive infrastructure, and reparative spaces are to be part of quality and standards, not their substitutes or replacements. It is a colonial and racist myth that when the westernised university is decolonised, quality education and international standards will automatically be expelled. In fact, it is the colonial university model, with its exclusion of indigenous languages and knowledges, that lacks some fundamental qualities and standards that liberation demands. In the decolonised university in Africa, the knowledges, languages and histories of African peoples should be central to the university.

Conclusion

The Euro-American model of the university has been made hegemonic in the Global South in general, and it must be decolonised if the African university is to be realised. This essay has deployed the philosophy of liberation perspective to critique the Westernised university in Africa and flesh out an image of a decolonised university that would be locally rooted and globally relevant. This decolonised university would answer to local relevance and international excellence in multilingualism, human and epistemic diversity, and inclusive architecture and infrastructures. It would be reparative in the sense that its spaces, locations and landscapes would take cognisance of the wounds of those whose histories include experiences of conquest, enslavement and domination. In this university, knowledge and knowledge production will be restored to their status as public goods and services that protect our ecosystems and contribute to the peace, security, and well-being of all living things on our planet – in other words, the decolonised university in Africa will be a planetary university.

The planetary university is what philosophers of liberation and decolonial theorists have called the pluriversity, grounded in the plurality of human identities and knowledges, and in diversity. The decolonised university in Africa would be an academy that provides answers to the difficult political, economic, cultural and philosophical questions and dilemmas imposed on Africa.

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Conceptualising Decolonisation: A Reflexive Essay from Portuguese Africa

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Abstract

In this article, I first address more general writings on decolonisation as simultaneously an anti-imperialist movement and a human rights emancipatory ideology, before mapping how to go about studying this elusive subject and object. Next, I suggest a series of interventions in this expanding area of scholarship by way of a reflexive practice: I discuss alternative ways to write about decolonisation as both a historical *event* and an ethnographic *moment*; attend to the experience of the transfer of state power at the end of colonialism; and focus on decolonisation as involving the mobility of people, ideas and things. Lastly, I provide an overview of what I label 'textual and visual landscapes of decolonisation' from the location of Portuguese Africa based on my own research and writing (Gupta 2019), before suggesting the contours of a future critical decolonisation studies.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Mozambique, Portuguese Africa, Goa, Postcolonial Studies, India, southern Africa, Ricardo Rangel

Résumé

Dans cet article, j'examine tout d'abord les travaux généraux sur la décolonisation en tant que mouvement à la fois anti-impérialiste et idéologie émancipatrice fondée sur les droits humains, avant de proposer une cartographie des approches permettant d'étudier ce sujet et objet insaisissable. Ensuite, à travers une démarche réflexive, je propose une série de pistes de réflexion visant à enrichir ce champ d'études en pleine expansion : j'explore différentes manières d'écrire sur la décolonisation, à la fois comme *événement* historique et comme *moment* ethnographique ; je m'intéresse à l'expérience du transfert du pouvoir étatique à la fin du colonialisme ; et j'aborde la décolonisation comme un processus impliquant la mobilité des personnes, des

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idées et des objets. Enfin, je présente une vue d'ensemble de ce que j'appelle les « paysages textuels et visuels de la décolonisation » à partir du contexte de l'Afrique portugaise, en m'appuyant sur mes propres recherches et écrits (Gupta 2019), avant de suggérer les contours de futurs travaux critiques sur la décolonisation.

Mots-clés : décolonisation, Mozambique, Afrique portugaise, Goa, études postcoloniales, Inde, Afrique australe, Ricardo Rangel

Prelude

At the 2015 WiSER book launch of his first African edition of *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe asked the telling question: 'Has decolonisation pushed [studies of] postcolonialism out?'¹ I start with Mbembe's provocation, in light of the 2015 'Fallist' movements,² and exactly ten years later, as a way to suggest that scholars located in South Africa and the larger Global South, at a moment of continuing uncertainties about the role of higher education, are rethinking how we go about decolonising and thus transforming certain spaces, not only those of the university. Did we perhaps jump too quickly into the global condition of postcoloniality and, along the way, somehow sidestep the complex processes of decolonisation that needed to take place prior to this shift? Perhaps we need to take up Mbembe's sustained critique, and dwell, or rather spend some time in this interim place, and perhaps there is an urgency to do so as we increasingly distance ourselves from these historical configurations that were anything but homogenous. This reflexive essay is one such attempt.

Introduction

Nearly twenty years ago, after my relocation to Johannesburg from New York City, a South African friend recounted to me his travels through Mozambique on a motorbike in the early 1990s. One of the stories that made an impression on him came from a Mozambican he befriended along the way, who, in a passing comment, pointed to the Portuguese colonial legacy of poor plumbing in Mozambique. When pressed further, he informed my South African friend that many White Portuguese settlers, upon leaving Maputo in 1975 in the aftermath of Mozambican independence, poured concrete down their toilets, almost as a last colonial act, to ensure that they could never be used again, certainly not by their Mozambican counterparts. At the time, I found the story deeply disturbing yet fascinating, for it showcased many of the aspects of decolonisation that I was beginning to conceptualise: that with the end of colonialism comes

optimism, frustration, and uncertainty simultaneously; how personal things can be read to understand colonialism as an individual form of possession and its fallout of decolonisation as one of dispossession; the stakes involved for those departing and the resentments they carry when forced to leave a place called home; the shifting moral landscape that comes with decolonisation and an inability to articulate colonial loss for some; and finally, a focus on who and what remains, less as a form of failure or ruin, but of potentiality instead.

Thus, I recount this traveller's tale to suggest some of my broader interests and investments in connecting India and southern Africa, historically and ethnographically, via the Indian Ocean, through the analytic of 'decolonisation' and the category of experience. By locating its politics in the personal, in everyday moments and individual and collective acts, this vignette also illuminates certain aspects of decolonisation that have yet to be researched and that, in some sense, point to its unresolved qualities (of messiness, trauma, loss and resilience) that are part of postcoloniality itself.

In the discussion that follows, I will suggest that it is these kinds of analytic entry points accompanied by rich ethnographic details that have the potential to shed light on the long-term consequences of decolonisation. Specifically, I approach decolonisation as both a historical *event* and an ethnographic *moment*; attend to the experience(s) of the transfer of state power; and focus on decolonisation as involving the mobility of people, ideas and things. By way of organisation, I first address more general writings on and about decolonisation before making an intervention in this area of scholarship through my own recent writings. Lastly, I provide a brief overview of what I have labelled 'textual and visual landscapes of decolonisation' from Portuguese Africa, which I addressed in my book *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography* (2019). This essay works by way of layered forms of reflexivity – on the category of decolonisation itself; on past research and writings by a range of decolonisation experts; on the problems and promises of adopting a critical lens towards decolonisation studies; and, finally, on a move towards suggesting the contours of a future African decolonised landscape.

Studying Decolonisation

Prasenjit Duara begins his 2004 edited volume, fittingly entitled *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, with a critical caveat: 'from a historian's perspective, decolonization was one of the most important political developments of the twentieth century because it turned the world

into a stage of history' (Duara 2004: 1). He continues, stating that 'there are remarkably few historical studies of decolonisation as a whole, despite the importance of the subject' (2004: 1). His twofold reminder is an excellent starting point for suggesting that European decolonisation was, firstly, about an institutional and legal transfer of power from a colonial power to a newly independent nation-state. He writes:

Decolonization refers to the process whereby colonial powers transferred institutional and legal control over their territories and dependencies to indigenously based, formally sovereign, nation-states. The political search for independence often began during the inter-war years and fructified within fifteen years of the end of World War II in 1945 (Duara 2004: 2).

Yet as the lessons of history have proven, decolonisation was far from being a smooth transition; rather there were difficulties built into this widespread 'process' that took place largely in the aftermath of the Second World War, and that have begun to be raised as a critical area of enquiry over the last twenty years. It is these difficulties that I explore in my book in relation to decolonisation processes in Portuguese India and southern Africa. Linking India and Africa through decolonisation itself is a crucial move that complicates our often unilinear, one-nation perspective on decolonisation.

It is also important to recognise, following Duara's critical interventions in this burgeoning area of studies, that 'decolonization represented not only the transference of legal sovereignty, but a movement for moral justice and political solidarity against imperialism. It thus refers both to the anti-imperialist political movement and to an emancipatory ideology which sought or claimed to liberate the nation and humanity itself' (2004: 2). Duara's last point is an important one, for decolonisation has the potential to signify two different aspects of this process, one material and one ideological, that are often difficult to disentangle from one another. This is a point to which I shall return.

Humanitarian discourses of decolonisation emerged in the foundational writings of figures such as Frantz Fanon, who was fighting (and furiously writing) against French colonialism in Algeria in 1961, and Amílcar Cabral, who was doing much the same against Portuguese colonialists in Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau throughout the 1960s. It was Fanon who famously wrote in his essay 'Algeria unveiled': 'colonialism must accept the fact that things happen without its control, without its direction' (Fanon 1965: 63). And it was Cabral who wrote in 1969: 'The Africans of the Portuguese colonies will destroy Portuguese colonialism. It may be the last colonial regime to go, just as it is the last in terms of technical and economic development, and the last to respect the Rights of Man. But its days are surely numbered'

(Cabral 2007: 65). I mention Fanon and Cabral here because they are two well-known political figures among many who have raised the issue of the profound psychological effects of colonialism, and who endure as philosophical figures and writers who are integral to decolonisation studies.

Most students of colonial history and historiography, including myself, grew up reading Kenyan novelist and theorist Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o famously titled and damning critique of colonialism's effect on language, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), a treatise very much influenced by the writings of Fanon and, in particular, his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). Here I return to Duara's earlier comments concerning decolonisation's doubling effect as a movement and ideology that in some sense continues to make it a slippery and unsettling subject of study. Yet it also makes it a compelling topic; the fact that these threads are so deeply intertwined suggests that there is so much more about the material and ideological complexities faced at the end of empire that need to be considered more carefully.

