
Oladele Ayorinde

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Correspondence: ayopiano@yahoo.com

Abstract

The term ‘transformation’ has become a commonplace among many people in South Africa. The social and economic conditions of the so-called historically disadvantaged people work parallel to and contradict how ‘transformation’ is discussed and understood in some established institutions – in particular, South African higher education. Against the backdrop of colonisation, apartheid and post-apartheid neo-colonialism, frustrated by unemployment-inequality-poverty, some South African students responded and demanded for decolonial ‘transformation’ of South African universities in 2015/2016. In this article, based on more than two years fieldwork in Cape Town, I draw on data based on key social actor’s perspectives and interviews to challenge how ‘transformation’ is understood in the context of higher education – in post-1994 South Africa. In so doing, drawing from existing literatures on transformation - #RhodeMustFall and #FessMustFall and participant observation, I present a discussion about refocusing discourse on ‘transformation’ to socio-economic empowerment of the so-called disempowered people in South Africa. I argue that ‘racial binary’ is not synonymous to ‘transformation’, and the ‘real’ transformation lies in refocusing discourse on transformation to social and economic empowerment of the South African people.

Keywords: ‘Transformation’, Higher Education, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, Socio-economic Empowerment, Post-1994 South Africa.

Introduction

In the early months of 2015, I witnessed a form of student protest at the University of Cape Town (UCT) that is quite different to what I am used to in my country, Nigeria. The issues highlighted by the protests – ‘inequality’, ‘poverty’ and ‘white supremacy’ – caught my attention in a way that I could not resist or ignore. As a foreign-based music student at UCT, I joined various rallies, lectures and discussions organised by students and learnt from these discussions that the practical and ideological manifestations of poverty, inequality and unemployment, as well as the romanticization of colonial cultural practices as more important than others, are general problems facing many post-independence African countries. These problems manifest differently in different African societies (Meredith, 2005). The most
intriguing aspect of the South African context, it seemed to me, was that these challenges seemed more complex than in other African societies in which I had lived and studied. The presence and power of colonial history, and the deep divisions and distribution of political and economic power in South Africa against the background of the particular impact of apartheid and its demise, created a unique usage of the notion of ‘transformation’. In apartheid South Africa, terms like ‘liberation struggle’, ‘just and de-racialised’ and ‘human right’ were used to motivate for new social relations and improved human conditions among the so-called ‘black’ people (Reddy, 2008: 209). This motivation opened a negotiation that ushered in a democratic condition in 1994 – through which Nelson Mandela became the first black president in South Africa.

The transition from apartheid to post-apartheid or democratic South Africa came with more expectations from the historically disadvantaged people of South Africa. Given this new socio-political context and seeming uncertainty about what the future holds for the new nation, the term “‘transformation”, which denotes a change from one state to another, and usually implies “improvement”’ (Reddy, 2008:210) became generally acceptable as a signifier and, perhaps, promise of a better living condition for the people. The possible consensus on the notion of transformation, according to Reddy, references some broad notion of social change away from apartheid, as in ‘a break with the past’ (ibid.). While it is somewhat difficult to maintain the validity of his perspectives in the present time (2015 to 2018), one could perhaps propose that his positions also allude to and constitutive of the 2015/2016 recent student uprising. The ambiguity of ‘transformation’ and the politics of representation among the new black politicians and elites – who only pay lip service to ‘real transformation’– weaned the hope for ‘transformation’ among the masses (Scheidegger, 2015:2).

The South Africa’s ‘Unholy Trinity’

From a socio-political perspective, the extent to which South Africa has been transformed before and after twenty-two years of democracy has been contested (Habib and Padayachee, 2000: 256-257; Kotze, 2000: 90-91; Meyiwa et al, 2014: 4-5; Scheidegger, 2015: 5-9). Following the 1994 democratic election, the ANC-led government implemented the 1992 Ready to Govern (R2G) discussion document as one of many plans for social and economic transformation of the new South Africa. According to Gumede (2013:1), the R2G document provides a robust analysis of social and economic development, and the perceived challenges, that South Africa was to confront in pursuit of a new political-economic order after 1994. In 1996, the ANC-led government announced its new neo-liberal economic programme, known as Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). This change, according to John Saul, was a ‘tragedy’. He argued that there is absolutely no reason to assume that the vast majority of people in South Africa would find their lives improved by the policies being adopted in their name by the ANC government (Ballantine, 2004:113). While Saul’s position was perhaps overly pessimistic, it seems that he was not incorrect considering the living and economic conditions of most historically disadvantaged South Africans. In Transformation from below, Scheidegger (2015), advancing from a political perspective, argues that ‘in spite

