

Confronting the Complexities of Decolonising Curriculum and Pedagogy in Higher Education

Abstract

Recent critiques voiced by students in both the Global South and North has turned attention to the ways in which higher education practices have been informed by, and continue to perpetuate, a series of assumptions that favour particular epistemological perspectives. Across the world, students have criticized universities for the content of their curricula and for their institutional cultures and pedagogic practices that perpetuate the attainment gap and exclusion. In response, curriculum and pedagogic change is being debated and promoted on campuses. This introductory article lays the theoretical groundwork for a special issue that brings decolonial theory into concrete engagement with the structural, cultural, institutional, relational and personal logics of curriculum and pedagogic practice. The article examines the relationship between decolonization as a theoretical concept, and the practices of decoloniality unfolding in pedagogical practice.

Introduction

Occasionally, a theoretical concept arises in academic debate that cuts across individual disciplines and is taken up in multiple ways from varying contextual and disciplinary perspectives. Such concepts – which may well have already been in use and debated for some time – become suddenly pertinent and invigorated at a particular historical juncture. Terms such as identity and discourse have had such cross-disciplinary heft over time, gaining symbolic capital within the academy and in popular culture as they have proliferated, been defined, re-defined, challenged and contested across multiple settings. In recent years, the notion of ‘decolonisation’ and the related idea ‘decoloniality’ have undergone just such a process of (re)popularization, with a corresponding increase in debates around their meanings and uses across semantic and disciplinary spaces. The concept ‘decoloniality’ has caught academic and popular imaginations. Decolonisation’s contemporary manifestation in the academy, however, comes on the back of years of debate around the concept and its meaning, particularly within the Global South (eg. Mazrui 1978, Quijano 2000).

In this introductory essay to a special issue on the current impetus to decolonize curriculum and pedagogy, we examine the relationship between decolonization as a theoretical concept, and the practices of decoloniality unfolding in pedagogical practice. We argue that while debates on decoloniality and decolonization have proliferated at a theoretical level, work on

operationalizing them within the academy is just beginning; and that there is a gap between high level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation. The work brought together in this special issue shows the range of ways in which academics are responding to this gap: reflecting that there is no one single way of implementing decolonial thought and practice in the classroom, and that this may well be recognized as a strength rather than a limitation, in that it allows for curriculum and pedagogy in universities to become pluriversal and contextually situated, even where these are working with highly abstracted forms of knowledge.

For the purposes of this introductory essay, we thus define decoloniality as it applies to pedagogy and curriculum as an inherently plural set of practices that aim to interrupt the dominant power/knowledge matrix in educational practices in higher education. These practices affect both what knowledge is produced via research and then selected for a curriculum (what content is taught), and the ways in which teaching and learning and assessment occur (how curriculum knowledge is taught, including the social power relations at work in teaching and learning). The work we present in this special issue explores the ways in which decolonial practices are currently interrogating both what and how we teach in higher education.

A Brief History of Decolonial Thinking

Early decolonial writings were associated with anti-colonial struggles and political ideologies (for example Césaire 2000, Du Bois and Edwards 2008, Nkrumah 1970, Nyere 1968, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986, Fanon 2001, Biko 2010). Politically, the concept was invoked in 1923 at the international conference against imperialism in Brussels and again at the Bandung Conference (1955) where leaders of decolonized states united to find a common voice against imperialism and formed the nonalignment movement (Kohn and McBride, 2011: 4). Yet its earliest usage in text was in a short piece by Henri Fonfrède, *'La décolonisation d'Alger'* written in 1846. Arguably, the concept's most prominent usage came from Franz Fanon's work on the anti-colonial war in Algeria.

According to Fanon (2001: 27-28), 'decolonization is always a violent phenomenon' which 'sets out to change the order of the world'. Decolonisation 'is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder'. Fanon observes that the possibility of change is equally experienced by the colonizer who is terrified of it. According to Fanon, political decolonisation is the confrontation between two opposed forces: coloniser and colonised. To Fanon, this necessitates a 'complete calling into question of the colonial situation' and 'the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up' (Fanon, 2001: 27-28). The political act of decolonising is a process of anticolonial revolution, of questioning, challenging and overthrowing systems of power and knowledge that serve to oppress. However, as we discuss further below, in both the global North and South, systems of coloniality persist at deep cognitive, cultural and structural levels of iterations and reiterations of power and authority.

Western conceptions of reason considered only certain people as rational, and thus dehumanised large segments of the population via the exclusion of other groups of people from having the capacity to reason. In his 'Critique of Black Reason' (2017:25), Mbembe thus argues that colonial discourse was based on an ontology of 'absolute alterity', that allowed Europeans to position themselves as the apex of civilisation, democracy and reason and colonised peoples as inferior, lacking, absent and non-human - an ideology that was used retrospectively to justify their violent colonial adventures. Thus, early decolonial scholars wrote to counter colonial discourse by asserting the humanity, autonomy, agency and sovereignty of colonised subjects. Despite their brilliance and the adoption by many of neo-Marxist political agendas, most retained the Western idea of a nation state defined by a racial community. Mbembe (2017) and others (Mudimbe, 1988 with regard to Africa; and Bhabha, 2004 with regard to India and the diaspora) have problematised these early decolonial discourses for failing to overturn the myth of the racial subject, for reproducing an oppositional identity for the colonized and thus for simply inverting the logic of race.

