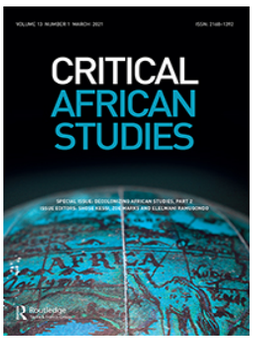

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INTRODUCTION

Decolonizing knowledge within and beyond the classroom

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This introduction to the second installment of a two-part special issue focuses on actors and spaces that facilitate different forms of progress or push-back in decolonizing African Studies. We map how student activists have served as agents of decolonial change on campuses over time, and argue that intersectional and feminist leadership characterize the current generation of activism. We then explore how classrooms and curricula serve as sites of synthesis between student and faculty activists, and conservative professional and disciplinary norms. Drawing on activist campaigns and articles in the special issue, we present five questions that serve as a starting point for decolonizing courses. Finally, we acknowledge the ways that academic disciplines enforce parochial professional norms and epistemic standards in academia, while also linking academic knowledge production to global marketplaces and intellectual property regimes. We contend that the interplay of these three categories of agents shapes cycles of transformation and patterns of re-consolidation.

Keywords: decolonization; coloniality; African Studies; universities; inequality; activism

This special issue, the second of a two-part series on decolonizing African Studies, explores further practical and theoretical implications of challenging power hierarchies that stifle the flourishing of more rigorous and liberatory knowledge systems. In our introduction to part one of this special issue we outlined four dimensions of decolonizing work in African studies: structural, epistemic, personal (via disobedient praxis), and relational. In abstract terms, these categories can sharpen our thinking about which dimensions are – or are not – reinforcing patterns of injustice or exclusion and how. But, there are also distinct actors and spaces within academia where different forms of progress and pushback are most prominent. In this brief introductory essay, we contend that understanding their particular power dynamics can help us think more critically about cycles of transformation and patterns of re-consolidation. Namely, student activism, classroom curricula, and academic disciplines are three social spaces in which demands for change, and conversely, calls for consistency lead to a dialectic that often defines the pace of decolonizing.[1]

In previous eras, Africans sought sovereignty and self-determination by liberating territory from the physical and structural violence of colonial governance. This double special issue focuses on the related but distinct intellectual decolonizing project, an inter-generational movement to expand access to learning and research to strengthen African autonomy in global knowledge economies, the material and metaphorical markets in which knowledge provides opportunities and power. Despite rich histories of formal religious and traditional educational

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institutions in the precolonial era, European colonizers created a particular form of higher education and scientific research hierarchies across Africa in the 1900s that used under-education, biased and exploitive research practices, and racist theories of knowledge as tools of colonial subjugation (Ajayi 1996; Zeleza 2006). The decades-long struggle for African independence was a partial triumph. While elites reclaimed or repurposed former institutions of colonial control for nation-building and sovereignty, African education systems have faced resource crises and entrenched power asymmetries.

The "Western university" and intellectual property regimes were not initially built for all thinkers and knowers, nor for inclusive human advancement (Wilder 2013). Yet, they were exported globally through imperialism and today, in the era of globalization, integration into the global knowledge economy (which connects knowledge and knowledge production to capitalism) has become contingent on catering to European and American academic and epistemic hierarchies (Moore 2019). English language now reigns supreme as the "language of science" and, as with other colonial tongues, such knowledge sharing parameters disadvantage indigenous languages and regionally specific scientific advancement accessible to multilingual populations. Language, knowledge, and epistemic hierarchies are mutually reinforcing. Today, in academia and in the global knowledge ecosystem – from research training, to intellectual property regimes for traditional knowledge – incentive structures push toward assimilating into hierarchies that derive from colonial power structures, not just in Africa but globally. These hierarchies persist despite claims that, "the worldwide circulation of knowledge is now considered not just as a one-sided colonial or post-colonial diffusion process, but rather as an exchange of knowledge in which each side is active … shaped as much by dissemination as by appropriation" (Renn 2015).