Writing about Decolonisation

Very briefly then in this next section, I want to outline some of my thoughts in treating decolonisation as a subject and object of analysis. More generally, the critical project of postcolonial studies has been one of 'deconstructing Master narratives, unsettling binaries and admitting marginalized knowledges' (Jacobs 1996: 29). These works have looked to the strengths and vulnerabilities of colonialism and its attendant colonial subjectivities; the political and economic enduring effects of colonialism as a postcolonial condition; the continued cultural links between metropole and colony in the aftermath of empire; and finally, the difficulty of giving voice to those silenced by colonialism itself (Chatterjee 1993; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Chakravarty 2000; Dirks 2001). Interestingly, or perhaps paradoxically, many of these studies focused on the postcolonial condition have tended to overlook the crucial link, or rather historical step, the one that transformed colonies into independent nation-states: that is, the physical act of decolonisation itself. Instead, European 'decolonisation' has been rendered an undifferentiated act that occurred in almost the same way in various parts of the world, largely in the aftermath of the Second World War. Its cultural distinctiveness in particular contexts has been largely negated in favour of studying the more sweeping experience of postcolonialism as an enduring political and historical condition, one focused (and rightly so, in many ways) on the story of the colonised triumphantly taking over, as an enduring political condition, but one that steps or jumps over or brushes aside the specific experience of a place's decolonisation.

Postcolonial critic Jane Jacobs also attests to the difficulty of writing about decolonisation. She argues, quite persuasively, that decolonisation is the 'least meaningful signifier of what might be thought of as postcoloniality' (1996: 22). It is a premise I have written about elsewhere, suggesting that the concept of 'decolonisation' has been poorly understood, let alone recorded, historicised or theorised (Gupta 2007); it has often been viewed as an unproblematic given, an insignificant signifier in the transition from colony to post-colony. As Achille Mbembe argues, it was a foundational moment that was not only based on an ideal of 'universal human emancipation' (2010) but also fundamentally reshaped peoples and states of the West and, I would argue, in relation to and in the Global South itself. I suggest that it is only in the more recent past, as we increasingly distance ourselves from certain decolonisation events and moments, and with the understanding of decolonisation as a globalised practice underwriting its own history and historiography, that it has become a possible dedicated topic of research. Thus, I am invested in looking closely at decolonisation at multiple entangled levels: how it has been recorded, archived, historicised, theorised and experienced, and finally, as conditioning postcoloniality itself. I also want to make the case that postcolonial studies, as an area of enquiry, needs to consider certain enduring affective qualities not often associated with decolonisation.

Historian Raymond Betts points out in his book *Decolonization* (1998) – now considered a classic in decolonisation studies – that the word 'decolonisation' only entered the lexicon during the 1930s but did not attain popularity until thirty years later, that is, only when the concept had been put into practice. Betts also points to the difficulty of conceptualising 'decolonisation'. He writes:

It is an awkward and inelegant word, therefore, in a way, appropriate to the subject it attempts to describe. Unlike the phrase 'end of empire' which has a certain poetic economy suggesting a grand and sweeping occurrence, 'decolonization' is work-a-day, rather like other 'de' prefixed words that denote cleansing changes (Betts 1998: 1).

Furthermore, Betts rightly points out that,

Decolonization was not a process but a clutch of fitful activities and events, played out in conference rooms, acted out in protests mounted in city streets, fought over in jungles and mountains. Its results pleased no one. It was too hastily done for some, too slowly carried out for others, too incomplete in effect for most. The subject is historically loose ended; there is no end to discussion of it (Betts 1998: 2).

Writing about decolonisation as a political and material reality suggests that it was messy and complicated, occurring in a wide variety of legal settings throughout the world at very different moments in time, and with very real consequences, and that dramatically altered the livelihoods of all those involved, not only those directly in the service of the colonial state. In other words, things changed dramatically, in both good and bad ways, and overnight. We need to interrogate not only the universality of the event of decolonisation, but also look to its particularities, as a moment of closure and possibility at the same time, and in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts. Yet there are still obstacles in doing so, as historian Fred Cooper rightly points out, for tracing distinct patterns of decolonisation due to the teleology of the subject matter. He writes:

Patterns of decolonization are particularly difficult to unravel because we know the end point: the emergence of the independent state from colonial rule. It is tempting to read the history of the period from 1945 to 1960 [1975 in this case] as the inevitable triumph of nationalism and to see in each social movement taking place within a colony – be it by peasants, by women, by workers, or by religious groups – another piece to be integrated into the coming together of the nation. What is lost in such a reading are the ways in which different groups within colonies mobilized for concrete ends and used as well as opposed the institutions of the colonial state and the niches opened up in the clash of new and old structures. Whether such efforts fed into the attempts of nationalist parties to build anti-colonial coalitions needs to be *investigated, not assumed* (1997: 406, my emphasis).

Thus, rather than assume that certain coalitions between old and new took place in the space opened up by the end of colonialism, we must examine each case carefully for what these alliances and networks looked like on the ground, even those communities caught in between, like the minority groups I write about in my book that were left out of Mozambique's nationalist story of colonial independence. The work of postcolonial studies more generally – including Betts on delineating the genealogy of the term decolonisation itself, and Cooper for suggesting that we must first unravel its deeply imbedded teleologies – have contributed the foundational blocks for excavating and writing intricate histories of decolonisation.

Anthropologising Decolonisation

In this section, I turn to an exciting set of studies that have expanded the corpus of critical decolonisation studies by approaching decolonisation as both an historical event and anthropological moment, with multiple enduring effects and affects. For the case of India, anthropologist Veena

Das has traced the violence that ensued with Partition after the British quit India in 1947. She writes: 'decolonization in South Asia was accompanied by the creation of artificial states, and these were accompanied by unprecedented collective violence. The communal riots during Partition have, in this sense, been called the birthmark of the new nations of India and Pakistan' (Das 1997: 58). She identifies Partition as a 'critical event' in India's history, a space in time where the individual and the collective must be equally considered, and that cannot be overlooked as anything but integral to the shift from colony to something post through a process of decolonisation. She also shows through fine-tuned ethnographic work and a focus on the personal voices of pain that India's aftermath very much still carries residues of this violence in the everyday. Lastly, Das provides a productive anthropological framework for studying decolonisation. She writes, 'the essays in this book have a double location. They identify certain critical moments in the history of contemporary India and then redescribe them within the framework of anthropological knowledge. In the process, it is not so much that new anthropological objects are created as that *old* concepts, being asked to inhabit unfamiliar spaces, acquire a *new* kind of life' (Das 1997: 1, my emphasis). This is exactly how I approach the term decolonisation itself.

Additional writings focused on understanding decolonisation at the level of political transition have looked to the Bandung Conference of 1955, held in Bandung, Indonesia, as a moment of heightened Afro-Asian solidarity amid colonial independence. This remarkable event saw representatives of twenty-five new nations of Asia and Africa come together, fifty years after the Russo-Japanese War. Key players included China, India and Indonesia. Prasenjit Duara, whom I cited earlier, writes that this conference 'aimed to express solidarity against imperialism and racism and promote economic and cultural cooperation among these nations' (2004: 3). It gave way to the beginnings of the Non-Alignment Movement in 1961, a wider Third World force in which nations avowed their distance from both the United States and the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. Even as it was a failed movement in some sense, the idea of the 'Bandung spirit' endures.

Historian Christopher Lee has put together an important collection of essays written by a range of scholars on Bandung and its 'political afterlives' as he calls them, in his book entitled *Making a World After Empire* (2010). He presents Bandung as a 'historical moment and site generative of intersecting vantage points and their storied outcomes' (2010: 3). His understanding of Bandung and decolonisation studies as generative of something else, forges

a new direction within this area of study as well. Lee argues that even as decolonisation continues to ‘present a problem of narrative and analysis’, it is best approached as a ‘situated process’. It is one that:

requires attention to local case studies as well as broader patterns of event and meaning across space and time. Rather than signaling a linear diplomatic transfer of power from colonial to postcolonial status, decolonization equally constitutes a complex dialectical intersection of competing views and claims over colonial pasts, transitional presents, and inchoate futures (Lee 2010: 7–8).

Lee aptly suggests that revisiting moments of decolonisation ‘present[s] an opportunity for recapturing the sense of optimism, frustration, and uncertainty that characterised such occasions’ (2010: 8). His focus on the emotive or affective aspects of decolonisation is a critical area of decolonisation studies that warrants more careful analysis. Decolonisation studies, as an area of critical enquiry, is greatly indebted to, and builds on, the careful scholarship of anthropologists like Veena Das, who brings ethnography to bear on past moments of violence that were very much part of the story of India’s decolonisation. The work of historian Christopher Lee has also been crucial for developing new approaches to the study of decolonisation. The example of the Bandung moment and its ‘afterlives’ raises the issue of Afro-Asian solidarity, which is also very much part of the story of Lusophone decolonisation.

Next, I would like to outline the approach I take in my book entitled *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography* (Bloomsbury 2019). Once again, and following in the footsteps of the works of Das and Lee, I approach decolonisation as both an historical event, and as a series of mutually constituting ethnographic moments that are distinctive to time and place. I also carefully locate the politics of decolonisation in the personal and everyday, and as a way forward for connecting the histories of Lusophone India and Africa. I became invested in exploring the ties that bind metropole and colony together in uncomfortable, unsettling, and unexpected ways during colonialism’s dismantling. It is those shifts – material and ideological – which transformed colonies into something ‘post’ that are relevant here. Thus, my emphasis was less on studying decolonisation at the macro level of political transition that Das and Lee write about. Instead, I focused on its more understudied underbelly, as a deeply material and intimate act in which certain individuals had to interpellate larger state processes at a more personalised level. Such a nuanced perspective, I argue, can help us understand the multiple and sometimes contradictory experiences of

decolonisation, particularly from those who experienced it first-hand. In addition, this same approach suggests that we look at decolonisation as simultaneously a struggle over ownership and self-hood in a period of dramatic transition; that is, decolonisation was a process by which people and things increasingly started to stand in for each other, as individuals experienced profound personal loss, with the fear of starting over looming ahead.

