DECOLONISING THE SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: FIRST THOUGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Times are indeed changing as South African universities continues to struggle under the growing pressures and ethical demands for transformation and decolonisation. Underpinning these pressures and demands is the taken for granted assumption that all is not well in the South African academy, and that urgent structural and deep rooted changes are necessary. In this article, I foreground the emergent decolonial calls for transformation in the South African higher education. I rely on Le Grange (2019) and Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020)'s notion of ubuntu currere to not only formulate theoretical and empirical critiques at the South African higher education system, but I also begin to offer some first thoughts on the solutions that could be enacted. I focus in particular on the (decolonial) purposes of a university as offering us a very useful space to reflect on and theorise the potential for decoloniality and transformative practices in the academy. I end the article with some conclusion and recommendations on the future of the academy in South Africa, and the projected nature of the struggles for transformation and decolonisation in the sector.

Keywords: higher education, decolonisation, ubuntu currere, teaching and learning

INTRODUCTIONS

"I believe that we live in a very exciting era in the world of knowledge, precisely because we are living in a systemic crisis that is forcing us to reopen the basic epistemological questions and look to structural reorganization of the world of knowledge." (Wallerstein 2004, 58).

"The universities have done very little since 1994 to open up 'to different bodies and traditions of knowledge and knowledge-making in new and exploratory ways'. While all universities have had new policies and frameworks that speak about equality, equity, transformation and change, institutional cultures and epistemological traditions have not considerably changed." (Heleta 2016, 2).

The 2015–2016 student protests in South African higher education proved critical in calling for the re-centering of transformation and decolonisation in the academy. Largely organized and mobilized under the banner of then #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, these movements

lodged a sustained critiqued at the deeply entrenched nature of coloniality, academic literacy, and lack of transformation in the higher education sector. Central to the modus operandi of these movements, was a tacit acceptance that the academy in South Africa and its discursive language practices was a colonial and apartheid invention, and did not serve the interests of the Black students and progressive Black academics who occupy and work in the sector (Hlatshwayo 2020; Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2015). This critique rightfully focused on the alienating/sexist/violent/colonial university institutional culture(s), particularly in historically white universities (HWUs) and research intensive universities; curricula and curriculum design, academic literacy as well as the outdated teaching and learning strategies (Booysen 2016; Heleta 2016; Hlatshwayo 2020).

In this article, I contribute to this emerging body of work that looks at and theorises the struggles for transformation in the South African academy (see Badat 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018b; 2021). I employ Le Grange (2019) and Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020)'s conceptual notion of ubuntu currere to look at often contested and deeply political purposes of a university in South Africa and its discursive academic practices. I see the purposes of a (decolonial) university as central to the discourses around the role and functions of a university in a post-apartheid society.

I now move to outlining the emergent decolonial struggles that are occurring in South African higher education system.

TRANSFORMATION IMPERATIVES IN THE ACADEMY

Calls for decolonising and transforming the South African academy are not a new phenomenon in the higher education system, and date back at least the late 1950s (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Reddy 2004). In the early 1990s, there was already a growing body of work and popular support that was arguing for the restructuring and reconfiguring of the South African academy, moving it away from racialised, unequal and deeply fragmented sector that served the needs of the apartheid order, to a sector that was underpinned by the values of democratic thought, epistemic diversity and inclusivity (see Badat 1994; Cloete and Bunting 2000; Morrow 2009). For Badat (1994), Cloete and Bunting (2000), and Morrow (2009), they rightly diagnosed the academy in South Africa as structurally central to the operational functioning(s) of the apartheid regime, and thus any material change that had to occur in society, had to start first and foremost with confronting the epistemic oppressions, outdated academic literacy practices and marginality in the ivory towers of the academy (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007; Badat 2010; Keet 2014). The Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for Higher Education Transformation (hereafter the White Paper 3) (Department of Education 1997a), the

Higher Education Act (Department of Education 1997b), the draft National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (hereafter the National Plan for Higher Education) (Department of Education 2001), and more recently, the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (hereafter referred to as the Soudien Report) (Department of Education 2008) all collectively sought to articulate a progressive vision for the South African higher education. We see this vision clearly articulated and expressed in the Soudien Report (Department of Education 2008), in which the report builds on the work of Morrow (2009) in calling for a complex and to some extent, reformist understanding of access and transformation in the institutions of higher learning,

> "... *in the formal processes, a distinction could be made between processes linked to legislative and policy imperatives, such as staff and student equity, and epistemological transformation, i.e., 'how knowledge is conceived, constructed and transmitted*' (Hall 2006). Similarly, the informal climate includes both inter-personal relationships and 'less tangible, but equally important aspects of transformation, as well as the traditions, symbols and customs of daily interaction which combined constitute institutional culture', (ibid.). In short, the latter refers .... Therefore, in the broader interpretation, *transformation could be reduced to three critical elements, namely policy and regulatory compliance; epistemological change, at the centre of which is the curriculum; and institutional culture and the need for social inclusion in particular.*" (emphasis added) (CHE 2008).

