

Articles/Essays

Part II:
Ufahamu: A Legacy

Decolonizing the United States: Lessons from Africa

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It all began with the poo protest. In March 2015, students at the University of Cape Town covered a bronze statue of the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes in human feces, claiming that its presence on campus was a direct insult to their dignity. Their argument extended beyond the symbols of apartheid, pointing out the deep racial differences that continue to define South African life, including within its vaunted academic sector.¹ The question the students raised resounded outside of South Africa: “What should a decolonized university look like?”

I certainly don’t know. But I’m glad that the question is back on the table. Inspired by the students in South Africa, I have been grappling with what decolonization means not only for Africans, but for my own institution, Vassar College, and for my own disciplines of political science and Africana Studies.

In the opening to his seminal essay on African literature, *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o recounts attending a meeting of African writers held at Makerere University in Kampala in 1962.² The premise of the conference, held during the heyday of African decolonization, began with the assumption that “African literature” only included literature not written in African languages, leaving out grand traditions of African writing such as the Kiswahili prose and poems of the Tanzanian author Shabaan Robert. His point is that African forms of knowledge were being systematically ignored in favor of those that were most accessible to outsiders. Ngũgĩ argues that by failing to interrogate how knowledge is produced both epistemically and institutionally, we uncritically reproduce the colonial approach in which the degradation of African bodies and minds was integral.

Ngũgĩ’s provocation has me asking similar questions in regards to my own professional commitments: is it enough for us as educators in the United States to say the past is the past and that we are no longer beholden to it? Must every generation reckon with

the sins of our ancestors, especially as they relate to Africa and its peoples? Can knowledge escape its colonial origins, cleansed by an assiduous adherence to the scientific method that dominates contemporary studies of Africa? And where do Africans, both on the continent and in the diaspora, fit into these questions?

On Colonial Institutions:

Despite the narrative of American exceptionalism, we are very much a post-colonial nation, not too dissimilar from the countries of Asia and Africa. Institutionally, the country's origins lie in British colonialism, but the shadow of European domination extends much deeper into the American psyche. As the child of a father born under British colonialism, the postcolonial nature of American life always appeared clear. I can remember the vitriol my high school English teacher unleashed on me when I questioned why we had to devote an entire year to the study of British literature.

But beyond our cultural adherence to a dying Anglo imagination, are the more prosaic postcolonial dilemmas that continue to define the American present. From the Civil War to the Apache Wars of the late nineteenth century, the United States has long dealt with these common symptoms of the post-colonial condition through both coercion and cover up. Challenges to the official narrative constantly invoke both the sword of repression as well as the word, through which they are rendered deviant, exceptions to the exceptionalism that is America.

Our heralded universities are not immune from this. Whether through direct ties—Elihu Yale's service as a colonial administrator in South India, for one, or more damningly, Nicholas Brown's slave trading—or through more indirect routes, American institutions have long struggled to come to terms with their racist and elitist past.

In a talk at the University of Witwatersrand, Achille Mbembe addressed the question of decolonizing higher education in South Africa.³ For Mbembe, decolonization entails not only the physical transformation of the university as a space, but also a reckoning with the forms of knowledge that it reproduces. Addressing the symbolic assault waged against colonial symbols by students, Mbembe cheered their actions but pushed them to go further.

Mbembe directly challenged the perspective that the ruckus around Rhodes was nothing more than the rantings of privileged black students inveighing against a barely remembered colonial figure head: postmodernist identity politics run amuck. Instead, he reminded us of the stakes involved: “the figures they represent are figures of people who have tormented and have violated all that which the name ‘black’ stands for while they were alive.”⁴

Rather than an assault on history, as some suggest, he offered a clear analysis of the importance of changing colonial iconography: “Should we be erasing history? History is not the same thing as memory. Memory is the way in which we put history to rest, especially histories of suffering, trauma and brutalization.”⁵

For Mbembe, the question is not whether South African universities should be decolonized, but why it has taken so long: “So it seems that at this juncture in the history of this place, these things can be dealt with swiftly. . . Why have we been waiting for them to explode in our face in order to start rapidly attending to them?”⁶

Mbembe’s call for decolonization extends beyond the question of symbols, targeting the architecture, the classroom, the laboratory, the bookstore, and the syllabi. Most importantly, he highlights the importance of access for Black students in institutions of higher education, pointing out the inevitable demographic shift that awaits all South African universities, whether or not they are ready to be transformed into black majority institutions.