Many early decolonial scholars engaged with the potential of education as a means of decolonisation. For example, as early as the 1880s William Wellington Gqoba engaged with the issue of education, decolonisation and liberation for colonised peoples in his poetry on the 'Great Debate about Education' (Ingxoxo Enkulu Ngemfundo) in *Isigidima SamaXhosa*

(1888). In 1948 calls for decolonisation were heard at Ibadan University in Nigeria, where academics contested the pre-eminence given to colonial modes of knowledge production (Livsey, 2017). In the South African context, AC Jordan, through the first comprehensive novel written in isiXhosa, *Ingqumbo yeminyanya* (1940), considered the question of colonial education on indigeneity. Colonial imposition, as treated by Jordan, concerned the ways in which coloniality was (re)fashioning and reshaping the life of indigenous people in South Africa. Nearly a century later after Gqoba's treatment of the subject, Ali A Mazrui (1978) in his seminal treatise *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, reconsidered the role of education as it pertained to the question of political freedom. In the same period, Brazilian scholar and philosopher of education, Paulo Freire (1970), treated the question of education and its liberatory potential vis-à-vis the oppressed. His ideas of critical pedagogy and its method of conscientisation were widely taken up in the colonies and ex-colonies including by the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa in the 1970s.

In the Global North, black power, women's liberation and the anti-war movements of the 1960s also sought to undo colonialist structures of power. In Europe and North America, students mobilised against perceptible injustices, against the wars in Algeria, Vietnam and in solidarity with black activists and the civil rights movement. In May 1968, students in France and the UK walked out of universities, held sit-ins and effectively shut down university campuses. Students called for the decolonization of the university and criticized it for educating students to be the new servants of capitalism (Bakewell, 2018). Students took a stance against what and how they were taught and rejected autocratic values, structures and attitudes. The movement was both wide and global. It was deeply embedded in anti-imperialist, anti-war, anti-capitalist, pro-civil rights and feminist convictions and activism.

Much of the decolonising sentiment to fundamentally change society was expressed through a variety of forms, including political writing, manifestos, philosophy, music, art, posters and political activism. Although the term 'decolonising' was initially associated with revolution against European colonial empire in the Global South, in the sixties in the Global North, the term took on a wider meaning to signify the rejection, not only of imperialism but also of patriarchy, of the 'old white male power' that was associated with a particular way of seeing, knowing and structuring the world. bell hooks (2012: 4) emphasises the intersectionality of

this system, terming it 'imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' to stress that political, social and educational structures reproduce multiple, entangled inequities. To hooks, theory is liberatory: we can unlearn the systems of power that structure our ways of seeing the world and thinking and hence challenge these systems by finding and asserting the voices of the marginalised - whose experience of oppression informs their critical thinking - to create more egalitarian, respectful and democratic societies by reclaiming the power and authority that belongs to all. Yet today the structures of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy are resurgent and a new iteration of decolonising theory and practice is gathering force.

A new wave of decolonial scholarship emerged in the 1980s, when a group of Latin American scholars broke away from Wallerstein's World Systems group at the International Congress of Sociology. In 1998 this same group also split from the South Asian Subaltern Studies group on the grounds that the latter were held captive by western post-structuralist criticism. Latin American decolonial scholars such as Quijano (2000), Dussel (2002), Mignolo (2006, 2011) and Maldonado-Torres (2005, 2011) set out to pose an epistemological as well as a political challenge to neo-colonialism in the age of global capitalism, termed 'coloniality'. For these scholars, 'coloniality' refers to 'long-standing patterns of power' that began with the conquest of the Americas in 1492 and defined a new world order that enabled the primitive accumulation of capital in Europe from which Western modernity developed (Maldonado-Torres 2007). This new wave of decolonial scholars argue that coloniality consists of interrelated structures of control such as patriarchy, racism, knowledge, authority, and the economy, all of which underlie Western civilisation (Mignolo 2012, ix). *Colonialism* is understood as a temporal period of political and structural oppression, with a concomitant set of epistemological and ideological hegemonic positions. It is claimed that while colonialism ended with the coming about of majority rule in former colonies, *coloniality* endures into the present –hence the distinction between decolonisation, a political and territorial project, and decoloniality, an ideological and epistemological one. A key concept in the Latin American thread of decolonial theory is that of 'modernity/ coloniality' – meaning that because colonialism was constitutive of modernity (its 'darker side') the two concepts must be held together to describe a single power system that historically has served the demands of capitalist accumulation and the interests of whites/ Europeans (Quijano 2007;

Escobar 2010). In the contemporary period, modernity/coloniality is understood as an entangled set of hierarchies that works intersectionally through global class formations of the core/periphery world system.

The idea of decolonisation gained traction once again through student protests across the campuses of South African universities (2015-2017). These acts of defiance were inspired by the continuing need to resist the violent demand that Black students and academics assimilate into settler cultures and the old liberal /new neo-liberal values that still define South African universities. Students across the racial divide echoed the scholarship of Lebakeng, Phalane and Nase (2006) who lamented learning curricula that were seemingly designed for students reared in London, Manchester and Hull. Students in South African universities wanted to learn knowledge that was responsive to their local contexts - knowledge that would inspire them to acts of active citizenship through considering local solutions to local challenges. The protesting students demanded emancipatory curricula that were responsive to their local contexts, identities and ambitions. In this regard, the South African student cohort of 2015, re-staked the demand for decolonisation of education that had been heard as early as the 19th century in colonised territories.

In our current moment, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement protests the arbitrary murder of black people in the USA and underlines the oppressive structures of power inherent in contemporary liberal democratic states. In the past weeks, the BLM movement has gained international momentum and calls for change and reparation are beginning to be recognized by those who have unjustly held power historically. In the US small changes to policing (that no longer allow the police to use chokeholds) and recognition across mainstream universities and the media of whiteness and its fragility, along with the reluctant agreement of Oriel College, Oxford to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the announcement of Lloyds Bank to make reparations for its role in the trans-Atlantic slave-trade and the protestors' dismounting of the statue of slave-trader philanthropist Edward Colston in the UK, amount to small gains toward decolonising systems and spaces of power, of coloniality.

