

3 Building a ‘decolonial knower’

Contestations in the humanities

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Introduction

This chapter discusses contestations around the ‘decolonial turn’ and interpretations of its meaning for institutionalized knowledge and curriculum in South African higher education, with a focus on the humanities disciplines. To do this I zoom in and analyze calls to ‘decolonize the curriculum’ and responses to that call at one university during and after the student protests (2015–2017). I argue that in a post-colonial context, still burdened with a legacy of education based on ‘colonial difference’ (Chatterjee, 2011), calls to decolonize knowledge, the curriculum, and pedagogy can be understood as a set of counter-claims by subaltern knowers desiring ‘liberation’ from the domination and control of knowledge production by knowers, institutions, and languages of European origin. Struggles around what and whose knowledge, what practices and whose dispositions should count in higher education fields in the South are also strategic moves for status and resources by those whose dispositions and practices have been discounted or misrecognized hitherto and who, consequently, have experienced marginalization or exclusion from the academic game.

Following Foucault’s analysis of the French student protests in May 1968 as a moment of ‘contingent eventualization’ that opened-up a ‘line of fragility’ based on a ‘breach of self-evidence (Foucault, 2000, pp. 226–227), I suggest similarly that the recent student protests can be understood as a ‘ruptural’ event in the constitution of the modern (post)-colonial historically white South Africa university. For Foucault,

It means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness that imposes itself uniformly upon all. To show that things weren’t as necessary as all that . . . a breach of self-evidence,

of those self-evidences on which our knowledges, acquiescences, and practices rest.

(2000, pp. 226–227)

By grasping the contingency of socio-historical contexts, such ruptures create opportunities for critical self-reflection on the institutions, practices, subject formations, and normative commitments that have led us to constitute ourselves and others as we have (Foucault, 2000).

For this reason, in decolonial work (which emphasizes the subjects and contexts implicated in knowledge production), it is important to state one's own 'locus of enunciation' and 'positionality'. The author is a white female academic who worked in Education Development and was an associate staff member of Sociology in the Humanities Faculty, the University of Cape Town when this research was conducted. Many of the student activists involved in the protests were registered in the programme I convened. I am grateful for the opportunities to interview some of them during and soon after the protests. The data presented here was sourced from interviews and documents by students and staff at UCT, a historically white, research-intensive South African university where the RhodesMustFall protests began in 2015. The data and analysis relate to the humanities because this is where the debates have raged most intensely and because this is where I worked and could access data.

The chapter is structured as follows: First the conceptual framework and method based on the Specialization dimension of Legitimation Code Theory (Maton, 2014) is introduced. I work through each of the three fields of the *epistemic–pedagogic device* or 'EPD' (Maton, 2014) – setting out the data and analysis for each field in turn. But I do not work down the device following the Bernsteinian tradition of a hierarchy of relations from knowledge to curriculum to pedagogy. Instead I show that student activists appropriated decolonial theory to support their cause in the field of pedagogy, against what they experienced as Eurocentric colonial forms of institutional culture, curriculum, and teaching. This case study thus illustrates the recursive nature of the EPD, showing how events in the field of pedagogy have impacted 'upwards' in the field of curriculum development. This is where I move next to analyze contesting sets of academic voices around how to respond to the students' call to 'decolonize the curriculum'. Finally, I draw some conclusions.

Conceptual framework

According to Maton, 'the epistemic – pedagogic device is the focus of domination and resistance, struggle and negotiation, both within education

and across wider society' (Maton, 2014, p. 53). He explains how social actors in symbolic fields, such as higher education, compete to control the epistemic–pedagogic device in order to ensure that its measures of achievement and legitimation reflect their own dispositions and practices; 'to control the epistemic–pedagogic device is to control the comparative values of specialization codes and thereby the structuring of a social field' (p. 52). This is a model that can show relations between power, knowledge, and consciousness and how these work between three levels or fields, as shown in Figure 3.1: knowledge production (driven by *epistemic logics*), curriculum design and organization (driven by *recontextualizing logics*), and pedagogy or sites of teaching and learning (driven by *evaluative logics*). Importantly, in Maton's model, each of the fields can shape discourses and practices in the other two fields. So, as noted earlier, I trace how the impetus for change was initiated by students in the pedagogic field, drawing on decolonial theory from the field of knowledge production; and how this in turn led to contestation around policy and practice in the field of curriculum.