Comparisons are always fraught, but a similar process is unfolding here in the United States. Long gestating demographic changes are beginning to take hold as American high schools begin to graduate more non-white students than whites. These racial shifts, combined with the debate on economic inequality, have pressured many institutions to open their doors to students from increasingly diverse backgrounds. Compared to even a decade ago, this is a transformative moment. Colleges once understood as bastions of privilege with the sole purpose of replicating that privilege across generations have seen huge increases in the number of students of color as well as students from low-income backgrounds. Yet, we are only at the early stages of this process. At my own institution, which has been widely acclaimed as a leader, only 24 percent of students come from families eligible for the Pell Grant (those making approximately \$50,000 a year or less).

The rise of non-traditional students (non-elite and non-white) at Vassar only began about eight years ago when the college, like many other elite schools, began to admit students under a need-blind admissions policy. Others have not come as far, despite having enormous endowments through which they could offer full scholarships to every student with little negative affect on their mission. At Harvard, the richest American university, only 19 percent of students are drawn from families eligible for a Pell. At Princeton, it drops to a depressing 12 percent. Washington University in St. Louis, the site of the massive protests related to the killings of Mike Brown and one of the most racially and economically divided cities in the country, only counts 6 percent of students from such families. Put differently, only about one out of twenty students at the university, one of the richest in the world, comes from a family earning slightly less than the median income in the United States.

But simply admitting “non-traditional” students is also inadequate. Rather than praising these institutions for their openness, many of these students are arriving on campus, looking around at the colonial imagery still so prevalent, and asking, “What the fuck is going on here?”

The shifting contours of America’s black population, increasingly populated by people from the continent or via the ex-colonies of Latin America and the Caribbean, are most visible on college campuses. Questions of blackness and its relation to power, both economic and political, have reemerged. The unsteady division between enslavement and colonization, a division long challenged by African-American leaders, from W.E.B. DuBois to Angela Davis, and Chuck D to Kendrick Lamar, is increasingly shaken. The prison industry is compared to the concentration camp and its global footprint raises the specter once again of an internationalist resistance to all forms of anti-black oppression.

The questions raised by the South African protest demand a clear answer here in the United States as well. Have our institutions been sufficiently transformed to genuinely claim that they are decolonized? Are they capable of training a new generation of African and diasporic students as they emerge into a world in which Africa is being positioned as the site of new contestations fueled by global capital? A world where black bodies remain targets of expanding state security services from Ferguson to New

Delhi and from Tel Aviv to Khartoum? What would it mean to acknowledge, that as institutions, we are so far from this that it is as if our journey has yet to commence? And what would the process of decolonizing our institutions of higher educations actually look like when we can't even acknowledge their origins in colonial exploitation?

For starters, it must begin by interrogating our institutional origins. But it must go further and probe the nature of knowledge production itself, as Ngũgĩ and Mbembe suggest. As the contradictions of the liberal world order make way for new geopolitical trends and formations, holding firmly to the fictions that have always constituted both the domestic and international order are no longer sustainable. A confrontation with our colonial origins can help us reckon with our difficult pasts, and more importantly, to begin the arduous process of ridding our institutions of their still dominant colonial inflections.

On Colonial Knowledge:

“We were just debating whether you were a Somali or an Ethiopian.” The bluntness of the query caught me off guard. I’m from Detroit, born to South Indian parents. Being mistaken for North-east African is neither new nor surprising to me. Dizzy Gillespie once flirtatiously asked my sister if she was from Abyssinia.

But this was an academic conference at UCLA, a gathering of then rising stars of African political economy. And I, a recent ABD, was struggling to make a good impression. So when these two young white scholars, both now big name professors, responded to my nervous “Hello” with an ignorant query about my ethnic origins, I admit I was bothered.

To be honest, I should have figured as much. I entered the conference room that morning and was struck by a sea of whiteness. Africa may have been the topic of the discussion, but Africans were certainly not a part of the conversation. This in the intellectual heart of Los Angeles, just a few miles away from the vibrant district known as Little Ethiopia, not to mention the significant number of African students who gravitate to study at UCLA with its famed African studies center.

