

# Decolonizing the University and the Problematic Grammars of Change in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni  
Change Management Unit  
Vice-chancellor's Office  
University of South Africa

## Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to deliver this keynote address at this **5th Postgraduate Student Conference on Decolonizing the Humanities and Social Sciences**.

This conference takes place at a crucial moment when our students are engaged in legitimate struggle for **decolonization of the university in general** and for **free education** in particular.

It is taking place, a time when the very idea of the university as an institution is facing the most difficult questions.

Worse still, we are meeting here at a time when some students have been **injured, imprisoned, and barred from the university**—this is not a good moment at all.

Universities have become militarised and securitised sites.

***How can we discourse about decolonizing social sciences and humanities at this moment when the very political economy of life of students it's at stake?***

***How can we focus on disciplinary debates at a time when the reality facing us summons us to focus on questions of life and death?***

***Can't we postpone the disciplinary debates for another moment and focus on the urgent questions of the national crisis facing us?***

---

<sup>1</sup> Keynote Address Delivered at the **5th Annual Students Conference on Decolonizing the Humanities and Social Sciences in South Africa/Africa**, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 6-7 October 2016.

The broader struggle for decolonization of the university in such a way that higher education becomes indeed a public good accessible to all our students not only constitutes *a difficult subject of our times* but is part of a broader *struggle for re-humanization of the world*.

In this lecture, I reflect on four interrelated topical issues in the hope to enrich the struggles for a decolonized university in which knowledge is not sold as a commodity to only those with money:

- Let me first reflect on the on-going student struggles—particularly on what I have termed the emerging *'student archive'* distilling what we must learn from this archive for purposes of envisioning a decolonized university in which education will be free.
- In the second place, I reflect on the very idea of the university focusing on the question of why the idea of the university has become so highly contested—here I will venture into history a bit—the history of the *university in Africa* and the struggle for *African universities* that is ongoing here in South Africa and elsewhere.
- In the third place, I specifically reflect on the very grammars of change, that is the main discourse or languages of change that are being utilised today in South African Higher Education as we struggle to deliver the change demanded by students.

-By *5 grammars of change* I mean: *transformation, Africanization, Indigenization, diversification, and decolonization*.

-My thinking is that we have to engage critically with the meanings, logics, problems, and prospects of each of these grammars of change as they mean various things.

-This is important because across the world, we have not yet found a clear formula on how to change the very idea of the university—we

have to work with these ill-defined grammars as we try to imagine and construct the university of the future.

- Finally, I will end with a reflection on what is to be done—here I am putting on the table four actions that we must take seriously particularly as forces for change namely ***return to the base, rethinking thinking itself, shifting the geography and biography of knowledge (moving the centre)*** and ***learning to unlearn in order to re-learn***—as practical essential pre-requisite for substantive change of the university.

### **The student struggles**

Let me begin by paying homage to our gallant students who have against all odds successfully brought back into the public agenda the incomplete struggle ***for decolonization.***

Let me also say that posit that ***the definitive demands and entry of black students into the academy after long years of exclusion and marginalization as descendants of the racialised, enslaved and colonized peoples was bound to impact on the idea of the very idea of the university, on curriculum, on epistemology, on institutional cultures, on funding of universities, and on pedagogy.***

The current struggles spearhead by students is broadly ***a re-humanising struggle after centuries of dehumanization.***

The messages cascading from the student struggles are loud and clear to those who dare to listen:

- The first message I get is that students are proclaiming that they are ***human beings***—as captured by Archie Mafeje, for black people to proclaim that they are human beings emerges within a context of a modern world and social order in which human species are racially hierarchized and socially classified in accordance with invented and assumed differential ontological densities.

- Like all human beings, students are reminding us that they were born into a valid, legitimate and functioning knowledge systems but these are absent from the academy.
- Fundamentally, the students have declared that their ‘lives matter’ and that their education is worthy of investment.

Some might ask, where are you reading this from?

I am reading from the rich ‘student archive’ which is not packaged into books and journals and enclosed into a building called the library.

