



The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Decoloniality Summer School: “Decolonizing Knowledge and Power: Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Horizons”

A Report

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In 1998, Thabo Mbeki, then Deputy President, described South Africa as a country of two nations, one relatively prosperous and white and the other largely poor and black (Government Communications, 1998), a legacy of colonialism and apartheid (Sader, 2015). Twenty-six years later, we remain a country of two nations.

Achille Mbembe (2015), in his lecture, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive”, describes South Africa as having entered a negative moment – a moment most African postcolonial societies have experienced. “A negative moment is a moment when multiple old and recent unresolved crises seem to be on the path towards a collision; ... a moment when contradictory forces – inchoate, fractured, fragmented – are at work” (p. 2). The South African Fallist movement, described by Maldonado-Torres (2017) as a “major earthquake that moved the foundations of South African consciousness and society” (p. 14), served as evidence of this negative moment in relation to the lack of transformation in higher education.

Undeniably, transformation in higher education has been a challenge post-1994, given the pressures to respond to the needs of a country emerging from a colonial and apartheid past characterised by gross structural inequalities and inequities. The initial trajectory of higher-education transformation post-1994 was informed by the goals of equity and redress (Sader, 2015). However, South Africa’s emergence in the global economy began to influence reforms in higher education, impelled by wider political and economic reforms and a shift to a global knowledge economy. Against the backdrop of a society characterised by

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gross social and economic inequality, higher-education reform began to reflect changes in line with the call to prepare South Africa for participation in the global economy, and universities began to restructure in response to globalisation (Department of Education, 1997). A key change was the corporate for-profit culture that emerged across universities and the commodification of knowledge, which significantly shifted the role and nature of universities.

The Fallist movement, that is, the #Fees Must Fall, #Rhodes Must Fall campaigns, served to highlight racialised socio-economic and gendered injustices that emerged post-1994. It also focused our attention on the lack of transformation in higher education in terms of equity and redress, and called for radical social change towards a decolonised, just South Africa and decolonised universities. The Fallists called for the removal of colonial symbols, which they saw as symbolising the violence of colonialism. They also called for an end to the academic capitalism reflected in the corporate university, greater access to higher education for historically excluded people, institutional changes away from the dominant westernised patriarchal culture, employment equity and decolonisation of the curriculum.

It is in this context that the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal hosted their second annual Decoloniality Summer School: “Decolonizing Knowledge and Power: Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Horizons.” The Summer School is part of a series of lectures, seminars and workshops under the UKZN Social Cohesion flagship programme, aimed at capacity building. Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) and Head of the College of Humanities, Professor Nhlanhla Mkhize, who opened the summer school, emphasised that decoloniality is integral to what we do in universities and said, “We need to decolonise knowledge in its entirety and not just limit it to the humanities and social sciences.” Participants in the 2020 Summer School included academics, activist scholars, students and representatives of local social movements and non-governmental organisations. While the Summer School is open to all, its target audience is academics, researchers, policy-makers, student activists, post-graduate students and social activists from local social movements.

The Decoloniality Summer School, offered in collaboration with the Centre of Study and Investigation for Decolonial Dialogues (CSIDD), El Mirador de Colón on the Mediterranean Sea in Barcelona, Spain, is part of a larger intellectual and political initiative generally referred to as the modernity/(de)coloniality research project (Grosfoguel, 2019). It provides a critical space for engagement with the debates and discourses on decoloniality and decolonisation in the sphere of knowledge and higher education. Prof Grosfoguel, Director at the CSIDD and Professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley, at the 1st UKZN Summer School emphasised that universities should be at the centre of these



conversations, as they have a critical role to play in the country. He was emphatic that “(w)e must decolonise power and knowledge and have critical conversations to move universities to pluraversities”.