My intention has also been to focus on the often-overlooked crucial link, or rather historical step, the one that transformed colonies into postcolonies: the physical act of decolonisation itself, which is telling, given that the 'de' in decolonisation denotes a removal of sorts. I emphasise the daunting task and sheer physicality of decolonisation in moving people and things across oceans and territories in a very heightened and rapid manner, and which, I argue, has not been addressed in most writings on decolonisation. Finally, I make a clear case in my book for suggesting that we need to look at the manner of decolonisation in context – its conditions of possibility – as fundamentally shaping the postcolonial contours of a specific place.

Textual and Visual Landscapes of Decolonisation from Portuguese Africa

There is a photograph by Ricardo Rangel, Mozambique's most illustrious photo-journalist, that reveals a most remarkable moment in history – it is the day of 19 December 1961 when people living in Lourenço Marques (present day Maputo) read the public decree announcing the quiet end of Portuguese colonialism in Goa (India) after 450 years of rule. The fact that Mozambique was also a Portuguese colony at the time the photograph was taken is not lost, neither on the viewer of the image nor the reader of the decree. It is this same powerful photograph that graces the cover of my book (2019) and was the impetus for my conceptualisation of decolonisation; from the first moment I saw the photograph, I knew I wanted to write about and through it.

I asked myself what was going on in the minds of this group of Mozambicans as they learned of Goa's demise and its integration into a burgeoning Indian nation-state, only fourteen years after its own independence from British colonial rule? How much did this moment make them think ahead to anticipate Mozambique's decolonisation? It is the representational details suggested in Rangel's image that were intriguing, and that opened up the possibility of thinking and writing about decolonisation from a different vantage point.

For my book, I became interested in reading the medium of photography (and Ricardo Rangel's images, specifically) in ethnographic and creative ways. I moved away from them as forms of evidence or historical truth claims, choosing rather to enter inside their frames to 'open a wider lens onto the world' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011) and as sites where history and anthropology are played out (Edwards 2012). As Elizabeth Edwards argues 'photography can communicate about culture, people's lives, experiences and beliefs, not at the level of surface description but as visual metaphor' (Edwards 1999: 58). I harness photography's ambivalences and 'incisive possibilities' (Edwards 1999: 54) that is, the medium's 'potential to question, to arouse curiosity, tell in different voices or see in different eyes' (Edwards 1999: 54).

I was equally invested in positioning Rangel as a historical figure working in certain spaces and places, and under restricted political conditions (where access or privilege was sometimes granted, at other times denied by colonial censors). I was very much attuned to the fact that he brought his ethnographic sensibilities to bear on the events and moments he chose to act upon, and the photographs he produced. My conversation with and impressions of Ricardo Rangel began in April 2008 when I first met him at the *Centro de Documentação e Formação Fotográfica* in Maputo, and have played a pivotal role ever since. Writing about Rangel's photography, visual historian Patricia Hayes writes: 'In the sense of the term aesthetic as a state of feeling, then it is not simply the boundaries of the sayable and visible that are being stretched by Rangel, but the boundaries of affect' (2009: 10). Her description is a powerful one that confirms the sense of urgency required in viewing decolonisation through an ethnographic lens, given the rapidity with which we are further distanced from these disquieting moments in history, with all their unanticipated effects and affects for those living through very distinct processes of decolonisation.

What follows is the five interconnected ways in which I set up my study of decolonisation. In the shift from colony to postcolony, the story of how a place becomes an independent nation-state, as it undergoes a distinct process of decolonisation, is often overlooked, misunderstood, or sidestepped. Here I am invested in dwelling (for quite some time) in this interim to return to Mbembe's provocation with which I started my reflexive essay, in the awkward and cramped space that lies between the fine line of (the end of) colonialism and its something post.

I first approached the study of decolonisation in the case of Portuguese Africa through a combined historical and anthropological lens, drawing on different eyewitness accounts (written, oral and visual) of the transfer of

state power. It is a way of trying to engage the state and state processes ethnographically following the innovative work of Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (2001). And for some of the Catholic Goan Indians living in Mozambique that I wrote about in my book, and who were caught up in these monumental changes, it was a double process of decolonisation, first for Goa in 1961 and then for Mozambique in 1975.³ Here I understand decolonisation as not a smooth political transition but rather one that was messy and complicated for those in colonial power, those disavowed of it, and those who were caught in between. I also argue that the manner of a place's decolonisation – that is, its very conditions of possibility – shape the contours of its postcolonial landscape. Precisely because Portuguese Goa was forcefully integrated into a larger Indian independent nation-state that was formerly a British colony, is what foresaw the movement of so many Goans to East Africa in search of continuing a certain way of being in the world. That Portuguese Mozambique had been ruled indirectly from Goa up until the mid-eighteenth century is also part of this story. It is due to these multiple factors that the cases of Goa and Mozambique (India and Africa) are historically and ethnographically enmeshed.

Secondly, I became interested in focusing on the materiality of decolonisation as a physical act that involves the mass movement of people, ideas and things across vast oceanic spaces within a shortened, scheduled time frame (for both Mozambique and Angola, it was over six months in 1975). In addition, it required deploying ships, caravans, cars, planes, troops, and crates. In the case of Mozambique, some 450,000 White Portuguese were given six months to depart their former colonial homes for the metropole, where they would be labelled *retornados* and treated as second-class citizens. Some 70,000-odd Portuguese soldiers were also conscripted to help get them out. It is here that colonialism reveals how much it was, in fact, a history of possession, with decolonisation showing its fallout, as a painful process of dispossession, and not only for those (Portuguese) formerly in power.

My third area of research examined the trauma of decolonisation (both singly and doubly experienced by many) as something that has largely been denied articulation as a form of loss. Even as the end of Portuguese rule in 1975 was a moment of postcolonial triumph for Mozambique, what was the experience of decolonisation on the ground, especially for those ethnic minorities (specifically for the Goan Mozambicans I write about in my book) caught between matrices of new and old power? How do we access these historical experiences of trauma, for trauma also takes on a

variety of forms, and for some I found that it was only accessible through ethnographic fieldwork and articulated through a discourse on things – for memory, nostalgia and longing often cohere in material objects – with the intimacies of politics located in the personal and personalised.

Fourth, this project of decolonisation was also one of writing post-national narratives that took its cue from the analytical work in my book. My work showcases deeply intertwined histories that not only link Goa to Mozambique across the ‘slender threads’ of the Indian Ocean (Ho 2006: 29), but also to Portugal and southern African regional histories, involving Mozambique, Angola, South Africa and annexed Namibia. Decolonisation became an entry point for bringing different governmentalities (colonial, national, apartheid) into a single field of analysis, particularly since it involved the circulation of people and things across territorial borders and oceanic waters. My historiographic interest was positioned in exposing historical and ethnographic connectivities (of people, things, and choices made) within southern Africa. It is an area of enquiry that still requires much more attention and critical analysis. Inasmuch as I can oppose writing linear histories of colonial independence, my book suggests a productive way forward to writing post-national narratives. Decolonisation here becomes the impetus for migration and diaspora-making, a swirling world of mobilities in so many directions: Goa to Mozambique, Mozambique to Portugal, Mozambique to Goa, Mozambique to South Africa, Angola to South Africa.

My fifth (and last) area of intervention had been to expand the canon of source materials we use to access narratives of decolonisation as different forms of seeing, thinking and writing about history. It is here that I juxtapose what I consider the ‘visual, the lyrical and the visceral’ (Gupta 2019). It is certain themed sets of photographs taken by Mozambican photographer Ricardo Rangel that feature in multiple chapters of my book and provide a visual landscape of Portuguese decolonisation in Lourenço Marques. Following Rui Assubuji and Patricia Hayes, I want to ask, what happens when we think about ‘photographs as history’ rather than of history (2013)? Thus, I rely on Rangel’s incredible imagery (and imaginary) to suggest the contours of individual lives and subjectivities on the cusp of colonial independence. Lyrical narratives are provided by novelist Mia Couto for Mozambique and Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, whose writings on Angola speak to the rich details of Lusophone decolonisation happening six months later, on the other side

of the African continent. Ethnography does the analytic work to access decolonisation viscerally, that is, at the level of the intimate, and helps us locate politics in the personal.

Nor do these source materials (visual, lyrical and visceral) sit easily side by side, rather they rub up against each other to suggest my larger point – that decolonisation was always messy, always complicated, particularly when seen from the perspective of those caught up in (and having little say in) these larger governmental processes. Here I am invested in exploring politics, following Patricia Hayes, as a ‘form of experience’ (2009) through Rangel’s photographs, Couto’s and Kapuściński’s thick descriptions, and my own ethnographic observations and conversations with individuals caught up in decolonisation processes. In rethinking the matrices for the Lusophone case of decolonisation between Goa (India) and Mozambique (and southern Africa more generally), I looked closely at the implications of taking on an ethnographic approach, one that I argue opens a set of distinct research possibilities and understandings. In the end, I hope to have produced a valuable archive, not of empire, but rather of *its end*, that which is easily lost or forgotten in the transition period between empire and its post.

Even as my book has its limitations and constraints with regard to its specific Lusophone context and is the product of a certain time and space, I would like to offer my five-pronged approach to the study of decolonisation as a new form of knowledge-making, and a map of sorts for developing further a future critical decolonisation studies. It suggests a new set of foci that includes a combined historical and anthropological perspective, a closer look at the materiality of decolonisation, a recognition of decolonisation’s collective and individual traumas, a viewpoint that goes beyond the singular nation-state to involve multiple colonies and governmentalities, and finally, a turn to more creative source materials to access invaluable experiences of decolonisation. I believe my approach is one that holds within it much potential for rethinking the ‘tensions of empire’, evoked so powerfully by Fred Cooper and Anne Stoler more than twenty-five years ago (1997), for exploring historically and ethnographically the ties that continue to bind metropole and multiple colonies together in uncomfortable, unsettling, and unexpected ways, and suggest in some sense the ongoing reality that was the ‘imperialism of decolonization’ itself (Louis and Robinson 2008). It is yet another form of ‘entanglement’ in the way that Sarah Nuttall describes for post-apartheid South Africa (2009). Processes of reversing the *slow violence* (Nixon 2011) that endures in colonialism’s aftermath slowly continue, even as we must be mindful that it always differs in relation to place.