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
of radical political change and various development plans of the ANC-led government, many South Africans still live under poor conditions; lacking running water, electricity, housing and sanitation’ (ibid., 5). According to reports, although government policy has made attempts at addressing these ‘three social evils’ – inequality, poverty and unemployment – the negative effect of this condition is overwhelming in South Africa after twenty years of freedom, and participatory democracy has been ‘obfuscated by lack of clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities of national, provincial and local spheres of governance’ (Meyiwa et al, 2014: 4). According to Meyiwa et al:

Local government, the sphere of government responsible for service delivery, faces a myriad of challenges, such as the lack of integrated planning and inefficient delivery, lack of capacity, underspending on projects, bureaucratic bottlenecks, wasteful expenditure, and corruption in protracted and inefficient consultation processes, all of which have eclipsed its capacity and ability to perform its functions optimally and effectively…[t]hese problems have been exacerbated by factors such as the loopholes in the national laws, and the lack of accountability and responsiveness among politicians and public officials (ibid., 5).

This overview on the economic and social context of post-1994 South Africa is important to understand the 2015/2016 student protest activities that I mentioned earlier. The foregoing perspectives outlined three particular challenges in the post-apartheid South African society: unemployment, inequality and poverty. These, I suggest, are the ‘unholy trinity’, challenging the progress of South Africa after 1994 – and to which discourses and activities of the 2015/2016 student protests signalled. This term is borrowed from Agbiboa and Okem’s (2011) the unholy trinity. The term was used in decoding the inherent political divides in Nigerian mainstream politics. Specifically, they outlined ethnic, religious and regional divides as the ‘unholy trinity’ facing Nigerian politics – that is responsible for the political instability of the nation after fifty years of her independence. In the South African context, I used the term to further conceptualize unemployment, inequality and poverty as major challenges facing South Africa after 1994.

Free Decolonised Education - #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall

It is against the backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa’s ‘unholy trinity’ that some black students in South African universities decided to protest in 2015, twenty-one years after the end of apartheid – to demand for ‘transformation’ and ‘free decolonised education’. The demand for ‘transformation’ was championed by two student movements: #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF). According to scholars, both collectives animated discourses on ‘transformation’ in a way that did not only interrogate post-apartheid South Africa’s socio-economic conditions, but also questioned the need of the said problematic historical monuments in public spaces (Hodes, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2016 and others). RMF emerged at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015. On the 9th of March, some students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) started agitating for the removal of the statue of former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, Cecil John Rhodes, which was strategically placed at the upper campus at UCT. The student protests, which eventually spread across

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
South African universities, expressed displeasure at the failure to ‘decolonise’ tertiary education after twenty-one years of freedom. These protests incited the most fiery and pertinent public debates that where not only addressing issues surrounding transformation but also about institutionalised racism and forms of alienation higher education. By mid-March, similar protests have been staged at schools like Rhodes University (Rhodes) in solidarity with students at UCT, and also demanded that the University (Rhodes) be renamed to reflect a more transformed and racially-inclusive ethos (Ayorinde, 2017; Linden, 2017).

