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Shifting sands: The decoloniality of geography and its curriculum in South Africa

Since the era of European exploration, the world has been conquered and nations subdued by imperial powers.¹ The evidence of colonisation is explicitly seen in the territorial demarcations on the global map, borders that at times seem to follow little more than natural boundaries chosen to divide territories between competing powers. The borders that demarcate African countries and separate its people are a clear illustration of this. It is within these borders that sovereign states now function and across these borders that international interactions occur. Geography, as an academic discipline which is concerned with both the physical environment and human interactions that occur within and between the borders of nation states, cannot ignore the politics of space. To date, the understanding and production of geographical knowledge continue to be informed by the European colonial modalities of power.^{1,2} Even though decolonial scholars acknowledge that the modern episteme is saturated with coloniality¹, the geography curricula in African higher education does not show or encourage a different way of imagining or describing indigenous places³. One example of this is how indigenous knowledge, and African and indigenous scholarships, continue to be erased or subsumed.⁴ Much of the current curricula content continue to exclusively credit only international explorers, e.g. Admiral Antonio with Table Mountain, yet most explorers used local field guides who introduced them to most spaces on the continent. Another example is how the curricula are still referring only to colonial names of places despite many indigenous names of places being known in local languages. Curricula also have a long way to go to sufficiently incorporate local ecological knowledge and practices that have wider implications and practical application, especially in topics of relevance to the higher education geography curricula. Evidence already exists that supports that African mythology can be credited for conservation^{5,6}, yet this is not adequately reflected in African geography curricula. It can, however, be justifiably argued that this omission may be a mere consequence of the mediation of knowledge by different communication technologies, which have uneven power dynamics, especially at the global scale.⁵ It is therefore imperative that geography as a discipline, and geographers as scholars, take it upon themselves to understand the centrality of this discipline within the call to de-colonise higher education and make an ardent effort towards building de-colonial curricula.⁷ Such acknowledgement, however, can only support the proposition of Bloor⁸, which is to interrogate popular discourses and established bodies of knowledge through careful historical geographical scholarship to the African geography higher education curricula. One way of doing so, could be by considering the application of post-colonial theory in tackling the decolonisation of the geography curricula.

Post-colonial theory: Adding value and reshaping the discipline of geography

The term post-colonial is often misconceived to mean that colonialism has come to an end and we are now in an era that has proceeded colonial rule.⁹ Post-colonial theory has very little to do with temporality but rather with the state of mind of people who have to question and respond to the 'theoretical underpinnings of disciplinary knowledge that has privileged some knowledge, societies and cultures, and have been used indiscriminately outside of the context and conditions and voices of people'⁵. Therefore, post-colonial theory implies resistance to imperialism, a critique of the colonial, and a rediscovery of indigenous histories and heritage.^{5,10,11} The idea of critiquing and answering back to the dominant narrative that the imperial is somehow superior and represents the normative for all people groups around the world has been questioned within higher education.^{5,9,11} De-linking decolonial thinking from the global hegemony of the West and her canon has been key in post-colonial critiques on higher education¹¹, and forms the basis of liberation from the colonial oppression of the West³. Answering back and questioning the supremacy of imperial knowledge has been utilised to great effect in the education system of New Zealand, a former British colony.⁵

Scholars have begun to make inroads into how academics can incorporate aspects of post-colonial theory into curriculum design that may refine understandings of Africa's particularities in disciplines such as geography.¹² In the sciences, Carter¹³ has formulated three aspects that may be useful in bringing post-colonial theory into the curriculum as a means of extricating the post-colonial societies from the Western hegemony of knowledge. The first one is termed 'representations' and calls for scholars to try and understand how the Western hegemony of knowledge and influence is maintained in the academy, and through understanding we can begin to question this process of legitimising the colonial voice in our curriculum. Second, incorporating post-colonial theory in the academy involves the idea of recuperation. Here what is necessary is the building of a local subjective understanding of the history of the nation. By doing this, it is argued that local histories, experiences and languages can be used to write back to the dominant colonial narrative, and in doing so legitimise the local voice, and transcend the binary thinking that currently dominates the curricula of so many nations.^{4,10} Translating difference is the third step in Carter's¹³ methodology for incorporating post-colonial theory in the sciences. Translating difference refers to the act of pushing back against the Western assimilation of all societies into a Western norm which allows the West to speak for all others while really only speaking for itself. Incorporating local and indigenous knowledge into the canon of teaching is a means by which to push back against this Western norm that has been created for all other societies.⁷