In Specialization, Maton identifies two analytically distinct relations that specialize and legitimate knowledge practices in symbolic fields: *epistemic relations* (ER) between a knowledge claim and its object, focus, and methods; and *social relations* (SR) between a knowledge claim and its subject, author, or actor (2014, p. 29). Humanities disciplines are often (though not always) dominated by *knower codes* (ER −, SR+); these are fields where the criteria for achievement, power, and hierarchy lie in the aptitudes and

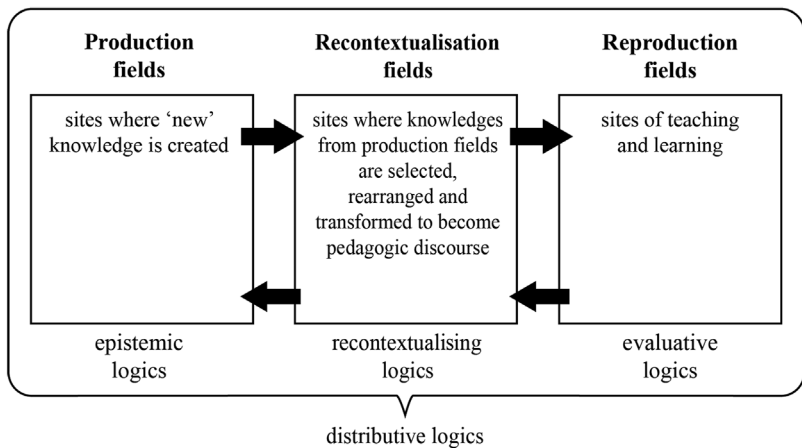


Figure 3.1 The arena created by the epistemic – pedagogic device (EPD) (Maton, 2014, p. 51).

dispositions of the ‘right kind of knower’ and control over the objects and methods of study are downplayed. In the humanities, hierarchies of knowers, their texts, and theories tend to compete with each other rather than building on one another, with new knowers typically claiming to offer theories that supersede the old (Maton, 2014, p. 92). Consequently, there is fierce contestation around canons and curricula, including the means of debate itself. Only some discourses get selected and recontextualized into curriculum knowledge, privileging the ‘gaze’ of some knowers over others. Regarding pedagogy, Maton suggests that knower codes progress through strong ‘sociality’ by building knowers. But privileged gazes in the humanities are acquired tacitly; in order to acquire what ‘counts’ in a particular field, learners must be socially and culturally positioned to relate to a community of legitimate knowers. Consequently, in the humanities, the distributive logics of unequal societies constrain access to legitimated gazes and to the means of determining their legitimation.

Maton (2014) makes a further distinction between the basis of different kinds of gazes: social attributes of the ideal knower, *subjective relations* (SubR) and ways of interacting with significant others, *interactional relations* (IR). This enables him to identify four gazes (see Figure 3.2) each with a different basis of legitimation.

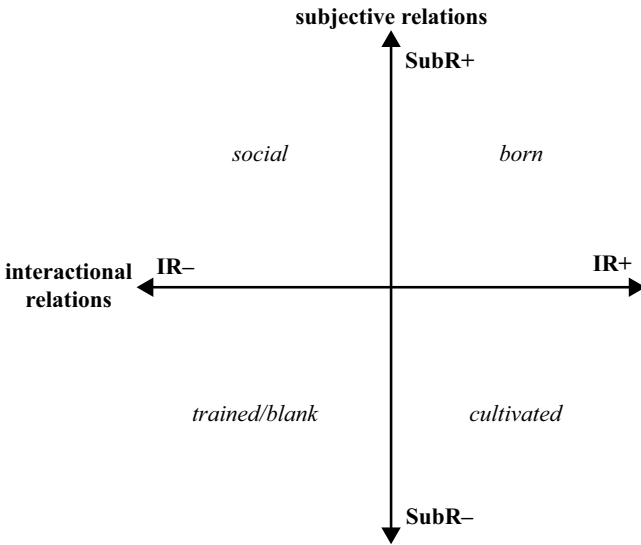


Figure 3.2 The social plane (Maton, 2014, p. 186)

Method

This chapter is based on qualitative data; I captured and selected instances of text from interviews and documents in the public domain that construe particular 'languages of legitimation' and their axiological stances expressed by social actors in the humanities field. From the data I inferred the underlying 'legitimation codes' or organizing principles on which actors base their claims to legitimacy, authority, and specialization. In a third step, I offer my own analysis of 'what's going on here?'. For this I dug deeper into the discursive formations and their associated axiologies in a highly 'raced' post-colonial context to make inferences about how distributive, epistemic, recontextualizing, and evaluative logics might be working to shape actors' stances and claims.