The student archive I am reading exists as:

- i. **Placards**
- ii. **Graffiti**
- iii. **Tweets**
- iv. **Media articles**
- v. **Speeches and songs**

I have become particularly attracted to messages on placards. One of them had this message: ***‘We’re not calling for a free university but a free society. A free university within a capitalist society is much like having a lecture hall inside a prison.’***

I read the messages from Fees Must Fall as about ***the ironic emphasis on production of a knowledge driven society without preparedness to invest in education, it is about national priorities, about decolonization of budgeting and more fundamentally about investment in reproduction of knowledge driven society.***

It is indeed, the student struggles that have forced academics, university management and the government to reflect on the idea of the university— they have forced the imperative of change on a complacent academia and leadership.

Let me posit that one of the fundamental questions facing all of us today *is not only that of relevance of the university but how can it be liberatory from predatory capitalist forces to make it an accessible public good and democratic open public sphere rather than a captured institution hostage to market fundamentalisms and bourgeois alienating and elitist cultures.*

### **Changing the idea of the university**

But let me begin by posing the question: *when we talk about the idea of the university—what exactly are talking about?*

I think, we are specifically talking about four pertinent issues:

- **The genealogy of the university**: its origins, its claims to universality, its shifting meaning, for example from *Kantian-Humboldtian University* to current problematic *Corporate University*, and specifically for our purposes today, about how the university was exported to Africa and the long-term consequences and implications for education and African consciousness formation and development.
- **The character of the university**: its identity, mission, vision, soul, institutional cultures, systems, operations, as well as its claims to autonomy and ability to self-define.
- **The function of the university**: not only the questions of its general purpose, epistemological and pedagogical thrust but its responsiveness to society—its place in society in other words how is the university placed in relation to the market, state and society.

In the 1960s, the founding nationalists wanted the university to serve three functions:

- i. Nation-building
- ii. Economic development
- iii. Training of the desperate needed skilled personnel (African civil service in the context of de-racialization and Africanization.

Today, the questions are much deeper—they are about cognitive justice/social justice.

- **The practices of the university**: not only how it works, how it generates and disseminates knowledge, how disciplines are organised, how is

assessment done and excellence measured but also access to the university and relevance of what is taught.

I must say that a combination of current pressure being put on the universities to change by the students and the long-standing broader unresolved **systemic issues** necessitate our current critical reflections on the very idea of the university before we talk about decolonizing social sciences and humanities.

Allow me to say that we are living at a time when the world at large is experiencing what Michel Foucault termed an '**epistemic break**' and Immanuel Wallerstein described as '**a systemic crisis**' that has opened up '**basic epistemological questions.**'

In his book entitled **The Uncertainties of Knowledge** (2004), Wallerstein has this to say:

***'I believe that we live in a very exciting era in the world of knowledge, precisely because we are living in a systemic crisis that is forcing us to open the basic epistemological questions and look to structural reorganizations of the world of knowledge. It is uncertain whether we shall rise adequately to the intellectual challenge, but it is there for us to address. We engage our responsibility as scientists/scholars in the way in which we address the multiple issues before us at this turning point in our structures of knowledge'*** (p. 58).

The important point that Wallerstein raises is: '***It is uncertain whether we shall rise adequately to the intellectual challenge, but is there for us to address.***'

Academically speaking the university as an institution is revealing complex tensions '***between its character, its function, its knowledge project, and its practices.***'

This reality led Ari Sitas to pose some pertinent questions that speak directly to the constitutive of the idea of the university and the imperative of change that is upon us:

- ***Is it possible to transform the character of the university out of its monastic character and make it worldly, engaged without surrendering its autonomy?***
- ***Can the system operate outside the cycles of elite formation and class and other forms of differentiation?***
- ***Can a new knowledge project be found that is about human flourishing rather than about trade, production, and war?***
- ***Can a democratic ethos supplant the hierarchical system of academic patronage and can freedom of experimentation and expression be guaranteed?*<sup>2</sup>**

To me, our engagement with the idea of the university is directly to speak about the relevance and future of the university.

It would seem our universities had become not only captured by corporate interests but have fallen from the habit of ***self-critique*** until they were awoken from slumber by student uprisings.

I agree with Debaditya Bhattacharya's analysis that ***'A politics of the university's future must necessarily begin from a premise of self-critique.'***

Thus as part of the university, we are engaged in reviving self-critique so as to remain relevant and purposeful.