It is argued here that geography as a discipline, so entrenched in its very foundations in the Western imperial canon, should start to engage with post-colonial theory and the efforts that are being made to at least try to decolonise the curriculum. By questioning the supremacy of the British canon and the means by which we perpetuate this supremacy even in our language of instruction we begin to address the call to decolonise.⁴ Whether this culminates in a radical change with regard to all teaching materials, pedagogy and research is yet to be seen. Through engaging with post-colonial theory in higher education teaching, we can begin to build our own ideas and thoughts and legitimise our positions as African scholars in the academy with a voice of our own built upon our worldview and not that of the West.



Post-colonial theory, therefore, could be the means by which geographers begin to question the history of the discipline, the history of the country and the politics that shape it. It would evolve into a discipline that legitimises the African voice in scholarship rather than parroting the colonial voice.¹ Post-colonial geography could become the discipline in which students who are infuriated with the colonial dominance of the current curriculum can begin to voice their opinions and begin to write back to the imperial narrative. It is these students – students who have yet to be trained in the tradition of the current curriculum, but have encountered it and seen that it is not representative of us as Africans – who have the most potential to decolonise the curriculum. As a means of fostering this transition, current educators should foster the dissent that has been brought to the fore through protests. Instead of studying ourselves and our world from an academic tradition that is from the outside, we need to look from within to critique the outside. This necessitates bringing the resistance slogans into the classroom and starting to theorise, to build the African identity in the academy and legitimise it as different to the West and yet just as valuable.

Geography and its centrality in the decolonising debate

In both the physical and the human environment, geography engages with the politics of space and power. Climate change is a key example of a discourse that can be studied entirely as a scientific endeavour, but once solutions are proposed the geography of space and power come into play¹⁴: who governs which territory, who has power over local and multinational polluters, who signs agreements and how we should work together as global citizens towards a more sustainable future. When human geography is examined, interactions of humans with the environment are examined; issues of class, race, and power are all examined within a given geography that has oftentimes been demarcated by colonial powers. Thus, the need to decolonise geography raises important questions. Why decolonise? And for whose benefit is this imperative?

Within the South Africa context, these interactions are not only examined within predetermined geographies, but are also examined using Western theories and ideologies. The result of this is that we are studying Africa from within using a lens that is without. In contrast, critiques made from this space emphasise the decolonisation of geography curricula in higher education as a commitment to centre and empower marginalised groups.^{7,12} As the question of decolonising higher education becomes more and more pertinent in our society⁷, we need to consider whether or not we as geographers are mere stewards of the colonial mantle of knowledge, passing it on to the students we influence through our writings, teaching and supervision. When we examine the history of the academy and the discipline of geography and her academics in South Africa, it is not surprising that this is the case.

As geography academics in South Africa are either educated locally or abroad, there is limited distinction between the theoretical and knowledge learnt in the two instances. The universities and their subsequent departments and curricula in South Africa have a long colonial history.¹⁵ A most obvious example is Rhodes University, named after a British imperialist, which was established to teach white colonisers using imperial curricula. The same is true for the establishment of the Universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch and more. The aforementioned universities are also located in affluent spatial pockets of the country, in contrast to the historically disadvantaged universities that are located in impoverished spaces, even today. The colonial history of the establishment of these institutions was further cemented in the apartheid era with race rather than academic ability being the key determining factor for student placement. These universities, which now educate students of all races, are still teaching predominantly from the dominant Western canon, perhaps as a legacy of the colonial curriculum taught to those who now carry the mantle of lecturer. Aside from this, the importing of teaching staff and qualifications from overseas has only meant that we have further imported our curriculum from foreign nations.