Conclusion: ‘Decolonisation now’

In this essay, I have been invested in rethinking the condition of postcoloniality through the analytic of decolonisation. The conceptualisation of decolonisation would not have been possible without the foundational writings of Fanon, Cabral, and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, or the conceptual frameworks provided by Achille Mbembe, Prasenjit Duara, Jane Jacobs, Raymond Betts, and Frederick Cooper, all of which are briefly outlined here. Material processes of decolonisation occurred in a wide variety of places throughout the world with very real and long-term consequences that are still felt today, and that dramatically altered the livelihoods of those who had to make difficult life choices about where to live (and die in some sense) in an undefined future in response to larger historical shifts that were not of their own choosing.

My set of comments and insights are an attempt to expose a way of understanding the effects of colonialism at the level of individual introspection which, in turn, exposes a whole set of new registers and articulations. In more than one sense, I am invested in understanding the devastating power of (colonial) *affect* for those persons caught in the throes of its material, political and ideological demise, in its inchoateness. I have thus adopted a reflexive approach to suggest these themes need to be inscribed in the story of decolonisation the world over.

I would like to end my essay with a sense of urgency, suggesting that the study of decolonisation, as a topic of enquiry, is even more pressing given the disturbing state of global affairs we are experiencing in 2026. In a recent special issue of *Radical History Review* (October 2025) entitled ‘Decolonization now’ (hence my title for this section), the collective of editors (Asif, Moorman, Namakkal and Nikpour) reconfirm the immediacy of this topic for further analysis in their jointly authored introduction. They write:

The articles in this issue testify to how decolonization movements, their intellectual interlocutors, and their ideas continue to demand our attention. The authors are, by and large, early career scholars, and they offer histories of decolonization that traverse different actors – from the collective to the individual to the nonhuman – in diverse geographies. Their facility with decolonial theory leads to new ways of writing histories of decolonization. Each, in their own way, keeps an eye on the now (Asif et al. 2025: 6).

Interestingly, with an ‘eye on the now’, the editors also suggest an opening up of studies of decolonisation to an expanded list of actors, including not only the collective (which has been the focus of many past studies), but also the individual (which has been my foci in this essay), and finally, the non-human which will give rise to another set of productive enquiries in the near future.

Notes

1. This launch took place at WiSER on 11 June 2015 to inaugurate the South African edition (University of the Witwatersrand Press) of Achille Mbembe's much celebrated and translated book, *On the Postcolony*, first published by the University of California Press in 2001. He also made the argument during his discussion that 'Africa has been disfigured by the dichotomy between reason and emotion or affect, and this is a false one. We need to focus on the latter more.' My writings here, in the form of a reflexive essay, stem from my book *Portuguese Decolonization in the Indian Ocean World: History and Ethnography* (Bloomsbury Academic 2019) are one such attempt to bridge that dichotomy.
2. The 'Fallist' movements include the #RhodesMustFall (University of Cape Town 2015) and #FeesMustFall (Wits University 2016) student-led decolonisation movements against structural racism within the South African educational system and university space, involving changes across curriculum, financial aid and housing.
3. The category of Catholic Goan Indian is tied to the long durée history of Portuguese colonialism and conversion on the Indian subcontinent, in a south-west region called Goa (1510–1961), surrounded territorially by British India (1757–1947). See my monograph entitled *The Relic State: St Francis Xavier and the Politics of Ritual in Portuguese India* (Gupta 2014). Throughout its colonial period and particularly in the years between 1947 (which saw India's independence from British colonial rule) and 1961 (which witnessed Goa's independence from Portuguese colonialism and forced integration into a newly independent India), a steady stream of Catholic Goans emigrated to other Portuguese colonies as a way to continue living within a Lusophone colonial world, including Mozambique where they got caught up in its decolonisation.

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From the Ground Up: An Autobiographical Reflection of Sol Plaatje University's First Decade

Jesmael Mataga^{1*}

'As a product of social agency, SPU must ensure it cannot be the proverbial "ivory tower". It must remain intellectually rigorous yet socially present.'

Abstract

What does the establishment of a new university signify and entail within the context of post-independence/post-1994 southern Africa? Which historical, structural, political and subjective factors shape such an undertaking at a time when universities are under increasing scrutiny and their social role is being reconsidered? This article reflects on the inaugural decade of Sol Plaatje University (SPU) in Kimberley (2014–2025) through an autobiographical and reflexive lens, examining the institutional dynamics that informed the creation of a new university in post-independence southern Africa. The emergence of SPU coincided with growing debates about the purpose of higher education and intensified calls for the decolonisation of universities across the region, particularly following the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements. Situated within this critical historical moment, SPU's first decade provides insights into efforts to make higher education more responsive to the needs of post-independence African societies. Rather than offering a comprehensive institutional history, the article analyses selected responses to decolonisation within the Humanities and Social Sciences. It argues that SPU represents an important case study for understanding the complexities of higher education reform, institutional transformation, and the pursuit of more inclusive and epistemically transformative educational systems in post-independence Africa.

Key words: Fallist movements, institutional dynamics, complexities of higher education, decolonisation, transformative educational systems, relevance, future of African universities

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Résumé

Que signifie et qu'implique la création d'une nouvelle université dans le contexte de l'Afrique australe post-indépendance et post-1994 ? Quels facteurs historiques, structurels, politiques et subjectifs façonnent une telle entreprise à une époque où les universités font l'objet d'un examen critique croissant et où leur rôle social est réinterrogé ? Cet article propose une réflexion autobiographique et réflexive sur la première décennie de l'Université Sol Plaatje (SPU) à Kimberley (2014-2025), en examinant les dynamiques institutionnelles qui ont présidé à la création d'une nouvelle université dans l'Afrique australe post-indépendance. L'émergence de la SPU a coïncidé avec l'intensification des débats sur la finalité de l'enseignement supérieur et des appels à la décolonisation des universités dans la région, notamment à la suite des mouvements #FeesMustFall et #RhodesMustFall. Inscrite dans ce moment historique particulier, la première décennie de la SPU offre un éclairage sur les efforts visant à rendre l'enseignement supérieur davantage adapté aux besoins des sociétés africaines post-indépendance. Sans proposer une histoire institutionnelle exhaustive de l'université, l'article analyse certaines réponses aux appels à la décolonisation dans les sciences humaines et sociales. Il soutient que la SPU constitue un cas d'étude important pour comprendre les complexités de la réforme de l'enseignement supérieur, de la transformation institutionnelle et de la quête de systèmes éducatifs plus inclusifs et épistémiquement transformateurs en Afrique post-indépendance.

Mots-clés : mouvements « fallistes », dynamiques institutionnelles, complexité de l'enseignement supérieur, décolonisation, systèmes éducatifs transformateurs, pertinence, avenir des universités africaines

At the Deep End: Some Notes on Methodological and Conceptual Underpinnings

This reflection employed a desk-based literature review and systematic document analysis, complemented by an autobiographical self-reflection by the author. The initial phase of the methodological approach involved a systematic review of publicly accessible institutional documentation, government reports, and scholarly literature pertaining to the origins, establishment, early development and expansion of SPU. These sources provide critical information on the institutional objectives that informed the creation of SPU, with particular focus on its commitment to regional development, social justice, and the transformation of the higher education landscape. Central to this documentary corpus are SPU's five-

year strategic plans, which are currently in their third iteration (2025–29). In addition, annual reports, academic plans, research strategies, and other official documents offered insights into SPU's foundational principles, institutional ethos, and strategic orientations regarding research, teaching, community engagement, and academic programme development over the past decade. Second, this article adopts a biographical–reflexive methodological orientation, explicitly engaging my positionality as a member of the founding team of SPU and, more specifically, as the inaugural Head responsible for leading the establishment of what has subsequently become the university's Faculty of Humanities. The analysis draws on my experiential knowledge accumulated during SPU's formative phase and throughout the subsequent decade of the institution's consolidation and development.

This reflection is positioned within, and theoretically informed by, a growing body of scholarship that critically interrogates the changing roles, functions and responsibilities of universities in relation to marginalised communities. Of relevance is the conceptual proposition articulated by Gastrow and Kruss (2016), who contend that there is a need to establish and institutionalise a systematic and sustained 'link between universities and marginalised communities'. The university–industry–community framework underscores the need for strategic engagement of South African universities with the sectors in which they are located, particularly within historically marginalised communities or settings. The proposition is embedded within the broader scholarly discourse on the so-called 'third mission' of universities – also variously conceptualised as community engagement or academic citizenship – which encompasses activities that extend beyond the traditional core functions of teaching and research to include the systematic mobilisation and application of academic knowledge for addressing immediate, context-specific challenges within local communities. These scholarly contributions underscore that public universities, in addition to their core academic mandates of teaching and research, bear a responsibility to proactively address the social, economic and developmental imperatives of their surrounding communities. In examining university–industry–government relations, Cooper conceptualised the so-called 'triple helix' model, a triadic configuration of research-oriented interactions designed to advance both knowledge production and economic development (Cooper 2011; Carayannis, Barth and Campbell 2012). This framework foregrounds the view that the epistemic function of universities ought to be oriented towards the university as a 'public good', with a normative commitment to promoting

social justice and fostering broader processes of social development (Kruss et al. 2012; Kruss and Gastrow 2016; Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Ngandu 2024). At the core of these suggestions is the dimension of societal benefit to communities. Accordingly, universities are now perceived as firmly 'anchored' in their respective locales and embedded within specific socio-spatial contexts and are increasingly expected to operate as catalysts for local, social and economic development, within socially and economically marginalised communities (Bank, Cloete and Van Schalkwyk 2018; Fongwa 2023).

For the South African context, as it is for other African regions, the thinking underscores that universities should catalyse local economic development through participative knowledge exchange, empowering communities to address livelihood challenges while also benefiting from their (communities') indigenous knowledge systems (Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Ngandu 2024). Located in a small, economically declining mining town in one of the largest yet least economically resourced provinces of the country, the SPU operates in a context characterised by pronounced social and economic marginality. This positioning required the formulation and implementation of deliberate strategies to engage with and derive mutual benefit for local communities (Kleinsmith, 2015; Ballim, 2018; Fongwa et al. 2022; Ngandu, 2024).

