

GUEST EDITORIAL

Space, Language and Identity Politics in Higher Education

Philippa Tumubweinee* & Thierry M. Luescher**

As a way of introducing the theme tackled by this guest-edited issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa (JSAA)*, it is worthwhile to pose a question, albeit a rhetorical one: Why would a journal dedicated to theoretical, practical and reflective contributions on student affairs entertain a special issue on space, language and identity politics in higher education? An answer to this may be found in an exposition by Benedict Anderson (2006) in *Imagined Communities*. Anderson argues:

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (Anderson, 2006, p. 7)

In Anderson's view, *style* has the potential of producing further assumptions about *space* and *time*. The notion of style in our case, it may be argued, refers to the *JSAA* which is the medium through which the student affairs discourse is presented; grounded in and in reference to the intellectual and technical resources that represent an "imagined community" of student affairs in higher education across Africa.

It is instructive that the representation under reference occurs primarily through the medium of a code: *language*. Notwithstanding the shared language and platform, in the imagined community created by *JSAA*, the multitude of actors participating in the professional and scholarly student affairs discourse are nonetheless bounded by space and time. We are connected by the same encircled, fixed landscape within which we simultaneously exist. In following this logic through, the simultaneities of space and time exemplified by *JSAA* are at the heart of the ways in which actors in the student affairs community across the continent consider themselves part of a community and build an *identity* informed in an imagined community. By design, the special issue will address itself to the post-colonial *time* and the *space* of higher education in *geographical regions with a colonial legacy*. The contributions in the guest-edited issue singularly and collectively grapple with the nuances attendant to the intersections between space, language and identity politics in higher education in *geographical regions with a colonial history*.

* Dr Philippa Tumubweinee is an architect and Head of the School of Architecture and Geomatics, University of Cape Town, South Africa. Email: philippa.tumubweinee@uct.ac.za

** Prof. Thierry M. Luescher is Research Director in the Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town, and Associate Professor of Higher Education affiliated to the University of the Free State, Mangaung/Bloemfontein, South Africa. Email: tluescher@hsrc.ac.za

Overview of the Articles in This Issue

In the South African context, the politics of space, language and identity in higher education have been brought into sharp focus by the 2015/16 student movement. It is largely due to the student movement and campaigns like #RhodesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosch, #AfrikaansMustFall, #FeesMustFall and #RURereferenceList, to name but a few,¹ that the debates of the mid and late 1990s on the Africanisation of higher education and curriculum reform, the transformation of institutional cultures, and the meanings and implications of advantage and disadvantage in higher education, are receiving renewed attention. All the articles in this guest-edited issue respond in various ways to matters raised in the course of the 2015/16 student movement or attribute the political salience of their analysis to concerns raised by various student campaigns since 2015.

The opening article by **Philippa Tumubweinee** and **Thierry M. Luescher** called 'Inserting Space into the Transformation of Higher Education' focuses specifically on the significance of space in the transformation of higher education. In this article, we argue that the concept of social space can provide the conceptual tools for reframing policy and designing new policy interventions in pursuit of higher education transformation goals. We start out by arguing against a notion of space merely as physical infrastructure or a void to be filled. Rather, in keeping with Lefebvre and others, we conceptualise a 'socio-political' notion of space as socially produced and as co-producer of the social. Using this understanding of space, we conduct an analysis of four national cornerstone policy documents on higher education transformation in South Africa (1997 to 2017). Our analysis shows that, since the original post-apartheid *White Paper on Higher Education of 1997*, it is only the most recent national policy document, the *Draft National Plan for Post-school Education and Training of 2017*, which blurs the lines between the social ills affecting the student experience of higher education (and indeed society at large), which we call 'the realities of the everyday' on campus, and different functions of space. Our article suggests new conceptual tools for a research agenda that explores the (social) organisation of space in higher education which will allow policymakers to insert space-related concerns into the policy debates on decolonised higher education that have been (re-)ignited by the student movement.