Not only has the establishment of the academy and the politics of the country influenced the degree of coloniality in the discipline of geography in South Africa, but it is the history of the discipline as a whole that also needs

to be questioned. Geography became recognised as a valid discipline in the 19th century in Western Metropolitan countries and through colonialism was exported as such.² Furthermore, it was in these nations that the very divide was made between the sub-disciplines of human and physical geography.² This divide persists in South African geography even though the divide between the human and physical, and the way in which the two interact, is less clear-cut in the local culture. Furthermore, our very own rather prestigious Society of South African Geographers was modelled on the colonial Royal Geographical Society.² The Royal Geographical Society being the follow on from the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, established to explore and map out the African continent according to a British cartographer.¹⁵ Furthermore, it is a mark of pride for the *South African Geographical Journal*, established through this society, to enjoy an international standing.² This international standing is determined by criteria of excellence not set by ourselves.

The sum of this is that we have a geography canon that does not reflect the local but rather the Western. We are studying from within the country as if we have a deficit of our own ideas and thoughts. We should be theorising from within, our studies should reflect the world as we understand it to be as Africans rather than through the lens of the West. If we as geographers can do this, we will make a far greater contribution to the academy and global discourse as a whole. We need to better understand how Africans can respond to issues of climate change, and need to further build how we theorise geography from African roots and gain a better understanding of our society.¹⁶ Responding to student calls to abolish colonial teaching cannot be ignored. Geography as a discipline, and geography academics as curriculum planners, are not ignoring this call, but equally, more needs to be done. When we consider that we study both the physical and human environment and how both of these spheres have been influenced by the advent of colonialism, it becomes an imperative that we decolonise our curriculum and teach the history and the impacts of colonialism not from the narrative of the coloniser but rather from the colonised.

A way forward for geography curricula

The addition of post-colonial theory into the geography curriculum is essential as a starting point for decolonising the curriculum. It is this voice that writes back to the West that we must begin to foster in the discipline of African geography. However, the question of who should be allowed to speak on issues of decoloniality remains pertinent in this debate. If we are to be critical of our positionality, let us question the legitimacy of white geographers to speak on issues of decoloniality. Many white South Africans now have no affiliation with the colonial powers that saw them becoming African decedents, and yet white South Africans are in many ways affiliated with the colonial history of the country. This means that the position of white South African geographers and academics as a whole may be questioned, leaving them as outsiders to the debates on decolonisation. There is, however, some concern as to how this exclusion will foster decoloniality when a large portion of the staffing base in South African universities is still white. The top five universities in South Africa, as ranked by the Times Higher Education World University ranking, all have a typical staffing ratio of white South Africans of European descent to black South Africans of over 70%, with all senior positions within the departments being held almost exclusively by white South Africans.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

Furthermore, as geographers, we need to destabilise the conception that the most highly ranked universities and their academics are able to voice the African experience and theorise from Africa. These universities are far too entrenched in their colonial pasts. Rather, South African universities that still conform to colonial structures and curricula, who also house most of the funding, should begin to partner with other universities who have students and academics who are truly able to be the African voice that can speak back to the colonial curriculum.^{12,20} Through partnerships, the discipline of geography can be transformed to reflect Africa and its indigenous people as a whole. With partnerships being key to knowledge collaboration and transmission, South African geographers must expand existing partnerships and forge new ones with other African universities across the continent. These Africa partnerships can foster the transmission of African knowledge building and sharing, which should be one of the mandates for geography in South Africa, as



noted by Sithole¹⁷, and echoed once again by Dalu¹² in considering the decolonisation agenda in South Africa specifically.

Conclusion

South African geography – with its very colonial roots – has the potential to be a discipline that brings to the fore the call for decoloniality. However, this will not happen without the academics who very much control and disseminate the curricula they design; the theories with which they choose to engage; the partnerships they make and the ranking they espouse to. In questioning our positionality we need to question how we as geographers feel about these various aspects and how we wish to engage moving forward. As academics we must commit to decoloniality, and perhaps using post-colonial theory in both our teaching and thinking about ourselves and the work we do is one of the best means by which we can clarify our stance and also make some inroads into the decoloniality of a colonial discipline.

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