The Demand to Decolonize Curricula and Pedagogy

The student protests in South Africa (2015-2017) triggered an explosion of interest in the new wave of decolonial scholarship in both global Northern and Southern universities. This has come not just with analytic heft but also with an ethical imperative to shift practices within academia itself: decolonization of the academy presently asks of academics that they not only study the phenomenon and mobilise it as a tool of analysis, but that they think through ways of applying it to their teaching practices (Lockett, Morreira and Baijnath, 2019). The recent critiques voiced by students in both the global South and North have turned attention to the ways in which higher education practices – at both the margins and the centres - have been informed by, and continue to perpetuate, a series of assumptions that favour particular epistemological perspectives. Through the movements and discourses of #Fallism, for example, based on the black radical tradition, anti-colonial and feminist works (such as Biko 1978, Fanon 2008, hooks 1994, Freire 1970) as well as recent Latin American decolonial theory (Moraña, Dussel & Jáuregui 2008, Mignolo & Escobar 2010, Mignolo 2011a, Mignolo, 2011b), student protests on university campuses have tabled radical challenges to institutional symbols, cultures and practices, including the call to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum and pedagogy. Across the globe, students and academics have criticised universities for the content of their curricula and for their institutional cultures and pedagogic practices that perpetuate the attainment gap and exclusion (see Morreira 2017). In response, curriculum and pedagogic change are being debated and promoted across campuses. However, as Badat (2017) argues, there remains serious theoretical, political and institutional work to be done to provide dialogical spaces where radical curriculum and pedagogic work can be undertaken.

In the past decade, calls for decolonisation in Northern universities have presented new ways of thinking about pedagogy, including the questioning of political and epistemological authority within institutions of higher education. This means critically interrogating a theoretical canon based on an all-white male perspective and its impact on society *and* the real world in which we live - how we know, exist and experience the world (epistemology, ontology, phenomenology). Decolonising knowledge in educational systems and curricula is linked to changing systems of power, of social and political rule. Hence, the silencing and marginalizing of certain voices from curricula and canons of thought or conversely the selection of particular voices as authoritative is a political act that underpins our understanding and perceptions of whom we see as authoritative and also to whom we are

willing to give authority (Ramgotra, 2015). These fundamental questions underpin the movements across Northern universities to decolonize their curricula and institutions by contesting and challenging those who, by their positionality, occupy spaces of power and knowledge (Bhambhra et al, 2018).

While we have shown that there are rich funds of theory we can draw on to problematize and disrupt the relations between knowledge, power and the reproduction of modernist disciplinary 'canons' (Gordon, 2014), these tend to remain at the level of high theory that do not gain easy traction at the level of curriculum and classroom practice. Thus, the purpose of this special issue is to bring such abstract theory into concrete engagement with the structural, cultural, institutional, relational and personal logics of curriculum and pedagogic practice. What is enabled, in practice, when academics set out to operationalize the decolonial turn in their teaching spaces? What commonalities and differences exist when academics set out to do so in universities across disparate politico-geographical spaces, and what political and epistemological challenges remain?

In this introductory essay to a volume whose papers provide contextualised responses to such questions, we think through what is at stake when decolonial work is brought from the level of theory through into pedagogical and curricula praxis. We argue that while debates on decoloniality and decolonization have proliferated at abstract and rhetorical levels, work on operationalizing them within the academy is only just beginning. As multiple actors across multiple institutions have begun processes of bringing abstract decolonial theory into practice in their institutions, there is a gap between the scholarships and theory and its practices of implementation. We explore this gap below, arguing that one source of the challenge may be conceptual while others are political. But first we discuss briefly the conceptual gap between theory and practice and its implications for pedagogy.

Bridging the 'gap' between theory and practice

All abstract theory inevitably leaves something out of its description of reality. This results in an incompleteness and inconsistency in its knowledge claims that can trigger a crisis in the field. The current (re)emergence of decolonial theory is a response to such a crisis. It is

precisely Western philosophy's privileging of abstract thought and its negation of absence and non-duality that has led to closed knowledge systems that exclude plurality and a common ground of being, that decolonial theory sets out to challenge. This intolerance of paradox in Western thought has led, in the Social Sciences at least, to a series of perennial and untenable dualisms – such as those between theory/ practice, abstract/ concrete, universal / particular, subject/ object, fact/ value, structure/ agency, mind/ body, male/ female and so on (Bhaskar, 2016). There is a discontinuity (a 'conceptual-discursive gap') between each of the poles of these sets of dualisms, such that when applying a concept to real world phenomena, the practitioner must make an inferential and interpretive leap. We argue below that while decolonial theory sets out to challenge this Western way of thinking, it too, in some of its variations, falls prey to the problem of conceptual duality, which in turn makes its application to a particular curriculum or pedagogic practice tricky. This dualistic thinking is one way of accounting for the range of heterogeneous applications of decolonial theory to pedagogy evident in this volume.

Furthermore, particularly in the social sciences, the application of theory to specific contexts entails the making of an interpretive judgment to across these 'conceptual-discursive gaps' which is also ethical. Where this ethical work is not undertaken deliberately and consciously, the 'gap' tends to get filled by axiology or ideology – for example generalised ethical imperative or admonition to act (more) justly or, in its weaker form, to make virtuous gestures towards such action. But because pedagogy is about both - setting up context-specific social relations (which involves ethical judgment) and teaching knowledge (making explicit the internal conceptual relations of a knowledge system), it requires attention to both social and epistemic relations (Maton 2014, Boff 1987). While epistemic relations concern what can be known, and how it can come to be known, social relations reflect the link between such knowledge, and the person making the knowledge claim. In other words, epistemic relations are concerned with the content of knowledge (the 'what' that we teach) and social relations reflect the power relations wrapped around that knowledge, that authorise and legitimate it (the context in which it was produced, how we go about teaching it, and who has legitimised access to working with such knowledge). This is challenging for pedagogues because working for justice and working for truth, although related, are analytically not the same thing. Of course, in actual teaching practice these two dimensions of pedagogy are

entangled and furthermore, will mean different things in different socio-historical contexts and knowledge domains (disciplines). As noted in the introduction, we defined decoloniality as applied to pedagogy as an inherently plural set of practices that aim to interrupt the dominant power/knowledge matrix that affects teaching practices in higher education. These practices affect both what knowledge is produced via research and selected for a curriculum (the content taught), and the more implicit ways in which teaching and assessing students happens – what power relations, norms and values inform these practices.