How is it that the fields of African politics and economics can remain almost completely devoid of Africa based scholars

and voices in 2015? A Zambian Ph.D. Candidate at UCT, Grieve Chelwa, pointed out in a blog post that of the three most prestigious economics journals related to African development, only one can claim a single Africa-based scholar on its editorial board. Political Science is as bad, if not worse. Top programs in political science regularly offer graduate seminars in “African politics” that include zero African scholars. If African scholars do enter the syllabi, they are valued only for their case study knowledge and treated as incapable of making any substantive theoretical contribution. Vast traditions of political science research emanating from the continent are systematically ignored. Is it any wonder that African politics, as studied in the United States, remains a field dominated by Euro-American scholars?

Scholars such as Pearl Robinson and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza have shown how the study of Africa has long been shaped by its founding racial divide.⁷ This narrative positions Melville Herskovitz as the founder of African Studies in the United States for his work at Northwestern University. It excludes the fact that he was a contemporary of Ralph Bunche, a UCLA graduate who did seminal work on African politics while serving as Chair of the political science department at Howard University, work that is largely ignored in the broader field. Indeed, the premier award given by the African Studies Association is named for Herskovitz. Bunche does not even warrant a mention on the association’s website. Nor for that matter, does W.E.B. DuBois, whose work on Africa preceded both Bunche and Herskovitz, and who epitomizes the transnational and diasporic concerns that have along animated African-American writing on Africa.

Speaking at Vassar College in April, Ngũgĩ offered an anecdote that recalled the opening of his seminal essay. While presenting to an audience of over 250 Africanist scholars at a conference recently, he asked how many had ever read a book or even a page in an African language. His response, is as telling as it is depressing—not a single hand rose.

As Ngũgĩ’s two anecdotes, separated by five decades, make clear, the battle over how knowledge is produced and what that means for relations between Africa and the West is certainly not new. But it has taken on new urgency over the past couple of years due to a convergence of factors. Technological advances have allowed forms of political action that may have once remained

unseen by anyone outside of Africa to pop up on blogs and other social media. These narratives are being crafted by African voices, decentering the significance of western mediators who position themselves as experts despite showing little interest in the lives of African peoples beyond how they aggregate into manageable data points. What they attest to over and over is the continued failure of African governments and the international community to improve conditions of life for the vast majority of Africans. This despite the recent narrative of “Africa Rising!” that celebrates the emergence of an imagined African middle class at the center of the continent’s political and economic transformation.

Ngũgĩ, Mbembe and most importantly, Frantz Fanon, have all raised doubts about this external narrative that celebrates the rise of an African middle class. There is, of course, the fact that “middle class” fails at even identifying an economically defined group situated in the middle of the African income spectrum. Instead, the term is applied willy-nilly, mainly to celebrate the emergence of an African consumer class, one who is more accurately understood as occupying the top rungs of the economic ladder. More importantly, the politics of this group, as Fanon warned, have often failed to engage in the decolonizing work long demanded by Africa’s masses. Instead, they have, through political patronage and favorable economic headwinds, often served to entrench the existing relations of exploitation while monopolizing the substantial economic profits produced by Africa’s latest encounter with global capitalism.

As Ngũgĩ has repeatedly insisted, decolonization must begin by knowing oneself first, in order to understand one’s relationship to others. It is an ongoing process, one that should not be led by those who are celebrated precisely because they have been most fully incorporated into existing structures of power. Only by questioning, and challenging, the epistemic status quo can we begin the arduous process of decolonizing our institutions, and most importantly, our minds.

I have no intention of disparaging the work of American social scientists working on Africa. But I am raising the question of what it means to constantly understand the continent through lenses that originated for studying the peoples and politics of other places? Put differently, our fetishization of ‘objective knowledge,’ produced through rigorous and rational scientific methods,

and untainted by alternate epistemic traditions, has rendered African voices marginal to the study of Africa itself. It has also left us in the position of assuming that we, as scholars in the United States, have nothing to learn from our African colleagues. In this moment of American racial crisis, nothing could be further from the truth.

African scholars have long challenged the modernist assumptions that define most Western scholarship on the continent. In my own work, I seek to decenter the assumption that African states have somehow failed to modernize, as if modernity is constituted by a singular trajectory. Instead, I have worked to recognize the many alternate modernities that Africans are constantly constructing. Some may look impenetrable or even heinous from Western eyes and, hence, explain the prejudice against them. But many others remain invisible, or more accurately invisibilized, by a West that has little interest in doing the work necessary to comprehend.