Dionne van Reenen's insightful article analyses the South African student protests from a language perspective. Her article traces detectable *linguaging strategies* employed by the student movement and the conceptual structures informing these strategies. The article starts by reviewing some post-1994 changes and the related impact of democratisation

1 In this issue, we use the term 'the 2015/16 student movement' to refer to the sum of social processes that have rallied students from 2015 under the banner of a variety of campus-based and national campaigns (typically marked by a Twitter hashtag) as political actors to demand change in higher education policy and practice (and, in some cases, beyond), thereby creating a sense of common cause and identity amongst the involved students (albeit at various levels of intensity), and bringing them into conflict with authorities within the higher education sector and beyond. This definition of 'student movement' draws on social movement theory (especially Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 21) and the theory of student activism and student movements (Altbach, 1991; Badat, 1999). However, we have not imposed this on authors and thus various authors in this issue may use terms like 'student movement' differently.

on higher education; Van Reenen notes that the student protests show that these changes are not seen as satisfactory in the eyes of the young generation and that the 'logics' underpinning higher education and contemporary debates and approaches are seen as oppressive by student protesters.

Using Visagie's (2006) theoretical frame, Van Reenen's analysis shows that grand narratives are rejected in student movement discourse in favour of attributes such as complexity, infinity, individuality, contingency, discontinuity, flux and unknowability. Students focused on the 'lower attributes' through which they were able to articulate individual life-history narratives. As a result, this led to disagreements in communication between students and university leaders. In addition, the author uses the theoretical frame of Stewart et al. (2012), which posits that movements utilise persuasive tactics of affirmation. In particular, she analyses the student movement in terms of identification, polarisation, framing, storytelling, and power. In doing so, the article problematises the student movement narratives, considering the dominating and silenced voices.

In a highly unequal and divided society like South Africa, accessing higher education is one of the few and effective ways to ensure upward social mobility. This has positioned the university at the centre of transformation in South Africa and makes higher education a high-stakes endeavour, especially for poor, working class, and first-generation students. While Van Reenen acknowledges that valuing higher education for its social mobility potential is an understandable and legitimate position taken by students, her argument is that the way disagreements are communicated requires critical consideration because otherwise the student movement may not achieve its goals. To conclude the article, Van Reenen also affirms the conceptual propositions of Stewart et al. (2012) and Visagie (2006) as useful to analyse the communicative elements of the student movement.

The third research article in this issue, authored by **Jacques Laubscher**, returns to the spatial concerns and raises important topics for change in the physical landscape of universities in South Africa. It aims to address the spatial implications at the heart of the #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall and #CurriculumMustFall campaigns. The article tracks the development of the Freedom Park on Salvokop in Pretoria, using the language of restitution, and seeks ways to define a new and integrated South African culture by drawing from the multiple identities and experiences of its people. In response to #RhodesMustFall, the article calls for a physical response by universities to create a responsive identity. It shows a way in which physical transformation of universities can encourage dialogue in order help to resolve future problems of higher institutions of learning. The suggestion of a *kgotla* for the spatial transformation of universities has particular currency because it brings concepts of indigenous knowledge systems to the university.

Solomon Dlamini's article '#FeesMustFall: Lessons from a Post-colonial Global South' discusses the core issue raised by the #FeesMustFall campaign: the meaning and models of fee-free higher education. Dlamini's article describes the context within which demands by South African students for 'free, decolonial, quality higher education' arose towards the end of 2015. He recalls the freeze on student fee increases (in 2016) and President Zuma's announcement of free higher education for the poor and the so-called missing

middle students in 2017. Dlamini's starting point is that South Africa, being a late-comer to liberation, has the opportunity to learn from other post-colonial countries with respect to the funding of higher education. Yet, Dlamini finds that the trend in the global South has been to actually move *away* from fee-free higher education towards various kinds of cost-sharing models, such as the one operative in South Africa until recently. In his discussion, Dlamini then argues, however, that the South African context demands a funding regime that provides the potential for social mobility on a large scale, given the highly unequal and divided nature of South Africa's post-apartheid society.