The case for decolonizing systems of knowledge production and for using decolonial analysis rests on the value and purpose of knowledge production and exchange. If the purpose of knowledge is to advance itself, it will continue to reproduce algorithmically narrower and narrower versions of what came before it. But if the purpose of knowledge is to advance humanity (or indeed all life), then it will need to become expansive and boundary transcending so that it is more accessible and dynamic. The decolonizing project in academia, much like the political project of decolonization, is rooted firmly in the latter understanding of knowledge systems. In the decades since independence, African scholars, students, and communities alike have been grappling with how to succeed in a global marketplace of ideas – defined by exchange, but also by competition and, increasingly, commodification – built to serve Northern questions and interests. In this special issue series, we amplify perspectives that seek to go further by transforming education, knowledge production, and science for local realities and ultimately seek to integrate and recognize indigenous and pluriversal knowledge.

As articles in this double special issue demonstrate, dissemination is not equally distributed throughout the global knowledge economy, nor is the uptake of knowledge incentivized commensurate with its potential. Rather, incentives continue to privilege elite networks, Western institutions, and rationalist paradigms. The papers that follow range broadly from interrogating the mechanics of coloniality in research capacity development, to student activist movements across South Africa and Brazil, through the arts, and into how the state and markets absorb and commodify traditional knowledge. They interrogate key areas of agency, progress, and push-back in the global shift toward decolonizing knowledge.

Student activists as agents of change

Student activists have been key agents of political and social change in African states, often setting their sights on the nearest power structure proximate to the state: the university. The origin stories of the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town are widely

documented (Nyamnjoh 2016; Booysen et al. 2016). The movement coincided with other substantive and symbolic student campaigns elsewhere in parts of the US, Europe, and Africa (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018). Student activists and campus organizers called for reparations and new syllabi. They asked "why is my curriculum white?" In South Africa, the fall of Rhodes led to demands, protests, strikes, and other student (and staff) campaigns for fees to fall. Others asked, "mustn't Gandhi also fall?" Previously we acknowledged this wave of coinciding voices that have renewed the contemporary global movement toward decolonizing academic spaces and knowledge (Kessi, Marks, and Ramugondo 2020). Yet, beyond the simultaneity of these student movements, it is worth briefly examining the broader historical role of student protests in pushing political change, and the significance of leadership by students from marginalized and oppressed identity groups in driving this history despite often being written out of it.

Understanding the deep history and cyclical nature of student activism underscores the role student activists play as outsider-insiders and rebellious stakeholders to the system. Maurice Amutabi described university students in Kenya as "destined to be the intelligentsia who would one day take over the reigns of power" and also "sympathetic to the cause of the common man" (2002). This ambivalent position as aspiring elites, often with political ambitions, often leads to divided student bodies as some seek to topple existing power structures, while others seek a place within them. Perhaps ultimately, even activists seek both: to change power structures to make them palatable and ideologically congruent with the world they imagine. While much has been written on the 1960s "protest generation" of Western students (e.g. Ferguson 2017), histories of student protest across African countries have been sparser, a result of state repression combined with the forces of coloniality. Yet, the past decade has seen a restoring of this record (Branch and Mampilly 2015; Heffernan et al. 2016; Hodgkinson and Melchiorre 2019; Zeilig 2007).

The significance of student activism – and specifically campus politics – as an engine for decolonizing can be seen in the cycles of organizing that have shaped African politics. Leo Zeilig has argued that cycles of student activism are linked with and defined by the political economy of the state and the broader geopolitical order (2007, 235). Tracing their phases situates the current era of student protest as a fourth wave of recurring and dialectic demands for political and intellectual freedom, expressed as literal and figurative decolonization. In the first half of the 20th century, experiences of racism and alienation in European and American universities, as well as exposure to radical ideas, forged the politics of elite leaders of liberation – Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral and others. Student networks both formal (such as the West African Students' Union in London) and informal served as vehicles for imagining and planning anti-colonial independence and African nationalism (Hodgkinson and Melchiorre 2019). These expatriate students did not invent anticolonial resistance but inherited it from generations of other resisters. In doing so, they adapted it and translated new ideas to colonial interlocutors and to comrades on the ground, many of whom were leaders *sans* academic credentials.