As detailed in the following section, the formative strategic priorities of SPU emerged as a direct response to the economic and social marginalisation that characterises the small town located in the country's largest province. In this context, the SPU positioned itself as 'a university within a town' (SPU, 2015: 14), articulating an institutional vision, mission and set of values grounded explicitly in principles of social justice (Ballim, 2016; Fongwa and Luescher 2022). The establishment of SPU occurred at a historical moment when the role of universities in a post-independence, post-1994 sociopolitical context was under critical scrutiny. Higher education institutions were increasingly condemned as sites that reproduced colonial power relations through their institutional architectures, spatial configurations, and modalities of community and knowledge engagement. This critique was vividly manifested in student protests and the broader intellectual debates on the decolonisation of universities (Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Jansen 2019). As an institution established in the post-1994 democratic era, the SPU was expected to contribute constructively to addressing the deep social inequities and structural harms produced by apartheid. It was expected that a university founded in this period

would differentiate itself from historically established institutions that were widely regarded as less responsive to or less representative of the socio-political and economic realities of wider South African society.

While this reflection draws on my own positionality in the Faculty of Humanities, notably there are several other social and community-based projects that have not been the focus of this paper. The university's growing contribution is substantiated by a body of commentary, reflection and empirical analysis on its impact, which, taken together, tends to project a predominantly positive assessment of both its historical trajectory and its prospective role (Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Ballim 2016; Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Mataga, Mokae and Marumo 2022). These studies have already revealed the significant role of the SPU in economic stimulation and community interdependence, reflecting the institution's central position in the city's economic resurgence (Ngandu 2024). Although a growing body of literature has, over the past decade, increasingly recognised SPU as an 'anchor institution in place-based development' (Fongwa 2023: 92; see also Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Ballim 2016; Coetzee and Werner, 2018; Fongwa and Luescher 2022; Ngandu 2024), the extent to which the university can substantively realise and sustain the roles and responsibilities implied by this designation necessitates continuous monitoring, as well as ongoing, investigation and analysis.

The Sol Plaatje University (SPU) in Context

Brian Willan, a distinguished historian renowned for his study of the figure of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (commonly referred to as Sol Plaatje), after whom the university is named, authored a meticulously researched and richly illustrated monograph entitled *Sol Plaatje University: An Idea and its Origins* (Willan 2020). In this monograph, Willan (2020) presents a systematic and analytically rigorous account of the historical foundations underlying the establishment of the university, meticulously tracing the institution's development over a ten-year period. The study documents, in detail, the key phases of its institutional consolidation and academic achievements, situating the university within the broader higher education landscape as one of only two universities established in South Africa in the post-1994 era. Willan argues that although the SPU was formally created by a central government directive, its real origins lie in a longer local and regional history shaped by sociopolitical struggle. This historical embeddedness informs the institution's character, priorities and ethos. A key stated goal of the SPU is to redress historical injustices by widening educational access for previously excluded individuals and communities. (Willan 2020).

The SPU is one of two newly established public universities created after 1994 within the state sponsored ‘Development Framework for New Universities in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga Provinces’, a South African government framework that outlines the planning, structure, and establishment of two new universities (Sol Plaatje University, SPU, and the University of Mpumalanga, UMP) (DHET 2012), which sought to address inadequate post-school education capacity and promote regional development through academic hubs, catalysed by anchor universities. SPU was named in honour of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932), a prominent cosmopolitan intellectual in South African history, acclaimed for his scholarly achievements and substantial contributions to African political discourse and literary heritage. Sol Plaatje was a multi-faceted South African intellectual whose life’s work at the intersection of journalism, literature and politics laid the foundation for the modern liberation struggle. As the first Secretary General of the South African Native National Congress (later the ANC), he became a voice against the 1913 Land Act, documenting its devastating social impact in his seminal work, *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje 1916). Beyond his political activism, Plaatje was a linguistic pioneer who translated Shakespeare into Setswana and authored *Mhudi*, the first novel in English published by a Black South African – and a literary work recently re-examined for its profound historical insights. Recent scholarship emphasises Plaatje’s extraordinary role as a cultural bridge-builder who navigated the complexities of colonial identity while fiercely advocating for African land rights and national unity (Willan 2018; Haire 2020; Mokae and Willan 2020; Willan and Mokae 2023).

Notably, the SPU was officially inaugurated in 2014, following the South African government’s initiative to establish higher education institutions in regions that had been historically marginalised under the apartheid education system. Located in the historically significant city of Kimberley in the Northern Cape province, SPU was conceptualised as a strategic intervention to address established geographic and socio-economic inequalities. The region has long been characterised by widespread poverty and underdevelopment, accompanied by limited access to advanced academic infrastructure and resources (DHET 2012; Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Ballim 2016, 2018; Ngandu 2024). The establishment of SPU was a key part of the post-1994, post-apartheid agenda to dismantle racially segregated education by promoting equitable access to quality higher education. In 2024, SPU marked its tenth anniversary, a milestone that invites critical reflection not only on university formation in post-apartheid South Africa, but also on the changing roles, purposes and significance of

universities more broadly – especially as their value is increasingly questioned amid growing calls for decolonisation and a systematic re-examination of their mandates, visual iconographies and curricula.

In 2015, the #FeesMustFall movement, led by student organisations across South Africa, articulated demands for tuition-free higher education and called for the transformation of universities into sites of critical engagement with the enduring colonial epistemic and structural legacy (Nyamnjoh 2016; Shepherd 2024). Consequently, the establishment of the SPU was not only a response to region-specific educational needs but was also aligned with broader national discourses on higher education reform and the decolonisation of academic epistemologies (Leibowitz 2017). Unlike older South African universities, the SPU was considered unencumbered by the history of advantage and disadvantage associated with higher education institutions established during the previous political dispensation (SPU 2015), thereby positioning it as an ideal environment for decolonial methodologies.

Yunus Ballim, the founding and inaugural Vice-Chancellor and Principal of SPU, provides a critical reflection on the complex challenges associated with establishing a new university in the post-1994 context, a period during which the role, function, and societal value of universities within a rapidly transforming, post-independence social order were subject to intensive examination and debate. Ballim pertinently asked:

How do you start a university? What Institutional arrangements make the most sense? What academic programmes ? ... the fact that we could ask such questions also meant we could reimagine the responses, and re-envision the way in which a university should rise to the challenge of its social purpose in a South Africa after Apartheid, unfettered by the historical legacy that burdened the development of so many of the existing Universities in the country? (Ballim 2020: 4)

Founded within a significant historical and socio-economic context, SPU adopted a clear social justice mandate from its inception. Its inaugural (2014–19) Strategic Plan set the tone, declaring that the university would work to ‘enhance democratic practice and social justice in society, and promote social, economic and educational development through teaching, research, and engagement with the community’ (SPU 2014). Across its three strategic plans (2015–19, 2019–24, 2025–29), social justice remains a central guiding philosophy, with its Vision describing it as ‘a university critically engaged in learning, research and development,

while improving democratic practice and social justice in society' (SPU 2014: 5). Further, and in line with this social justice focus, the university's Mission also envisaged the institution as:

an intellectual space for the production of ideas and knowledge that facilitate and enrich participation in, and democratic transformation of political, social, cultural, and economic life. As a functional symbol of the new South African order, the SPU is unencumbered by the history of advantage and disadvantage related to the institutions of higher learning established during the previous political dispensation (SPU 2015: 11).

What is also notable and has been adequately documented is that in its initial decade, the strategic positioning of SPU within Kimberley as a 'university in the city' was firmly established during the university's formative years, serving as a foundation for its role and influence in a town that was experiencing economic decline (Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; Willan 2020; Fongwa et al. 2022; Ngandu 2024). SPU demonstrated an awareness of the importance of this geopolitical positioning, evidenced by the way it articulated its institutional identity and strategic orientation as a 'university in town' rather than a typical 'university town' (SPU 2014: 14). The inaugural strategic plan of SPU explains this positioning by proposing that the institution would, over time, catalyse the transformation of Kimberley into a classical 'university town', understood as an urban environment that develops in form, function and character around and as a direct consequence of the presence of the university (SPU 2014). SPU rightly acknowledged that as a small city, Kimberley already possessed its own character and identity as a city that extended beyond the scope of SPU. However, the university also noted that it was undeniable that its location in Kimberley would eventually significantly influence the economic prospects and the development trajectory of the city (Kleinsmith and Horn 2015; SPU 2015; Willan 2020; Ngandu 2024).

This placement and positioning was an ample opportunity for a university that would integrate within its location and would create ways of working that made incisive contributions to the local community, the city and beyond. In line with this positioning, the SPU recognised that it would play a major role in, and actively help shape, the future development trajectory of Kimberley. For example, it was clear that the spatial plan of the university, intricately inserted into the centre of the city, would change and reshape the urban plan of the city (see Image 2). Therefore, in the physical planning stage of the university, it was envisaged that the new campus would become embedded in the urban fabric in a way that would benefit both the university and the surrounding community through the evolving

socio-economic and cultural opportunities generated by their relationship. Spatially and economically, the establishment of a new university, in the middle of the city, would profoundly reconfigure the dynamics of what was otherwise a declining mining city.

From the Ground Up: New Universities in 'Marginal' Places

In early 2015, on my first day of work at SPU, I walked into a room with two colleagues – the university called them the 'Heritage Studies programme team'. After my arrival, the three of us formed the nucleus of what was supposed to mutate into a fully-fledged school. At this stage, the three-member team ran a one-year undergraduate Higher Certificate in Heritage Studies, which has remained a flagship programme at the university (Benneyworth and Pinto 2019). In 2015, the inaugural cohort of students in Humanities/Heritage Studies was enrolled, and in early 2016 the certificate programme produced its first thirteen graduates at Sol Plaatje University. Although modest in scale, this initial graduation was of considerable symbolic significance, as it marked the early tangible outcome of the broader process of establishing new universities in South Africa in the post-1994 period. In the modest graduation hall, with students accompanied by their families and friends, and supported by a small but dedicated and enthusiastic complement of administrative and academic staff, Sol Plaatje University was formally integrated into the core institutional landscape of public higher education in South Africa.

