



6

Travelling Between Historical Memory and the Current Predicament of Educational Reforms in Higher Education: A Transnational Perspective

Amina Mama and Dave S. P. Thomas

Dave S.P. Thomas *What are your thoughts on the idea that the Canon of thought in Westernised universities are predominantly based on the knowledge systems of five countries (Italy, France, England, Germany and the USA)?*

Professor Mama Well, these five countries were all imperialist powers. I believe the term *Canon* is entirely appropriate. Let's think of the *canon* as a weapon of force; a male weapon. So, if we start by using that metaphor, then we can explore the question of what a canon of thought is and what it does.

A. Mama (✉)

University of California, Oakland, CA, USA

e-mail: amama@ucdavis.edu

D. S. P. Thomas

Division of Natural Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, UK

e-mail: d.s.p.thomas@kent.ac.uk

Intellectually, it is that authorisation of knowledge that is on the side of power. And power is defined in a very exclusionary way that is associated with empire, with White supremacy, with the global project of imperialism and the expansion of a patriarchal form of capitalism. The ruling canon is a product of historical power relations, with which we, as African people will have a problem, because they have subjugated our continent, trafficked, traded and exploited all our resources, and dehumanised our people.

The history of knowledge in the West is the history of empire, and that has included the psychological pacification that all colonised people have been subjected to. It has included the eradication, elimination and degradation of any other form of knowledge. That's what supremacy is, that's what chauvinism is. It's centred on a particular kind of ruling power that relied on denying the humanity and intelligence of all other people, and has a predatory relation to other life forms, and the planet. So, the canon has been defined for imperialist purposes. Within its own terms, it is legitimate and it's authentic. My problem with it is that it disparages everything else marginalises and inferiorises everything else, so that it reigns supreme. So, we have to ask ourselves, who is the knowledge in the canon for and for what purpose?

For people of colour, we want and seek knowledge that is more capacious, more liberatory, so the malestream colonial canon as it stands doesn't serve us well. If you look at what we as Africans want knowledge to do for us in the aftermath of colonialism, we want knowledge to decolonise our minds, we want it to liberate our still-marginalised and exploited societies. So, as Africans, we take a different approach. We see knowledge as freedom in terms of our continent and other oppressed peoples, not freedom for White men to roam the world and dominate all other civilisations and parody these as barbaric, but knowledge that will free us from that historical baggage. So, African knowledge production in the contemporary period is entirely about resisting and transcending colonial pacification, overcoming our internalisation of a world order that has not done us any favours, and in fact is very much implicated in our oppression. Both as African people and as women.

We can take it back to identifying the first universities. According to the West, this was a place populated by German monks and it was

theocratic, Christian knowledge. Now, the critique of that from another perspective we should ask, who defined that as a university, and who determined it was the first? For the sake of argument, I will give you an example to test that. I would say that I know a much older university.

The oldest university, in fact the first university, was founded by a Tunisian woman called Fatima al-Fihri and it was founded in the ancient city of Fez 859 AD, before the European medieval period. I would argue that the fact that a woman founded that university means that knowledge was not exclusively a masculine preserve in the way that the Germans defined it. So, you see, we can use knowledge to counteract White supremacy if we do our work well.

History is full of similar examples. The foreclosure of knowledge by White masculinity, by imperialism has cost us dearly. This is why every little village woman in Africa wants to learn to read. We all know that knowledge is power. That's why feminist intellectuals pursue knowledge, to undo male authority and our subjection to male authority. All the way through history, you find women using their brains to out-think, out-manoeuvre and sabotage that male epistemological authority. Depending on how you are positioned in the world, you have a different vantage point on what is legitimate knowledge and who is it for. We can trace this back to the burning of women at the stake. The literature suggest that the women accused as witches were healers and that their skills afforded them some level of power. The rise of scientific medicine was also the rise of a male monopoly, and it was enforced using theocratic power, and supported by the Church. Christian patriarchy evolved in Europe and they eradicated approximately 6 million women to establish male supremacy over traditional healing. So, the institutionalisation of medicine as a modern, scientific male-dominated preserve eliminated traditional midwives. It eliminated women. When women were brought back into healthcare, it was in a subservient role in relation to the male doctor. But, we still had Florence Nightingale, we still had Mary Seacole, who was referred to in the Caribbean as a Doctress. So even though that was the system, you still had those who defied and still did what they thought was their God-given work. So, examples like Seacole are driven into what is called the subaltern terrain, or the terrain of dissident knowledge. So, we need to redefine the meaning of knowledge, and how we want it to be

produced to serve our purposes from the vantage point of the antithesis of empire. To think is to live, and to resist toxic forces.

