

BOOK REVIEW

Jansen, Jonathan D. (Ed.) (2019). *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press.

Reviewed by Vicki Trowler*

In my day job as a researcher of higher education, one of the topics I have studied and written about is student engagement. Engagement of, and by, students is now universally held to be central to student success (Trowler, 2010) and all of us working in this arena grapple with ways to facilitate this. Kahu and Nelson (2018) argue that an alignment of institutional and student factors unlocks student engagement, and thus learning. Specifically, when the curriculum is aligned with students' interests, experiences and "future selves", students will engage on an emotional level, so learning can take place. Preparing slides ahead of an undergraduate lecture, I sit staring at my computer screen, wondering as does every other lecturer preparing to teach, how best to make the material engaging, accessible, relevant. How do we best speak to not just the students' past, current and "future selves", but also their possible selves, subverting the predictions of "differential outcomes" that doom students from certain backgrounds (categorised by "race", ethnicity, gender, social class, disability status, geography and the other cleavages to which inequality clings persistently) to lesser attainment?

Questions of social justice arise in all contexts, but persist perniciously in South African higher education 25 years after the transition to democracy. These concerns, while never absent during that time, nonetheless ruptured forth during the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (and other associated) movements in 2015, wrenching attention onto injustices not only of redistribution (#FeesMustFall) but also of recognition (#RhodesMustFall) (Fraser, 2008; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Those students did not draw their inspiration from the Mandelas or the Mbekis, but from the Bikos, the Cabral, the Fanons, and with that they returned to public consciousness the discourse of decolonisation. As noted by Jansen in the introduction to this volume, this term had not enjoyed significant currency in South Africa up to that time – its roots lay elsewhere on the African continent and beyond, in a time predating their birth (and possibly the birth of their parents). Yet within months, it was a term that shaped the discourse from Twitter to Senior Leadership Group agendas and curriculum working groups at Higher Education Institutions across the country.

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Numerous discussions have been undertaken since then as to what exactly, in this place, at this time, it is understood to mean; how that translates into a programme of action for “transforming” institutions; what that means for staffing, for students, for curriculum ... with, as yet, no single emergent consensus. And then, into the fray, dropped this edited collection. Given my research and personal interests, I welcomed the opportunity to immerse myself in this volume not only because of the content, but also because of the expertise and authority of the contributing authors. Representing a diversity of views on decolonisation, or more accurately the need for and means of decolonisation at this moment in this place, this collection is edited and introduced by Professor Jonathan Jansen, whose earlier analysis of South African vice-chancellors to the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall (and associated) movements has been reviewed previously in this journal (Trowler, 2018).

The collection is organised dialectically, with the first two chapters (authored by Mahmood Mamdani and Lesley le Grange, respectively) presenting the case for decolonisation. This is followed, antithetically, by three chapters (authored in turn by Jonathan Jansen, Lis Lange, and Ursula Hoadley and Jaamia Galant), which consider constraints, problems and the politics around the decolonisation agenda. As synthesis, the following sections consider the process of “doing decolonisation” (three chapters, authored by Jess Auerbach, Crain Soudien, and Yusuf Sayed, Tarryn de Kock and Shireen Motala) and “reimagining colonial inheritances” (four chapters, by Brenda Schmahmann, André Keet, Piet Naudé, and Achille Mbembe, respectively) before concluding with an afterword by Grant Parker. The focus of the book, as is made explicit in the subtitle, is on Knowledge – what knowledge, whose knowledge, and how that knowledge is constructed, conceived, accessed and rendered – and how such knowledge might translate into curriculum.

The chapter by Mamdani, originally presented as an invited lecture at the University of Cape Town (UCT), locates the discussion within two competing drives – for “excellence”, or for “relevance” – which Mamdani frames as a false dichotomy, illustrated by the juxtaposed trajectories of two institutions (Makarere and Dar es Salaam) and two scholars (Mazrui and Rodney). Arguing that theory requires reference points, Mamdani calls for new and multiple reference points, beyond Europe and the West, forged authentically in conversations with the global and the local, the public intellectual and the scholar, excellence and relevance – recognising that these are both components of the same pursuit of knowledge.