Bhattacharya went further to posit that ***'A University without the political mission of interrogating its own ontologies—that is, a mission of radical self-transformation—is a university of no 'use,' and is indeed a useless 'idea.'***

### **Changing the idea of the university**

---

<sup>2</sup> Sitas, A. 2016. 'The University in Question.' *Cafe Dissensus*, September 15, pp.1-4.

What we are engaged in is changing the idea of the university rather than destroying it.

The university, to borrow an argument from Gayatri Spivak, is part of ***'that which we cannot want.'*** Even the students want it.

Let us not therefore entertain the simplistic idea that the students want to destroy the university itself.

From as early as the 1870s such thinkers as **Edward Wilmot Blyden, J. E. Casley Hayford** agitated for particular kind of a university—an **'African university'**—an **'indigenous university.'**

These early educated Africans became pioneers in grappling with the idea of the university from an African perspective.

My point here is that we have a long history of critical reflection as Africans on the idea of the university.

Bhattacharya stated clearly that ***'the history of the university has never been immune to questions of 'use.'***

He went further to argue that universities must **'confront the fetish of utility.'**

- For the pioneer African educated elite particular Blyden, they were worried about the possibility receiving the university that was a **'transplant'** from Europe and America into Africa.
- Blyden did not want Africa that was dominated by universities that were nothing but an ***imitation of European and American universities rather than authentic outgrowth from the African socio-cultural-intellectual as well as economic and political soil and climate.***
- Blyden antagonised over what he described as ***'the fate of copycats and imitators'*** produced by transplanted universities.



- Specifically, Blyden was particularly worried about use of European textbooks that portrayed Africans as *‘a heathen and worse than a heathen—a fool’* being used at the university in Africa.
- He imagined a liberatory education whose purpose was to *restore cultural self-respect among Africans.*
- Blyden agitated for an ‘African university’ that was free from what he termed *‘despotic Europeanising influences which had warped and crushed the Negro mind.’*
- He was deeply concerned about what he termed the *‘race poison’* that was embedded within European thought and textbooks.
- Blyden imagined a higher education that produced a distinct *‘African Personality.’*
- Blyden wanted a balanced education whose aim is **‘to preserve an accurate balance between the studies which carry the mind out of itself, and those which recall it home again.’**
- J. E Casley Hayford campaigned for an *‘indigenous university’* where teaching was to be in vernacular languages, where books written in foreign languages would be translated into indigenous languages and where the overarching objective of education was to *‘preserve in the students, a sense of African Nationality.’*
- But even during these early reflections on the idea of the university, there was no consensus on the type of university for Africa: For example **James Africanus Beale Horton** from Sierra Leone who had trained in medicine in Britain agitated for ***undiluted Western education for Africa.***
- Horton represented those Africans that strongly believed that we ***cannot embrace the technological aspects and reject the cultural aspects of Western civilization.***

- These thinkers locked horns with those who defended African ways of life, languages and cultures—who feared an education that was alienating.

I am giving you all this historical background because Blyden and Hayford were not successful in their struggles for an ‘African university.’

- For example, Fourah Bay College emerged as an affiliate of the University of Durham in Britain.
- Achimota College located near Accra was an affiliate college of the University of London.
- ‘Universities in Africa’ only multiplied after 1945. Examples include Makerere University in Uganda and Ibadan University in Nigeria.
- These were products of *Cyril Asquith Report/ Doctrine (1943-1945)* that became a blueprint for the export of universities from Britain to the colonies as ‘*university colleges.*’
- The problem with exportation of universities to the colonies from the metropolis was well captured by Eric Ashby in his *Godkin Lectures at Harvard University* that were eventually published as *African Universities and Western Tradition* (1964): ‘*The doctrine was a vivid expression of British cultural parochialism: its basic assumption was that a university system appropriate for Europeans brought up in London and Manchester was also appropriate for Africans brought up in Lagos and Kumasi and Kampala.*’
- Robert R. July correctly noted that ‘*The first universities in black Africa were imports, their purpose the indoctrination of a foreign culture.*’

### **How did African nationalists confront the question of university?**

If exported universities sought to introduce foreign cultures and alienate Africans from themselves, African nationalism sought to indigenise and Africanize the university in Africa into an African university.