Field of production: a cultivated gaze, decolonial lens

The mere fact that the discourse of the Latin American school of decolonial theory currently resonates strongly with black knowers in the South African academy suggests that 'coloniality' persists in South African higher education institutions, especially in those that are historically white. Decolonial theory is concerned to promote social and epistemic justice; I argue later in the chapter that in South African higher education, there is an ethical obligation to respond to the challenge to decolonize institutional cultures and curricula. Decolonial theory set out to re-frame modern assumptions about epistemology. The Latin American school (Dussel, Mignolo, Escobar, Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres) builds on earlier traditions: early anti-colonial thinkers (Cesaire, Ghandi, Senghor, and Du Bois); political-philosophers engaged in anti-colonial national liberation struggles (Nkrumah, Nyere, Cabral, Fanon, and Biko); post-colonial scholars (Said, Hall, Quijano, Chatterjee, Spivak, Chakrabarty, and Bhabha). Here I focus on the writings of just two of the most prominent theorists of Latin American decolonial theory – Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo.

In the 1970s Dussel, a philosopher, wrote a historical-materialist re-reading of Western philosophy as a counter-narrative to Hegel's Eurocentric historicism. Starting modern history with the Catholic church's mission in the Americas in the fifteenth century, Dussel critiques Hegel's promotion of Europe as the apex of civilization and his assumption that the rest of the world should follow its path of development (the 'Eurocentric fallacy'). Instead he argues that non-European alterity in the 'periphery' was constitutive of Europe's self-definition as the 'centre'. He launched a scathing critique of the West's 'civilizing mission' (which included education)

during and beyond the colonial era, which was used to justify modernity's originary and constitutive violence, 'we do not negate reason (the rationalism of the Enlightenment) but we insist on the irrationality of the violence generated by the myth of modernity' (Dussel, 1993, p. 75). Dussel asserts that modern knowledge claims are implicated in the unjust power relations established by colonialism. His solution is 'transmodernity', defined as the co-realization of an inclusive form of solidarity which European modernity cannot achieve alone (Dussel, 1993).

Following Dussel, two key moves in decolonial theory are first to acknowledge the historical 'epistemicide'¹ of previously colonized knowers and their ways of knowing by the colonizers (Europe and then the West). Second, the decolonial critique announces the end of the 'Oriental' and the 'savage,' that is, the end of the West's self-constitutive 'othering' techniques. Unlike earlier anti-colonial Marxist critiques that framed racism as an ideology used to justify colonialism after the fact (Fanon, 1967), the Latin American decolonial school argue that the racism developed during colonialism continues as 'coloniality' in the present. For example, that the racism of 'coloniality' is used to perpetuate asymmetrical power relations in contemporary developmental policies and programmes (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, pp. 243–244).

A key concept in decolonial theory is that of 'modernity/coloniality' (Mignolo, 2010b; Quijano, 2007) which captures the idea that unjust colonial relations continue into the present both as an effect of the colonial era and contemporaneously as a consequence of the way the West has imposed its version of modernity on the rest of the world. The modern episteme has been institutionalized and universalized through the modern university system, the modern disciplines and through the five hegemonic (ex-colonial) European languages (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 74).

In LCT terms, decolonial theorists argue that the distributive logic of modernity/coloniality's EPD (who gets access) is entangled with its epistemic logics (the basis of knowledge creation). In this sense they redefine the contexts of production of the modern canons. They argue that because the modern disciplines were generated from within colonial apparatuses and power relations, thus not only the contents of the modern disciplines but also their foundational epistemic assumptions should be interrogated (Escobar, 2002; Grosfoguel, 2008; Mignolo, 2011). Thus, 'epistemic de-colonization' involves exposing 'the hidden complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality' (Mignolo, 2005, p. 111). This spatializing and temporalizing of reason's European history leads to the demoting of Western knowledge claims from universal status to just one of many competing social gazes (Mignolo, 2010a).²

W. Mignolo (1993) is a semiotician who introduced Foucault's concept of the 'locus of enunciation' into decolonial discourse. He uses this concept to argue that he is not advocating that a subaltern woman is necessarily better placed to understand subaltern women's issues (a social gaze). Instead he proposes that all knowing subjects are inscribed into a network of disciplinary and cultural structures, processes, and places that shape their knowing, and that critical to accounting for the workings of social relations in knower codes, is to understand from where the knower is speaking (this includes the historical formation of the knower's agenda and intended audience):

Whoever writes in whatever place at whatever time writes within, outside or in the margins of disciplinary configurations and cultural identities. Consequently, the 'true' account of a subject matter in the form of knowledge or understanding will be transacted in the respective communities of interpretation as much for its correspondence to what is taken for 'real' as for the authorizing locus of enunciation constructed in the very act of describing an object or a subject.

