The role of the Humanities in decolonising the academy

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Abstract
This short paper argues that the #RhodesMustFall movement, which originated at the University of Cape Town, has brought renewed attention to the need to decolonise the academy in South Africa. It further argues that the Humanities are ideally placed to engage with the intellectual problems and questions presented by the decolonisation debate. Deep understanding of these questions are necessary to prevent more of the same ‘techno-bureaucratic fixes’, which, until now, have left South Africa’s universities largely untransformed. While seeking change, however, scholars should avoid performing what Tack and Yang call ‘moves to innocence’ – strategies that distract or deflect attention away from conversations about decolonisation to assuage White guilt.

Keywords
Decolonisation, humanities, Rhodes Must Fall, South Africa, university

Few could have predicted the outcome of a group of University of Cape Town (UCT) students throwing human excrement on a statue of the British colonialist, Cecil John Rhodes, earlier this year (see Kekana, 2015). In addition to the statue being removed from the university’s upper campus exactly one month later, the students’ actions led to the formation of the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement. Self-described as ‘[a] student, staff and worker movement mobilising against institutional white supremacist capitalist patriarchy for the complete decolonization of UCT’ (UCT: Rhodes Must Fall, 2015), the movement inspired the formation of similar groups at Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Wits Universities1 as well as the ‘Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford’ movement (see Ali, 2015). This short paper will argue that scholars in the Humanities2 have an important contribution to make in terms of supporting and driving the ensuing debate on decolonisation. This is

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because Humanities scholars are equipped with the skills necessary to engage with the questions that have been raised about the university in South Africa 21 years after the end of formal apartheid. These are, as Mbembe (2015) and Pillay (2015) have pointed out, deeply intellectual questions that require complex understanding to subvert the current techno-bureaucratic approaches to transformation. The Humanities, therefore, have a key role to play both in the academy’s evaluation of itself as a colonial project and in its remaking.

It has been noted since the ‘fall of Rhodes’ that decolonising universities is about more than simply removing colonial and apartheid era symbols, increasing the number of black academics and including African texts in the curriculum. Decolonisation, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2004: 88) argues, is about rejecting the centrality of the West in Africa’s understanding of itself and its place in the world. It is about ‘re-centering’ ourselves, intellectually and culturally, by redefining what the centre is: Africa (Mbembe cited in Blaser, 2013; Mbembe, 2015: 17). For Franz Fanon (1963: 36), decolonisation is similarly a process of remaking – a violent phenomenon that has as its goal the creation of a new humanity. Decolonising universities is essential if we are to rethink ourselves and cultivate African epistemologies. But, and here is where Humanities scholars can pay a role, to decolonise the university we firstly need to be clear on what the university is (Mbembe, 2015: 8) or, as Stefan Collini (2012) asked, what it is for. We need to understand what the effects of the ‘Westernised University’ and the knowledges it produces in an African context are. This will require that academics confront the epistemic violence inherent in these knowledges which ‘authorizes thinking about Others in ways that enables political and economic violence to be enacted on the bodies of subject men and especially women’ (Pillay, 2015). It will also require that scholars confront the dominance of the Eurocentric canon in the academy and their complicity in marginalising epistemic traditions that take the African context seriously. Equally important as an analysis and critique of the university is the study of what decolonisation is and how it differs from other social justice frameworks (Mbembe, 2015; Tuck and Yung, 2012). We cannot decolonise universities or the country, for that matter, if we do not adequately grapple, in greater numbers than we are currently, with the idea of decolonisation. And we cannot envision the shape that it must take if we do not, as Franz Fanon (1963: 36) would say, call into question the particularities of colonialism in South Africa. In other words, we need to analyse the ways in which our colonial and racist past continues to inform economic, political and social realities and, with reference to universities, how it shapes institutional culture, values, practices, processes, appointments, curriculum planning, standards, etc.3

Much intellectual work, therefore, is needed. However, while seeking and working towards change, we should guard against decolonisation becoming, as Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, a metaphor. Decolonisation is not a ‘swappable’ concept nor does it have a synonym. It is disruptive and uncomfortable and scholars, particularly White scholars, should avoid performing what Tuck and Yang (2012) call ‘moves to innocence’. Moves to innocence refer to the subtle ways in which ‘settlers’ in the United States (as they are called in their paper) distract and divert
conversations away from decolonisation. These strategies serve to assuage settler guilt without them having to give up power or change very much. An example applicable to South Africa is the idea that decolonisation is achieved through ‘decolonising the mind’. While curricula and pedagogical practices that critique European epistemologies and search for new ‘ethics that reject domination and exploitation’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 19) are necessary, one should ask who these initiatives serve if critical consciousness does not translate into change, especially with regard to the land issue. Another example of moves to innocence are White scholars who engage in conversations about White privilege while avoiding ‘any kind of discussion about building the kind of alliances and taking the kind of action that could achieve real change’ (Jagarnath, 2015, my emphasis). Without real action, the performance of White guilt to demonstrate a seeming dilemma with one’s position in society does not challenge the dominance of Whiteness, it simply presents it as ‘benevolent’.

The Humanities, as Premesh Lalu (2009: 269) points out, are indispensable ‘for thinking our way out of the legacies of authoritarianism’. These legacies have created universities in South Africa that alienate, marginalise and discriminate against black students and staff in ways that are both obvious and subtle (see Jagarnath, 2015; Mangcu, 2014; Mohoto, 2015). This is because universities reproduce the idea that ‘to be human is to be white’ (Schutte, 2013), and to be White is to be, among other things, competent, efficient, scholarly and trustworthy. Like the RMF movement, we cannot leave this idea unchallenged, nor can we leave our own disciplines untransformed. Universities are not static nor are they simply ‘ideological zombies’ that only serve the dominant powers (Pillay, 2015). Universities are also sites of ongoing critique, renewal, innovation, subversion and debate (Pillay, 2015) – all the things that are necessary for change. A great dept is owed to the RMF movement for bringing renewed attention to the need to decolonise the academy and for demanding that academics and university management take the concerns of students seriously. This paper has considered some of the ways in which we, as Humanities scholars, can begin to grapple with these concerns. Let us not fail another generation of students.

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Notes
1. The Open Stellenbosch movement, which is based at Stellenbosch University, is ‘[a] collective of students and staff working to purge the oppressive remnants of apartheid in pursuit of a truly African university’ (Open Stellenbosch, 2015). Similarly, the Black
Student Movement at Rhodes University is ‘a group of students concerned about the institutional culture of Rhodes University’, which ‘is exclusionary to the disadvantaged and marginalised students...’ (Black Student Movement, 2015). TransformWits is based at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and is constituted by ‘students concerned and dissatisfied about the slow pace of curriculum and staff transformation at WITS.’ (TransformWits, 2015).

2. The term ‘Humanities’ in South Africa refers to the ‘traditional’ Humanities disciplines, the Social Sciences and the Arts (ASSAf, 2011: 19).

3. The latter is based from a comment made by the South Africa public intellectual and academic, AC Fick, on social media.

References


Author biography

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