On a personal level, I experienced considerable anxiety about the decision to join the newly established university. This concern was primarily informed by the fact that by the time I joined the university, there was very little physically and structurally at that time and also that my appointment at SPU coincided with a particularly volatile phase in the South African higher education sector, marked by widespread unrest across university campuses, as students mobilised to advocate for free and decolonised education for economically marginalised groups. When I joined SPU in early 2015, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall were at their peak, calling for the unravelling of dominant knowledge practices and university iconographies, recognition of diverse ways of knowing, and reduced university costs. Being at SPU then was surreal. The university was only a few months old, and building what many hoped would be a university free of colonial and apartheid legacies was both challenging and exhilarating. It quickly became clear that, despite our recent establishment, we could not remain insulated from the broader trends and systemic forces shaping higher education. Possibly because it was newly established and had a relatively small student



Image 2: Part of SPU's Central Campus in 2025, showing the Main Library in the centre and the Moroka Multipurpose Building on the right, with Rock Art motifs drawn from Driekopseiland, a petroglyph site near Kimberley, etched into its metal façade (Photograph : SPU)

The establishment of a new university encompasses a multitude of concurrent processes. The first among these was a significant infrastructure project (Image 1), which involved the construction of new facilities and the rehabilitation of existing structures. Images 1 to 3 illustrate the degree of development experienced by SPU. Although these may initially appear as mere visual representations of the infrastructural segment, they are rich in symbolism, conveying the visual, emblematic and conceptual ideals associated with the establishment of a new university in post-apartheid South Africa and within the broader context of postcolonial Africa.

During the development of physical infrastructure, the university had to put in place administrative and governance frameworks, design and implement reputable academic programmes, and build a robust human resource base while developing a collaborative network with local communities – all initiated *de novo*. Therefore, from the outset of this institution-building process, it was evident to those involved during the formative years that establishing a new university in the post-1994 period represented a distinctive opportunity to create an institution that was, at least in principle, unburdened/ relatively less burdened by the inherited structural and ideological legacies of apartheid. This awareness is reflected in the university's initial strategic plan, which positioned the project of establishing the new university ostensibly unencumbered by

the legacy of colonialism and apartheid (SPU 2015–19: 11). However, it was recognised while this historical legacy persisted and remained, in practical terms, inescapable, as they were partly manifested in prevailing socio-economic conditions, including unemployment, widening social inequalities, and pervasive poverty. Regardless of the persistent legacy of the economic and social structures of the apartheid-era, the university perceived itself as ‘a functional symbol of the new South African order’ and saw itself as ‘unencumbered by the history of advantage and disadvantage pertaining to the institutions of higher learning established during the previous political dispensation’ (SPU 2014: 12). The university’s newness afforded a unique opportunity to design the university from its inception with decolonial principles in mind, rather than dismantling established colonial and apartheid structures. This moment in establishing a new university was seen as enabling institutional systems and curricula free from colonial and apartheid legacy, thus making a substantively decolonised university possible (Fongwa 2023). In particular, although the university’s activities and curriculum were not explicitly labelled as decolonial, efforts were made to challenge the inherited and deeply ingrained practices and systems embedded within policies, structures and curricula in South Africa (Ballim 2018). The strategies ranged from mundane to strategic. For example, given the institution’s modest size and the fact that most students came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, all students received accommodations and support, including access to world-class information technology (IT), food, and other necessities. It was recognised that the material conditions of the students, at least during their time on campus, were vital for effective learning. From its inception, the institution articulated the ambition to establish itself as a world-class university and strategically positioned itself as an ‘ICT-enabled university, making substantial investments in educational technologies to support teaching and learning for academic staff and students’ (SPU 2014: 1).

Due in part to its relatively small enrolment, as well as a deliberate institutional emphasis on high-quality pedagogy, holistic attention to students’ lived experiences and intentional development of the ‘third curriculum’, SPU has achieved pass and throughput rates that exceed national averages, compared to sector-wide trends of decreasing performance on these indicators. The high patterns in pass rates challenged the dominant assumption that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or materially under-resourced schools are inherently less likely to succeed in higher education. Rather, the high graduate throughput rates at SPU indicate that, despite the

economically marginalised background of students, the provision of adequate material, social and academic (including technical) support enables them to achieve academic results that are comparable to or even exceed those of students coming from resource-rich backgrounds and institutional environments.

A salient aspect of SPU's institutional trajectory as an emerging university seeking to confront and transcend established structures of inequality in the apartheid-era, was its commitment to a social justice-orientated agenda (Ngandu 2024). As articulated in the preceding section, the formative strategic plan of SPU, along with its Vision, Mission, and Values, shows the university's commitment to a social justice agenda. The university's Vision Statement, sees the SPU as 'A university critically engaged in learning, research and development – while enhancing democratic practice and social justice in society' and posits that, as 'a site of learning, the SPU is envisaged as an intellectual space for the production of ideas and knowledge that facilitate and enrich participation in, and democratic transformation of political, social, cultural and economic life' (SPU 2014: 1). Furthermore, SPU's inaugural Strategic Plan (2014–19) assertively declared that 'the drive for equity, social justice, and democracy is a particularly significant policy focus in the context of South African higher education, given the high levels of poverty and inequality that remain endemic in society' (SPU 2015: 5). Its mission and positioning are defined as follows:

to become an institution of higher learning uniquely positioned to: graduate citizens competent and capable of realising the aspirations of society; produce new knowledge impacting on key challenges of the region; engage critically with communities of discourse and communities of people in order to search for pathways to equitable development (SPU 2014: 12).).

In its formative years, SPU was highly intentional about its identity. As a university woven into the fabric of a historic city in a culturally and linguistically diverse province, the university's iconography clearly expressed its local origins, while expressing universal knowledge ideals. Its emblem, bearing the motto 'Light from Africa for Humanity' in the province's three main languages, rooted the institution locally while expressing its value and contribution to universal knowledge. The emblem features a local quiver tree – valued for its environmental, cultural and medicinal significance – topped by a star symbolising a beacon of hope (Image 2). Also, named after historical and intellectual icon Solomon T. Plaatje, SPU draws on his well-documented forward-looking cosmopolitanism and intellectual achievement (Willan 2018,

2022; Willan and Mokae 2023). By taking his name, the university affirmed the value and contribution of African intellectuals, including those whom apartheid and colonialism could not silence. Naming its main buildings after characters from some of the country's earliest literary works, including African-language texts like *Mhudi*, SPU foregrounds the resilience and importance of African knowledge and intellectual traditions (Haire 2020; Mokae and Willan 2020).

The university's location in the city symbolises the revitalisation and reclamation of a place long shaped by extractive mining, which began with the discovery of diamonds, just moments from where the university now stands. The university's presence in the city centre has reshaped the architectural and visual landscape and stands as a major visual and symbolic challenge to the lasting effects of extractive colonialism (see Image 1). Its recent acceptance of a donation from the De Beers diamond company epitomises this 'reverse engineering' of colonial extractivist symbols: the Harry Oppenheimer House, named after a leading diamond mining benefactor and the tallest building in the city, is now owned by the university. Beyond its striking physical presence, this handover of the building to the university is deeply symbolic. It suggests a forward-looking, post-1994 institution, with African knowledge reclaiming a symbol of capitalist extraction. The university has also grounded its identity on the city's history and heritage. Within and next to its three campuses are key Kimberley heritage sites, including the Oppenheimer Gardens, the Diggers Memorial – honouring colonial mining and the labour behind it – and statues of figures such as Cecil John Rhodes, Sol T. Plaatje and Frances Baard, all historically linked to the city. In addition to this are building facades decorated after ancient rock engraving from a site near the city or mosaics crafted after the province's rich geological and palaeontological heritage (Image 2). Adjacent to campus are sites like the Sol Plaatje Museum and fractured heritage sites such as the Malay Camp Memorial, dedicated to residents forcibly removed between 1939 and 1959.

In many ways, the university contributes to these layered and sometimes contested histories of this historic city. Building on SPU's institutional commitment to social justice, its rootedness in place, and its effort to transcend the legacy of apartheid highlighted in this section, the following section examines how the university responded to debates and demands for decolonising higher education. It shows how SPU's formative years were shaped by these broader calls, focusing on curriculum design and community participation in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Indigenous African Languages, and how approaches in these disciplines reflected ongoing decolonisation discussions.

SPU and the Need for Epistemic Decolonisation of the Humanities

As a new institution established in 2014, the SPU emerged during a period when calls for the decolonisation of South African universities were intensifying. These calls for decolonisation gained significant momentum, especially after the 2015–16 #FeesMustFall/#RhodesMustFall student protests, which not only opposed tuition fee increases but also challenged persistent colonial structures in higher education (Langa 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Jansen 2018; Reiter 2022). The aftermath of the #RhodesMustFall movement significantly stimulated discussions, debates and methodologies on the decolonisation of universities. A continuous array of writings from academics, university bureaucrats, student formations, and general communities across Africa has centred on the questions of decolonisation. Despite the fissures, debates and disagreements within the colonialism discourse, such discussions have prompted a re-evaluation of the curriculum and how curriculum decolonisation now constitutes the core of the global academic knowledge project (Mbembe 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; Leibowitz 2017; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu 2018; Jansen 2018; Jansen et al. 2019). In southern Africa, this is evidenced by the increasing publications on decolonising universities, focusing on transformation, change, and the associated struggles and achievements (Jansen 2016, 2023; Habib 2019). Located within ongoing discussions, debates and contests on decolonising universities in Africa, these writings emphasise the persistent 'struggle for the soul of a university' (Chetty and Merrett 2014).

