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On shaky ground: A response to Long et al. (2019)

AUTHOR:
Shari Daya¹

AFFILIATION:
¹Environmental and Geography
Science, University of Cape Town,
Cape Town, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Shari Daya

EMAIL:
shari.day@uct.ac.za

HOW TO CITE:
Daya S. On shaky ground: A
response to Long et al. (2019). *S Afr
J Sci.* 2020;116(3/4), Art. #7932,
3 pages. [https://doi.org/10.17159/
sajs.2020/7932](https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/7932)

ARTICLE INCLUDES:
 Peer review
 Supplementary material

KEYWORDS:
Geography, decoloniality,
Africanisation, higher education

PUBLISHED:
26 March 2020

Geography's histories are indubitably imperialist. The very origins of the discipline, the 'writing of the world' that its name denotes, lie in colonial projects of cartography, exploration, knowledge and conquest.¹ The contexts in which we in contemporary South Africa practise geographical scholarship remain oppressive, as the recent Fallist movements have demonstrated and as gamEdze and gamedZe², for example, clearly show. There is an urgent need in South African higher education for decolonised and transformed spaces of teaching, learning and research. It was therefore with interest that I read Long et al.'s³ call for the decolonisation of Geography curricula in South African universities. I found myself ultimately frustrated, however, by the lack of clarity in their Commentary about what decolonisation might mean for our discipline, as well as concerned by the authors' misreadings of postcolonial theory and their insular and exclusionary ideas of 'legitimacy' in academic spaces. In this rejoinder, I focus on what I consider to be some serious flaws in their argument, followed by a brief proposal for more productive decolonisation strategies in our context.

It is worth noting that what we call Human Geography, although a relatively young sub-discipline, has for some time taken the violence of colonialism seriously. As early as 1938, Carl Sauer⁴ examined the 'destructive exploitation in modern colonial expansion' and since the 1980s, critical accounts of 'Geography's empire'⁵ and its implications for contemporary scholarship have animated debate in journals, books and conferences. Nonetheless, it is true that questions of colonial oppression and its complex legacies have been less prominent in South African geographical scholarship until recently. The silences here, and the slow demographic transformation of South African Geography departments clearly demonstrate the need to render more visible the oppressions and exclusions that shape the foundations of our discipline.

This is the need that Long et al.³ identify, calling specifically for explicit recognition in curricula of 'local' knowledges and place names, and for a turn to postcolonial theory as 'resistance to imperialism, a critique of the colonial, and a rediscovery of indigenous histories and heritage' (p.1). There would surely be little argument against these, at least as principles, in any contemporary South African department of Geography, and indeed Long et al.³ would find little evidence in academic writing for their straw man that the postcolonial is 'often misconceived' as the era after colonialism (p.1). However, simply calling for resistance, critique and rediscovery does not amount to a substantive call for decolonised curricula (or indeed research).

More problematically, however, the article draws 'postcolonial theory' into service as a shorthand for both 'decolonisation' and 'Africanisation', without making it clear how the authors understand any of these terms. I cannot in this short riposte elaborate on the debates about decolonisation versus Africanisation (see, however, Mbembe⁶ and Long⁷), but the conceptual slippage in Long et al.'s³ article undermines their core argument. The authors would do well to take into account Fanon's⁸ critique of Africanisation as an ideology that becomes 'more and more tinged by racism' (p. 154) and often leads to what we in South Africa would now term xenophobic violence against fellow Africans. As I point out later, such discursive violence is a real danger in this article.

In the space available here, however, I want to focus less on the 'what' and more on the 'how' in Long et al.³ – in other words on what these authors see as the *means* by which decolonised curricula should be achieved in South African Geography departments. It is here that their argument steps onto shaky intellectual ground, displaying a surprising ignorance about the scholarship the authors claim as foundational to their project, and putting forth, frankly, regressive proposals for transformation.

Given the centrality of postcolonial theory to the argument, it is reasonable to expect references to theorists such as Said⁹, Spivak¹⁰ and Bhabha¹¹, whose work in cultural and literary studies developed the foundational theories of postcolonialism. The work of the 'Subaltern Studies' scholars, including Chakrabarty¹² and Prakash¹³, as well as contemporary postcolonial geographies such as those elaborated by Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo¹⁴⁻¹⁷, Sidaway^{18,19}, McEwan^{20,21}, Jacobs²² and Blunt and Rose²³, to name only a few, similarly escape mention by Long et al.³ Instead, the authors devote about 10% of their contribution to Carter's²⁴ critical examination of the 'unwitting and lingering colonial referents' (p. 825) within science education scholarship on cultural diversity. Carter's piece makes a valuable contribution to the specific project of interrogating the language used in science education, but her work cannot substitute for a full appreciation of the wealth of debate within postcolonial geographies nor, more worryingly, is it accurately represented by Long et al.³ These authors misrepresent Carter's careful work on difference by using her framework as a basis for the claims they go on to make about who should speak within South African higher education, a point to which I return shortly.

While Long et al.³ do not specify what they mean by decolonisation, they are somewhat clearer about how they think it should be achieved. Some suggestions, such as re-thinking 'criteria of excellence' and building African partnerships, indicate a reflective and inclusive approach. Worryingly, however, they also include proposals to 'question the legitimacy of white geographers to speak on issues of decoloniality', 'leaving them as outsiders to the debates on decolonialisation', and the injunction to stop 'importing...teaching staff and qualifications from overseas' (p. 2).