In the above quotation, the report offers an alternative, transformative and complex understanding of transformation in the South African academy through calling for an "epistemic shift" from merely thinking through and conceptualising transformation through various modes of reforms and demographic changes. The report recognises the need to tackle epistemological transformation, and attempts to re-centre alternative modes of being, seeing and thinking and writing in the world. Put differently, transformation cannot and must not *only* be about the demographic numbers, physical/formal access to the university, racial composition of staff and student, and enrolment change(s) in the academy (see Ramrathan 2016). Transformation *also* needs to be about changing, challenging and dismantling the epistemological landscape in the academy, alienating academic literacies, and foregrounding curricula, knowledge and the different epistemic traditions that continue to be marginalised and disregarded in the university (Badat 2017). Echoing the clarion calls of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student movements, Kamanzi (2016) draws similar lines in socially constructing and fashioning a much broader conception of transformation, one that calls into sharp focus the purposes of the university, the colonial and apartheid spatiality, democratic academic literacies, benchmarking and other neoliberal (and colonising) standards that South

African universities have adopted. Unlike Kamanzi, Badat and Ramrathan (2019) offers a much self-reflexive, existential and personal narrative on the epistemic and ontological violence of an untransformed and research intensive university, one that seemingly demands "productivity" yet abuses, marginalises and oppresses the self,

> "*I have diagnosed myself as suffering from intellectual and emotional toxicity induced by racism, harassment, discrimination, and white privilege within the academy. Toxicity is defined as the degree to which a substance can damage an organism or the degree to which it can be poisonous (Campbell 2007).* In audiology, my field of practice and research, there is a phenomenon referred to as ototoxicity. Ototoxicity is the property of being topic to the ear. This form of toxicity is commonly medication-induced, can be predictable but not always preventable, but can be identified, monitored and managed to varying degrees of success. Imagine I, as a black female academic with its culture, systems and policies – this substance. My journey through higher education, through a black female student to associate professor in a historically white university, resonates and mirrors this phenomenon of toxicity exceptionally well." (emphasis added) (Khoza-Shangase 2019, 42).

In the above quote, Khoza-Shangase offers us her painful journey in the academy through navigating, negotiating and confronting institutional and systemic racism. She self-diagnoses herself as suffering from emotional and intellectual toxicity because of this entrenched racism. What Khoza-Shangase shows, which Ngcobozi (2015), Hlengwa (2019) and to some extent Hlatshwayo (2020) also indicate in their work, is the structural limitations of neoliberal individualistic forms for resistance in the academy and how wholly insufficient they are in assisting those at the margins in HWUs and research intensive universities. The false and often misleading idea that the individual in and of themselves without solidarity from organised allies and support – have the agency and capacity to fight and dismantle institutional/structural racism/ontological and epistemic violence alone lacks coherent and serious understanding of the functioning of the university.

More recently, decolonial scholars such as Mbembe (2015), Kumalo (2018b) and Hlatshwayo (2019) called for the dismantling of outdated/colonising academic literacies, Eurocentric traditions and intellectual formulations in curricula, and focused on reclaiming and re-centring African epistemic canon that could facilitate and enable the thinking, reading and engaging with the word and the world from the perspective of an African subject. Drawing on the old Yoruba adage, Adesina (2020) cautions us that in our decolonial work, we need to avoid "going Sokolo to look for something that is in our pocket" (Adesina 2020, 174), meaning that we have often assumed that African epistemic traditions do not exist, and therefore we need to anthropologically "find" and "discover" it again. Rather, ours ought to be a re-centering discursive project in which we re-claim, re-center, re-place and re-establish the importance of

these other *othered* intellectual traditions in our work.

So far, I have outlined the emergent transformation discourses in South African higher education system, and were in the broader decolonial struggles I am aligning my contribution. I now turn to introducing the conceptual frame of this article, that is, ubuntu currere, and how it is operationalised and employed in this article.

UBUNTU CURRERE AS A DECOLONIAL DEVICE

In this article, I view ubuntu currere (that is, ubuntu curriculum) as a decolonial device that could help us explicate, theorise and attempt to transform the South African higher education sector. I rely on and use the device to foreground and to engage with critical engagement with the purposes of a university as epistemic and ontological spaces for potential decolonial and transformative interventions.