To give one example, I recently completed a book with Adam Branch on African popular protest. We started, as most scholars do, by surveying the recent literature on African protest in leading social science and area studies journals. The dominant approach was to discern whether ongoing protests in Africa, what we refer to as the “Third Wave of African Protest,” were driven by primarily economic or political concerns. A related tendency was to dismiss those protests that were unable to articulate a single, coherent political agenda as little more than the economically induced rioting of the poor. Protest itself was treated as a novel phenomenon in Africa, with many even asking if Africans might learn how to protest by watching the convulsions unfolding in the Arab world (as if they were not taking place on the African continent as well).

How is it that nearly sixty years after African independence, we still lack the language for discussing the politics of Africa’s masses? Instead, Africans are commonly treated as pre-modern people, denied agency, beholden to tribalism, and incapable of producing political change except through violence.

We draw on Frantz Fanon, who himself was inverting Marx and projecting agency on to the urban “lumpenproletariat” over the working class.⁸ For Marx, the lumpenproletariat were criminals and unemployed vagrants. Fanon recasts them as the only segment of society with the necessary ideological independence to

bring about revolutionary change. He suggests that under colonial rule, the division between economic and political is meaningless, as the logic of colonialism fuses the two into a singular form of oppression.

But in his reliance on Marxian terminology, Fanon failed to challenge the intellectual slight of referring to Africans not employed in the formal sector as *lumpen*. Many other African greats, from Cabral to Mandela, similarly in thrall to European knowledge categories, struggled to make sense of Africa's masses, viewing them instead through labor categories that offer little insight into how the majority of Africans actually survive.

In this they are not alone. Even the most original form of social science research to emerge from third world, subaltern, or postcolonial studies gained credibility through its sophisticated engagement with European thought. As the Indian scholar and University of Witwatersrand professor, Dilip Menon, put it recently: "The very act of provincialising Europe was done through an assiduous engagement with European thought and a studied indifference to Asian or African modes of thinking."⁹ Menon continues:

What does it mean to think with traditions of intellectual inquiry within Africa—and not just through a notion of *ubuntu* that is little more than a *Readers Digest* version of everyone getting along fine with each other? What would it mean to think a decolonised imagination drawing upon Islam, Confucianism, or the different and radical modernities of the Caribbean and Latin America? What would it mean to impose our shadow on an intellectual world that has created an abbreviated sense of time for us? In our universities we think with and teach a theoretical tradition forged in Europe in the last 400 years, rather than affirming that questions of self, community, politics and ethics have been the marrow of traditions of intellection in our spaces for a few thousand years.¹⁰

Menon's final sentence proposes that a decolonized institution must start with the lived histories of its community. It recognizes that rather than an esoteric knowledge available only to the select few, questions of politics and ethics must be accessible and available to all. That we must start by questioning the very institutions

and forms of knowledge that appear irreproachable simply since they have managed to hide in plain sight for so long.

Maybe then our students will not arrive on campus only to look around in disgust. Maybe then our promises that education can be liberation will not ring so hollow. Maybe then we will acknowledge, as we always should, that Africa and Africans have much to show us as we wrestle with our own post-colonial syndrome.

Notes

¹ UCT, considered the most prestigious university in Africa, remains a bastion of whiteness with approximately 80 percent of administrators and faculty drawn from a community that makes up less than 10 percent of the population. As of 2013, there were only five black professors out of 223, and despite 20 years of post-apartheid affirmative action policies, only 20 percent of the students are black South Africans.

² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann.

³ Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing the University: Five New Directions," Presented at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, CITY, South Africa, April 22, 2015. Quotes have been transcribed by the author from the podcast version of the lecture available online at <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/content/podcast-achille-mbembes-public-lecture-decolonizing-university-12046>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robinson, Pearl. 2008. "Ralph Bunche and African Studies: Reflections on the Politics of Knowledge." *African Studies Review* 51(1) 1-16; Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. 2011. "The Ties That Bind: African, African American, Africana, and Diaspora Studies." Presented at the Center for African American Studies, Princeton University, April 15.

⁸ Fanon, Frantz. 2005. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

⁹ Menon, Dilip. 2015. "Rattling the bag – Language Knowledge and the transformation of the university in South Africa and India." *Kafila*. April 25. Available at: <http://kafila.org/2015/04/25/rattling-the-bag-language-knowledge-and-the-transformation-of-the-university-in-south-africa-and-india-dilip-menon/>

¹⁰ Ibid.