He further explained that “an underlying assumption of the decolonial project takes knowledge-making, since the European Renaissance, as a fundamental aspect of coloniality – the process of domination and exploitation of the capitalist/patriarchal/imperial Western Metropolis over the rest of the world. Decolonising ‘knowledge and power’ becomes, then, a task and a process of liberation from assumed principles of knowledge and understanding of how the world is and should be, as well as from forms of organising the economy and political authority.” To this end, the Summer School questioned basic assumptions ingrained in the idea of modernity, progress and development, and encouraged thinking and living in search of non-Eurocentric and non-corporate social and human values (Grosfoguel, 2019). In introducing decolonial thought, Grosfoguel explained that we live in a world characterised by unequal power relations between the North and the South, which is the result of more than 500 years of Western colonial expansion and imperial designs. In his words, this “Western-centric/Christian-centric, capitalist/patriarchal, heteronormative, modern/colonial world system denies the epistemic diversity of the world and pretends to be mono-epistemic”.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Professor of Latino and Caribbean Studies at Rutgers University, in introducing the decolonial turn, reminded us that decolonial thinking existed since the inception of modern forms of colonisation in the 15th and 16th centuries. However, the significant shift away from modernisation towards “decoloniality as an unfinished business” occurred in the 20th century and is ongoing (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 2). He explained that anti-colonial and decolonial political, intellectual and artistic expressions existed before the decolonial turn. However, it was not to the extent of self-awareness, and regional and global exchanges occurred in the twentieth century, which were characterised by an increased “self-conscious and coalitional effort to understanding decolonization, and not simply modernity, as an unfinished project” (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 2).

The philosophical orientation to decoloniality presented by Grosfoguel and Maldonado-Torres provided the foundation for an engagement with African anti-colonial and decolonial thinking. Elelwani Ramugondo, Professor of Occupational Therapy at the University of Cape Town, suggested that “genocide at the point of colonial encounter is not only a historical event, but an ongoing phenomenon as a function of coloniality”. She argued for a disruption of the dominant understanding of health and wellness, “which is racist, capitalist, patriarchal and often paternalistic within christian-centric logics”, and proposed a decolonial approach to health research, practice and education. “A decolonial approach provides a lens for



critical analyses of intersections of power, identities, and knowledges and can help disrupt dominant understandings of health and well-being” (Ramugondo, 2020).

One of our most prolific African decolonial thinkers, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, using decoloniality as a point of departure and the idea “that every human being is born into a valid and legitimate knowledge system”, reminded us that “African people had their own valid and legitimate indigenous systems of education prior to colonisation”. He explained, “Eurocentric modernity through colonialism and imperialism unleashed a particularly racial ethnocentric attitude that led European colonialists to question the very humanity of African people” and this questioning and denial of “African people’s humanity inevitably enabled not only genocides but epistemicides, linguicides and cultural imperialism” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017, p. 5). Co-presenting with UKZN student Thobane Zikalela, Ndlovu-Gatsheni focused on trajectories of struggles for an “African university” and questioned if “Africans can create African futures within a modern world system structured by global coloniality” (Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014, p. 181).

Rithuli Orleyn from the Blackhouse Kollektive, a community-based organisation established as “an ideological home for black radical thought”, co-presented with Maldonado-Torres. Their work aimed at disrupting “the dominant logic of theorising about blackness from spaces that serve to maintain the intellectual negation that embody philosophical thought in white-dominated spaces”. Shahnaaz Suffla, Professor Extraordinaire, and Mohamed Seedat from the Institute for Social and Health Studies, University of South Africa, drawing on their experiences of transdisciplinary, community-engaged, liberatory research, presented a historical account of decolonial psychology and facilitated a workshop on decolonising praxis, using participatory methodologies. A highlight of the Summer School was the play, “An Adaptation of Césaire’s Notes from my Native Land” by Pumelela Push Nqelenga, Tamantha Hammaschlag and Ongezwa Mbele, performed by UKZN students from the School of Arts.

Presenters Saleem Badat (UKZN), Zodwa Radebe (UNISA), Vuyolwethu Seti-Sonamzi (UNISA) and Mershen Pillay (UKZN) shared their research on decolonising the African university. Writer and poet Betty Govinden, Relebohile Moletsane (UKZN) and Ronelle Carolissen (Stellenbosch University) presented on feminist thinking from the South. The Summer School also hosted a public symposium, themed ‘Decolonizing the University – What would a decolonial knowledge project that privileges human flourishing look like?’



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