In his seminar work, #RhodesMustFall, Francis Nyamnjoh (2016) offers an insightful analysis of the historical bases and contexts, as well as the potentials of student activism at UCT – as premised on the idea of ‘decolonising’ education. Drawing extensively on archival materials and literatures, Nyamnjoh persuasively makes a case for decolonise education through the lens of Cecil John Rhodes. Nyamnjoh argues that tertiary education on the continent has been relegated as parochial and as subordinate to global concerns. Therefore, local languages, customs, and knowledge systems as backward and unworthy of serious intellectual inquiry. As such, knowledge production in Africa, especially in South Africa ‘is still the victim of a resilient colonial and colonising epistemology’ – in this way predominating ‘the spirit of togetherness, interpenetration, interdependence and intersubjectivity’ (ibid., 69); which resounds the demands of RMF, a decolonised South Africa. The comprehensive view Nyamnjoh provides of Rhodes’ expansionism and its attendant history of racialised alienation and dispossession suggests a context for understanding not only the trauma that the monuments of Rhodes arouse, but it also alludes to the notion of amakwerekwere. A condition that has recently replayed itself in a disgruntled way in South Africa, when some black South Africans turned to their ‘African brothers’ as strangers. According to Nyamnjoh, ‘Rhodes took over, ruled, developed and exploited for his personal profit and that of Britain the lands and bodies of those he conquered, turning them into amakwerekwere (a derogatory term for outsiders) on their own native soil, their homeland’ (ibid., 28). Important to also mention is Nyamnjoh’s appraisal of specific actors within the student movement at UCT – for their sense of responsibility and sensitivity to the not often discussed deep-rooted political issues, signs and symbols that permeates students’ life on campuses in South Africa.

In sum, Nyamnjoh’s thought provoking positions tends to contradict the notion of totalitarianism and black South African nationhood among factions of the student movements. Nyamnjoh states:

> [f]or existing colonial statues and monument to signify anything but oppression and dispossession, they would have to be re-articulated, recalibrated and reconfigured into multi-cultural symbols of reconciliation [of ] the various shades of the rainbow nation (ibid., 207).

The position above, to wish I will return later, challenges the divisions – white versus black – that are created by the movements. Nyamnjoh’s position could also be read as a metaphor for restitution between black and white, the middle and working classes, South Africans and foreign nationals, which in my opinion is the beginning of the ‘real’ transformation of post-1994 South Africa, and more specifically, the higher education.
Closely related to Nyamnjoh’s account is Michal-Maré Linden’s (2017) study of the Fees Must Fall movement. Linden considered considering how protests have come to be represented in media and discuss the relevance of story-telling as a means of sense-making. Focusing on blame-placement as a way to explain the events, she argues that blame placement reveals the fractured nature of South Africa. Linden draws attention to the tendency to personalise the movement versus the trend of figuring it as an act of social justice for a society still plagued by inequality and oppression which is necessary not only for the insights it may offer into the initial movement itself and the events that occurred but also because it foregrounds the complex ways in which these events were narrated and understood. Linden explains:

The Rhodes Must Fall movement and associated events opened up the discussion around the desire for South African education to be “decolonialised” and thereby made more representative of the students who attend the institutions. While the general Fees Must Fall protests of October 2015 initially started as a separate campaign for a 0% increase in tertiary education fees for 2016, it came to embody an extension of the Rhodes Must Fall movement. In other words, it also fought for free education, revised language policies, higher wages for and the insourcing of university support staff such as campus security and cleaners, and an education system with greater black and South African focus (ibid., 3).

According to Linden, the movement RMF and FMF exposed the two major and interlinked frustrations of South African students. For her, the first is a financial frustration. She explains:

In a country with a competitive job market and a high unemployment rate, tertiary education is a near necessity if one is to find a job that pays a living wage. Recent poverty data shows the extent of the situation. Approximately 54% of South Africans lived in poverty around the time of the 2015 protests. In addition, approximately 63% of black South Africans were living in poverty, whereas only 1% of white South Africans were (AfricaCheck, 2016). White South African families also earned six times more than black South African families (StatsSA, 2015). This could be because white South Africans occupy 70% of South Africa’s top managerial positions, positions only accessible to those with the correct qualifications or connections (StatsSA, 2015). In light of this, university education at South African universities in 2015 ranged from R12 800 (BSc, Unisa) to R64 500 (MBBCh, UCT) for the first year of study (Africa Check, 2015). These figures exclude other study costs such as textbooks, accommodation, meals, and registration fees (ibid., 5).