A second wave of student protests, this time in post-independence universities and featuring prominently left-wing and communist thinking, challenged the postcolonial political settlement. These protests were perceived as deeply threatening to state control and often led to armed clashes with state security agents and frequent, sometimes enduring campus shutdowns. One newspaper reported more than 500 university closures in West Africa from the late 1960s to 1990 (Balsvik 1998). In Sudan and Ethiopia, student-led protests ultimately overthrew military governments; elsewhere, radical student groups spun off militant revolutionary wings, and mainstream students formed cells of larger revolutionary parties (Balsvik 1998; Mlambo 1995). As Paul Zeleza and others have written, structural adjustment programmes slashed university budgets across the continent throughout the 1980s (Zeleza 2006; Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). This devastated research training and public access to education, but also led ultimately to a

third wave of protests characterized by material demands aligning with calls for multiparty democratization (Nkinyangi 1991). Students and universities alike had been weakened and many felt forsaken. Democratization was propelled in many countries by student activists, who helped form and strengthen opposition parties amidst the consolidation of neo-liberalism and weakening of the global Left.

A distinguishing feature of the fourth and contemporary wave of decolonial student movements is the prominent leadership of black women, queer and trans students, and others whose identities and histories have been marginalized in academic institutions and formal knowledge hierarchies. In past cycles of student protest, women were significantly outnumbered by men in African, European, and American institutions. However, according to UNESCO there are now more women than men enrolled in tertiary education in South Africa; trends have been improving elsewhere on the continent (2018 regional tertiary enrolment data suggests a ration of three women to every four men); and in OECD member states, women students now outnumber men on average (UNESCO 2020). Indicative trends suggest that queer student communities and other marginalized and minoritized identity groups are also growing, in part through greater access to basic education and increased visibility of underrepresented groups in higher education. As Roderick Ferguson writes, critics who lament the decline of the public university all too often

> presume a universal notion of 'the public' that fails to fully appreciate … the heterogenous publics whose due has never been received, whose dreams have never been fully activated, and whose histories and identities are rarely acknowledged as part of our 'public'. (2017, 5)

This echoes patterns of marginalization in African anti-colonial and decolonial campus politics. As Sandy Ndelu, Barbara Boswell, and Simamkele Dlakavu wrote in the wake of South Africa's Fallist movements:

> Although these current movements/protests are part of a historical continuum of resistance against racism and colonialism on African university campuses, they simultaneously mark a point of departure. They have, unlike earlier student struggles, brought to the fore a clear and powerful feminist challenge to the cisheteronormative patriarchy – in broader society as well as within the student movements. (2017, 3)

Wanelisa Xaba argued that queer students, Black radical feminists, and students with disabilities were marginalized and erased in ways that weakened the Fallist movements in South Africa by normalizing certain forms of oppression (2017). Yet, these students' leadership and activism efforts also indelibly changed the scope of the transformation conversation, thrusting into the mainstream intersectionality theory and sexist/gendered oppressions.

Situating student activism and campus-led social movements in this historical process acknowledges the continuities of coloniality and anticolonial, now decolonial resistance. It reveals how distinct protests emerge simultaneously in multiple places, animated by a network of shared ideas and understandings about the world as it is and as it could or should be. These processes of coincidence and cross-fertilization may be accelerated today by social media, but they are not novel to it. Moreover, to an outside observer they can belie the domestic specificity of student protest within institutions and within national conversations. Rhodes Must Fall (UCT) and Rhodes Must Fall Oxford had a common symbolic objective and some shared demands, but ultimately faced different projects and sources of opposition. Just a month after protests began on 9 March 2015, the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at UCT signified the start of a new phase of political contestation and a revolutionary social rupture, as Josh Platzky-Miller argues in this special issue (2021). Conversely, the Governing Body of Oriel College in Oxford only formed a commission of inquiry to manage the

removal of their Rhodes statue after anti-racism and Black Lives Matter protests swept the US and UK in June 2020, despite the student campaign launched five years prior.

This indicates the ways that university intransigence and institutional culture is differentially slow to change, as it is held back by privileged stakeholders and influenced by peer institutions and transnational trends. Cyril Adonis and Fortunate Silinda deploy critical race theory in their contribution to this special issue to examine the slow pace of change in South Africa's historically white universities. They identify how these institutions normalize whiteness and conceal racism, even in the face of student campaigns that aim to do the opposite: to give voice to experiences of racism and to destabilize institutional whiteness. As we outlined in the introduction to part one of this special issue, the Black Academic Caucus at the University of Cape Town is just one example of how faculty have played a pivotal role in creating space to organize and advocate for internal stakeholders and institutional transformation (2020). While advocating for their own lives and careers, faculty also navigate divisions and dissension in prioritizing the way forward for the university, with some facing backlash from colleagues and administrators when they are seen as stepping "out of line" professionally. This is part of the broader systems of institutional racism and culture preservation that are activated amidst student-led decolonizing movements (Adonis and Silinda 2021). These corrosive dynamics, which hurt black women and underrepresented faculty the most, can be interrupted when departments and centres come together to chart a common purpose and create space for fully engaging the issues raised.