Le Grange (2016)'s conceptual notion of ubuntu currere is a useful decolonial framework to help us understand and theorise the protracted and deeply entrenched structural challenges confronting the South African higher education system. Le Grange conceptually builds from Pinar (2011) and Wallin (2011), to argue that "currere", Latin for running, ought to project and socially construct the *active* aspect of curriculum. This active, conceptual force implies and refers to the "newness, the creation of things unforeseen, experimentation, and the expansion of difference and movement" (Le Grange 2014, 1288). The challenge and Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020) echo this phenomenon, is that curricula, curriculum design and in the academy tends to be a hierarchical, top down process were the academics are positioned as the (legitimate) knowers and holders of curriculum knowledge while students linguistic discourses are often assumed and projected to be the (illegitimate) Freirean empty vessels that ought to be deposited with curriculum knowledge in the class rooms (Freire 2018).

For Le Grange and Hlatshwayo, Shawa, and Nxumalo (2020), they suggest that we need to reclaim the active force of currere and reject the epistemic and ontological fallacy of the Cartesian duality. It must be highlighted that the Cartesian duality is premised under the flawed assumption of *cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am – and that we need to move into an ubuntu perspective of – I am because we are – to better reflect the democratic and inclusive ways of being, seeing and thinking (see Le Grange 2019). This shift towards the "we" and moving beyond the "I" reflects decolonial scholars' argument that the "I" in the Cartesian duality symbolises and signifies the colonising European white man who refuses to recognise the epistemic and ontological diversities in the word and in the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018a; 2018b). This results in the Maori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) referring to re-search as a "dirty word", were knowledge production and its

methodologies were employed (and to some extent, still operate) as colonial tools to occupy, dominate and dismantle the African and global South people intellectually, culturally, economically, socially, and spiritually (see Mudimbe 1988).

In this article, I see ubuntu currere as offering a useful framework to think through decolonial possibilities in the South African academy. I now turn to employing ubuntu currere as a decolonial device in explicating the different struggles in South African higher education, and the epistemic and ontological spaces for decolonial possibilities.

THE PURPOSES OF A (DECOLONIAL) UNIVERSITY

The Dutch philosopher and educationist, Gert Biesta, argues that there are at least, three overlapping and dialectical purposes of education (Biesta 2009). The first purpose of education includes the "qualification" aspect, which focuses on providing and supplying the young with appropriate academic literacies, skill, dispositions and formal education. This aspect of the purpose of education strongly aligns with the needs of the neoliberal marketplace regarding what the capitalist order and its regime see as "useful" and "essential" skills for the different jobs in the various sectors of the economy require. The second purpose of education is socialisation. This aspect entails the complex and nuanced ways in which education inducts people to be members of social, political and cultural organisations. Building on the work of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of the different forms of capital (economic/cultural/social) (see Bourdieu 2011), Biesta suggests that whether explicitly or implicitly, education in and of itself inducts its members into these "acceptable" and palatable norms and values that enables people to thrive and negotiate their belonging in society. These norms could be seen as the site were often the "hidden curriculum" and the pervasive, toxic and violent ideology of the university/department/curricula/pedagogy most firmly resides. The third purpose of education for Biesta, focuses on the notion of "subjectification", which is primarily concerned with the young becoming autonomous and independent citizens in their critical thinking, acting and being in the world.

Hlatshwayo and Bertram (2020) suggest that there are a couple of tensions with Biesta's framing of the different purposes of education. The first one is that Biesta's subjectification and socialisation could be seen as being in tension with one another, with socialisation largely focusing on learning to a "good" and "accountable" citizen in the country (Biesta 2009). Subjectification on the other hand, calls for critical thinking, autonomy, dissent, dissidence and questioning what Habermas (1987) has referred to as our taken for grantedness in our complex lifeworld(s). This tension is in fact a decolonial one, one in which to socialise in the current South African university, particularly in HWUs, is to take on and accept the norms, values,

ideologies and beliefs that are often being inducted to Black students and progressive Black academics who are struggling to negotiate their being, belonging, survival and success in such ontologically and epistemologically violent institutions (Hlatshwayo 2015; Kumalo 2018a; Hlengwa 2019). In order for one to succeed in HWUs, one must self-mutilate themselves, their being, and become what Hlengwa (2019) has termed a "safe bet" in not challenging, critiquing, dismantling or resisting the hegemonic institutional culture(s) in the hope of accessing and succeeding in the academy (see also Hlatshwayo 2020). The danger with the safe bet phenomena is that the ethical demands of self-reflection, self-reflexivity and transformation are placed squally on the shoulders of the safe bet who need to "adjust" and "cope" with the epistemic violence rather than the university/department/curricula needing to reform and reconfigure itself on how its norms, values, hidden and codified policies, as well as institutional practices tend to alienate and marginalize those who occupy and possess Black ontological identities. Thus, the critical purpose of a decolonial university ought to be one that promotes, facilitates and enables being, acceptance and recognition of the different ontologies and epistemic traditions in the academy.