Again, these propositions merit more reflection than I can give here, but my main critique of Long et al.'s vision of how decolonisation should be effected is that their ideas of 'legitimacy' (a term used six times in the paper) rely heavily on superficial notions of identity and difference. Long et al. employ (1) essentialist ideas of whiteness and indigeneity, and (2) assumptions about which universities house 'students and academics who are truly able to be the African voice that can speak back to the colonial curriculum', presumably based on their race and class identities. By contrast, Carter²⁴, on whom their work relies so heavily, explicitly points out that postcolonial theory's 'framework of hybridity and ambivalence' gives us 'more complex conceptualizations of cultural difference as hybridized and fluid, always in the making'. Instead of the 'homogenized identities' that Carter explicitly critiques

and that Long et al. in fact perpetuate, we see in Carter's work, 'multiple, mobile, and provisional constructions' (p. 833).

As Carter²⁴ (p. 832) points out: 'postcolonial interpretation would reveal Western and non-Western borders to be profoundly ambivalent constructs'. Her conceptualisation of difference is in keeping with those of Said, Spivak, Bhabha and the Subaltern School who, for all their theoretical differences, would agree that a postcolonial project must recognise the ways in which, as Gregory²⁵ put it, colonised and colonial societies always were and remain entangled in 'webs of affinity, influence and dependence' (p. 614). Long et al., by contrast, seem to read difference as binary, shaped by racial and national/regional boundaries as well as by simplified institutional histories. In such a conceptualisation of difference, it may seem possible to step outside of the histories of colonialism and apartheid to occupy an unsullied critical position. But as postcolonial theorists continually remind us, postcolonial projects can only work 'in medias res'²⁶ or 'in the midst of things'. That is, our scholarship can only proceed from inside an ongoing narrative and from within national and cultural spaces that have been thoroughly intertwined for centuries.

It could be argued that the flaws in this article are mostly innocuous, or that their effects are confined to the ivory tower. The oddly gendered language in references such as 'the West and her canon' (p. 1) may not matter much. Perhaps the lack of evidence for the authors' claims about existing curricula in South African Geography is not vital within their larger argument. Even the theoretical lacunae evident in this piece and its misrepresentation of Carter's work could be dismissed as not having material consequences. More problematic, however, is a tendency towards the exclusionary construction of the foreigner that Fanon⁸ warns about in his critique of Africanisation. In South Africa's contemporary climate of xenophobia and intense and pervasive violence,²⁷⁻³⁰ lazy references to 'importing' people from 'overseas' and curricula 'imported... from foreign nations' are politically irresponsible (see Naicker³¹ and Tagwirei³² for analyses of the language of 'foreignness' in South Africa). The clear boundaries that Long et al.³ draw between Africa and the West, and who may and may not 'legitimately' speak in intellectual spaces, are not only far from the postcolonial theoretical tradition, they are in themselves discursive acts of violence that perpetuate simplistic and damaging notions of identity, difference and belonging.

I hope that this rejoinder to Long et al. will not be misread. I fully support their call for the critical dismantling of colonial iconography, canons, curricula, pedagogies and intellectual paradigms, just as I wish to see more African and South-South partnerships, greater recognition of diverse forms of knowledge, the development of new criteria for excellence in theory, methodology and pedagogy, and the demographic transformation of the staff in South African higher educational institutions. I am firmly of the view that postcolonial theory has much to offer decolonisation projects in South African Geography, because it has already invigorated a wealth of research that is sensitive to 'the colonial present'.³³ The power of that theory lies precisely in the nuanced understandings of historical and experiential difference³⁴ that emerge from it, rather than its endorsement of Long et al.'s³ seemingly clear boundaries between 'within and 'outside' (p. 2), or 'local' and 'Western'. No critical scholar should be endorsing ideas of who may 'legitimately' speak in academic spaces that are based on essentialist and reductive notions of 'race' or geographical location.

How then might we proceed in a more productive way to decolonise Geography? I offer three brief suggestions. First, we need to build an evidence base of curricula and pedagogical practices in the discipline, in and beyond South Africa. Knight's³⁵ recent work – which Long et al. do not cite – is a good start, and although his 'detailed case study' is not as broad as we might wish, it provides a framework for a wider scoping study of Geography teaching.

Second, Geography departments must critically interrogate and re-imagine our pedagogies, as a collective project. Conventional models of teaching in raked lecture halls, and our default modes of assessment (tests, essays, exams) shape our hierarchical and often silencing institutional culture, the revision of which forms a core part of

decolonisation.³⁵ Of course, the effects of such teaching are not always exclusionary, and equally many departments already undertake fieldtrips, workshops, and other forms of teaching that do not rely on a 'container' model of education. *Sharing* these techniques and experiences as part of a collective conversation, in order to build more equitable institutions, is essential to pedagogical learning within our discipline.

A final strategy for decolonisation, one that falls squarely within the ethos of postcolonial theory, is critically to historicise and contextualise the discipline from the perspective of Africa and the Global South. The biographies of power that shape both Physical and Human Geographies, as they are researched and taught in our institutions, remain under-examined. As Mufti³⁶ argues, we need to interrogate the 'culture of theory' with which we work, not only in our research but also in our teaching.

The call that Long et al.³ are making, and the thoughts I have sketched out here, merit much more reflection and action. They could form part of an inclusive conversation within our discipline that I, and I trust many others, would embrace.

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