This is clear from the works and words of African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere.

At the centre of African nationalism was not only the quest for political freedom and cultural freedom but also that of development.

Nkrumah emphasised that universities in Africa should draw their inspiration from an African past, fusing ancient traditions with modern mainly Marxist ideas and producing graduates capable of working and living in Africa.

To Nkrumah the University of Ghana had to engage in intellectual decolonization—***a new way of looking at the world from an African standpoint.***

Just like Blyden Nkrumah emphasised the creation of ***African personality.***

In February 1956, when Nkrumah opened Akoafo Hall of Residence at the University of Ghana, he made clear his policy: ***'We must in the development of our university bear in mind that once it had been planted in African soil it must take root amidst African traditions and culture.'***<sup>3</sup>

When Julius Nyerere was inaugurated as the first Chancellor of the University of East Africa (Makerere, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam) on 28 June 1963, he reflected on the idea of the university, demanding that the ***'university takes an active part in the social revolution we are engineering:'***

- Nation-building
- Economic development
- East African-consciousness building.

***'The university must think, and force us to think, in terms of humanity, not any sectoral interests. Its members must guard against their own prejudices as well as ours.'***

The early nationalists emphasised the need to study African history, African music and African arts as part of ***Africanization process***—without delving

---

<sup>3</sup> Nkrumah, K. 1956 quoted in Ashby, E. 1964. *African Universities and Western Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press. p, 61.

deeper into epistemological questions—beyond taking a simply *culturalist position*.

They also emphasized that the university must play a leading role in the *agenda of development—that development was defined in modernist terms of catching up with the West or in terms of socialism that emphasised distributive justice and banishment of exploitation of some human beings by others*.

The nationalist critique of colonial education led to the rise of Ibadan, Dakar, Dar and Maputo schools of nationalist history, which flourished in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The nationalist school contributed to:

- Challenging colonial library
- Demonstrating that Africans have a long history prior to colonization
- Identification of what they termed ‘African factor’ /‘African initiative’/ ‘African agency
- Emphasis on domination and resistance as a core part of African History.
- Introduction of new methodology—that of oral tradition in their writing of Africans back into history.

Their decline is linked to the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and the interventions of the World Bank (WB) that de-emphasised the importance of higher education in Africa.

But what I want to posit is that *decolonization of the state did not translate into decolonization of universities in Africa into African universities*.

*They might have undergone Africanization but not decolonization*. I will reflect on the problems of Africanization later.

This argument is given credence by the fact that we are today faced by the fundamental question of decolonization of the universities, indicating beyond doubt that the earlier initiatives must have failed.

For us in Africa, on top of other general challenges facing the higher education sector worldwide, ***there is a specific challenge that is before us is that of how to change the very idea of the university from being a ‘university in Africa’ to an ‘African university.’***

Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his book *Decolonizing the Mind* identified the bigger problem confronting us today when he distilled the long-term consequences of what he termed the colonial ‘cultural bomb’ that was detonated on Africa:

*‘The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other peoples’ languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of the struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish.*

Have we not heard some of us saying this call for decolonization does not make sense because colonization and apartheid ended long ago; and it’s ridiculous to talk of decolonization and Africanization today?

This is what Ngugi wa Thiong’o talks about as part of coloniality’s planting of ‘*serious doubts about the moral rightness of the struggle*’ and even the rationality behind imagining another university.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o helps us to understand the logic of operation of coloniality: having planted doubts, ‘imperialism presents itself as the cure’ as the solution to African problems rather than cause.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o clearly defined for us the major part of the problem we facing when he wrote that:

- ***'The debate, in other words, was [is] about the inherited colonial education system and the consciousness it necessarily inculcated in the African mind'*** (p. 101).