(Mignolo, 1993, p. 336)

Mignolo takes both epistemic and social relations into account, offering a more subtle argument than simply promoting an alternative social gaze to that of the Western modern, 'I am concerned with the tension between the inscription of an epistemological subject within a disciplinary context and its inscriptions within a hermeneutic context in which race, gender and tradition compete with the goals, norms and rules of the disciplines' (1993, p. 335). Further, Mignolo's proposal for a 'pluri-dimensional hermeneutic' involves a shift from the 'colonial discourse analysis' (of written texts) to a 'colonial semiosis' that captures the oral, pictorial, and other means of symbolic communication used by, for example, Amerindian cultures.

Analysis

In LCT terms, decolonial theorists articulate the idea that the same distributive logics of the political economy of colonialism (exploitative, extractive, and violent relations) are implicated in the social and symbolic relations of knowledge production between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' in the modern era. In this they have articulated a scathing critique of modern institutionalized knowledge practices from a Southern or colonized perspective, reminding us that the legacy of 'coloniality' gets into not only the social relations of knowledge production, but also the historical contexts of its production and therefore epistemological premises. If one accepts

their arguments and re-historicizing of the contexts of production of the modern disciplines, then one's ontological moorings have to shift, certainly for knower codes in the humanities. Further, their work includes a call for social and epistemic justice for previously colonized peoples and thus carries a high axiological charge. This is achieved by a cosmology that sets up the evils of colonialism against the innocence and violation of the colonized (Mbembe, 2001, p. 243).

However, decolonial theorists are silent on the relations internal to knowledge and thus on the differentiated nature of knowledge structures and their implications for knowledge-building and curriculum. This leaves them open to accusations of 'knowledge-blindness'. However, as I have argued earlier, a careful analysis of the subjective and interactional relations proposed by theorists such as Mignolo and Martín Alcoff, plus their advocacy of an inclusive teleology via concepts such as a 'pluriversity' (Walter Mignolo, 2013) and 'transmodernity' (Dussel, 2002), suggests that they do not base their claims on a crude social gaze, nor are they wanting to simply install a new set of knowers and ways of knowing and throw out the old. While advocating a weakening of the classification and framing of knowledge and its production by modern Western institutions, to open it up to previously excluded knowers, their end goal is to enrich humanity's stock of knowledge. This reading of key decolonial theorists suggests they are committed to the 'sociality' of knowledge production and want to open up rather than close down conversations about knowledge.

In terms of LCT (Specialization), decolonial theorists assume that all knowledge forms are *knower codes* and base their own claims on a *cultivated gaze* with a *discursive lens* (SubR -, IR+) (Maton, 2014). However, because they argue for a 'new way of seeing' that includes 'coloniality' as the 'darker side of modernity', I think they would want to flip the script – rather than be defined in terms of LCT concepts (articulated from a modern/Western locus of enunciation), they offer us a new lens altogether – a *cultivated gaze* with a *decolonial lens*. On the basis of this gaze they would undoubtedly want to include LCT in the conversation, but on new terms of engagement that might entail re-negotiating the rules for how the interactional relations of cultivated gazes are conducted, leading to a more inclusive transmodern/pluriversal gaze that accommodates local knowledges.

However, decolonial theorists do not address the fields of curriculum or pedagogy directly. Decolonial theory does not provide principles or conceptual tools for determining what knowledge to select for a 'decolonized curriculum', how it should be taught, or on what basis students should be assessed. While it is tempting for decolonial scholars to continue to engage in theoretical skirmishes in the field of production, it has been left to their followers to take up the theory and interpret its implications for curriculum

and pedagogic practice. To trace this, I turn to interpretations of decolonial theory for education practice in my own context, where it was black student activists during the protests of 2015–2017 who put the decolonial agenda firmly on the table as a means of challenging traditional/colonial higher education practices.

Field of pedagogy: a social gaze, psychic lens

While student protests related to fees and readmissions occur regularly on historically black South African campuses, in March 2015 a new spontaneous movement that became known as RhodesMustFall (RMF) erupted at UCT, an elite, historically white campus. The focus of RMF was on removing the statue of arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes as a symbol of the racism and whiteness of the institution and the 'black pain' suffered by students. Referring to symbolic as well as economic access, Mbembe notes 'that decolonisation of buildings and public spaces is inseparable from the democratisation of access'; creating the 'conditions that will allow black staff and students to say of the university, "This is my home. I am not an outsider here. I do not have to beg or apologise to be here. I belong here"' (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30).