Heterogenous Responses to Decolonising Pedagogy

The papers presented here show the range of ways in which university educators are grappling to bridge the gap between theory and practice in decolonising work. All the papers represent an important shift in pedagogical or disciplinary praxis and all are driven by a core concern with implementing decolonial theory through immersion in specific contexts. We suggest that while there may be a conceptual-discursive gap between the scope of decolonial theory (abstractions about world systems) and pedagogic practice (by definition context-specific), the papers in this issue stand as examples of the heterogeneity and creativity of the field, despite the institutional, political and conceptual complexities with which academics may be working (see below). In what follows we explore the ways in which the papers in this volume have used decolonial thinking to engage in a plurality of ways with both internal epistemic relations – by expanding the canon of legitimate knowledge within a disciplinary space (addressing internal relations) and undoing hierarchical power relations in the classroom (addressing external social relations). While in practice epistemic and social relations are entangled, it is heuristically useful to pull them apart in order to examine the different sorts of work that can be done in these two dimensions in order to operationalize decolonial theory in the classroom. Most papers in this volume do both sorts of work.

Decolonising curricula through working with internal epistemic relations

Many of the papers in this volume share a key concern with opening up the classifications of what counts as legitimate knowledge within a discipline: in other words, they work carefully towards expanding the canon and hence curricula in their respective fields such that alternate

knowledges (content) and alternate ways of knowing (methods and methodology) are included.

Kumalo's (2020) article gives an account of the failure of systematic attempts to erase ways of knowing in the Global South. He argues that claims to epistemicide are overstated, and that such claims limit the possibilities for academics in the South to re-claim knowledge that was displaced by colonisation and persistent coloniality. Instead, he argues that in the South African context the discipline of philosophy has failed to recognize important scholarship that exists outside of Philosophy as a discipline, resulting in a narrowed definition of works of disciplinary importance. In other words, this indigenous knowledge has not disappeared - as the term epistemicide would suggest - rather it has been disregarded, particularly those philosophical works written in African languages that are not read or understood by most South African philosophers. Kumalo's paper works with the notion of the Black Archive in South Africa (exemplified by authors such as Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, Mazisi Kunene and SEK Mqhayi) as a space for 'epistemic restitution', such that decolonising philosophy entails expanding the conventional philosophical canon.

The role of language in social and epistemic relations is particularly important in Kumalo's work, and this emphasis is also seen in Danielle Jeffrey's article on Spanish and Latin American Studies as taught in Australian universities. Jeffrey' sets out to examine what impact decolonial movements have had on wider course syllabi and course descriptions in Spanish and Latin American Studies departments across Australian universities, by conducting a discourse analysis of course outlines. Jeffrey argues that the wider discourse of Australian society normalises monolingualism even while it gestures towards the value of multiculturalism. Her paper shows the presence within course descriptions of a series of markers that reflect moves towards what she calls "ethico-onto-epistemological responsibility": a recognition within curricula of the decolonial turn? in which ethics is seen as entangled in ways of being and ways of knowing - thus recognising Latin American indigenous knowledges and permitting practices of languaging rather than formalised language. Jeffrey's method is guided by an overarching recognition of the plurality of knowledges at play even within spaces that are constrained by neo-liberalism. In this she draws on the theoretical

concept *un mundo ch'ixi*: “a world of juxtaposition in which opposites antagonise and reciprocate the other in a muddling that does not result in complete mixing.”

Similarly, Gukurume and Maringira (2020) argue, like Jeffrey, for plurality, hybridity and the recognition of ambivalence in decolonial work. Their article examines the ways in which Zimbabwean sociologists currently articulate decolonisation, and shows that sociologists in Zimbabwe are working with both the traditional sociology canon as well as localised knowledge; and that many recognise value in both. Gukurume and Maringira first contextualise the historical role that politics has played in higher education in the country under colonisation and since independence in 1980, and show that Zimbabwean higher education grappled with ideas of decolonisation for decades. They demonstrate the emergence in Zimbabwe since 1980 of authoritarian repressive state system, such that one form of colonialism has been replaced with another type of coloniality. Nonetheless, they argue that in the 1980s and 1990s Zimbabwe took the transformation of higher education systems seriously, so that much of the decolonial work now called for in other contexts has been practised for decades – thus mitigating the quest to completely re-write curricula. Instead, they propose a curriculum that comprises blended knowledge forms, that recognises incompleteness, and attributes universality to no single knowledge system.

While sociology is one of the older more entrenched Social Sciences, Kaneva, Bishop and Whitelaw's (2020) article takes us towards the interdisciplinary space of Childhood Studies. This paper is one of two in this issue that considers the influence of the decolonial turn on work being done in universities outside of the Global South: in this case, shifts in the curriculum at a British university as a result of the call to decolonise. A series of case studies of curricula and classroom practice are presented enabling the authors to think through how the decolonial turn involves moving away from an idealised Western, heteronormative, cisgendered and able-bodied childhood as the unmarked norm in Childhood Studies. The first case study on global childhoods engages carefully with ways in which curricula can allow students to critique the conditions of capitalist modernity that have produced a universal notion of childhood towards which development agendas should strive. The second case study on narratives of disability in Britain allows students to deconstruct such discourses to see the ways in which they support able-ist perspectives and set up 'barriers-to-being' for

disabled children. The third case study works with gender to show how debates around knowledge, power and representation in the Global South are beginning to shift curricula and teaching practices in the Global North to include alternate knowledges and ways of knowing.