Having defined the elephant in the room, Ngugi wa Thiong'o went further to poses fundamental questions that must give content to our engagement with the idea of the university and envisioning another university:

- ***What directions should an education system take in an Africa wishing to break with neo-colonialism?***
- ***What should be the philosophy guiding it?***
- ***How does it want the 'New Africans' to view themselves and their universe?***
- ***From what base: Afrocentric or Eurocentric?***
- ***What then are the materials they should be exposed to: and in what order and perspective?***
- ***Who should be interpreting that material to them: an African or non-African?***
- ***If African, what kind of African?***
- ***One who has internalized the colonial world outlook or one attempting to break free from the inherited slave consciousness?***
- ***And what were the implications of such an education system for political and economic set up or status quo?***
- ***In a neo-colonialist context, would such an education system be possible?***
- ***Would it not in fact come into conflict with political and economic neo-colonialism?***

Ngugi wa Thiong'o provides a broad response to these pertinent questions:

- ***'Whether recommendations in the quest for relevance are successful or not ultimately depends on the entire government policy towards***

*culture, education and language, and on where and how it stands in the anti—imperialist process in Africa today.'*

**The problematic university of today:**

- Elitist and exclusionary
- Site of neo-liberal thinking in which students are defined as 'customers' and where education is commodified and sold at market value.
- Marketised/corporatized: where denationalised forces of the market and business models drive the work
- Alienating-patriarchal and racist cultures
- Absence of cognitive justice
- ***University in Africa/offshore*** that is located in Africa but does not reflect its location, does not feel any obligation to take full account of its location and history of its location.
- ***Monolingualism: languages imposed by colonialism reign supreme.***
- ***A site where knowledge has been reduced to skilling and students are simply defined as potential workers rather than knowers and citizens.***
- ***One reality is that the current university is hostage to state, market and civil society imperatives: each with its specific, varied and different expectations and demands.***
- ***We must today talk of a captured university—captured by coloniality of markets and corporatist imperatives that understand education as a simply commodity to be sold to those with money.***

**Building on this this analysis of the problems facing the current university, one can then try to envision a university of the future**

- A site of multilingualism: an institution in which African indigenous languages, cosmologies and ontologies are central part of its identity and soul.
- A site of cognitive/social justice that fully embrace the idea that all human beings are born into a valid and legitimate knowledge system.
- A site of 'ecologies of knowledges' where pluralities of knowledges compete and reinforce each other.

- A socially responsive institution that is intolerant of epistemicides, linguicides and cultural imperialism.
- A re-capitalised institution in which even those without money have access to education: where education is a right rather than a privilege, of the few.
- A thoroughly decolonized, de-tribalised, de-racialised, de-patriarchized, and de-corporatized home of everyone.

I can go on and on articulating what the University of the Future has to look like, but what needs even urgent critical reflections are the pathways to this imagined university.

### **On the five grammars of change in South African Higher Education**

Nyerere emphasised that **deep thinking must precede action**, building on this argument I posit that as we engage in the actual changing of the idea of the university and doing curriculum anew, we must consistently reflect critically on the very grammars of change.

What are we seeking to do practically speaking?

- Are we engaged in **transformation** of universities?
- Are **Africanizing** the universities?
- Are we engaged in **indigenization** of universities?
- Are we simply doing **diversification** of universities?
- Are we **decolonizing** the universities?

Practically, we must consistently interrogate the ‘five grammars’ of change we are working with for now in our search for epistemic freedom and cognitive justice:

### **Transformation**

Transformation has been introduced as a solution to the long-standing paradigm of difference that gave birth to apartheid colonialism.



Since the transition from apartheid to democracy, transformation has been the most popular concept used to capture the spirit of change in South Africa.

With regard to the universities, transformation meant de-racialization, which is, increasing the number of black VCs, professors and students.

It meant opening up, formerly white only universities to accommodate blacks.

Epistemologically, it meant adding works of African scholars into the existing curriculum.

With the rise of students protest the word transformation has undergone radicalizations for example Universities South Africa (USAf) formerly HESA (Higher Education South Africa)(2015) defines higher education transformation in this radical manner:

- ***Higher education transformation entails decolonizing, deracialising, demasculinising and degendering South African universities, and engaging with ontological and epistemological issues in all their complexity, including their implications for research, methodology, scholarship, learning and teaching, curriculum and pedagogy...it presents the challenge of creating institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference and diversity – whether class, gender, national, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, epistemological or methodological in nature – and creating spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects and questions other than those that have long been hegemonic in intellectual and scholarly thought and writing”*** (HESA, 2014: 7).

### **What have been the problems of transformation?**

- i. Transformation does not speak to a ‘rupture’ but is detained by ‘transitional’ thinking: rupture means that which inhibits freedom and justice has to die.