In October 2015, RMF was superseded by FeesMustFall, a protest against fee increases at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) that later included a demand to insource university workers. By the end of 2015, 16 universities and 11 colleges had been shut down by students now demanding 'free decolonized education for all'. In order to force students back to class and protect university property, university managers called poorly trained police and private security forces onto campuses. After two more years of intermittent outbreaks of violence and counter-violence against the protesters, the then-president Jacob Zuma, backed down and promised free education to all students from poor families from 2018.

The data presented here was gathered via interviews with student activists from RMF at UCT and also includes quotes from a book published by a student activist (Chikane, 2018). First, student interviewees expressed a sense of misrecognition and exclusion by the hegemonic white culture at UCT that required them to assimilate to become legitimate knowers:

Particularly in first year, I swam in self-defeatism, self-doubt, and low self-esteem. 'Black and Stupid' were some of my every day inferences through which I made sense of myself and my abilities.

I was scared my contributions would be viewed as stupid. I feared this would be made concrete by my lack of the proficiency of English, which at the time appeared to be a measure of intelligence.

Black students feel that their only hope of survival is assimilation.
(Chikane, 2018, p. 64)

Being at UCT introduced me rather rudely to the lived realities of being black in the white world . . . the public lectures and seminars all seemed to be about lived black realities in South Africa and yet were done by white old men and women.

Second, students shared what the protest movement stood for in their eyes,

#RhodesMustFall . . . was born on the 9 March 2015 out of pain and frustration, what we later called Black Pain!

By throwing poo at the statue of Rhodes we were showing our disgust with the way Rhodes mistreated our people in the past. Equally, we are showing our disgust at the way UCT celebrates the genocidal Cecil Rhodes. The act of poo-throwing was an institutional critique of UCT.

Third, a few students shared their experiences of the psychological and therapeutic work that went on in 'Azania House' (the administration block occupied by protest movement). One student described how some students were viscerally 'purged' or 'exorcized' as they 'vomited out' the 'white spirits' that possessed them.

The life of black people is a life of nervous condition. This is true at UCT for all black people. . . . It is this life of nervous condition that drives me and many others either to go mad or commit suicide. . . . We were fearful of what will happen to us while we are in the white world if we are to disrupt white power.

We wanted to get rid of the gaze of white people so that we were free to talk about race with whites out of the room. We needed to separate from whiteness to understand our self-worth – we had to learn how to love ourselves – this was a form of liberation, it was psychic recuperation.

Together we asserted what it means to black and powerful – this felt good, it became addictive. RMF became a form of rehab for sharing experiences of being black at UCT – it was like the AA we were all victims of whiteness – we shared some heart-breaking experiences.

The cry of 'black pain' resonated with most black students on campus who came out in support of the protests. Student leaders used an identity politics based on a racialized polemic to mobilize black students against the enemy of 'whiteness'. By late 2015 the movement became controlled by student activists linked to an Africanist political organization. One interviewee

explained that this led to a stronger definition of blackness; not only were whites excluded from the movement, but 'coconuts'³ and 'other Africans' were no longer welcome.⁴ It seems that the movement now required a certain Africanist and/or 'woke' disposition from members of its inner circle.

Black Consciousness ideas were consolidated in RMF – we were all reacting to white institutional racism. We used a race-based analysis and agreed not to talk about class, ('amandla awethu' was replaced with 'izwe lethu'). We took black South African lived experience as the basis for identity . . . so in the beginning, intersectionality was expressed under a black umbrella.

(Chikane, 2018, p. 56)

While the meme of 'black pain' united black South African students across class, gender, and sexual divisions during the first year of the movement's existence, this was not sustained. As one female interviewee explained, as the Africanist agenda became more dominant, some female and LGBTQI+ members became disgruntled with the patriarchal, authoritarian style of some male leaders. In March 2016, a group of transgender activists expressed their outrage by disrupting the opening and destroying the contents of a photographic exhibition set up to commemorate the founding of the RMF movement. From then onwards it became clear that a political movement based on identity politics was fragmenting; the RMF was absorbed into the broader national campaign for free decolonized education.

The RMF movement's criticism of whiteness at UCT was spelled out in a list of long-term goals. Those relating to knowledge and curriculum included:

Implement a curriculum which centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure – through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning – and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience.

Introduce a curriculum and research scholarship linked to social justice and the experiences of black people.

(Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Movement, 2015)

Analysis

The RMF movement adopted a raced social gaze (being positioned as black in South Africa) (SR+, IR –) to legitimate its political message and to unite classed and gendered factions of black students. A raced social gaze is also

evident in its proposals for decolonizing the curriculum. The data suggest that over time some groups in the movement shifted to a more essentialist and exclusive born gaze based on a nativist or ‘woke’ disposition (IR+) as well as a biological or genetic basis for legitimation (SubR+), which later caused the movement to fragment politically. But it must be noted that black students’ use of identity politics and a born social gaze originated in a cry of misrecognition. They experienced the hegemonic cultivated gaze of this historically white university as a social gaze based on racialized colonial difference that excluded them as legitimate knowers. In this society where subjectivities remain highly ‘raced’, it is hardly surprising that students reacted by simply inverting the categories of the colonial gaze to a black social gaze, still based on racialized colonial difference.

Furthermore, there was data to show that some students felt a need to purge themselves of this internalized colonial gaze – described as ‘resentment’ by post-colonial writers such as (Fanon, 2008; Mbembe, 2017; Naicker, 2019).⁵ Here we are not dealing with knowledge-building in the formal sense, but with subjects coming to terms with what Fanon identified as the psychic condition of the colonized, which he described as an inferiority complex leading to dependency and self-hatred. For Mbembe (2017) this is a neurosis of victimization based on an internalized, moral inversion of colonial metaphysics. These colonized subjects have to first deal experientially with a psychic condition as a precondition for their self-realization as fully agential knowers. Mbembe (2017) warns that this condition is typically accompanied by a pathological belief that ‘authentic’ African agency can arise only through the violent destruction of the enemy – an external evil other (Mbembe, 2001, p. 251). LCT does not (yet) cater for this kind of experiential knowing and it is probably inappropriate to label it in LCT terms, but if so pushed, I would name it a ‘psychic lens’ based on the understandable but deleterious effects of an internalized born/social colonial gaze.

Code clashes in the field of recontextualization

I now turn to the site of curriculum policy and development where I present and analyze stances taken by academics as they debated how to respond to the students’ demands. It is noteworthy that it was student action in the field of pedagogy that worked ‘up’ and not ‘down’ the EPD to challenge the old recontextualizing rules for curriculum construction. The student protests had a polarizing effect on university staff; they signalled an end to fondly held liberal notions of (white) collegiality and claims to academic freedom as an individual right. In LCT terms, the debate that raged around how to respond to the demand to decolonize the curriculum was a code clash between positions based on social and cultivated gazes. In this section

I discuss three categories of academic voices evident in the data: a traditional academic voice, black radical voices, and an institutional response, each based on a different gaze or lens.

Traditional academic voice, a cultivated gaze: colonial lens

In 2016 a postgraduate student interviewed academics in the humanities faculty about their views on decolonizing their curricula (Bajjnath, 2017). She concluded that there was little consensus on what decolonization might mean, while few academics had a strong enough grasp of decolonial theory to attempt substantial curriculum change. One responded, 'I'm not yet sure it's a coherent idea' while another stated, 'I think that the kinds of issues that they raised are things I already teach'. All interviewees talked about the content of their courses; none mentioned social relations, culture, language, or pedagogy. One retorted,

You remember how in feminism they would say 'add a little gender and stir', and you have your gender perspective? You could also say 'add a little blackness and stir' and then you have your new curriculum.

(Bajjnath, 2017, p. 51)

There were some oppositional responses suggesting that these academics were out of touch with black students. Some complained about the introduction of identity politics on campus, how it leads to 'intellectual policing' and inhibits possibilities for change. Others asserted that the students' demands were incompatible with their 'academic freedom' to determine what to teach.

Analysis

Some of the data gathered from traditional academics suggests a lack of awareness of the socio-historical specificity of the curriculum and that it may fail to address the burning issues that their students face. This analysis was supported by the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions which described 'the transformation of what is taught and learnt' as 'one of the most difficult challenges this sector is facing'.

Given the decontextualised approaches to teaching and learning that are evident in virtually every institution, it is recommended that institutions give consideration to the development of curriculum approaches

that sensitise students to the place of, and the issues surrounding South Africa on the African continent and in the world at large.

(Council on Higher Education, 2008, p. 21)

Old taken-for-granted assumptions that the pedagogic norm is a privileged white middle class student works in exclusionary ways for most black students. In the humanities, the problems surrounding assimilationist/exclusionary curriculum and pedagogic practices and a lack of shared contexts and forms of sociality are compounded the implicit nature of the legitimate gaze and the invisibility of its criteria for assessment. What is assumed to be a cultivated gaze (IR+) by those in power – an ostensibly teachable and learnable curriculum – may be experienced as a colonial social gaze (SR+) – as a curriculum accessible only to whites – by cultural ‘others’. The protests are a powerful reminder of the consequences of ‘knower-blindness’ by academics in hegemonic positions and by institutions that arrogantly retain their colonial white settler cultures as the norm.