Considering the perspective above on the proposed fee increase in 2016, Linden added that the opportunity to escape from poverty became even less attainable as even fewer South Africans would be able to afford education and those attempting to fund their studies through loans would be plunged even further into debt. Prolonged debt would mean that graduates would still be crippled by their financial situation despite having an education. This desperate, worsening situation was one of the key sources of student anger (ibid., 6).

According to Linden, the second underlying frustration, is the systematic exclusion of black South Africans from education, public institutions and the economy. For her, this situation of
financial and academic exclusion can be understood as part of the legacy of apartheid caused by long-term institutional racism that still privileges white South Africans. Linden explains:

As indicated earlier, because tertiary education is needed to obtain a job that pays a living wage, those who cannot afford tertiary education are kept impoverished. Black South Africans in particular remain the poorest of the poor despite South Africa being more than 20 years into democracy. Looking deeper into this frustration, it is evident that institutional racism (where people of colour are continuously but covertly marginalised by an institution’s long-standing norms and practices) also manifest itself in the form of under-representation: in this sense, black South African identity, culture, and thought in university curricula, language policies, and student culture tend by be downplayed in favour of the historical norm. The frustration at the ongoing systemic exclusion (where people of colour are repeatedly denied education based on financial circumstances and are repeatedly overlooked in long-standing university norms) eventually reached a head, spurring on the Fees Must Fall movement (ibid., 6).

Linden’s perspectives on the causes of the protests –financial exclusion and systematic frustration - resonates with Chrislyn Laurore’s (2016: 7) argument that while this movement may have been sparked around the issue of the Rhodes Statue: the existence of the statue is only one aspect of the social injustice of UCT. Laurore explained:

The Rhodes Must Fall protesters have defined these somethings as the prevalence of institutional racism in the Academy and the structural inequality that continues to marginalize South Africans of color even “post”-apartheid. The movement was never solely about the statue. It was a physical manifestation of the rampant inequality that incited students to protest in the first place; a slice of the colonial past bleeding into a neo-colonial present. The ANC5-led South Africa that emerged out of the dark ages of apartheid has done its best to distance itself from the country’s colonial history (ibid.).

Laurore added that from its inception, it was clear that the Rhodes Must Fall movement was about much more than the statue, the statue was a violent image that represented more violence. Therefore, ‘the fall of “Rhodes” is symbolic for the inevitable fall of white supremacy and privilege at our campus’” (ibid.,35). In the same vein, Rebecca Hodes (2017) explained that while the language of tuition was the principal focus of groups at Stellenbosch and the University of Pretoria, catalysts for mobilization elsewhere included student housing shortages and the presence of colonial iconography. She added that by late 2015, through campaigns to establish unity of purpose, student movements mobilized behind a common demand: free higher education. When asked about the need for RMF, Chumani Maxwele, the student that threwed human faeces to desecrate the Rhodes statue at UCT, explained that:

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
We want white people to know how we live. We live in poo. I am from a poor family; we are using portaloos (Nyamnjoh, 2016:77).

Maxwele’s response accentuates the profundity of poverty, unemployment and inequality that monuments like Rhodes statue embodies – and by extension, how this ‘unholy trinity’ directly affects the destiny of black child in South Africa.¹

Considering the foregoing, it is reasonable to argue that the student uprising, RMF and FMF was a direct response to what Laurore (2017: 35) referred to as the ‘culture of forgetting’ that as ingrained in the state-endorsed narrative of the ‘Rainbow Nation’. This culture of forgetting by the new South African elite (both in politics and the academia) was scripted and often performed on the platform of ‘transformation’. As Nyamnjoh, Linden, Laurore and Hodes [and many others] have brilliantly suggested, the activities of RMF and FMF animated and brought new energy to discourse surrounding transformation in post-1994 South Africa – and it became the most successful student political engagement in pre- and -post 1994 South Africa. Following the success of the RMF movement, the FMF emerged from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in October 2015. Their emergence spread to other universities across South Africa and questioned the legitimate of imperialists monuments in public spaces and the historic shutdown of higher education institutions nationally. Through the activity of these two movements, ‘transformation’ took a central position in the national discourse.