Classrooms and curricula as sites of synthesis

The teachers and staff who sit between the students and the administrative face of the institution are often powerful change-makers in taking up student demands or adapting them in novel ways in the classroom. The student bodies across Africa, Europe, and the US have changed and increasingly, though much more slowly, the professoriate is changing. Both are more gender diverse and increasingly racially and socioeconomically diverse. Not only are faculty members often working behind the scenes – and occasionally on the frontlines – as mentors to student activists, they also have their own diverse political and intellectual ambitions for the university and the political place it sits. Following Ferguson above, our histories and identities need to be researched, taught, and grappled with to redress past exclusion and erasure, but also to activate students' imaginations to improve the world (2017). Teachers are key agents of potential decolonial progress and synthesis, bringing together their disciplinary canon, cutting edge research, and students' intellectual needs for the future.

In their article, Shahana Rasool and Linda Smith describe how one department came together to respond to Fallist demands, providing an insider view-part "how to" and part reflexive analysis-of a comprehensive curricular transformation project in a South African Social Work department (2021). Rasool and Smith detail how faculty and students of Social Work, a discipline ostensibly built to serve those most marginalized, undertook a purposive project of decolonizing their department and curricula through collective reflexive practice. Prior to undertaking the department-wide process, they had undertaken a two-year process of "reading, discussion, research and writing, around indigenization, decolonization, and Africanization in social work" (2021). Preliminary attempts at transformation included incorporating more local literature, contextual examples, and African cultural practices into the curriculum, but as they reflect, these changes "did not facilitate a deep, consistent, and coherent transformation" across the programme (2021).

Their case study underscores that *how* teachers, departments, and university institutions arrive at decolonization is as important as *what* results from the process. Reflexive practices, horizontal dialogue, student engagement, and creative experimentation embody alternatives to

the usual way of doing things in university settings, which are often top-down, path-dependent, and managerial. Understanding the decolonizing process as a practice that strengthens new academic muscles, and as praxis that links theory and action, helps shift the conversation away from getting to a destination – suggesting a one-time event, "fixing" coloniality – and toward the pursuit and sharing of knowledge aimed at inclusive rigor, liberation, and justice.

Curricular transformation requires the transformation of teachers, students, and the relationship between them. It can be conceptualized concretely as a multidimensional project of inclusion and synergy or complementarity. As editors of this series, we propose that educators can ask themselves, their colleagues, and indeed their students the following questions to guide curricular expansion with the goal not to reach new orders of homogeneity, but rather greater representation of pluralistic ideas and rigorous knowledge:

- Which authors and voices are represented on our syllabus or in our classroom as knowers?
- Which methods and epistemologies are we teaching; which are we prioritizing?
- What topics and substantive issues are we treating as foundational, fully integrated, simply included, or left aside?
- Which pedagogic tools or approaches are we using to meet students where they are and to help them grow; do learners have equivalent or differential outcomes?
- Which indigenous or community knowledge systems are we listening to, elevating, or letting redefine our learning agenda? What is our purpose and whose future does our knowledge imagine?

Across all of these categories: where is racial or ethnic, regional, gender, class, religious or ideological, and linguistic diversity? How do we account for historic hierarchies and systems of exclusion and erasure?

Most university lecturers and professors have never been taught to ask these questions or follow decolonial principles to map or craft a syllabus – much less a broader curricular portfolio. Neither have most students been taught to think about their own knowledge acquisition in these terms. But, these simple questions can guide students and faculty alike in beginning to articulate their own goals and values for learning and research. Until such questions are taken up at scale, academic knowledge and broader knowledge economies will continue to be built on an apprenticeship system, where disciplinary knowledge is passed from one generation of scholars and supervisors to the next, over and over, rarely disrupting the historical asymmetries that birthed them.