- ii.* It has been very slow and frustrating.
- iii.* Like all forms of change, it has been confronted by resistance: the flag of compromising standards have been raised.
- iv.* It has been narrowly defined to mean simple equity.
- v.* It has been misunderstood by some to mean entitlement to employment and promotion without meeting the requirements: in this sense transformation can easily trap us in celebration of mediocrity and consequently confirm racist supremacist lies, if we are not careful.
- vi.* More importantly, it has been cosmetic: it has not resulted in qualitative and meaningful change that touches on the very Eurocentric foundation of epistemology, for instance.
- vii.* To the radical students, transformation has been nothing but a strategy to keep the status quo intact.
- viii.* Liberals have reduced transformation to diversity.

### **Africanization/Indigenization**

To me, Africanization is part of transformation aimed at indigenizing inherited institutions.

At its centre is de-racialization process: a process of making the university African in form and content.

Politically, Africanization was underpinned by 'Affirmative Action.'

Epistemologically, Africanization entailed attempts at bringing into the university 'indigenous knowledge systems' (IKS).

Under Africanization, there has also been change on names of universities and addition of works of African scholars into the curriculum.

There is nothing wrong with Africanization as a lever of liberation but its implementation so far has created problems

### **The problem with Africanization**

Frantz Fanon has provided the most detailed critique of Africanization as a form of decolonization and liberation.

- i. Fanon questioned the suitability of those tasked with Africanization, namely the national middle class, which he thought were lazy, unscrupulous, parasitic, embedded in colonial thought and corrupt.
- ii. This Fanonian critique faces us today: are we the correct people to change the curriculum since we were produced by same university that we are trying to change?
- iii. Africanization is abused to enable looting and predatory tendencies.
- iv. More importantly and relevant for what we are discussing today, Africanization hides chauvinism that manifest itself in the form of tribalism, reverse-racism, xenophobia, sexism, and patriarchy.
- v. Africanization is permeated by 'repetition without change' as it fails to set foot new humanity (new life) free from tribalism, regionalism, racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and sexism.
- vi. Africanization is tantamount to tinkering with the margins rather than real change.
- vii. Under the name of Africanization, there are many who seek to go all the way to 'villagise the university.'
- viii. In one newspaper article one young scholar has this severe critique of Africanization ***'Using the excuse of Africanizing the university racists, xenophobes, nativists, tribalists, and regionalists wish to ensure that only their relatives, clansmen and clanswomen are found on campus, turning what was supposed to be a university into what Achille Mbembe calls an 'ethno-provincial' institutions of higher learning. Standards are thrown out of the window as employment and promotions are done along the bloodline and the mother tongue.'***
- ix. The young academic goes on to warn us that we must not ***'remove the universality of the university'*** under the name of Africanization.
- x. The young academic argues that the weakness of Africanization is that it proceeds through the format of remove and replace: e.g. Hegel with Cheikh Anta Diop.

- xi. To the young academic: this is *'simply revenge not liberation: It is to remove and replace not to create a new reality.'*

### **Diversity/Critical diversity**

This is the preferred term by many liberal-minds.

What is emphasised is inclusion: into what?

At the university it has meant diversifying:

- i. Faculty
- ii. Students
- iii. Cultures
- iv. Symbolisms

### **Decolonization**

The decolonization that has returned to haunt the universities is not the one that was simply anti-colonial.

It is a new form of decolonization which others term decoloniality.

- i. It speaks to cognitive injustices: born out of refusal to accept that all human beings are born into a knowledge system that is valid and legitimate.
- ii. It is opposed to the practices of removals and replacements: it speaks to the need for transcendence of the current conceptions of subjectivity and knowledges
- iii. The decolonization that is spoken about today is that which strongly advocates ecologies of knowledges/multiplicity of knowledges: not removal and replacement.
- iv. It speaks of humanising humanity beyond its current racial hierarchization and social classification in accordance with assumed differential ontological densities.
- v. A decolonized university is one in which there is not only ecologies of knowledges but also a diversity of people that are committed to expanding knowledges.

vi. Decolonial thinkers speak of a *pluriversal* university--pluriversity.