Dave S.P. Thomas *To what extent do structural inequalities in higher education promote “Black suffering” and subsequently inequalities in outcomes for people of colour intersectionally?*

Professor Mama Since Black people are not inherently or innately unintelligent, then we have to question the system that is producing “Black underachievement.” As people, we are not academically inferior to any other people. You also have to look at the groups that are succeeding in the system, and then investigate what is the system doing to produce these outcomes. So, we have to look into our education systems and reveal just how these are reproducing historical inequalities. You don’t have to interview too many Black students to find out that they are indeed suffering existentially. There is no scientific evidence, yet most people believe you are less intelligent if you have a Black skin. That idea has somehow persisted, despite the vast evidence to the contrary. Remember that film called *Hidden Figures*? The female mathematicians at NASA were brilliant but that reality had to be suppressed because the White men couldn’t handle it. So, this suppression of the talents of people, who in a sense White identity depends on inferiorising is what’s driving Black suffering, even among school children and students. I think we experience a lot of stress and many young people of colour in our higher education systems do fail more often, if they are not given support to counteract these dominant ideas about race, to interrupt what the education system makes into a self-fulfilling prediction. I believe it takes a lot for a system to bring down young people who come from families with a strong educational focus. Generally, these children are not brought up to believe they are academically inept. They do very well in the universities elsewhere. Look at the University of the West Indies, you have brilliant students there who are thriving. But, in Africa, there has been a concerted effort to “take down” the African university, divesting them, imposing fees and so on so that most people can’t get a decent university education on the continent.

You can look at the percentage of the world's scientific publications that are produced by Africans... it's very small. Worst still, ask yourself, how much of the knowledge on Africa is produced by Africans? It is still very little, more than half a century after we started building hundreds of higher education institutions, most of which remain starved of resources. And if you look at African women, the marginalisation of African scholarship is even more extreme. So, knowledge production on Africa is very externalised and to think that we are more than 50 to 60 years out of direct colonial rule! Now we have to look at how the contemporary global system is reproducing the colonial inequalities because so we are still not able to produce sufficient knowledge, even on our own realities and conditions. We expected more. If you look at the history of African university and what was envisioned decades before independence, you would think that by now at least the world's scholarly knowledge about Africa would be produced on the African continent, and by Africans.

Kwame Nkrumah took the matter of building universities for African purposes seriously. The old colonial faculty at the University of Ghana argued that he was violating academic freedom if he thought the national university was to serve Ghana's liberation and development. Because, for them, academic freedom meant their freedom to perpetuate the old *Canon*. But for African intellectuals, freedom means overturning colonial knowledge production and uncovering African history. In the first few years of political independence the Africanisation of the university went ahead. There were few women until later on, because Africanisation favoured men, and didn't bring many women in at first. That came later, because women kept pushing their way in. Unlike the universities in Germany, Oxford and Cambridge, African universities never excluded women. So, from the moment of independence, African women have been fighting their way into the universities. Universities in Africa are not easy or comfortable places for women, or for that matter, for poor people or rural people either, but the determination meant that insofar as you have inclusive public education, poor people, women and others who might not have been able to afford the high costs of elite education will get in and secure qualifications.

Dave S.P. Thomas How was educational policy lived and suffered by those who have little hand in policy formulation or implementation?

