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Decoloniality and Higher Education Transformation in South Africa

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First, I want to declare that subsequent to my critical analysis of transformation of the higher education sector in South Africa, through a decolonial lens, I found it difficult to be impartial when writing this chapter as my epistemic reading of the current system revealed patterns that embrace coloniality. Despite these sentiments, this chapter is based on fair and balanced judgement upon evidence scenarios of transformation in higher education. For example, the essential characteristics of our South African higher education system, such as access and access testing, have remained resolute in maintaining coloniality, and this still tends to foster classism and racism despite all the transformation policies and rhetoric since the dawn of democracy in 1994. The National Benchmark Tests project initiative (NBT), which is largely used by the South African university sector, as one of statutory requirements for university admission is one of such examples. Although some universities claim to employ the NBT

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results to assist students for placement in appropriate curricular routes, the reality seems to be the assessment of academic readiness of students; hence, my contention that the NBT could either increase or diminish students' chances of getting into higher education. To justify my assertion I would say, in the case of many black students, the NBT shatters hopes of ever accessing university, which is most needed as it is a tool for social mobility, as many of these students tend to lack capital required for contesting university placement, when attempting to gain access into higher education. Also, although the NBTs are aligned to the National Senior Certificate, the University of Cape Town (UCT) is the 'gatekeeper' of the NBT project as it collaborated with Universities South Africa (USAf) to develop a project that is geared towards the assessment of academic readiness of students amongst other objectives. This project was commissioned while USAf was still known as Higher Education South Africa (HESA) (Universities South Africa Online 2018). So one wonders if UCT can ever be objective when dealing with the needs of average students, since the university has a penchant for academic affluent students. If we go by the rhetoric of the Fallist Movements of 2015–2017 (#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, which overwhelmed many historically advantaged universities—and which challenged the disproportionate status quo and white privilege at universities), it can be argued that UCT is predisposed to disaffirm black students from poor schools because the university's historic admission systems favour students that are academic superior. As an example the details that indicate the university preference is depicted online in the application process page (UCT Online 2018), where faculties implement different access criteria that are to be met to gain access at this institution. Be that as it may, if some students do make it, they are likely to be relegated to Arts and Social Sciences, as most faculties are not easily accessible probably because the university sustains its academic reputation through them. The implication therefore is the likelihood of many black students from poor schools gaining access into higher education is from slim to nil. One also wonders whether UCT and others similar to it can ever be able to forsake coloniality and subjectivity and grant access easily to the majority of black students who come from poor schools.

To explain my assertion above about the policy framework that maintains coloniality, I draw on Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 487, 488) who explains coloniality as a concept that could help us understand colonial-like power relations that exist to this day, especially in countries like South Africa, which experienced direct colonialism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 487) advises that in the current systems, we should take note that coloniality is not easily recognised as it is now a somewhat invisible power structure, that is "well-maintained in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspiration of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience". Over and above this, in the present world contexts, coloniality is perpetuated through globalisation and has been normalised by modern politics as it promotes free market systems, which is a way of life in our world. Decoloniality on the other hand becomes an antithesis of the concept of coloniality born out of the realisation that the very modern world is still as asymmetrical as in the era of colonialism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 489) corroborates this assertion and goes further to explain that, through decoloniality, we can be informed of ongoing struggles against inhumanity, unmasking coloniality as an underside of the modern world.

Departing from the above perceptions, the narrative from which I am expounding upon concealed colonial substructures in the present policy framework, I have split the sections into three parts. The first part discourses the aspect of the policy framework in higher education and challenges. The second part focuses on the covert oppressive themes within the higher education system, and finally, the chapter posits what the African vision should look like.

Policy Framework in South Africa After 1994

The foundation of this discourse is articulated from the position that wants to highlight how demoralising the higher education system can be to students from poor schools (myself included as I am a product of poor schools) especially if we take into consideration the shortage of black graduates from poor schools in the historically advantaged institutions

