

**Decolonisation as Democratisation: Global Insights into the South African Experience.**

Siseko Kumalo (ed.).

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The edited collection *Decolonisation as Democratisation* arrived at my door approximately four years after the iconic #MustFall student protests first rocked South Africa. As I write this review, the streets have long since been cleared of the marching masses, but the #MustFall embers still smoulder across the university landscape. The physical evidence of what we know now as a decolonial moment is still there. Stumps where colonial altars once stood remain as ugly scars; some graffitied and scarred buildings remain as physical testaments to the moment. However, the ideals of the moment remain more vivid than any of the physical markers and have entrenched themselves firmly and conspicuously into the university's fabric in the form of discourse.

The collection edited by Kumalo is testament to how far the decolonial imperative, accentuated by the student-activists, has travelled. The book comes at a time when decolonisation, particularly the decolonisation of the university, is facing a hurdle. In action terms, the hurdle can be called a problem of operationalisation, but in conceptual terms it is a question of methodology. To be clear, the question of whether or not to decolonise is a ship that has long sailed, but *how* to decolonise is an imminent institutional dilemma. The book tackles this *how* head-on. In a quest to actualise decolonial demands in the South African university some have gone hastily about the endeavour, resulting in skin-deep re-dress, which has unearthed new problematics in the ideas that institutions hold on what decolonisation means. The book is therefore timely.

The book questions how the university, particularly, can move from here to "a there"—hence decolonial methodology is an overarching theme. However, in the foreword, Mignolo cautions that the methodology of decolonisation cannot lead with a simple *how* question; however compelling it feels. He states that "*who* is investigating *what* and *what for* are three basic issues

for the decolonial option. The fourth one, *how*, depends on the answers given to the previous three. If you do not know who, what and what for, you do not need a method” (xi). My reading of Mignolo here is that while methodology may indeed be the problematic of decolonial discourse presently, it cannot be handled callously. Positionality, episteme and cause have to be equally considered in the process of making the decolonial turn. This is a caution that the contributors heeded critically (see for example, Pirbhai-Illich and Martin’s positional reflections in chapter 4 or Zondi’s in the afterword).

*Decolonisation as Democratisation* argues that decolonisation is not an end in itself but rather a methodological orientation towards a bigger project of an epistemic and indigenous nature. As Tuck and Yang (3) note, “decolonisation is not a metaphor”—therefore we should guard against its domestication. Kumalo and others heed this assertion as well. Mitova, in chapter 2, for example, demonstrates the dangers of an unnuanced relativism that can seemingly align itself to the pluriversal ideals held in decolonial work. This kind of relativism is a hindrance because it takes a decolonial epistemic perspective as *one of many* truths that exist in the world and not as an imperative. In chapter 3, Stein, Andreotti, Hunt and Ahenakew bring to question the futurity of a higher education that sits at the centre of a fracturing and unsustainable house that modernity built. In continuance of the book’s theme of mediations in decolonial methodology, Stein et al. (60) propose that “while we cannot imagine a substantively different approach to higher education [...] it is important to experiment with other possibilities”.

The book’s second contribution to the decolonial discourse is in providing a global perspective on the South Africa moment. The paradox that the #MustFall protests were both iconic and yet not novel is a sobering thought bravely laid out in the book. The insights are not patronising of the fallist movement but provide ways of think through the decolonial moment. The second part of the book makes vital contributions in terms of contextual and pedagogical considerations of the decolonial project. It raises an array of issues from epistemic justice, power inequalities, gender disparity considerations, the humanities, and the university’s futurity, to name a few. These issues may seem disjointed, but as was demonstrated by the multi-prongedness of the #MustFall movement, these are complex yet intersecting realities in higher education.

*Decolonisation as Democratisation* also makes meaningful contributions by curating indigenous archives without the pressure of immediate translation. Because an archive is an evidentiary assemblage that is used in meaning making, indigenous archives are important in making a decolonial epistemic turn. It is one thing to acknowledge that such archives exist (what Moosavi [332] calls “intellectual decolonisation”), but it is another to engage with them as Kumalo and others have done in this book. In resurrecting the work of Gqoba, the book takes a refreshing turn from paying lip service to Othered knowledge and engages it richly in meaning-making, a refreshing epistemic turn.

While the book makes important contributions to decolonial methodology, the concept of democratisation, and certainly of democracy, needs to be problematised. The protesting students placed a demand not only on the education system—they called into question the *demos* (the people) and *kratos* (power) link that the nation-project of South Africa projects. Therefore, to state, as Kumalo does in the book’s opening, that “the aim of decolonisation in South Africa can be understood in the ideal of democratising the knowledge project” (1) or that “the task of historical justice, lies in making good on the promise of democracy” (197) without a problematisation of democratisation, is an oversight.

As I close this review, South Africa sits in the wake of another wave of protests. Granted, the carnage and looting that followed the #FreeZuma protests are an unruly mimicry of the political statement mounted by students in the #MustFall protests. Still, the mimic stands as a kind of postcolonial hauntology (Coly 3) of the ideas (and perhaps ideals) of democratisation. Yet again, deep questions are raised about the marriage of decolonisation and democratisation. This makes the book put together by Kumalo even more relevant as it speaks far beyond discourses on education. Perhaps its oversight with regards to the concept of democratisation will lead to new conversations that contemporaries can pick up. Still, this is a relevant, brave, and timely academic seed.

#### Works Cited

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