Mlamuli Hlatshwayo and **George Kehdinga** take a social justice perspective in an attempt to theorise the #MustFall student movements of 2015/16. They start by arguing that a significant amount of literature on the student movement in South African higher education is characterised by two limitations: literature on the student movement is often found in non-academic and non-peer-reviewed outlets and it is typically lacking in theoretical grounding. Hlatshwayo and Kehdinga's article seeks to contribute to remedying these gaps. They briefly contextualise the emergence of the #MustFall campaigns historically within the higher education landscape and then outline Fraser's social justice framework as a lens through which to consider the economic framing, the cultural framing and the political framing of the #MustFall movement.

What form of culture arises from the #FeesMustFall protests? In his article, **George Mavunga** analyses a selection of newspaper articles published between October 2015 and March 2016 in the *Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *City Press*, *Sunday Independent*, *The Star*, *Daily Sun*, *The Citizen*, *New Age* and *Sowetan*. His analysis is inspired by a critical realist framework. He specifically looks at the interplay between higher education (political and governance) structures and various forms of agency employed by key stakeholders – that is students, university management and government – in relation to the voicing of demands, protesting, and responding to protests. Mavunga argues that overall a culture of tension and distrust amongst the key stakeholders arose from the protests which could be attributed to the way these stakeholders perceived, and went on to exercise, their agency in an attempt to resolve the conflict arising from the protests.

To avert a recurrence of the negative consequences of student protests such as the destruction of property, violence on the side of protesters as well as security personnel, and thus the development of adversarial and toxic relationships amongst different stakeholders, Mavunga recommends collaborative approaches to conflict resolution in South African higher education. These approaches need to be framed differently from those in which some stakeholders seek to achieve outright victory over other stakeholders, which he argues was a recurring mode of engagement during the #FeesMustFall protests. Thus, what is needed is to return to a culture of seeking compromise; one which acknowledges that a sufficient consensus may not satisfy all stakeholders' demands fully, but provides enough common ground to move forward together.

A collaborative approach to addressing student needs is also central to the article by **Travis C. Smith** and **Emily E. Virtue**. Their concern is to profile the experiences of postgraduate students of colour in American universities, and they argue for more

intentional collaborations between academic and student affairs staff when it comes to support for postgraduate students of colour. Their survey of the literature shows that, so far, little has been explored empirically on the topic, but the available evidence is strong and compelling: postgraduate students feel 'lonely', 'isolated', operating in a 'chilly' climate – and this sense is multiplied for students of colour. According to Smith and Virtue, the barriers that are experienced by students of colour in graduate schools operate like 'systems of oppression'; the authors' purpose is to consider how they can be dismantled in collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs.

According to Smith and Virtue, some universities are incentivising collaborations between student affairs and academic affairs. By means of such collaborations, they are able to provide better experiences and more support for postgraduate students of colour. Such collaborations are vital to improve the student experience and academic success of postgraduate students, particularly postgraduate students of colour. A starting point in initiating collaborations is that both sides – student affairs and academics – understand and acknowledge the limits of their respective expertise and reach out to each other.

Stephen Steyn's article 'Presenting History: The Manipulation of Chronological Structures in the Development and Maintenance of Transformative Curricula' analyses different conceptions of timelines in the teaching of architectural theory and history. The article is in parts inspired by one of the decolonisation-related splinter campaigns of the 2015/16 student movement: #ScienceMustFall. Steyn reflects on the teaching of history and theory in architecture in the context of present challenges posed to the discipline's knowledge base. He explores an inclusive and representative way of identifying and selecting knowledge in order to profile and engage with it in a critical way. This is done to counter the canonical approach that has guided knowledge production and associated 'power' in architectural education. In the process, Steyn takes a critical stance that aims to question established ways of teaching history and theory in architecture and on its framing, in order to establish a more reflexive and representative approach to teaching.