In the Humanities, focus was placed on revising curricula in response to perceived threats to the Humanities and Social Sciences in a neoliberal context that prioritises utilitarian fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). In South Africa, the response was reflected in the Department of Higher Education and Training's *Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences* (DHET 2011), which aimed to reinstate the importance of the Humanities and Social Sciences as central. Since then, persistent discussions have continued on how to transform universities from 'ivory towers to ebony towers' through 'transforming curricula in the humanities and social sciences' (Tella and Motala 2020; Reiter 2022). There is increasing consensus that decolonising the humanities in Africa requires critically reassessing the Eurocentric curriculum, challenging the dominance of European epistemologies, and recognising how these have marginalised other ways of knowing (Mbembe 2015, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Zondi 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancioğlu 2018). The approach calls for incorporating African epistemological systems, languages

and cultural paradigms into the curriculum, reaffirming their worth and legitimacy. This demands a rigorous review of content, pedagogical methods, and theoretical paradigms in humanities education, questioning their relevance and biases

The establishment of the SPU was directly influenced by the objective of decentralising higher education and enhancing its accessibility to historically marginalised communities in the Northern Cape. In pursuing its social justice agenda and acknowledging its geopolitical context, the inaugural leadership of the SPU, although not explicitly stating it, aimed to incorporate the ideals of decolonisation into the very essence of the university, particularly within the curriculum, language of instruction, and institutional culture. Its location in a relatively marginalised community in itself provided a foundation for reimagining teaching, learning, and research methodologies distinct from those of older universities (Kruss and Gastrov 2015). One of the principal strategies used by the SPU in participating in the decolonisation agenda was through the development of its curriculum. The university's dedication to curriculum transformation was in direct alignment with the broader national discourse concerning the decolonisation of higher education. In response to the period's calls for decolonisation, SPU's academic programmes and community engagement initiatives were designed to align with these discourses. As noted in the 2016 Annual Report, in the Humanities and Social Sciences, SPU prioritised offering academic programmes that emphasised local, African and indigenous knowledge systems, alongside the more conventional 'Western' academic models (SPU 2016b).

Reflecting on debates on decolonisation, the team recognised the need to transform curricula without marginalising other forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Rather, as Ballim argued,

Our curricula must be ever respectful of the irreducible plurality of human opinion. This means that we have to avoid calls for us to acknowledge only one interpretation of history and to genuflect before the singular ideological position – whichever one happens to be in the mind of the particular group in discussion with us at the time (Ballim 2018: 143).

Ballim also called for,

the transformation process of the curriculum has to recognise our students as autonomous learners who can form their individual opinions after careful consideration and reflection [and that] there are no forms of knowledge or ways of knowing that are not accessible to some of our students simply because of their 'Blackness', 'poorness', 'Africanness', etc. (Ballim 2018: 143).

In its initial academic plan, the SPU identified the field of Heritage Studies and African languages as significant focal areas, articulating that,

One of the notable attributes of the Kimberley and the Northern Cape lies in its exceptionally rich repository of human and natural heritage. This repository is present both in structured collections and in informal communal and natural contexts... Situated within this yet-to-be-documented narrative, SPU possesses a distinct opportunity to make a considerable contribution to global intellectual advancement and understanding within this academic domain (SPU 2014: 13).

The institution's location made heritage studies, especially on local Indigenous communities, heritage sites, languages, archival resources, and knowledge systems, central to its research and teaching. By explicitly recognising the importance of local Indigenous epistemologies, cultural heritage, and languages in its inaugural strategic and academic plan, SPU committed to drawing on its immediate socio-cultural environment to shape its research agenda, pedagogical practices and community engagement (see Image 3).

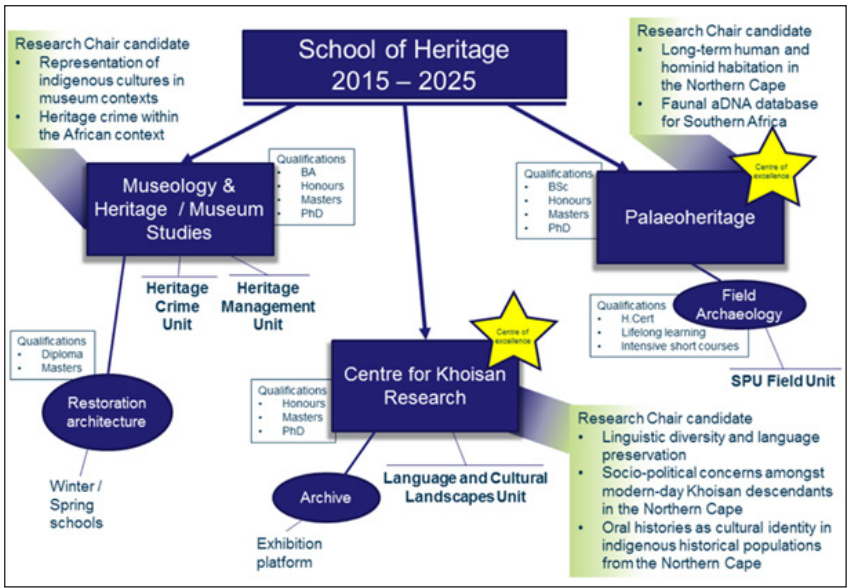


Image 3: The plan for the School of Heritage at SPU. This diagrammatic presentation of the research and teaching thrust for a School of Heritage, was the foundational document for the establishment and growth of what is now the Faculty of Humanities (After Olivier 2014: 5)

Consequently, when the school began to develop academic programmes, colleagues were acutely aware of contemporary 'decolonial' discourses, and the expectations placed on a newly established university such as ours. During the formative years of our faculty, the work undertaken by colleagues in Languages, Anthropology, Archaeology, and Heritage Studies serves as salient examples, illustrating both a heightened awareness of decolonial imperatives and a commitment to reflexive practices informed by decolonial theory. For instance, drawing on their experience of developing and teaching foundational programmes in Archaeology and Heritage Studies, two of my colleagues reflected on how these disciplines have advanced decolonial approaches in higher education by engaging with the established, yet fractured and highly contested heritage landscape shaped by the town's colonial mining history (Benneyworth and Pinto 2019). Working with local museums to give practical exposure to students, most of whom had never encountered museums or heritage sites, colleagues found that museums and public culture spaces offer tools within the existing heritage landscape to research, teach, engage and challenge entrenched colonial biases. Another colleague's undergraduate Anthropology course incorporated collaborative work with artists and a local dance/performance collective, culminating in a film, a musical performance, and a student-curated exhibition that challenged the city's mining history, physically represented by the 'Big Hole', left in the centre of the city from long years of diamond mining (Truys 2018). In a reflection, curiously entitled 'Trash, teaching and the city: The "Big Hole Counter Narrative" project and the Urban Anthropology' (Truys 2018: 55), Truys suggests that 'by interweaving practice-based engagement, anthropological theory, and alternative research and narrative methodologies, the course constituted an intervention that critically interrogated and disrupted the developmentalist trajectory that underpins the 'romanticised and sparkling' representation of Kimberley as the 'city of diamonds' (Truys 2018: 55). Commenting on Truys' work, Majombozi (2018: 67) notes that the institutional novelty of Sol Plaatje University creates a 'clean slate' for critical reflection and experimentation with new pedagogical approaches in Kimberley, a city marked by a harsh colonial and apartheid past. Majombozi (2018) likewise commends Truys' paradigm of embodied learning, which exposes usually unseen phenomena, creates space for learners to articulate marginalised or suppressed experiences and perspectives, and supports interpretation via multiple sensory channels. According to Majombozi, this model enabled students to communicate and uncover previously concealed stories, especially when they were encouraged to draw on semiotic modes and languages that matched their own meaning-making practices, such as song, dance, and other forms of embodied expression (Majombozi 2018).

In addition to the opportunity for new decolonial methods of curriculum development and delivery, represented by the two cases above, the university's location in the linguistically diverse Northern Cape provided space for a decolonial thrust rooted in local Indigenous languages. Building on scholarly debates concerning the transformative capacity of language (Mkhize 2020), and on analyses of the role of African languages in the decolonisation of South African higher education institutions (Helland 2013; Kaschula and Wolff 2020), the Northern Cape province presented a strategic research site for interrogating the linguistic challenges that have characterised post-1994 South Africa (Prah 2018). This context further enabled an exploration of the ways in which African languages can function as central to the broader decolonisation processes (Wa Thiong'o 1986). Given the highly multilingual context of the Northern Cape province – where Khoi and San, Afrikaans, Setswana, isiXhosa, and several other African languages have historically coexisted, and where there is sustained advocacy for the official recognition and revitalisation of Khoi and San languages – the prioritisation of these Indigenous languages represented a strategically advantageous point of departure for institutional intervention at the university. In alignment with this mandate, the School of Humanities identified the critical imperative to re-establish intellectual discourse in Indigenous languages and to promote their systematic development, particularly within contemporary linguistic and academic domains. SPU acknowledged the long-standing, structurally embedded marginalisation of African languages and the attendant epistemic erasure experienced by communities for whom these languages are primary means of communication and thus worked towards the systematic recovery and reintegration of the knowledge encoded within these linguistic and cultural systems. Consequently, recognising both the importance of engaging with the 'language question' (Brock-Utne 2003) and the pivotal role of language in processes of national transformation, reconstruction and development (Webb 2002; Alexander 2012), particularly given the persistent adverse sociopolitical and economic conditions and the marginalised status of African languages (Beukes 2009; Cakata and Segalo 2017; Prah 2018), SPU strategically prioritised the advancement and systematic development of African languages.

As a strategic intervention, and as reflected in its inaugural strategic and academic plans, the SPU elected to significantly contribute to creative writing and reading in African languages (SPU 2025). The university intentionally leveraged the extensive human, natural, cultural and linguistic heritage of the Northern Cape to establish a robust foundational framework for teaching and learning, research and community engagement (SPU 2015). At the level of academic disciplines within the School of Humanities,

a principal mechanism through which the school engaged with and responded to processes of decolonisation in its humanities curriculum was the prioritisation and systematic integration of African languages within its foundational degree offerings, specifically the Bachelor of Arts (General) programmes. In this context, the school undertook a formal commitment to provide African languages as both a medium of instruction and discrete subjects of study. This decision reflects an acknowledgement that African languages function not merely as instruments of everyday communication, but also as critical epistemic and cultural resources through which indigenous knowledge systems are generated, transmitted, legitimised and valorised. Within the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme, and with the explicit aim of promoting multilingualism and intercultural tolerance, all students were required to complete a compulsory introductory module in conversational proficiency in an African language that did not correspond to their mother tongue. Although the BA programme offered majors in more than ten additional disciplines, fields such as Heritage Studies and creative writing in African languages functioned as key platforms for introducing students to multiple epistemological frameworks and for advancing the status of marginalised African languages, as well as diverse archival repertoires and knowledge systems. In addition to academic programmes focused on African heritage and to the growing recognition of the centrality of linguistic issues within the social sciences and humanities in post-1994 South Africa (Cakata and Segalo 2017), the following section synthesises selected institutional strategies through which the university contributed to the revitalisation and advancement of marginalised Indigenous languages.