Black radical academic voice: a social gaze, decolonial lens

During the protests at UCT, senior management set up a working group led by black radical academics outside of regular committee processes, to develop proposals for curriculum change. The Curriculum Change Working Group produced a Curriculum Change Framework (CCF) published in 2018. The CCF emerged from their work with student activists-as-partners in curriculum development at three different sites during the protests. The authors could empathize with the students’ ‘black pain’ and set out to interpret this position for the academic community, stating, ‘students are important stakeholders, they must participate in the academic project without having to be stripped from their identities by colonial narratives’ (University of Cape Town, 2018, p. 62). The report stressed the urgency of correcting the misrecognition and alienation of black learners, arguing that misrecognized students will be neither motivated nor engaged in their learning. The authors of the CCF were the first to formally articulate a decolonial position – the CCF aims to ‘resist deficit and assimilationist models based on Anglonormativity and Eurocentricism’ (ibid., p. 58). They understand curriculum change to be about challenging the hierarchies of coloniality,

Central to resisting coloniality is defying colonial authority in what constitutes knowledge, how it is produced and who is allowed to claim custodianship.

(University of Cape Town, 2018, p. 54)

The CCF shifts the terms of curriculum contestation from knowledge to knowers, 'curriculum change at UCT must be black-led' (ibid., p. 54); 'the curriculum must reflect students' cultural capital', and 'bring African ways of knowing to the centre' (ibid., p. 62). It also questioned the legitimacy of the disciplines, 'curriculum change is about contesting power, especially disciplinarity, which carries colonial narratives'. They are in effect calling for a new set of knowers to control the EPD.

Black radical academic voice: a cultivated gaze, decolonial lens

Not all black academics agreed with the CCF. Some interviewees implicitly critiqued it. One asked,

Does it mean learning only about Black thinkers? . . . is this the only way to approach decolonization? . . . We agree to the need for the politics of representation – but this is not what we consider to be substantive decolonization. . . . We are not going to teach students that 'the West is bad and the rest is good'. We want to interrupt this 'lazy history'. The 'decolonial turn' wants to start anew. This is romantic idealism. . . . Colonialism has reconfigured the world – and we have to live with it and learn about it.

This academic legitimated curriculum knowledge on the basis of a cultivated gaze: decolonial lens.

We start by insisting that students know what they are critiquing. . . . Students must have a sense of the world from a wide perspective. . . . It's not about having the correct identity or politics, but what you know and how you work with that. . . . We teach that the meanings of concepts are contingent on their historical context – they can't just be lifted from elsewhere – we need to find a vernacular language that can interpret modern political concepts for this context.

Analysis

The authors of the CCF critique the 'whiteness' of UCT's institutional culture and its ossified, 'colonial' curriculum based on supposedly open cultivated gazes (but carrying a colonial optic). In their concern to correct the institution's 'knower-blindness', the CCF emphasizes the misrecognition of knowers in an institutional space experienced as racist and exclusionary but leave themselves open to the accusation of 'knowledge-blindness'. If this analysis is correct, then in LCT terms the claims of the CCF are legitimated by a social gaze with a decolonial lens.

All modern/colonial education systems in the South face the challenge of producing alternative modes of subjectivity and sociality to underpin knowledge-building. The challenge is to work with the ‘messy contradictory’ problems of the ‘post-colonial condition’ and imagine what kinds of learning experiences and curricula will free all knowers from colonial racialized subjectivities and essentialized binaries.

***Responses to the Curriculum Change Framework (2018):
cultivated gazes***

Unsurprisingly, the CCF caused heated contestation. A website was set up for staff to respond:

The CCF is based on a very specific set of social science theories. It fails to take disciplinary differences into account. It can’t work for the natural and applied sciences.

The CCF’s theory of knowledge is reductionist – knowledge and curriculum appear to be equated with power relations (only).

The CCF endorses a race-based criterion for who can drive the curriculum.

(University of Cape Town, 2018)

Thereafter, UCT’s Senate Teaching and Learning Committee produced a formal, internal document ‘Taking Curriculum Change Forward’ (Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, 2019) that takes into account the CCF and responses to it. It proposes a set of principles to inform an institutional review of the undergraduate curriculum going forward. The document includes measured critiques of the CCF that aim to correct its ‘knowledge-blindness’. For example, it states that the ‘radical relativizing of knowledge’ by the CCF and its ‘emphasis on positionality also entails the potential to silence’ (ibid., p. 5). Further that ‘students’ social identities or lived experiences cannot be the only grounds on which students engage or make knowledge claims’ while the ‘pedagogic challenge is to help students make sense of the gap between the “powerful knowledge” of the disciplines and their lived experience’ (ibid., p. 5). The document defends academic expertise and the specialized nature of knowledge (ibid., p. 10). Finally, it calls for a coordinated, collective, and dialogical approach to curriculum review and reform.