According to Habib (2016), these student movements became the largest and most effective social movements since the dawn of South Africa’s democracy in 1994, as ‘it shook up the state, changed the systematic parameters, and began the process of fundamentally transforming our higher education sector’ (ibid., np). My research finds itself positioned uncomfortably at a historical moment in South Africa when the patience for transformation has reached new lows, and the aspiration for transformation has dwindled in the anger and frustration inspired by the ‘unholy trinity’.

In what follows, I draw on data based on key social actor’s perspectives (mainly from Facebook and Youtube), interviews and participant-observation [I participated in various debates on decolonization and transformation at Stellenbosch University and UCT between 2014 and 2017] to challenge how ‘transformation’ is understood in the context of higher education – in post-1994 South Africa. I describe the ambiguity of ‘transformation’ and how various social actors, in higher education, assimilate and make senses of this ambiguity in their pursuits of ‘transformation’. Following this, I present a discussion on refocusing discourses on ‘transformation’ to socio-economic empowerment of the so-called disempowered in South Africa. Drawing on key theoretical perspectives, I argue for the demythologising whiteness and blackness, and a refocus of discourse on ‘transformation’ in higher education for socio-economic development in South Africa.

¹ For reflections of student activists across South Africa, see Langa, Malose 2017. #Hashtag: An analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African universities. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
Perspectives on ‘transformation’ in higher education

As mentioned earlier, ‘transformation’, as it is popularly used in South Africa after 1994, is shaped by diverse understandings and language registers. As such, one could suggest that ‘transformation’ is a concept that affects every sphere of South Africa’s society – including politics, economics, culture and education – there seems to be no fixed interpretation of the term in South Africa. My own consideration of the term will focus on transformation in higher education. When asked about his concept of ‘transformation’ in South African higher education, Xolela Mangcu, Professor of Sociology from the University of Cape Town explained that there is an urgent need for equity in the professoriate in higher education. He further argued that although there is ongoing mass representation of ‘blacks’ in higher education, old apartheid structures remain dominant in contemporary university life. From the latter, one could infer that Mangcu’s concept of transformation in higher education is primarily one concerned with the inclusion of black academics in tertiary institutions, especially at senior levels.²

Panashe Chigumadzi, a student activist and member of the Transform Wits Movement, states that students demand that universities become African, and that means ‘we need to change everything from who writes the textbooks, who teaches the content of the textbooks and how the courses are structured’. She further explains: ‘but importantly, you cannot decolonize the universities if you have not decolonized South Africa’.³ Chigumadzi’s position represents a much broader view of ‘transformation’ compared to that of Mangcu, who seems mostly concerned with staffing. Chigumadzi’s views are supported in a different context by Ramabina Mahapa, the Student Representative Council (SRC) President of the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 2014 to 2015. In his address at the University Assembly on 25 March 2015, Mahapa, addressing institutional symbolism at UCT, said:

[I]t is not only the statue [of Cecil John Rhodes] that is problematic; this very same hall is very much problematic! Look around you ladies and gentlemen! What do you see? Do you see a black (African) person? Do you see a coloured person, do you see an Indian person!? When we come here for the graduation ceremonies, we hear a Latin song that is sung here! We can’t identify with that song! Our living and learning spaces should be diverse and inclusive for us all.⁴

Chigumadzi’s argument was expressed by Mahapa through rhetorical questions that were in themselves calls for a need to change ‘everything’ at UCT. These perspectives form part of ongoing discourses on an African-centred education in South Africa.⁵ Additionally, there are views from students who see ‘transformation’ as the total removal of ‘apartheid remnants’ from universities, including changing the language of instruction in higher education. For

² Mangcu was interviewed on SABC Digital News. //www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ue0tz5obeM.
³ This is one excerpt from the ‘Big Debate on Rhodes Must Fall’, on the Big Debate South Africa’s YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFlp9h4znyc.
⁴ I was present at this meeting while a student at UCT, the coverage is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlnFNN7swI.
⁵ See for example Suren Pillay’s (2015) “Decolonizing the University”, published online by Africa is a country. http://africasacountry.com/2015/06/decolonizing-the-university/.