The purposes of a university are central to our debates regarding attempting to fashion a much more inclusive and socially just higher education system in South Africa. I support and echo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) and Mbembe (2016)'s notion of the need to move beyond the "university" that seeks to protect and conform into the dominant, singular and monolithic academic literacies, underpinned by the Euro-American forms of knowledge production into one that embraces a more pluriverse (or diverse) epistemic and ontological traditions. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021), at the center of our struggles is the understanding that we need to dismantle, de-universalize and re-provincialize Euro-American epistemologies,

> "*At the centre of these struggles are the agendas of de-universalisation/re-provincialisation, that is, confronting the centred-ness and overrepresentation of Europe and North America in knowledge production and dissemination that dates back to the time of colonial encounters and colonial conquests*. As put by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018), what is envisioned is an opened space for the emergence of ecologies of knowledges and pluriversities (universities that take seriously particularities and pluralities of human existence, including multiplicity of languages)." (emphasis added) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021).

Building on the work of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) and Santos (2007), the decolonial university ought to respond seriously to at least, the three protracted challenges confronting the public university in South Africa. Firstly, and as outlined above, recognising, critiquing and dismantling the deeply embedded coloniality in the academy. This coloniality presents and manifests itself through various university functions and roles such as archaic academic

literacies, curricula, teaching and learning, institutional ceremonies and practices, institutional culture(s), space and spatiality and other university processes and mechanism. Secondly, the decolonial university needs to adopt an anthropological and excavations project, one that is underpinned by the re-emergence of and epistemic resurrection of the Black archive and other marginalised, hidden and silenced Global South epistemologies (Kumalo 2018a; 2018b; 2020). Different disciplines and fields such as Chemistry, Pharmacy, Law, Sociology, Political Science, Natural Sciences, Philosophy, Geography, Geology and others all have rich and vibrant African and global South epistemic traditions that could enhance and strengthen the relevance and diversity of the knowledge(s) in the field. The third protracted challenge that the decolonial university needs to confront focuses on the deeply political and contested site of teaching and learning in the university.

Teaching and learning could be seen as the *sine qua non* (central core) of the #RhodesMustFall student protests in the 2015–2016 moment. This was seen in how students and progressive Black academics argued that post the 1994 political dispensation, little to no significant changes have occurred in the South African higher education system regarding the kinds of knowledge(s) that are still being valued, legitimated, taught and institutionalised in the academy (see Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2016; Kamanzi 2016). In other words, Coloniality is still firmly rooted and consolidated in the academy, with outdated academic literacies, African epistemic traditions and knowledges from the global South still dis-located and marginalized to the periphery in teaching and learning. For Heleta (2016), Kumalo (2020) and Adesina (2020), and as mentioned before, the value lies in committing to an excavationist project in pursing Black epistemic traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, the Black archive and other marginalised global South knowledges as an attempt at dislodging the curriculum powers of Euro-American thought. The Covid-19 pandemic emerges in an already deeply political and contested terrain in the South African academy. Writing in another publication on the Covid-19 implications for curriculum design, teaching and learning, as well as assessment practices, I argue that,

> "With all the current challenges facing the public university during this lockdown period, teaching and learning is arguably central. Universities have begun to conceptualise teaching and learning as the 'dumping' of curriculum material online in an attempt to salvage what is increasingly becoming a lost academic year. *The operating logic of this discourse of salvaging the academic year, is largely driven by the need to ensure that it is 'business as usual' at the university, and that the university calendar, its ceremonial traditions and norms cannot be disturbed, and should continue as normal, albeit online. This insistence on the reestablishment of 'normalcy' and its social order presents a couple of challenges. Firstly, it reduces the pedagogical shift to entail the mere uploading of material online. Secondly, it forfeits the social justice and critical engagement agenda that is often required when teaching and learning is concerned.*" (emphasis added) (Hlatshwayo 2020, 144).

