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Responding to 'On shaky ground', Daya (2020)

It was with eagerness that we received a response to our original opinion piece entitled 'Shifting sands: The decolonality of geography and its curriculum in South Africa'.¹ This was composed as a way to engage in the debate around geography, its history, and where it currently stands in relation to student calls for its decolonisation. With this debate in mind, we South African geographers are making progress in moving towards a curriculum that is being scrutinised and, with wilful effort, being made to move forward.

In this reply we seek to address issues we feel are the essence of Daya's² response. In doing so, we wish to re-orientate ourselves to the original spirit in which our opinion piece was written. In refocusing our article on its original intent, we have placed most of our focus on addressing three main concerns raised by Daya², namely: (1) a lack of clarity on what decolonisation might mean for our discipline; (2) misreadings of post-colonial theory; and (3) insular and exclusionary ideas of legitimacy in academic spaces; with the latter two being our main focus and addressed together.

As authors it was not our intention to incite violence or to create a system of legitimacy that leads to exclusion. The core of our argument was that this has already been done. Much to our dismay, Daya² misconstrues our intent to question positionality, and indeed questioning the power of negotiation in debates within decolonisation in geography and in postcolonial theory of different races. Daya² inflates the idea of 'othering' and exclusion that she introduces through Africanism, by asserting (rather misleadingly) that the legitimacy of geographers who are white rather than black, 'is questioned'. The question is more about language, and whose voice is likely to dominate, given the current structures within the discipline which are currently still skewed according to pre-apartheid biases, having been influenced by the historical traits of the education system. As Young, in Rukundwa and van Aarde³, reminds us, 'the language of postcolonial theory is uncompromising, because it threatens privileges and power'.

The main point is whether we should continue to engage in this debate, whilst still completely disregarding that we have yet to address the issues of power within our academic disciplines. Our opinion was that each academic in the discipline of Geography needs to be aware of their power and position in the academy, acknowledge where it comes from and acknowledge its possible limitations for decolonisation. That power then should be utilised not only to engage with ideas around decolonisation but also to engage with scholars and students who are not afforded the same academic recognition in order to promote African research and researchers. Recognition can be limited by one's position in terms of university rankings and the ability to attract funding. This can result in the negligible recognition of African academics at lower ranking institutions and their ideas, which go unread or unpublished.⁴ Collaboration could be used as a tool to address this and to promote African research and researchers. At the heart of our original piece was a call to collaboration – an appeal to bring together African scholars, students and ideas that may go unpublished or unread and bring them into the African geography canon to be recognised, taught and researched.

Denying power, or one's ability to do something, on the basis of 'superficial notions of identity and difference' does not assist in collaborative effort to decolonise the Geography curriculum. In the same way, excluding certain academics from the conversation of decolonisation owing to 'superficial notions of identity and difference' also hinders attempts at progress. It was in this spirit that the original Commentary sought to honestly reflect on the race and power dynamics in academic geography and put out a call for collaboration that seeks to address this imbalance.

Daya² argues that 'simply calling for resistance, critique and rediscovery does not amount to a substantive call for decolonised curricula (or indeed research)'. However, in response to the article as a whole, Daya² proposes three recommendations that are 'more productive'. In fact, these three recommendations mirror very closely those we made in the original opinion piece. We are pleased, therefore, to note that there is some consensus on the possible way forward for decolonising the geography canon in South Africa. However, Daya² criticises the means by which we have arrived at these similar recommendations. Moreover, she points out that we have not engaged with the wealth of writings by postcolonial scholars. We feel, however, that the majority of her critique centres on the theory of Africanism she introduces in her article, rather than on postcolonial theory itself that was central to our original article.

We acknowledge that our Commentary did not extensively engage with postcolonial theory, but it was not our intention to do so. Our aim was to plot a potential way forward and seek to interrogate the methodology we proposed. We further aimed to stimulate conversations with other academics in Africa. A rigorous theoretical paper would be a welcome collaboration with anyone who wishes to engage.

Therefore, in the same spirit in which we wrote our article, we welcome conversation, collaboration and bringing together African researchers, educators and scholars to further this African debate and to flesh out a unified way forward to achieve what we can debate and define ourselves as decolonised and Africanised geographers.

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