Pryah Mahabeer's (2020) paper is also concerned with opening what constitutes legitimate knowledge within a discipline, and the ways in which this may need to unfold within the constraints of wider systemic concerns. Her analysis is situated in a university teacher education curriculum and explores the limits and possibilities for decolonial practice when teachers need to be trained to teach a state-set school curriculum. Like Gukurume and Maringira, Mahabeer centres her analysis on an exploration of practitioner's perspectives on what decolonisation might entail: she works with black women, training or recently trained as school teachers, to understand how discourses of decolonial pedagogy can move from higher education to school teaching practice. She argues that while most of these teachers had some idea of decolonization as an important means to social equality, the possibilities of their applying this to the content of their official school curricula were limited. However, while her participants were not able to change the 'what' of the school curriculum, they were able to bring a decolonial lens to bear on the 'how' of their teaching practices.

Decolonising curricula through challenging external social relations

In addition to a concern with content, the papers gathered here also focus on external social relations, in order to think through ways of undoing the hierarchical power relations that exist in higher education practices. In other words, they engage with not only opening curricula to include other knowledges or ways of knowing, but also with how to shift institutional cultures and classroom practices to recognise and legitimate participation by all kinds of knowers.

Hlatshwayo, Shawa and Nxumalo's article (2020) takes a step back from detailed discussions of course material, to provide a wider view of the ways in which curricula more broadly are imagined and designed across the disciplines. They argue that conventional methods of teaching and learning in higher education follow a top-down, hierarchical approach that constructs clear power differentials between students and academics. Their paper opens with a historical consideration of how the transformation of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa has been approached. In contrast to the Zimbabwean example in Gukurume and

Maringira above, these authors demonstrate that these attempts at transformation failed to shift underlying power dynamics, leading to the student protests of 2015 onwards. They argue that the decolonial turn that arose from student protest has opened possibilities for changing how we conceptualise design, teaching and assessment practices. Drawing on Le Grange (2016), they work with the conceptual tool *ubuntu currere* to argue for curricula practices that move away from hierarchy toward inclusivity and social justice. The paper provides imagined moments of enacting a dialogical and emancipatory curriculum to demonstrate possibilities for shifting the social relations that currently constrain student learning.

Morreira, Taru and Truys (2020) provide an analysis of the ways in which curricula have been designed at newer, post-colonial universities in Zimbabwe and South Africa with just these sorts of emancipatory aims in mind. The authors work with space and materiality as decolonial teaching tools, arguing that one of the effects of coloniality has been the displacement of people such that they are now disconnected from place and space. Introducing the notion of 'pedagogies of emplacement', the article shows how space and materiality can be used in reformulating pedagogy in and for the Global South. The authors argue that such practices allow for the recognition of students as embodied, knowledge-making persons situated within communities, rather than as abstracted individuals to whom academia imparts knowledge created by others. Thus they show how decolonial theory can be brought into teaching practice in ways that shift the external social relations that have traditionally governed the teaching space.

The final paper in this volume considers the teaching of method in higher education. Authors Cruz and Luke (2020) argue that there is a disjuncture between the ways in which the world is represented in methodology textbooks and the real-world power relations that exist in the spaces where people will conduct research - thus the mainstream representation of methodology does not consider the colonialist implications of its own assumptions. The authors carefully unpack the ways in which conventional methodology represents research as an inexhaustible practice that exists independently of historical and political asymmetries of power. They argue that this fails to redress contemporary geopolitical power relations, benefiting scholars of the Global North and permitting the continued domination of

knowledge production by metropolitan universities. The authors offer an alternative approach to teaching methodology, that attempts to unsettle the structures of academic colonialism and extractivism. The paper is thus concerned to challenge the global power relations that currently control knowledge production.

The above descriptions of the papers in this volume highlight that while the responses we received to our call for work on operationalising decolonial theory in higher education were heterogenous, they are all guided by a core concern to interrupt the dominant power/knowledge matrix in higher education pedagogies. All, too, are aware that the contexts in which they enact varied forms of decolonial practice have all been shaped and structured by western modernity. In the final section of this introductory essay, we identify some of the political and conceptual complexities of decolonizing universities that emerge from this modernity/ coloniality contradiction.

Identifying some Complexities in Decolonising Universities

Perhaps it is ironic that, despite the decolonial critique of modern liberal-humanist and supposedly democratic universities, the political and epistemological challenges raised by decolonial scholars have been formally articulated within the public sphere provided by these same institutions of civil society. It is the discursive formations and languages of the modern Western academy, that have provided the intellectual and institutional resources and conditions for generating and circulating the decolonial critique. It may prove easier to attack the racist culture and practices of coloniality in universities through manifestos and journal articles and pull down the statues of notorious racists than replace the modern episteme on which the very idea of the public Western university is founded. In this section we discuss some of what we suggest are the yet-to-be-resolved complexities entailed in decolonising modern universities. We have categorised these complexities into two categories – political complexities and conceptual complexities.

Political Complexities

One of the political challenges to decolonial work by academics is the danger and temptation of appropriating indigenous knowledge resources from local communities for academic

purposes (Nakata, Nakata, Keech and Bolt, 2012). Zoe Todd (2016) a scholar of indigeneity, laments the emergence of a new form of epistemic injustice by academics who exploit the currency of indigenous knowledge to further their own careers by appropriating and repackaging indigenous local knowledges. She argues that such acts of epistemic injustice serve to erase and silence subaltern knowers and undermine the historic decolonial struggles of Indigenous peoples once again. When co-creating knowledge with knowledge practitioners from local communities outside the academy and when power relations remain so unequal, it is challenging for those working from within the academy to establish relationships that accord due recognition and reward for the progenitor groups of the knowledge in question.