The final article in this issue titled 'Grasping the Regimes of Language, Space and Identity in the Visual of Post-Apartheid Higher Education in South Africa' by **Giselle Baillie, Mary Duker and Zamansele Nsele** discusses what they have learnt – individually and collectively – from a research project that investigates the contribution of visual arts to social cohesion, specifically in relation to space, language and identity politics in higher education. Their research project was conceptualised just prior to the pivotal #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests and grounded in the South African National Development Plan's (NDP) assumption that the arts have the power to re-imagine social relationships by facilitating opportunities for social cohesion. Given that the implementation of the project coincided with 2015/16 student mobilisation, it necessitated critical reassessments of the NDP's social cohesion assumptions and its Western narrative of 'the power of the arts'. In the process, the question of whether the arts have the power to re-imagine social relationships by facilitating opportunities for social cohesion became increasingly questionable; indeed, as one of the authors argues, the role of the arts in public spaces remains contentious, while the development of a more appropriate language

to address South Africa's history of racism remains elusive. Baillie, Duker and Nsele query whether the idea of social cohesion has become a taken-for-granted, common-place and unquestioned norm, because we have not imagined any other way of dealing with a past (and present) as divisive as South Africa's. Questioning the idea of 'social cohesion' is uncomfortable; yet, there is a great need to do so. The article ends with the suggestion that we need to "increase our collective appetite for discomfort", and it proposes that "arts-based methodologies" might assist us in doing so.

Book Review and Editorial Matters

In addition to the research and reflective articles discussed above, this issue of the *JSAA* also includes a review by Monica McLean of Talita Calitz's recent book, *Enhancing the Freedom to Flourish* (Routledge, 2019). At insights gained from the narratives of a diverse group of South African undergraduate students, Calitz explores the complex reasons why some students flourish at university while others are socially and academically marginalised. In doing so, she makes a welcome contribution to a growing literature on ways of enhancing the student experience (e.g. Ashwin & Case, 2018), narrative studies of students' pathways into, through and beyond higher education (e.g. Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana, 2017), and life-history studies of particular students (such as those of former student leaders, cf. Luescher, Webbstock & Bhengu [forthcoming]). A unique contribution of Calitz's book is that she employs a capability approach (along with drawing on the work of others like Paolo Freire) and aims to "design capability praxis for higher education environments where students are vulnerable to unequal participation" (Calitz, 2019, p. 147). In the words of the book reviewer, Monica McLean:

In my view, the outstanding achievement of her book is to replace the usual deficit view of students whose economic and social circumstances make it difficult for them to benefit from university education with a theory of participation which emphasises agency and inclusion. This achievement results from Calitz's combining a human development approach with insight from the life stories of eight students in a South African university who faced economic and academic barriers to equal participation.

Finally, on behalf of the Editorial Executive of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, we would like to express thanks to the reviewers of Volume 6. Their time and expertise in evaluating and helping to select and improve the submissions is hereby acknowledged and greatly appreciated. Conversely, as guest editors of this issue, we would also like to express our own gratitude to those that have assisted us in preparing this special issue, including the authors, peer reviewers and publishing team, and especially the *JSAA* Editorial Executive for their trust and support throughout.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the University of Cape Town and the Human Sciences Research Council for providing the space and time to conceptualise and produce this *JSAA* issue.

We would also like to acknowledge the funding support received by Dr Tumubweinee from the UCT Research Block Grant, and by Prof. Luescher from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Grant no. G-1802-05403), to produce the issue.

References

- Altbach, P.G. (1991). Student Political Activism. In: *International Higher Education: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism*. Second edition. London: Verso.
- Ashwin, P. & Case, J.M. (Eds.). (2018). *Higher Education Pathways: South African Undergraduate Education and the Public Good*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Badat, S. (1999). *Black Student Politics, Higher Education & Apartheid: From SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Calitz, Talita M.L. (2019). *Enhancing the Freedom to Flourish*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315207070>
- Case, J.M., Marshall, D., McKenna, S. & Mogashana, D. (2017). *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans*. Cape Town: African Minds.
- Della Porta, D. & Diani, M. (2006). *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Luescher, T.M., Webbstock, D. & Bhengu, N. (forthcoming). *Reflections of South African Student Leaders, 1994-2017*. Cape Town: African Minds.

How to cite:

Tumubweinee, P. & Luescher, T.M. (2019). Space, Language and Identity Politics in Higher Education. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 7(1), v-xi. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v7i1.3688