system. For those that make it into the higher education system, they equally do encounter experiences that are likely to leave them disempowered. As an example I allude to the struggles I have gone through, just like many historically disadvantaged students, in my journey in pursuit of higher education encounters. In this section, I discuss the symbolic promises that seem to have not been implemented to effect sound results because a large part of the policies after apartheid bought into the politics of the new world. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 486) aligns this to globalisation, which he argues that it is still driven by coloniality, which is a system that is disruptive and dehumanising. Perhaps as an example, I should compound this with a discourse on the vision of White Paper 3 of 1997 (Department of Education [DoE] 1997) and White Paper for Post-school Education and Training of 2013 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2013) that are yet to materialise. The vision in White Paper 3 of 1997 was to transform higher education from apartheid and colonial ethos to a democratic system (see DoE 1997, 1), with aspirations to redress past inequalities and inequities, and to respond to new realities and opportunities. The anticipated outcome was to transform higher education to an extent that it responds to new realities and "stimulate, direct and mobilise the creative and intellectual energies of people towards meeting the challenge of reconstruction and development" (Department of Education [DoE] 1997, 11). Additionally, a single coordinated system with new planning, governing and funding arrangements was meant to ensure that all students benefit from the new system notwithstanding race, gender or culture. Essentially the context of the transition was to remedy the structural cruelty designed by the apartheid government.

Sadly White Paper 3 goals merely scratched the surface; hence, black students still seem excluded from higher education, like they were before 1994. Mouton et al. (2013, 288) claim that a large number of students that still struggle to gain access to higher education are black and mostly from poor schools as their schooling encounters leave them with mediocre capital to navigate higher education, not to mention capital to navigate the affluent university system. The Fallist Movement and scholars, such as Jansen (2002) who christened the policymaking of the new democracy as symbolic and inapt, corroborate the notion that the past and present policy framework can never work—especially as the transfor-

mation policies did not foresee how fixed the characteristics of apartheid were in the higher education system. Also, through this assessment, one wonders how else the transition would be undertaken, especially as the new democratic government that inherited fiscal constraints was also besieged by other unanticipated obstructions, such as the new neo-liberal ideology of globalisation that was creeping in at high speed. The new democratic government had to abandon the reconstruction and development plan, and compromised equity and redress programmes to make itself relevant to neo-liberal rules of the new world (Akoojee and McGrath 2003, 6). From Akoojee and McGrath's outlook, it can be argued that by the time the 2013 White Paper followed, the neo-liberal ideologies were essential elements of what South Africa was exhibiting herself to be, as the rhetoric conveyed the vision for the type of post-school education and training system that mirrors global views. This then meant the 2013 vision changed from working towards access and redress to creating platforms for global competition, such as developing training institutions and marrying work place sector to higher education in order to reproduce human resources for the labour market (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] 2013, 4). This meant ample learnership opportunities and the new Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) path that students could utilise instead of flocking into the university system. In my point of view, in a perfect and equal world, this would have been ideal for the country as there would be so much scope to choose from, but in South Africa, this could only mean that the TVET path was for black students from poor schools because they could not get into the university system as the university system seemed to be preserved to accommodate those whose pedagogical encounters were refined through white privilege encounters so they were able to enter elite universities without difficulty. Kane (2007, 354) who studied Frantz Fanon's theory of racialisation analyses Fanon's "racial optic" within colonialisation and decolonialisation. Kane perceives the racial optic concept as a representation of class distinction, to describe the gap in the economic substructures, and any prevalent social inequality. In a case that resembles the South African political landscape, which is discernible for its racial exclusion baggage, social inequality can be interpreted as the systems in higher education that still favour privilege and reject those with poor

schools education encounter. As I have argued earlier, the TVET path seemed to be carved for the students from poor schools, as they seem to be still on the outside. The implication therefore is either the present discomforts are the perpetuation of coloniality, for which we seek responsiveness from the custodians of higher education, or the neo-liberal demands are affecting the higher education system profoundly.

The question then is whether Vision 2030 (South African Government 2011) can build a fair, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa. To attain this vision will remain impossible due to the reasons I have mentioned earlier, as despite the policy framework declarations, the higher education system seems to continuously alienate black students as universities in South Africa "are still sites to reproduce coloniality" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 488). For example, after 1994, South Africa experienced institutional massification, which comprised a flood of students from low socio-economic income with longings for higher education encounters flocking into institutions of higher learning. The distress in this influx was that, while the students were looking for opportunities for social mobility, historically disadvantaged institutions were the only available option as most historically advantaged universities were keen to grant access to students who had private and Model C encounters, which would help these universities maintain their academic standing. These experiences are bludgeoning the hopes of underprivileged students as they seemed to be driven towards the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, that is, if they did not decide to forsake their dreams. Considering that South Africa has had progressive transformation blueprints, one would have expected that the inclusion of black students from underprivileged schools would have been simple; instead, the asymmetry in pedagogical experiences and encounters between the students from underprivileged schools and students from affluent schools accentuated the imbalances.