A second and related political challenge to decolonial work in universities is that of co-option. Recently, Mbembe (2017) has described the expansion of global capitalism via his concept the 'becoming black of the world' (2017, 31). By this he means global capitalism's extension of the logic of colonial reason (notions of absolute difference and hence exclusion) to most parts of the globe. Although traditionally positioned as institutions of civil society, modern public universities have been far from immune to incursions of global capitalism, market values and neo-liberal forms of management. Indeed, for some decades now, academics have bemoaned the 'hollowing out' of the meaning and functioning of universities as 'public goods' by neo-liberal state and management policies (Bhambra, 2018).

The current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the failure of the university as a public good and exacerbated the inequities and exclusions practised by modern public universities. In current and future contexts of financial austerity, there is a real danger that the 'decolonial turn' might get co-opted and domesticated by desperate managers intent on growing their markets and pleasing their customers. If the meaning of decolonising the university gets co-opted to mean no more than diversity and inclusivity and gets limited to a politics of representation, it will fail to address Mbembe's (2017) critique of global capitalism's reproduction of the logic of absolute alterity; and it will fail to realise the vision of the second wave of decolonial scholars and their adherents.

Conceptual Complexities

Decolonial theorists apply their concept 'modernity/ coloniality' to the political-economy of modern knowledge production and see the same colonial patterns of power working to determine who accesses and produces knowledge, who owns it, legitimates it and controls it. They are critical of how historically, knowledge has been colonised and controlled by Europe in ways that have validated only one form of knowledge, not only de-legitimizing the knowledges of others; but undermining the very conditions for epistemic life (Gordon 2014, 85). Gordon critiques modern epistemology for colonising reason, for attempting to confine thought within its own rational system. He rejects the "self-justificatory standards" of the West against which all others are to be measured (2014, 89). Thus, a key decolonial critique is that knowledge produced in the West has been universalised as the only legitimate form of knowledge. It is claimed that the European location of modernity is "cloaked in the rhetoric of universality" and that Eurocentricism is based on "confusion between abstract universality and concrete world hegemony derived from Europe's position as centre" (Mignolo 2010, 317). Grosfoguel (2013) argues that the modern episteme has been institutionalised and universalized through the modern university system, the modern disciplines and the five hegemonic (ex-colonial) European languages (2013, 74). The work of decoloniality, then, is to interrupt these forms of global power that place European thought as the only universal and legitimate form of knowledge. 'Epistemic de-colonization' involves exposing 'the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality' (Mignolo 2010:313).

As captured above, much of the recent wave decolonial theory focuses on the unjust power relations that persist between the Global North and South as a consequence of colonialism. The decolonialists' ideology critique of the political-economy of knowledge production, legitimation and control at the level of world history and world systems is a vital and necessary mediation for the realisation of social justice in the academy and beyond. However, we suggest that the pre-occupation of most decolonial scholars with the external social and political relations of knowledge production – namely unequal power relations between knowers, the social and geo-political location of knowers and the historical constitution of their subjectivities - is a necessary but incomplete mediation for analysing the production of knowledge. Knowledge is built through both a regime of historically constituted power

relations (that structure knowledge externally) and a regime of concepts and their epistemic relations (that structure knowledge internally) (Boff 1987, Maton 2014). By launching a meta-level critique that highlights the external relations of knowledge production, we argue that the decolonial project has failed to date, to provide an epistemological critique that adequately engages with the internal relations of the Western knowledge project (Seats, 2020).

We suggest this may be one of the reasons why decolonial theory has spawned a wide range of implementation possibilities – from working within the Western episteme but expanding its boundaries to include a wider range of knowers to radical projects that reject Western knowledge and advocate starting over with alternative ways of knowing. Decolonial concepts such as ‘pluriversity’ (Mignolo 2007), ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2011), ‘border thinking’ (Mignolo, 2011) and ‘transmodernity’ (Escobar 2010) gesture towards epistemic pluralism but do not provide sufficient clarity on how to engage with the internal concepts and relations of knowledge – for example how to contest the norms of scientific validation or how to work with untranslatable or incommensurable forms of reason. So, although most decolonial scholars use Western forms of public reasoning to make their arguments, it remains unclear how far they want to take the eradication of coloniality and to what extent this means dropping the Western idea of public critique via internal epistemic norms.

Ever since the ‘death’ of German Idealism and the breakaway of science from philosophy at the end of the long 19th century, European theories of knowledge with universalist pretensions (from Kant to Hegel) were jettisoned, along with their metaphysical *a priori* premises that set up ahistorical, self-referential systems of knowledge-and-power (although these endure in the modern era in fascist or fundamentalist sects). This suggests that in its most generalized form, the decolonial critique of Western claims to universal rationality may be anachronistic – particularly with regard to science. Since the early 20th century, science has built and rebuilt itself without recourse to philosophical universals, through its normative practices of methodological rigour and public scrutiny for coherence and validation by expert communities of practice. These moments of judgment about truth claims must be seen to withstand critical scrutiny appropriate to their epistemological status and conducted by procedures endorsed by expert communities (typically found in the modern disciplines).

Furthermore, these normative practices require certain institutional conditions that are supposed to protect them from bias and non-epistemic interests. These norms and values are privileged and practised within virtual disciplinary communities across contemporary modern universities – including by decolonial scholars themselves. Of course, is it precisely the failure of these internal normative practices to safeguard knowledge production from external socio-historical structuring that decolonial (and likewise feminist) scholars are critiquing. So, while these ‘epistemic rules’ have not protected knowledge production from the arrogance, ignorance, elitism, lack of transparency and hence domination of others by the Western academy, they have also enabled scientific communities to build knowledge dynamically, through an on-going process of encouraging the emergence of new phenomena, concepts and explanations to challenge the old.