Mamdani appears himself as a character in other chapters’ discussions of attempts to retool curriculum since 1994 – the so-called “Mamdani Affair” at UCT where his radical proposal for a compulsory first-year “Introduction to Africa” course was subsequently diluted and reframed, illustrating both that the impetus to re-curriculate is not new, but that the institutional context in which this takes place constrains the possibilities for doing so. Lange refers to this, in her chapter, as “institutional curriculum”, in opposition to “academic curriculum”. At issue, she notes, was a question of epistemology: not only what constituted valid knowledge, but how that was defined and whose knowledge was deemed valid. She positions a protesting student with a poster calling for recognition as the essence of the impetus behind the current calls for decolonisation.

Hoadley and Galant pick up on the tension between the “who” and the “what” in contestations around curriculum, using the work of Bernstein to consider the visit (and subsequent debates) of Professor Raju to UCT. They distil Raju’s position, and by extension a significant thrust driving the decolonisation agenda, as being about the “who” rather than the “what” – whose voices, presence, recognition or authority are excluded from curriculum, even when criteria for inclusion are (at least on the face of it) met.

This question of identity emerges in a number of the contributions – the lack of recognition in the existing (colonial) curriculum of the identity and essence of the students being taught and their contextual location in South Africa, as well as the epistemicide of indigenous knowledge. This raises the difficulty, mooted by Mamdani, of imagining the decolonial from within coloniality – to quote Audre Lorde, “... the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” The centrality of discourse, and language, is foregrounded here in a number of contributions – the need to construct knowledge, and curriculum, through indigenous languages (with the examples of Kiswahili and Afrikaans cited, as well as the work of Neville Alexander’s National Language Project). This, however, is a long-term project, and requires sustained systemic support which, in a global neoliberal context in which English has emerged as the *de facto* lingua franca, may seem wishful.

It is necessary to note at this point that none of the contributors are opposed to decolonisation – or rather, that none of them are in favour of a curriculum that remains static and unresponsive to context, whether or not they believe that the current impetus for decolonisation as embodied in the Fallist movements will be successful, or sustained, or most appropriate to the needs for the current context. The most optimistic voice in the collection may be Mbembe’s, while the most pessimistic voice in this regard is Jansen, whose argument considers the successive knowledge regimes which have shaped the higher education curriculum landscape in South Africa, noting how each in turn is supplanted but how each successive knowledge regime retains vestiges of those that preceded it – thus, there can neither be a “clean break” with the past nor can there be a replacement that will not itself, in turn, be supplanted by something else. The “decolonial moment”, he argues, will pass because it does not engage fully with the complexities of the educational context, and because the sheer weight of institutional inertia largely results in innovative practices snapping back into old ways of being and doing.

And that, perhaps, is the most glaring omission in this collection: the lack of a persuasive theory of change. While convincing arguments are presented for the need for decolonisation, and in some cases instances presented of ways in which decolonisation could be said to be underway, these case studies are limited and isolated. Indeed, as Sayed, De Kock and Motala note in their chapter, decolonisation requires an “eco-systems” approach (though unfortunately no further details of how this might sustainably happen are provided) rather than intervening at a single point in the system.

Mamdani notes that theory emerges from comparison, and knowledge through classification and ordering, inevitably using one’s own position as a reference point. This process of engagement invokes resonances with processes such as those alluded to in the

Sayed, De Kock and Motala chapter of curriculum co-construction, a frequent subject in the literature on student engagement or student partnerships. Sayed, De Kock and Motala propose an “eco-systems approach”. If we were to take this further and consider engagement in its fullest sense – engagement of and by not just students but also civil society at all levels – might we not make some progress towards an emerging consensus about what knowledge and whose knowledge should be instantiated in curriculum, and what form this might take? Drawing in a range of voices representing diverse perspectives may be of benefit – and this collection represents a valuable step in this process.

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