**How should we work move forward with the decolonization agenda towards building a future university where education won't be a commodity?**

The problem is *us the academics produced by westernised universities*.

We are not the solution, we are the main problem.

The problem is our *mentalities and consciousness*.

It is us who reproduce what the Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake described as '*knowledges of equilibrium*.'

We suffer from *alienation* that was imposed on us by a particular form of education that continues to actively promote *coloniality* long after the end of direct colonialism.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o eloquently described the problem of alienation as taking the form of dislocation of the African mind '*from the place he or she already knows to a foreign starting point even with the body still remaining in his or her home-land. It is a process of continuous alienation from the base, a continuous process of looking at oneself from the outside of self or with the lenses of a stranger. One may end up identifying with the foreign base as the starting point toward self, that is from another self toward one self, rather than the local being the starting point, from self to other selves.*'

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is extremely explicit on how alienation was imposed: '*Get a few of the natives, empty their hard disk of previous memory, and download into them a software of European memory.*'

**1. Returning to the base/locus of enunciation**

The fundamental question we must begin with, in our present struggles to change the idea of the university is: *from what base do we look at the world?*

For instance, from what base do we look at the question of free education in South Africa?

Is it the neo-liberal base from which we understand education as a commodity?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o poses this question as the question of *perspective* and *relevance*.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o posits that *'How we see a thing—even with our eyes—is very much dependent on where we stand in relationship to it.'*

In simpler terms returning to base speak to *how we see and experience the world as defined and reflected in the African experience of history*.

It speaks to the *centring of Africa as a legitimate epistemic site from which to see and experience the world*.

In his latest book entitled *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe* (2016), Ngugi wa Thiong'o noted that:

*'We cannot afford to be intellectual outsiders in our own land. We must reconnect with the buried alluvium of African memory—that must become the base for planting African memory anew in the continent and the world.'*

The real base according to Ngugi wa Thiong'o is *the people* and he elaborates that:

*'A return to the base, the people, must mean at the very least the use of a language and languages that the people speak. Any further linguistic additions should be for strengthening, deepening and widening this power of the languages spoken by the people.'*

A return to the base means *taking African archive* as the starting point in our work of changing the idea of the university.

A return to the base also means *thinking from where we are—from Africa specifically*.

## **2. Shifting the geography and biography of knowledge**

One reality that we must clearly understand is that what masquerades today as the '*global knowledge economy*' has a hegemonic centre from which it circulates from—that centre is Europe and North America.

As put by Raewyn Connell (2016): '*Modern universities and their staff and students exist in a global economy of knowledge, with a definite geography of production and circulation.*'<sup>4</sup>

One specific challenge we have to deal with as we engage in changing the university is that of marginalization of African scholarship.

This marginalization of African scholarship in the so-called 'global knowledge economy' is part of a *deliberate division of labour* rooted in imperialism and colonialism in which scholars of Africa and the rest of the Global South have been reduced to **hunter-gatherers of raw data** that is turned into theories in the Global North, '*native informants*' as well as *consumers* of theories, concepts and methodologies cascading from the Global North.

The concept of '*shifting the geography of knowledge/reason*' is used as a motto by the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA) and in Africa the same process is described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o described as that of '*moving the centre.*'

At one level, shifting the geography of knowledge speaks to a deliberate process of liberating ourselves from the *prison of Eurocentrism*, which makes us to discuss changing the idea of the university today.

---

<sup>4</sup> Connell, R. 2016. 'Decolonizing Knowledge, Democratizing Curriculum.' (Paper Prepared for Presentation at the Decolonizing of Knowledge Discussion, University of Johannesburg, March 2016).

At another level, it entails moving the centre *'between nations and within nations'*—so as to free the world from *'restrictive walls of nationalism, class, race and gender'* (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1993).

To Ngugi wa Thiong'o moving the centre is also meant to deal with the problem of the centre as *'located in the dominant social stratum, a male bourgeois minority' (a Eurocentric bourgeois, male and racial minority)*

To Ngugi wa Thiong'o moving the centre as part of shifting the geography of knowledge/reason is a process of correcting *'the imbalances of the last four hundred years.'*

It is meant to resolve the *'present conditions of a continent's disbelief in itself'* (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1993: xiv).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o just like Frantz Fanon put forward the concept of moving the centre as part of a process of seeking to set *afoot a new humanism.*

Practically speaking, shifting the geography of knowledge/reason is very important because the knowledges that took us to this current phase of what Immanuel Wallerstein terms *'systemic crisis,'* cannot be the same knowledges that pull us out of this crisis.