That said, it is also widely accepted in the philosophy of science that knowledge of these internal conceptual relations as well as the normative criteria and legislative practices of scientific communities are contextually, technologically and historically contingent. But this does not mean that we should fall back on exclusively external social explanations for the contingency of knowledge production. There are alternative ways of dealing with the historical legitimation of knowledge that do take internal relations into account. For example, in writing about the transportation of western disciplines to Bengal, Chatterjee notes that scholars should attend to differences in the formation of objects, in the modalities of enunciation, in concept formation, and in thematic choices. He warns that the work on concept formation and translation is the most intricate of all (Chatterjee 1995, 24).

Another example is the school of historical epistemology which studies the social and epistemic conditions necessary to do science. Rather than speculating about ‘a priori’ theories of knowledge or focusing on the lived experience or subjective consciousness of the knower, this school sets out to trace the historical genealogy of concepts and the socio-historical discursive formations for their legitimation (De Guzman-Pena, 2016). Mudimbe’s (1988) magisterial work on ‘The Invention of Africa’ is an example of decolonial scholarship in this tradition.

A further example of epistemological work that tries to account for both the internal epistemic and the external social relations of knowledge, is feminist philosopher Louise Martin-Alcoff (2011)'s 'political epistemology'. She argues that rather than jettison modern epistemic norms for validating truth claims, we should retain them but practice them more reflexively in inclusive, open-ended, conversational spaces of reason. Calling for a 'political epistemology' that questions how epistemic roles and authority are structured and institutionalised and what the ontological implications of our truth claims might be (2011:70), she argues for retaining modern practices of epistemic normativity to validate forms of knowledge. She posits that because the process of validating a knowledge claim is always tied to a particular social context, it involves both external power relations and internalist criteria such as judgments about its coherence with other beliefs. She thus proposes a pluralist concept of reason that can account for its historical contingency and social embeddedness, without accepting nihilism, epistemic relativism or irrationalism.

In conclusion we believe that all knowledge systems have forms of legitimation and validation – based on both external power relations and internal criteria and norms. We believe it is particularly important for decolonial scholarship to work closely and intensely with indigenous knowledge and concepts in the indigenous languages in order to bring to light – not only the external social relations based on unequal power relations– but also the internal epistemic relations and normative practices of these knowledge systems for validating knowledge. There is a rich tradition in African philosophy of such work on concepts internal to indigenous knowledge systems; see for example Ramose (2002) on 'ubuntu' philosophy; Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2008) on false dichotomies (the universal and the particular); Wiredu (1996) on truth as 'being so' in Akan; Gyekye's (1997) work on ethics in Akan sage philosophy; and Sogolo (1993) on language and the translatability of African concepts.

Conclusion

As we do the work of practically thinking through how we interpret and implement the theoretical propositions of decolonial scholars for our teaching practice and research, we might find it useful to actively pursue epistemic humility. There is evidence that since the inception of colonialism, the struggle for decolonisation by colonised communities has been preserved in their writings, art, music and oral traditions. We could appeal to and learn from

the knowledge systems and practices of those who have been historically excluded from the official sites of knowledge production. We should also recognise the ways in which this knowledge has been historically dismissed as incoherent, unscientific and lacking epistemic authority. Simply put, untangling the Gordian knot that is entailed in decolonising our institutions and pedagogy might be enhanced by adopting an attitude of epistemic humility towards the knowledge and knowers located outside the academy. Some of the contributions to this issue include the delicate work of reaching back into history and attentively listening to the thoughts of indigenous people. The decolonial work showcased in this special issue invites us to jettison all forms of epistemic arrogance and entitlement that come with academic status and instead to humbly consider the wisdom contained in the voices of the excluded. For research into indigenous knowledge systems has already shown evidence that they contain potential answers to some of the intractable environmental, political and socio-economic problems created by Western modernity/ coloniality.

References

- Alcoff, L. M. 2011. An Epistemology for the Next Revolution. *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of peripheral cultural production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, 68-78.
- Badat, S. 2017. "Trepidation, longing, and belonging: Liberating the curriculum at universities in South Africa." Public Lecture Series on Curriculum Transformation Matters: The Decolonial Turn, Unpublished, April 10 2017.
- Bakewell, J. 2018 *May 1968* BBC Documentary aired May 2018.
- Bhaskar, R. 2016. *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism*, London and New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bhabha, H. K 2004 *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bhambra, G. K., D. Gebrial, and K. Nişancıoğlu, (eds). 2018 *Decolonising the University*. London: Pluto Press.
- Biko, S. 2010 (1978). *I Write What I Like*, Johannesburg, Picador Africa.
- Boff, C. 1987. *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Chatterjee, P. 1995 'The Disciplines of Colonial Bengal' in *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Cesaire, A. 2000. *Discourse sur le Colonialism* [1995]. Translated by Joan Pinkham New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Collins, P. 1994. 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought' in ed. Mary Evans, *The Woman Question*. London: Sage Publications, pp.82-103.
- Cruz, M, and D. Luke. 2020. Methodology and Academic Extractivism: The neo-colonialism of the British University. *Third World Thematics: a TWQ Journal*
- De Guzman-Pena, D. 2016. "The Nineteenth Century in Ruins: A Genealogy of French Historical Epistemology", *Foucault Studies*, 21: 159-183.
- Diagne, S., and J-L. Amselle. 2020. *In Search of Africa(s) : Universalism and Decolonial Thought*, Polity Press. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoct/detail.action?docID=6157412>. Created from uoct on 2020-06-08 05:26:18.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. and B.H. Edwards. 2008. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dussel, E. 2002. "World System and Trans-Modernity". *Nepantla. Views from the South* 3 (2): 221-244.