Academic disciplines and intellectual property as norm enforcers

Academics are trained within academic disciplines, such that in even small ways we tend to reproduce knowledge value systems that maintain our positions (and vice versa). The networks of scholars, their predecessors, and ultimately, their students become norm enforcers, rewarding the epistemic, methodologic, and even substantive standards for what is studied and how it is packaged. Other norms – professional, social standards of behaviour – also shape academic disciplines and patterns of bias and inequity (Bernhard, Fehr, and Fischbacher 2006). In their contribution to this special issue, Lene Madsen and Hanne Adriansen examine how transnational collaborations aimed at research capacity building and mutual support can reproduce patterns of Eurocentric disciplinary knowledge economies. They trace how collaborative projects that take scientific knowledge and standards of excellence as universal often presume they are automatically "transferable without considering an African academic context" (2021). In concrete terms, coloniality is reproduced when colleagues meet in African universities for transnational collaboration – designed deliberately to be mutually beneficial and to strengthen local research – and the conversation

rotates around, for example, which European doctoral model to follow. While Madsen and Adriansen offer concrete instances of colonial dynamics in research training within and beyond the disciplines, some researchers have sought to break free of disciplinary silos entirely.

Even as academic disciplines maintain their plural and contested standards of excellence, many scholars are turning toward interdisciplinarity or multidisciplinarity to further both theoretic and empirical knowledge. As a journal, Critical African Studies was developed to strengthen cross- and multidisciplinary conversations in African Studies, itself a multidisciplinary field. Different academic systems and networks place variable value on such work, often not recognizing the audience, outlets, or impacts equivalently to those that travel within disciplines. Yet, some scholars are pushing further, into the realm of transdiciplinary knowledge creation and creative inquiry that is neither animated nor motivated by disciplinary debates, nor packaged for existing discursive norms. Rael Salley's contribution to this special issue presents one such example to weave together visual culture and art criticism to examine Kemang Wa Lehulere's art (2021). Salley argues that Wa Lehulere's conceptual works defy categorization and facilitate perceptual learning oriented toward decoloniality and freedom (ibid.). Engaging with the implications of fiction, myths, and non-fiction in looking at art, Salley asks,

> Is your looking the discrete act of a solitary individual, or does your look play a role in transforming the social worlds we inhabit together? Do you become ethically engaged with others as you look, and if so, what about afterward, when you stop looking? (2021)

While written as a meditation on the work of a specific South African artist, these questions resonate more broadly to the pursuit of research and knowledge creation. What is the appropriate role of researchers as "lookers" or knowers in transforming our social worlds? What purpose do disciplines serve in stifling or facilitating ethical engagement and decolonization?

Finally, the articles turn toward the property regime that regulates knowledge as something not only created and exchanged, but owned and protected. Decolonizing debates have often invoked the importance of retrieving, uplifting, and integrating indigenous knowledge in order to go beyond Eurocentric epistemic perspectives. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes,

> It is surely difficult to discuss *research methodology* and *indigenous peoples* together, in the same breath, without having an analysis of imperialism, without understanding the complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices. (1999)

Equally layered in colonial and neocolonial hierarchies is the political economy of community-owned or traditional knowledge. John Harrington, Harriet Deacon, and Peter Munyi argue that Kenya's "pioneering 2016 legislation", designed to protect traditional knowledge, in effect transfers community sovereignty and control to the nation-state, which becomes the arbiter of the legal regime (2021). The legal construct of traditional knowledge sits within broader regimes of intellectual property, which has become an increasingly important tool for transforming knowledge into a commodity. In the final commentary essay for the special issue, Sasha Mathews offers a decolonial, feminist critique of intellectual property and a manifesto for renewing global public domains of knowledge production, sharing, and innovation (2021). Taken together, Harrington et al. and Mathews map the fingerprints of colonialism that now extend a web of legal and institutional controls over knowledge and ideas across African states, indigenous communities, and the rest of the post-colonial world.

The paradox for all of us is how to move away from intellectual property regimes and competition as a defining feature of knowledge systems, while expanding access to more diverse,

synergistic, and creative knowledge itself. Here, we see the movement to decolonize academia as one that is inherited from past decolonial campaigns, while being firmly oriented toward the future.

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Note

1. Research institutions, funding bodies, academic publishers, boards of trustees, donors, and others are also important powerbrokers and may be among the gatekeepers who most accelerate academic inequities, but they fall outside the scope of this issue's articles.

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