This pandemic teaching that I write about and theorise above, lacks coherence and gives birth to a series of crises. Rather than heading and taking stock of Indian activist and novelist Arundhati Roy's advice on using the pandemic as an epistemic and ontological portal to reflect/re-evaluate/re-imagine our way of life and potentially changing/reforming it – I see the pandemic in the academy as *re-enforcing* normalcy through the "business as usual" and salvaging/saving the academic year discourses. Further to the above, I also see two other teaching and learning crisis. The emergent teaching and learning discuses brought about by the emergency remote teaching and appears to reduce and collapse pedagogy to merely the uploading of curriculum material online without critically reflecting on and understanding what online learning entails, and how potentially exclusionary it could be. Secondly, it forfeits and potentially kills/ignores/undermines the social justice ethic of ensuring that no student gets left behind. We have widespread and well-documented evidence of systemic inequality in South African society, with millions still living in structural and abject poverty (see Stats SA 2019). How does moving the curriculum material online, help mitigate or potentially exacerbate those inequalities in our society? I am not suggesting that virtual and online forms of teaching and learning should not be pursued as the global communities continue to face the Covid-19 pandemic. I am arguing that the emergency remote teaching, virtual forms of teaching and learning and online pedagogies all need to be underpinned by and help influenced by the values of social justice, democratic access and inclusivity. This could be done through a complex understanding of teaching and learning that includes and takes account of access to virtual platforms, food, safety, conducive environment and others that all ultimately help influence and affect's one ability to engage with curricula.

So far, I have discussed at length the purposes of a (decolonial) university and the different crisis and challenges it ought to respond to. I have located the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic to an already deeply contested and political higher education sector, with growing calls for transformation and decolonisation. What I have not done sufficiently so far, is to use the ubuntu currere as an analytical/theorical device to help theorise the calls for decolonising the South African university. I now turn to that idea.

RETURNING TO UBUNTU-CURRERE

As mentioned earlier, ubuntu currere offers us a useful device to thinking through and theorising the struggles for decolonising the South African university. Le grange and Wallin's notion of "currere", that is, to run, calls to attention that Fanonian commitment to being in motion with the world, that is enacting, constructing, designing and creating a curriculum that not only

responds to the present challenges and realities of the global South, but one that also has student voice(s) and input in it (Fanon 1963; Gordon 2015). Traditional forms of curriculum design tend to exclude student voices and critical input, and thus on only when modules/curricula are being assessed, students are asked to come in to evaluate what could be seen as a "finished product" in the end of the semester/term. I should emphasise that I am not suggesting that academics are not the experts in their field and therefore there is no room for specialist knowledge in curriculum formulations and its deliberations. Rather, I am suggesting that students have their inherent knowledge(s)/values/views and those complex lifeworlds should be brought in the curriculum design and if possible, incorporated. Furthermore, Ubuntu currere also recognises Said (1978) and Smith (2013)'s historical and anthropological critique of the role of re-search as colonial tool to in owning and dismantling the colonised at the level of knowledge, methodology and discourse. Thus, ubuntu currere enables and promotes research that places the global South at the centre, and that promotes and facilitates ontological and epistemic diversity, different forms of being, thinking and seeing and reading the word and the world.

In his magnus opus, *The Leviathan*, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (2016) writes about the importance of the social contract in society in preventing and avoiding the "state of nature", that is, violence, brutality, chaos and dysfunctionality. For Hobbes, and to some extent Locke, the social contract is a symbolic marker of the social/political/economic/legal consensus that we have with one another on what is expected, rewarded and sanctioned in the society (Gauthier 1969; Waldron 1989; Hobbes 2016). In this article, I argue that we need an ubuntu currere that is anchored by and underpinned by a decolonial social contract in the academy. This decolonial social contract will take stock of and respond to the coloniality of being, coloniality of power, and the coloniality of knowledge that the South African universities are currently facing.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

South African universities are facing an existential crisis in responding to the growing calls for transformation and decolonisation. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in late December 2019 confronts an already depressed higher education sector, one that still has unresolved the outdated/archaic academic literacies, curricula, teaching and learning and assessment issues. In this article, I contribute to the emerging body of research that looks at the struggles for transformation and decoloniality in the academy. I rely on the conceptual tool of ubuntu currere to foreground and theorise the purposes of a university, the various crisis in the sector as well as some of the solutions. Based on the above, I make the following theoretical and empirical

recommendations:

- Ubuntu currere as a theoretical and empirical tool is still relatively new and under-theorised (see for example Le Grange 2019, Hlatshwayo and Shawa 2020; Hlatshwayo et al. 2020). Future research could take up the tool and explicate it further to give us an analytical framework for data analysis and discussion.

- Brief mention was given in this article on what I termed the "decolonial social contract" in the academy. Future research could conceptually and theoretically develop this term, and see to what extent in helps us in responding to the calls for transformation and decolonisation in the global South.

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