Practically, we have to shift both *geo-and bio- of knowledge* in these practical ways:

- i. Changing the giants on whose shoulders we stand.
- ii. Changing the geographical location of the thinkers.
- iii. Changing from repeating the ideas of dead white men.
- iv. Changing the gender, race, and generation of thinkers.

We have to do all this if we have to change the idea of the university in Africa to reflect its location and to ensure relevance

### **3. Rethinking thinking itself**



Without a deliberate effort in ***rethinking thinking*** and even unthink some inherited idea we cannot begin to change the idea of the university

Our work in ***rethinking thinking*** begins with accepting the limits and problems of the current knowledge as well as the forms of power and subjectivity it sustains.

Cathrine Odora Hoppers and Howard Richards in their book ***Rethinking Thinking*** (2012) defined 'rethinking thinking' as: ***'The casting of light at last onto subjugated peoples, knowledges, histories and ways of living unsettles the toxic pond and transforms passive analysis into a generative force that valorises and recreates life for those previously museumised'*** (p.8).

Radicals speak of ***'epistemic disobedience'*** as part of rethinking thinking.

This is important because we are currently under pressure respond positively to the definitive demands and entry into the academy of those descendants of the racialised, enslaved and colonized peoples who are today loudly proclaiming that:

- ***Like all human beings they were born into a valid, legitimate and functioning knowledge systems***
- ***They have rationality***
- ***They have history and culture***
- ***Fundamentally, they have declared that their 'lives matter'***

This is a message that I get from the **Rhodes Must Fall Movements** and the rich **student archive** they have produced.

#### **4. Learning to unlearn in order to re-learn**

This concept is borrowed from the indigenous people of Latin America who are just like us grappling with the challenges of recovering from genocides, epistemicides, linguicides and cultural imperialism.

In fact 'learning to unlearn in order to re-learn' is a principle contained in the curriculum of *Amawtay Wasi* [The Intercultural University of the People and Nations of Ecuador].

Academically, the concept is used by Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo in their book entitled *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (2012: 7) where they defined 'learning to unlearn' as '*to forget what we have been taught, to break free from the thinking programmes imposed on us by education, culture, and social environment, always marked by the Western imperial reason.*'

At the centre of the process of 'learning to unlearn in order to re-learn' is:

- Inextricable linking of 'being,' existence' and 'doing' in building knowledge that is contextually relevant.
- Community learning from accumulated knowledge and wisdom in society.
- Shifting from the Cartesian subject-object relations to the subject-subject model.
- Epistemological disobedience ranged against Eurocentrism.

This is an important path to travel as academics produced by Westernised universities.

It is a search for relevance.

Learning to unlearn in order to re-learn is a call to us to **breaking out of epistemic deafness/refusal to change epistemologically.**

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I must say that our present engagement with the very idea of the university is not a new struggle but it is one that is refusing to die and ***the struggles for free education constitute what was not delivered by decolonization.***

Here in South Africa the agenda of changing the very idea of the university becomes urgent as response to the definitive entry of previously excluded people into the academy—vehemently refusing the Hegelian ideas of African people with no history, no rationality, no civilization, and no knowledge.

I must warn that our engagement with the idea of the university (from being a university in Africa to a genuine African university) that is responsive to the challenges facing African people including the pertinent one of funding, the curriculum changes we are doing and the decolonization of institutional cultures that are patriarchal, sexist and racist ***must not be simply a compliance activity*** but part of well-thought-out imagination cascade from a need for re-humanising the world, to define a better tomorrow and to open our planet to all who inhabit it especially those that have been reduced to the ‘anthropos of the earth’/ ‘the wretched of the earth.’

Finally, I must end by saying that changing the very idea of the university and making education free must be founded what I have termed the ‘6-grammars of freedom:’

- De-racialization
- De-tribalization
- De-patriachization
- Decolonization
- Deimperialization
- Democratization

**Thank you**