SPU, Communities and Indigenous Languages: Repatriation and Recovery²

As highlighted in the preceding section, Sol Plaatje University (SPU) has explicitly prioritised the revitalisation and advanced the re-intellectualisation of local and Indigenous languages. Located in the Northern Cape province, characterised by its linguistic diversity and a tapestry of indigenous languages, including the threatened and endangered Nama, Khoi and San languages, SPU's involvement in the revitalisation and promotion of local or marginalised languages, as well as the reopening of Indigenous linguistic and cultural archives and epistemologies, has been notable (Mataga, Mokae and Marumo 2022). SPU acknowledged that African languages possess the transformative potential to recalibrate and significantly deepen decolonisation processes within African higher education institutions (SPU 2015). This critical intervention acknowledges the enduring linguistic

marginalisation and the systematic epistemic erasure of valuable knowledges produced within, and transmitted through, the communities that speak these languages. Universities occupy a pivotal position in the revitalisation and intergenerational transmission of Indigenous languages, functioning as key institutional actors in their documentation, preservation and sustainable development. The strategic approach adopted by SPU deliberately engaged with the longstanding 'language question' in Africa, which problematises the precarious sociolinguistic position and institutional status of African languages and seeks to redress both their historical and contemporary marginalisation (Wa Thiong'o 1992; Brock-Utne 2003, 2015; Prah 2017).

SPU's strategy was to deploy the discipline of 'Creative Writing' as a dynamic pedagogical and cultural intervention, on the basis that the contemporary culture of creative writing and reading in African languages in South Africa remains markedly underdeveloped. This condition was taken to warrant a deliberate and systematic institutional response by the university (SPU 2014: 15; cf. Mkhize 2020). This was complemented by targeted community-based, capacity-building project aimed at inculcating writing in the local languages. The projects integrated the intellectual expertise of language and literature scholars from SPU with the professional skills of experienced translators and community-based language practitioners.

In this regard, SPU's 'repatriation of letters' translation project, is worth noting (see Mataga, Mokae and Marumo 2022). The translation project was rooted in local concept – '*phetsolelo*' drawn from the local Setswana³ language. According to the project lead, Professor Shole, '*phetsolelo*' signifies translation as a form of repatriation and the recovery of values, symbols and profound meanings that are often lost when African experiences are depicted in foreign languages such as English (Shole 2012, 2016; Shole and Pooe 2020). According to Shole and Pooe (2020), this notion of repatriation or '*phetsolelo*' derives from the Setswana proverb '*ga e phetsolele nageng*', which translates to 'that which is in foreign lands must be returned home' (Shole 2016). Shole elucidates that the proverb is customarily related to the return of mortal remains or sacred elements to their original location and community. In this context, African narratives written in languages other than indigenous African languages represent a form of linguistic exile, where '*phetsolelo*' serves as a repatriation mechanism, restoring these narratives to their origins (Shole 2016; Shole and Pooe 2020).

Therefore, inspired by an innovative conceptualisation of translation as the reclamation of intrinsic values, symbols, cultural essences and diverse ways of knowing, the formidable 'repatriation of letters project' embarked on an ambitious journey to meticulously translate a curated selection of

English novels and other compelling creative literature back into the rich linguistic tapestry of Setswana (SPU 2016). The primary objective of this innovative programme was twofold: first, to systematically address and ameliorate the critical shortage of novels written in Setswana; and second, to affect a substantive 'repatriation' of those narratives and literary works, which although originally produced in English, are profoundly embedded in Setswana cultural frameworks, idiomatic structures and expressive conventions. The specialised project team systematically identified a curated corpus of seven books (comprising six novels and one work of non-fiction) for implementation in this pilot phase of the programme. The selection was governed by stringent inclusion criteria stipulating that the texts be written in English while being firmly situated within Setswana-speaking communities, with additional preference accorded to works whose authors are native Setswana speakers or, optimally, satisfy both conditions. The selected literary masterpieces of the literary repatriation project, comprising *Mhudi* by Sol Plaatje, *Taung Wells* by Martin Koboekae, *Sarcophagus* by Tuelo Gabonewe, *This Book Betrays My Brother* by Kagiso Lesego Molope, *Maru* by Bessie Head, *Call Me Woman* by Ellen Khuzwayo, and *Matters of Life and Death* by Lesego Malepe, stand as a testament to the rich tapestry of Setswana linguistic influence. Each of these titles either originates predominantly from Setswana-speaking authors or is deeply embedded within Setswana-speaking communities, thereby reflecting and sustaining a high degree of cultural specificity and authenticity.

This collection embodies a vibrant spectrum of themes and writing styles, and features some of the most pivotal works crafted by South African writers over the past century. Despite their English articulation, these titles resonate deeply with the cultural and linguistic nuances of Setswana. The project underscores the intrinsic value of African languages, highlighting their capacity to convey and sustain the totality of societal knowledge, as a society's worldview is inherently embedded within its language. As recently noted by Awung and Wagner (2025), Plaatje's linguistic style in *Mhudi* is aligned with that of other African authors who are argued to engage in a form of mental translation, transferring creative concepts from their indigenous languages to European languages during the writing process. In reviewing the translation of *Mhudi*, Awung and Wagner (2025) concur with Shole (2016), that African literature written in English, such as *Mhudi*, may be aptly characterised as local language narratives, articulated in English, and that this characterisation suggests that its translation requires the deployment of strategies designed to reconstitute, as far as possible, the cultural worldview of the source text within its original cultural frame of reference in the target text (Awung and Wagner 2025: 63).

In addition to the translation initiative, a further community-based language revitalisation programme was the annual Northern Cape Writers Festival (NCWF). This festival was complemented by a range of community-oriented activities designed to engage emerging and established writers, as well as the broader reading public. Held annually since its inception in 2007, the NCWF – co-hosted by a public department and various stakeholders in the arts sector (SPU 2016; DSAC 2019; SPU 2019b) – has achieved considerable recognition as a transformative literary platform, effectively mediating between emerging local talent and the national, regional and international literary landscapes. The festival's programming included an annual 'Sol Plaatje Lecture', which became the cornerstone of the festival and often focused on intellectual traditions and South African heritage (SPU 2016). The programme also included workshops and round tables on creative writing and publishing, along with panel discussions on topics such as indigenous languages, protest poetry and the creative process. The events included the Children's Festival, a dedicated programme for young readers that encourages a culture of reading from an early age. Additionally, one of its most notable milestones was the *ArtLit* initiative, which was intended to forge transatlantic collaborations between South African and American artists, leading to international exhibitions (SPU 2016, 2019b; DSAC 2019). Beyond the one-week programme and awards, the NCWF year-long programme has comprised community workshops and public readings that have successfully nurtured a robust culture of reading and writing in all provincial districts, ensuring that South African stories are told in local African languages like Nama, Setswana and Afrikaans (SPU 2016, 2019b, DSAC 2019).

Using this space and leveraging its intellectual resources, SPU has adeptly facilitated the convergence of a thriving community of writers, both experienced and emerging, thus establishing a fertile ground for engagement, collaboration and networking. As these initiatives spurred capacity building and community development, they also nurtured an intellectual environment ripe for the flourishing of creative writing in local languages.

Conclusion

The inaugural decade of Sol Plaatje University (SPU) presents a case study of the intricate opportunities associated with the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. Despite substantial obstacles, SPU has achieved significant advancement in developing both a curriculum and an institutional culture that embody the decolonial mandates of the post-1994 educational environment. The strategic initiatives of SPU collectively delineate an

institution actively immersed in its post-independence/post-apartheid milieu, striving to actualise the ideals of a decolonised university. In its first decade, SPU continues to articulate a compelling depiction of an institution profoundly engaged within its post-independence framework. From its foundational dedication to social justice and its progression towards integrated community engagement, to its increasing adoption of African languages and indigenous knowledge within its curriculum, the SPU indicates a deliberate initiative to unravel colonial heritages. However, despite its potential to serve as a prime candidate for decolonised higher education in the African context, it is imperative to note that the ideals associated with a decolonised university remain constrained. The architectures of universities remain inherently bureaucratic, predominantly governed by an amalgamation of legal, statutory, procedural, policy and institutional directives that impede any comprehensive realisation of decolonial projects. Although progressive in nature, the case of SPU illustrates that the decolonial journey remains ongoing and inherently complex. Thus, while acknowledging the advantageous position of SPU as a recently established university, which allows for agility in innovation and the construction of systems free of historical burdens, its progress points to the persistent intricacies and paradoxes that challenge the decolonisation of higher education in Africa. Notwithstanding the constraints universities still face in relation to a decolonial agenda, what can be gleaned from the SPU case is that, through persistent critique, universities – especially those newly established – possess the potential to gradually influence the pathway towards the attainment of a decolonised higher education structure within Africa.

Notes

1. Dr Zamani Saul, Premier, Northern Cape Province, Speech delivered at the SPU Chancellor's Investiture, 24 March 2026
2. This section drew from Mataga, J., Mokae S. and Marumo L. 2022, 'Nurturing partnerships for language development: The SPU-DSAC creative writing programme in the Northern Cape Province', in S. Fongwa, T.M. Luescher, J. Mataga and N.N. Mtawa N.N. (eds), *The Role of Universities in Society: Mapping University Community Engagement in Secondary Cities*. SunMedia, pp. 175–99.
3. Setswana is one of South Africa's 12 official languages, and is also spoken in Botswana, and parts of Namibia and Zimbabwe (see <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/languages/setswana>). According to the 2022 census data, in South Africa's Northern Cape province, Setswana is spoken by approximately 35.7 per cent of the population, making it the second most spoken language in the province after Afrikaans. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Cape#:~:text=In%20the%202022%20census%2C%2054.6,speakers%2C%20after%20North%20West%20province

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