Analysis

Identity politics tends to emerge in political struggles in response to misrecognition. This is surely a healthy form of assertion required to reclaim

the agency of subordinated groups. But when transferred to educational fields, a politics of identity works as a social gaze that is insufficiently inclusive to build knowledge and potentially silences voices from other social positions. This concern was taken up by the Senate Teaching and Learning Committee. However, in settler societies like South Africa, it is not helpful to simply dismiss social gazes as reductionist or anti-intellectual. In contexts where socio-cultural distance and lack of intersubjectivity between knowers is an effect of considerable ignorance and arrogance by white people, what is intended as a cultivated gaze by white teaching staff may well be experienced as a social gaze by black students (previously labelled a cultivated gaze: colonial lens). In such cases, the decolonial instinct to open up the classification and framing of knowledge to colonized knowers and their ways of knowing is critical to the knowledge-building project in order to correct blind-spots in hegemonic ways of knowing and give 'others' access to the academy without requiring assimilation. This might permit knowledge production to better address local problems and introduce new concepts and methods to the global stock of knowledge.

The heated contestations around a decolonized curriculum on South African campuses may be symptomatic of a deeper problem related to the undoing of colonial subjectivization and the ongoing challenge to work for alternative forms of subjectification, education, and culture that can free us from gazes based on colonial difference and keep the intellectual conversation open to those with whom we disagree. In this sense Maton's (2014) advocacy for the value of interactional relations over subjective relations is critical. The institutional and epistemic conditions that enable open forms of 'sociality' around knowledge-building in the academy should be valued and protected. At the same time the terms of engagement for knowledge-building conversations in the post-colony need to be re-calibrated by those previously colonized to guarantee their full participation. This includes the challenge raised by the CCF of how to include students as legitimate participants in the curriculum decolonization project. Following Mbembe (2016) and the decolonial theorists discussed earlier, this will mostly likely be realized and legitimated by a pluriversal, cultivated gaze: decolonial lens that adopts a 'horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions' and a 'radical refounding of our ways of thinking that can transcend disciplinary divisions' (ibid., p. 37).

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the value of LCT Specialization for analyzing contesting languages of legitimation around decolonizing the curriculum in the humanities in a post-colonial context – as a code clash between

social gazes and cultivated gazes. However, in post-colonial contexts with long histories of violence, exploitation, and racism, I exploited LCT's conceptual flexibility to suggest new lenses to accommodate the data – namely a colonial lens, a decolonial lens, and a psychic lens.

Ironically, it is the much-maligned Western academy that is not only the object of decolonial critique but has provided the political freedom and material and institutional conditions for the development of the critique itself. In this sense, this study confirms Bernstein's insight into the internal contradiction of the pedagogic device, namely that offers new knowers access to 'unthinkable knowledge' which in turn they can use to take control of the device itself. In post-colonial societies where civil society is weak, it is of vital importance that new educated elites not only take control of the pedagogic device, but use it to build civil society.

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Notes

- 1 While this may be a correct description for those languages and cultures that were deracinated by colonialism, it is over-stated and unhelpful for the South African and other contexts where indigenous languages have been preserved. There is already important work being done to resurrect the black archive (see for example Kumalo S.H. (2019) 'Khawuleza – an instantiation of the Black Archive').
- 2 In his study of British cultural studies, Maton (2014) points out that the redescription of a cultivated gaze to a social gaze is a move typical of social gazes. However, he also concedes that 'critiques based on social gazes correct the essentialist temptation to misrecognize a canon as asocial and ahistorical' (2014, p. 101).
- 3 Coconuts are assimilated blacks who have taken on white middle class culture, often as a result of elite schooling.
- 4 This trend corresponds to what Achille Mbembe has called 'the new nativism'. On the one hand, it operates on the basis of a form of discursive exclusion that separates 'authentic Africans' as racial insiders from outsiders: the exiled, vulnerable communities and diasporic configurations from other continents. On the other, it fails to recognize the plural cosmopolitanism that characterizes Africa. Rather than focusing on what Africa is, Nativism prescribes a moral discourse on what Africa ought to be (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 2–3)
- 5 Mbembe (2017) has a more sophisticated analysis than that of Fanon's – the latter written during the first wave of anti-colonialism. Mbembe argues that in the late global capitalist era it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between coloniality and modernity – this idea is contained in his concept 'the becoming black of the world'.

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