Professor Mama Well, I think the policies that we now have in place are making the universities less inclusive globally. Post-independence, in Africa, we had a huge push to make universities more inclusive of the population, because we wanted everyone to be educated and we still have a huge amount of people uneducated. We should have planned ahead for population growth. But the failure to maintain inclusive free public education is disastrous. We need big public institutions where people and ideas can gather; we need big research institutions to address our numerous challenges. As long as every academic is doing their own little project or working for Western corporations, then we're not pursuing any African agenda. The genius of it is that there are still a lot of Africans doing their own research and coming up with discoveries that don't always get to see the light of day and African researchers don't get funded to develop their discoveries. Indigenous knowledge is not valued until someone else "discovers" it, like the so-called superfoods. Indigenous cosmetics and herbs are not valued until L'Oreal or Pfizer brand them.

Dave S.P. Thomas To what extent did higher education institutions in Africa play a role in the liberation of its people after colonisation?

Professor Mama All African nations had to build universities. Even military dictatorship couldn't resist that public hunger for access to education. So, we didn't just grow dozens of universities, we grew hundreds of universities. Then structural adjustment. The Western financial institution, that whole Washington consensus of the 1980s actually decided that Africans shouldn't have their own universities. Nineteen eighty-eight, the World Bank had the temerity to suggest that anywhere in the world (it could only be Africa) couldn't afford universities, on the basis of some cost return surveys that basically argued that African countries should focus on primary education. I remember arguing that this amounted to the decapitation of the continent. They also said that they would provide consultants to plan development. Obviously, you need highly skilled people to do modernised development—social development planning,

industries, technology. This is *the knowledge era* and they were telling us that we didn't need universities. There was uproar, riots, students got shot in Nigeria over the imposition of structural adjustment. We had another military coup. The military have always been the enforcers of Western, corporate agendas, and that's what happened. So, they repackaged it and it came back as "higher education reform."

I can remember stories about the moment of independence. In Ibadan, they invited all the traditional doctors to the Medical School. The cafeteria menu changed overnight from Irish potatoes to Eba and so on. Today, if you go to a university graduation in Ghana, you will see that they are still wearing the medieval, European regalia, but with some *Kente* (a type of fabric made with interwoven cloth strips and indigenous to the Akan group of Ghana).

Higher education reform meant that people had to pay for education. Education once again reverted to the colonial thing of being a very elite project. So, you now had an African elite who could get an exclusive university education and be able to identify with global elite interests. Then, the academics' alienation from the interest of the marginalised majority of people is secure. So that severing of intelligence from its proper social responsibility, its identification with the class interests of ordinary people is the modern, neoliberal university project. Therefore, the ideal neoliberal university is a corporate, elitist project, not a democratised or inclusive public project.

Higher education reform in African defined salaries, along the lines of the development industry, so that foreign faculty could be paid more for their expertise. So, in an African country, expatriate faculty were to be paid more than African faculty. What does that do to a young African lecturer? That would inferiorise them financially and intellectually. The academic staff unions had to resist that. The reforms also specified which publishers they could use. The books all had to come from Western publishers. What did that do to local publishers? You could see that this was a recolonisation, down to the details of what text you can use to teach, who can come to the university, and how much they would be paid. People rioted over this, they went on strike. They had to appoint a military man, a General to become the administrator of the university near my home, Ahmadu Bello University. People resisted it, but I can't say we

won, but there was some negotiation, but universities were reconfigured, and teaching and research suffered. Then in the early 2000s five big US corporations decided to fund higher education in Africa. So once again it was funded. Higher education now comes under the World Trade Organization, and US universities dominate the global market in “higher education services” and international students are a profit centre.

On the continent we even numerous for-profit private universities, as well as more Christian and Islamic universities. There are campuses set up by private American universities, Australian universities—all these service providers that bring their curriculums and interests to profit on African insatiable demand for education and training. Another model that was introduced is the African virtual university. This idea that you didn’t need a campus with all those rebellious students getting together and developing collective thinking. You could have everyone in their own rural or urban areas learning digitally by themselves. In post-apartheid South Africa, the argument for it was that this would increase access, and get education to more Black people. But to me, it also meant that they could avoid having millions of Black South African students on campuses, socialising and politicising and doing all the things that should be happening on a campus. So, if we want African universities to play a meaningful role in the pursuit of continental freedom and development will require a different design and a radically different curriculum.