- Escobar, A. 2010. "Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise": The Latin American modernity/coloniality Research Program. In: MIGNOLO, W. & ESCOBAR, A. (eds.) *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fanon, F. 2001 (1961). *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Fonfrède, H. .1846. *Oeuvres*. Bordeaux: Chaumas-Gayet.
- Gordon, L. R. 2014. Disciplinary Decadence and the Decolonisation of Knowledge. *Africa Development*, 39, 81-92
- Grosfoguel, R. 2008. Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality: Decolonizing political economy and postcolonial studies.
- Gukurume, S. and G. Maringira. 2020. Decolonising Sociology: Perspectives from two Zimbabwean Universities Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal
- Heleta, S. 2016. Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1, 1-8. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9>
- hooks, b. 1982. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press.
- hooks, bell. 2012. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Jefferey, D. 2020. Decoloniality, Spanish and Latin American Studies in Australian Universities: ¿es un undo ch'ixi posible? Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal
- Jordan, A.C. 1940 *Inqumbo yeminyanya*. Alice: Lovedale Press.
- Hlatshwayo, M., L. Shawa, and S. Nxumalo. 2020. Ubuntu Currere in the Academy: a Case Study from the South African Experience. Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, DOI: [10.1080/23802014.2020.1762509](https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2020.1762509)
- Kaneva, D., J. Bishop & N. E. Whitelaw. 2020. Initiating decolonial praxis: childhood studies curricula in an English university, Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, DOI: [10.1080/23802014.2020.1762511](https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2020.1762511)
- Kohn, M. and K. McBride. 2011. *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundations*. New York: Oxford University Press USA.
- Kumalo, S. 2020. Resurrecting the Black Archive through the decolonisation of Philosophy in South Africa. Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal

Lebakeng T.J., Phalane Manthibe M., & Nase Dalindjebo. 2006. 'Epistemicide, Institutional Cultures and the Imperative for the Africanisation of Universities in South Africa' *Alternation*, 13(1): 70-87.

Le Grange, L. 2016. Decolonising the university curriculum: leading article. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 30, 1-12.

Livsey, T. 2017. *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lockett, K., S. Morreira and M. Baijnath. 2019. 'Decolonizing the Curriculum: Recontextualization, Identity and Self-critique in a Post-apartheid University' in Quinn, Lynn (ed). *Reimagining curriculum: spaces for disruption*. Stellenbosch, African Sun Media

Mahabeer, P. 2020. Decolonising the school curriculum in South Africa: black women teachers' perspectives, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, DOI: [10.1080/23802014.2020.1762510](https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2020.1762510)

Mazrui, A. 1978 *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*. Ibadan, Nairobi and Lusaka: Heinemann.

Mills, C. 2015. 'Decolonizing Western Political Philosophy' *New Political Science*, 37:1, pp. 1-24.

Maldonado-Torres, N. 2007. On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept. *Cultural studies*, 21, 240-270.

Maton, K. 2014. *Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*, Abingdon, Routledge.

Mbembe, A. 2016. Decolonizing the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 15, 29-45.

Mbembe, A. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mignolo, W. 2007. Delinking: the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*, 21, 449-514.

Mignolo, W. & A. Escobar (eds.) 2010. *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Mignolo, W. (2011a). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mignolo, W. (2011b). Epistemic disobedience and the decolonial option: A manifesto. *Transmodernity*, 1, 3-23

Moraña M., Dussel E. & Jáuregui C. 2008. (Eds) *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Morreira, S. 2017. 'Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities.' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52 (3), pp. 287-301
DOI: 10.1177/0021909615577499

Morreira, S., J. Taru & C. Truyts. 2020. Place and pedagogy: using space and materiality in teaching social science in Southern Africa, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, DOI: [10.1080/23802014.2020.1747944](https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2020.1747944)

Mudimbe, V.Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Nakata M.N., V. Nakata, S. Keech & R. Bolt. 2012. 'Decolonial goals and pedagogies for Indigenous studies' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1): 120-140

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 1986 *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey; Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya; Portsmouth, N. H.: Heinemann; Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.

Nkrumah, K. 1970. *Conscientism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Nyere, J. 1968. *Freedom and Socialism*. Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press.

Quijano, A. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentricism and Latin America" *Nepantla. Views from the South* 1 (2): 533-580.

Ramgotra, M. 2015. 'On Teaching Political Theory,' post at UK PSA Women and Politics Specialist Group available at <http://psawomenpolitics.com/2015/12/21/on-teaching-political-theory-to-undergraduates/> or at <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/2019/02/04/on-teaching-political-theory-to-undergraduates/>.

Ramose, M. 2002. Ubuntu Ethics. In: PH COETZEE, A. R. (ed.) *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seats, M.R. 2020. "The voice(s) of reason: conceptual challenges for the decolonization of knowledge in higher education". *Teaching in Higher Education* (published online March 2019) DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1729725

Sogolo, G. 2002. Logic and Rationality. In: PH COETZEE, A. R. (ed.) *Philosophy from Africa: A text with readings*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Stuurman, S. 2000 'The Canon of the History of Political Thought: Its Critique and a Proposed Alternative' *History and Theory*, 39(2): 147-166.

Todd, Z. 2016. 'An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for Colonialism' *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1): 4-22.

Turner, C. 2017. 'University students demand philosophers such as Plato and Kant are removed from syllabus because they are white', Daily Telegraph, 8 January, available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/01/08/university-students-demand-philosophers-including-plato-kant/>, accessed 9 August 2019.

Wiredu, K. 1996 'The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language', in *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* . Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wiredu, K. 1992. "Moral foundations of an African culture". In Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (eds.), *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*. Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.

Wiredu, K. 1980. *Philosophy and An African Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Wiredu, K. 1996. *Universals and Particulars*, Indianapolis, Bloomington.

Wiredu, K. 1998. Can Philosophy be Intercultural? An African Viewpoint. *Diogenes*, 46, 147-167.