

Book review

Decolonisation in Universities: The politics of knowledge edited by Jonathan D. Jansen

Naiefa Rashied

University of Johannesburg
Johannesburg, South Africa

naiefar@gmail.com

Abstract

In this review of *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*, edited by Jonathan D. Jansen, book reviewer Naiefa Rashied explains how this book serves as an enriching resource for understanding decolonisation from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. This book is an important resource for academics and other stakeholders who are interested in decolonisation, particularly with respect to curriculum reform in higher education.

The 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student uprising in South Africa saw a re-birth of the term decolonisation. In the linguistic sense, decolonisation is defined as “the process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). However, even after political withdrawal, former colonies grapple with the aftermath of colonialism across various facets of society. This aftermath is known as coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

The act of decolonising is seldom perceived as a collective societal endeavour, at least in South Africa. Rather, decolonisation is seen as a university-driven priority, fuelled by its usage as a political catchphrase during student protests. This is problematic for two reasons: 1) it confines decolonisation to the walls of university spaces and 2) it absolves society from taking decolonisation seriously. Regardless, this caveat provides universities with an opportunity to set a decolonisation precedent. After all, universities, especially in South Africa, are crucial drivers of social transformation (Reddy, 2004).

Jansen’s book provides rich insights into decolonisation at universities from a variety of perspectives, across many disciplines. Despite its predominantly (South) African focus, the book contributes to the field of higher education regarding decolonisation by providing rigorous arguments for decolonisation and practical, constructive suggestions regarding the implementation of decolonisation. What makes the book authentic is that it provides a balanced view by acknowledging the problems of decolonisation and the associated politics, particularly around knowledge and authority. The undertone of the book is one of inclusivity and nation-building, despite the prevailing coloniality of the present day.

Jonathan Jansen aptly begins the book with his overview, providing a valuable rationale for decolonisation at South African universities. He raises valid questions such as “Where does the press for decolonisation come from?”, “Why does it emerge more than 20 years into democracy?” and “Is decolonisation the appropriate response?” and subsequently derives the four key themes in the book.

The first theme in the book, “The Arguments for Decolonisation”, contains two chapters with the first by Mahmood Mamdani, arguing for decolonising universities and the second, by Lesley Le Grange, presenting the curriculum case for decolonisation. Mamdani argues that the African university was established as a strategic subjugation tool of the colonial mission and that modern scholars remain prisoners to prevailing coloniality in higher education. Mamdani offers pragmatic suggestions to break this prevailing coloniality at universities, one of which entails “subverting the project from within...discarding some parts...and adapting others to a new-found purpose.” Similarly, Le Grange provides rigorous reasons necessitating a decolonised curriculum, ranging from the need to seek cognitive justice, to correcting the misconception that knowledge from the global South is merely culture.

The second theme in the book contains three chapters, all of which deal with “The Politics and Problems of Decolonisation”. Jansen begins by presenting the political background for decolonisation in South African higher education and expounds the decolonisation knowledge problem. He also explores the features of a knowledge regime and explores examples where the centre-periphery approach to knowledge production are successfully challenged, namely the cases of the late Bongani

Mayosi, Saleem Abdool Karim, Quarrisha Abdool Karim and Ian Phimister. These cases serve as useful examples of how research and postgraduate supervision was decolonised. Thereafter, Lis Lange explores the institutional curriculum (university values, culture, policies and behaviour) and the academic curriculum (disciplinary knowledge) in South Africa, making two important points. Firstly, it is important to focus on the knowledge embedded in the curriculum, over and above organisational transformation. Secondly, the academic curriculum is typically at a disadvantage relative to the institutional curriculum – the “Mamdani Affair” is a clear example of this in democratic South Africa. The last chapter in this section deals with “Current Debates in Decolonising the Curriculum”. Ursula Hoadley and Jaamia Galant raise important questions related to the identity implications of decolonising the curriculum, among the most profound being is decolonising the curriculum “about the way received knowledge is taught?” and does decolonising the curriculum “concern issues relevant to the field of the production of knowledge?”. Like previous chapters, this chapter provides a useful example, related specifically to “a decolonial challenge to curriculum”.

The third theme in the book, “Doing Decolonisation”, explores decolonisation as a practice in Africa and South Africa. The chapter by Jesse Auerbach, Mlungisi Dlamini and Anonymous reflects on their experiences at Institution Q, where they developed an Afrocentric social sciences programme for “young lions”. They argue that neoliberalism can be just as damaging within the curriculum context as other politicising forces. In the subsequent chapter, Crain Soudien, critically assesses a development education initiative to demonstrate the role of South Africans in the process of social development globally. Soudien argues that the initiative was difficult to sustain, for reasons that include the politics of institutionalising development education practice. The final chapter in this section explores the meaning of decolonisation for teacher education. Yusuf Sayed, Tarryn de Kock and Shireen Motala use a meta-analysis to establish lecturer voices on curriculum, institutional background and national policies (with respect to initial teacher education). They argue that language should form an important component of decolonising the initial teacher education discipline, as should addressing systemic challenges in the broader education system.

The final theme, “Reimagining Colonial Inheritances”, examines manifestations of coloniality in different contexts. Brenda Schmahmann examines public art and monuments as curricula and argues that existing monuments can serve as a tool for critical reflection on past relations of power and thus comprise an important part of awareness, transformation and the new curriculum. She also provides useful photographic examples of various monuments at South African universities. Similarly, André Keet examines the “plastic university” and argues that “decolonising knowledge will not emerge from a battle of additions, assimilations or displacements, but as prefigured within knowledge itself”. In the subsequent chapter, Piet Naudé reflects on whether *Ubuntu* can assist with addressing coloniality. Naudé argues that *Ubuntu* cannot be taken seriously under the current academic dispensation, unless it is contrasted with standard Western conventions. Naudé echoes other contributors to the book with his parting message which encourages “transforming a university into a pluriversity by continuing to produce local knowledge forms”. Achille Mbembe provides a befitting end to the book by discussing “future knowledges and their implications for decolonisation”. Mbembe challenges the notion of fragmented disciplines as they occur today, and argues for knowledge transformations. Grant Parker’s afterword provides a contemplative conclusion to the book which, again, encourages the exploration of new alternatives to existing practice.

The book is not without limitations. The dominant (South) African authorship may make the book less relatable to readers in other parts of the global south. The dominant (South) African authorship also signals a lost opportunity to learn from other enriching contexts in the global South. Decolonisation in (South) African Universities would have been a more appropriate title for the book.

Despite its shortcomings, the book serves as an enriching introduction for scholars who are unsure of where to begin with reforming in their own discipline, and provides practical examples of decolonised curricula and research. The book raises awareness with respect to how coloniality prevails across current disciplines and classrooms more than 20 years since South Africa's emancipation from Apartheid. This book left me wondering "if Africans/South Africans/indigenous peoples do not have a voice in their own story, how will their stories be told?" As the famous African proverb goes "Until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter". We **must** find and use our voice, regardless of the prevailing coloniality.

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