As if this struggle is not enough, now poor students are expected to pull out all the stops to compete with affluent students to gain access into universities. When they are accepted into the universities, the expectation is that they have to perform as if they had similar pedagogical experiences as privileged students; yet, affluent students' pedagogical experiences place them ahead of poor students. Nearly all higher education practices

seem to be punitive on black students from poor schools, as they disaffirm the existence of inequities in educational encounters. In short, higher education appears to be designed to embrace affluence, which suggests that the 2030 vision may never be achieved if inequities are nullified.

Another example of a policy framework that does not seem to work is the issue of language, which remains a pickle as African languages seem to have no place in the higher education system. African languages are not developed enough for academia. This suggests a rebuff of the existence of black students in the system. As in the apartheid era where African children were expected to forsake their mother tongue and be educated in either English or Afrikaans, African students are still expected to forsake languages they grew up speaking from early childhood to embrace English or Afrikaans, the languages that do not embrace any African customs or cultures. It is as though indigenous knowledge never existed, and the disdain of it has caused a destruction of known nuances in African languages. I will take the traditional healer concept as an example. In the English language, the traditional healer is referred to as a 'witchdoctor'; yet, in African languages, the traditional healer is known as *iSangoma* in isiZulu, or *iGqirha* in isiXhosa, which means 'healer'. Suffice to say; when the African nuances are translated into the English language, the meaning somehow becomes skewed, probably because of a lack of words to use, or a deliberate move to disparage African customs. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 11) says the above assertion denotes the articulation of subjectivity and being, with whiteness gaining ontological density far above blackness.

Furthermore, in many instances, the destruction of mother tongue often leads to a complete loss of identity and/or value system, and in the end, it becomes a loss of sense of belonging—which helps the coloniality as power structure flourish since those who have lost their sense of belonging are now identifying with colonial culture (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 11). Despite knowing this aspect, it is surprising to find language attrition perpetuated under the banner of equality in higher education. Institutions claim that students do not want to be taught in their mother tongue, as this would not help them get employed. Of course, students are likely to feel this way, as the world with which they are familiar is asymmetrically sustained by colonial power nuances that control the

manner the students think, and therefore the students are likely to laud Western knowledge and despise or reject their own African value systems.

On the basis of the above accounts, the current South African higher education system appears to be selling coloniality as normal, suggesting there is no need for African students to protest, as this is how the world is today. This attitude is predisposed to immortalise asymmetrical pedagogical experiences, classism and racism because Eurocentrism and Americanisation, which are synonymous with globalisation, have become the power structure, while Africanism is obliterated. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 48) concurs and states that globalisation is driven by coloniality—and this in South Africa may still perpetuate social inequality that is similar to the Apartheid era. Somehow, these harsh realities have been transported into the new systems, together with the visible hegemonic principles in them. What have become worse are the developments of the new South Africa, after dawn of democracy, which are either abandoned or debated to be unnecessary. I am referring to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), affirmative action, black economic empowerment (BEE) which later became broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE). These are either scorned or discarded, and have been replaced by globalisation, which promotes Eurocentrism and Americanism. In the promotion of Americanism, which could be seen as synonymous with globalisation as Ndlovu-Gatsheni has alluded above, privilege and partisanship triumph, and black students are expected to catch up. The popular comment in South Africa today is often, "it is now 24 years after independence; yet, blacks are still crying foul. Can't they get over it?" What is often overlooked is how deep the cuts of colonialism, apartheid and coloniality are in the lives of African people. Apart from denying Africans the basic needs enjoyed by everyone, such as quality education, coloniality destroyed the sense of worth, which left the majority losing self-worth and not trusting their own capabilities; hence, to this day South Africa still have exclusion and inclusion challenges in higher education (Mouton et al. 2013, 288).

From this asymmetry and unfairness, decoloniality arises to point at the dichotomy in education encounters, which is often rebuffed as nonexistent, or to some extent is assumed to have changed in 1994. Through

decoloniality, I am going to point at what seems to have gone wrong in the new policy framework.

Oppressive Themes in the Current Higher Education System

The characteristics of the present South Africa's post-school education and training (PSET), although argued to be a democratic system, tend to depict a hybrid system approach that exhibits both the continuous apartheid ethos and a discrete forceful system borrowed from globalised institutions, such as Harvard, which tends to be worrisome as this prestige university also developed from religious dogma to what it is today (Christensen and Eyring 2011, 101). Yet, South Africa does not seem to want gradual development. Furthermore, in the current higher system, there is evidence of the functional approach favoured by the apartheid government, which embraces mostly the Platonic and Calvinistic approaches in education, and there are also traces of Americanisation. The Platonic and Calvinistic elements seem to purport the idea that students should be prepared for civil duties, that is, each person has a particular position in life and God predetermined these positions (Noddings 1998, 47). Under these approaches, men are expected to make the best of their situation. This is pretty much what the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training seems to encourage, our youth finding their places in the ecosystem. This is not necessarily a ruthless idea. However, how then can South African youth find their places in society if societal structures still embrace coloniality? Former Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, corroborates my assertion and states that the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training represented "the government's thinking in the area of higher education and training and is in line with the country's key national policy documents including the National Development Plan, the New Growth Path, the Industrial Policy Action Plan and the draft Human Resource Development Strategy for South Africa" (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013, vii). So, for example, if the National Development Plan (NDP) speaks of