Dave S.P. Thomas *Do you think neoliberalism enhances or doesn’t enhance the decolonisation project?*

Professor Mama Well, it depends on what level you want to focus on. Overall, I believe hyper-capitalism is bad. It is especially bad for Africa. Global capitalism as it has manifested since the days of slavery has not been good for the continent of Africa. So, that’s why many of us grew up to be leftist thinkers, wanting to socialise production, make politics participatory and democratic and ensure freedom and development for the people. Some thinkers argued that African cultures are deeply socialistic. What we do know is cooperation matters; especially if you are at the marginalised by the rest of world, you have to work together. Even at community level, if a village wants to do something, the more hands on

deck, the more likely it is that it will happen. We can do a lot of creative things. At one level with neoliberalism, if you can get funding, you can do entrepreneurialism. On a larger scale, it is a disaster. We can't get any traction at scale unless we run our own systems, make our own rules, run our own governments and our own education and health services. We can vaccinate as many people as we want but, if there is no primary healthcare, we will always have deadly epidemics. These huge epidemics have come about with the destruction of primary healthcare systems, the result of divestment of the public sector, the sacrifice of ordinary people on the altar of free-market fundamentalism. This is neoliberalism. So too with knowledge, we can't get to systemic change if we can't exercise the sovereignty to protect the public good, to run systems on behalf of our own interests, instead of for private profit.

Dave S.P. Thomas I believe what you are saying is that in order to enhance the decolonisation project, we need a pan-African approach?

Professor Mama Yes! Not easy because the continent is huge. We need to form networks across the continent, because everywhere is different and we can learn a lot from how the different manifestations of neoliberal empire are affecting different groups and societies differently. And we can also get traction of questions of culture, because Africa has an infinite repertoire of diverse cultures. There's power in the kind of thinking that comes when you're able to transcend your immediate locality to think transnationally. Be grounded locally but be able to think globally. Transnationalism is a methodology for thinking creatively in order to find and create new reservoirs of knowledge and information. For me, this is a different kind of pan-Africanism from what Garvey and the pan-African congress had in mind, because they were still thinking about a big state. In his book *Africa Must Unite* Nkrumah meant a state. Nyerere had a different view. He thought you must have the nation states and then they could unite. Both of them were thinking of the bigger picture. Now, we are thinking beyond the state, more laterally as important strategies and ways of connecting. The challenges for women and marginalised groups is to come together beyond borders. I think of pan-Africanism from an epistemological, political-philosophical perspective that is

people-centred and therefore anti-capitalist, socialist and feminist. I certainly don't think of it in terms of the pan-African army or an African Union of corrupt and illiberal neoliberal states.

Dave S.P. Thomas As a transnational scholar, what is your transnational perspective on how we can redress structural inequalities in the academy?

Professor Mama Right now, I think we have to form transnational associations and networks to address the challenges of pursuing freedom agendas that focus on our collective interests, despite the pressures of our neoliberalised higher education institutions and their individualistic opportunity structure. That means working in cooperation, not in competition. I think it means being able to think and work outside that opportunity structure, to think of it as working in defiance, and thinking as a collective underground, rather than letting our minds be atomised and defined by our job specifications. That like being captured, not at all free. Pursuing freedom is not the job we are paid to do. If you combine transnationalism with a radical class perspective that is centred on linking across the oppressed and the marginalised of the world we might be able to subvert and transform the structures of power. As women, we are working through various feminist networks. That is what excites me about transnationalism—thinking about strategies that create spaces that connect the weak and the marginalised, who are paying the price of today's global regimes of power and profit. We need to connect the oppressed, the subaltern, the counter-hegemonic majority against corporate elite power, which is currently really prevailing over the realm of the state and the military as well as our education system. As a Black faculty member, perhaps you can connect to the pan-African and diaspora networks and set up intellectual projects that can inspire Black students who grew up as minorities in overwhelmingly racialised contexts by teaching that they are the majority in the world. Perhaps you can give them a better perspective on the world. For example, I'd like to see some exchange programmes between African and Caribbean universities, not just thinking via the West. So, for me, cultivating transnational, feminist pan-African perspectives grounded in our history offers a humble pedagogic strategy for redressing structural inequalities in higher education.