growing an inclusive economy and solving South Africa's complex problems of unemployment, poverty and inequality, then I should be forgiven for thinking that the White Paper came into being to fast-track what could be the crisis of unemployment caused by global forces within our education system and other spheres of South African public institutions.

The Americanisation of the PSET has meant that it has become an obsession for South African education institutions to want to be recognised and rated according to the standards of world universities. In essence, the globalised rating standards are a norm in the academic world, as many institutions want to emulate Harvard (Christensen and Eyring 2011). Unfortunately, these standards also seem to maintain and perpetuate coloniality, which in turn seems to continue to marginalise the same group that was marginalised because the ratings are based on what America and Europe deem to be the best, which happens to be embedded within coloniality, as I have alluded to earlier that Ndlovu-Gatsheni says if one looks for coloniality, they should look for it in books, criteria for academic performance and so on. The question to be asked then is how can we deliberately transform the South African higher education system so that it is free of coloniality, namely apartheid and neo-liberal characteristics that sustain the asymmetrical power relations at institutions of higher learning. Beyond this, one can then argue that if the higher education system is not taken apart in order to create a new system that could provide symmetrical education encounters, higher education is headed for a huge collapse.

For instance, if the present higher education system continues to promote the colonial hegemony, which mostly still perpetuates the issues of race, the transformation ethos born from the spirit of the New South Africa, which saw *ubuntu* at the heart of South African epistemic identity, will continue to be undermined. This means our higher education system will forever overlook the national needs and caring for the other in favour of neo-liberal perspectives, which constantly undermine the concepts of Africanisation and indigenous knowledge, in favour of individualism and competition, and which continue to devour the dreams of underprivileged students. This does not only affect the lives of students; it takes South Africa back to the colonial times. And unfortunately if South

Africa does not unshackle herself from coloniality, Europe and America will continue to dominate South Africans' thought processes.

To survive the new form of coloniality the students' resistance movements are necessary and need not be seen as anti-progressive but as barometers that help assess symmetry and asymmetry within the higher education space. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 15) corroborates the necessity of decoloniality in academic spaces by stating, "decoloniality gives ex-colonised peoples a space to judge Euro-American deceit and hypocrisy and to stand up into subject hood through judging Europe and exposing technologies of subjectivation". More to the point is that the students' rhetoric speaks of decoloniality as an epistemological means to liberation of the higher education sector. As in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire 1985, 41) where Freire links realisation, conscientisation and collectivism as critical loops in emancipation of societies from all forms of social oppression, decoloniality therefore can drive processes to obviate disproportionate education encounters that continue to alienate underprivileged students. Furthermore, since underprivileged students also tend to doubt their potential even when they do manage to enter higher education, decoloniality could also be used as the lens to view what is lacking within the higher education institutions in relation to structures that may be alienating to underprivileged students.

From the above position, therefore, the fundamental question is how can we free the South African higher education system from coloniality? My idea posits the theorisation of an African vision that would embrace students from all walks of life. Primarily, the higher education system that embraces an African vision will accentuate systems that evoke and restore dignity of African people by embracing indigenous knowledge in the higher education system. My argument is drawn from Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015, 489) outlook, from which he reasons that schools, colleges, churches and universities in Africa are sites for the reproduction of coloniality and that there are no African universities but universities in Africa. More to the point is, the systems need to be geared towards developing African languages into academic languages, so that the idea of having degrees that are conducted in African languages are not seen as ridiculous. The gap that is intensified by rising costs should be closed by introducing a realistic implementation plan on how free education could be

distributed and who should benefit. In essence, the new systems should not refute the plight of black students but accept there is a problem and then map the way forward. Additionally, the African vision should be mindful of the fact that neo-liberal policies tend to favour free market capitalism and globalisation, which leads to the marginalisation of the underprivileged, which in South Africa, tend to be black people. This therefore means a system will need to be created to address local needs before embracing neo-liberal politics. More than anything, the new higher education systems should not disparage Africanism.

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