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
example, Sikhulekile Duma, a spokesperson for the student movement: Open Stellenbosch, argues that race and language are the major tools of excluding ‘black’ students at Stellenbosch University.\(^6\) Duma explains that:

> We [black students] find ourselves in an environment that still has the element and remnant of apartheid; with higher amount of institutional and direct racism, but most importantly, we are dealing with a university that uses tools such as language to exclude students. For example, bringing students of colour from different cultures to university and enforcing Afrikaans upon them even though they don’t understand Afrikaans; lecturers telling students because they don’t understand Afrikaans that they shouldn’t be here. We said no. No student should be forced to learn or be educated in Afrikaans (ibid.).

For Duma, the idea of ‘transformation’ would be an inclusive environment for ‘black’ students. In the same vein, Majaletje Mathume, another spokesperson for the Open Stellenbosch movement also supports the view that Afrikaans is a colonial symbol, necessitating institutional transformation through language policy changes.\(^7\)

Apart from the various perspectives within and about academic institutions on the concept of ‘transformation’, there seem to be divergent views between the higher education community and the lived experiences of ordinary South African citizens. In a debate on ‘transformation’ in South Africa, the journalist Buhle Ndweni focuses on economic transformation and the frustration of the youth.\(^8\) Mienke Steytler, head of media and public affairs at the South African Institute of Race Relations, and Xhanti Payi, lead economist and researcher at Nascence Research Insight, support Ndweni’s view of ‘transformation’. Ndweni notes that:

> South African blacks remain marginalized in all economic participation, unemployment is increasing instead of decreasing…this is what the young ones out there are concerned about and they are frustrated; and that’s why you see them doing what they are doing [protesting and vandalizing school properties] (ibid.).

In response to Ndweni’s position, Steytler explains:

> … the student movement’s position (RMF) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) does not address the bigger issue but is definitely a start of much bigger conversations on transformation: unemployment, inequality, education and job creation (ibid.).

Clarifying the student uprising further, Payi says:

> The ways in which curriculum is presented do not make them [the black students] feel as part of the system; teaching and learning method in the university is very important and crucial to social, economic and cultural development of black people, and in moving the nation forward (ibid.).

---

\(^6\) This was the Open Stellenbosch interview at Contraband Cape Town. The interview is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0bGLKFns-c.

\(^7\) See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x624KDhyl50&t=156s.

\(^8\) Fine week Money Matters: Young, black and angry – SA’s economic transformation. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hmeXHyrlZI.
These authors are unanimous in interpreting transformation in broad-based economic terms, with special emphasis on the importance of creating employment for young people. Job creation, they argue, should not be the government’s responsibility alone, but should also be the concern of the ‘business fraternity’. At a South African Broadcasting Corporation’s (SABC) TNA business briefing in Durban, panel members include Ben Ngubane (Chairman of Eskom), Mncane Mthunzi (President of the Black Management Forum), Mohale Ralebitso (CEO Black Business Council) and Toyko Sexwale (Businessman and ex-minister of Human Settlements) discussed and explored the obstacles facing ‘transformation’ in post-apartheid South Africa. For the majority of the audience members, who were largely ‘black’ South Africans, transformation meant returning the land to black people, creating jobs and creating black entrepreneurs and business owners. Job creation and business empowerment programmes were seen as key to eradicating inequality and poverty in the country. Yet another perspective on transformation privileges the rhetoric of exclusive ‘black’ South African nationhood.

The most pertinent issue connected with the transformation discourses cited above and not confined to campus politics and concerns, is unemployment, a position often articulated in the rhetoric of inequality based on racial privileges. For the community outside of higher education, basic amenities like food, shelter and sustainability seem to be essential to the notion of transformation. Fiona Ross (2010) has documented in Raw life, New Hope, how poverty renders the historically disadvantaged people of the Cape vulnerable, with little or no changes in their social and financial circumstances, even after the demise of apartheid. For an average working-class South African, transformation perhaps means to have a dignified life in terms of shelter, food, education and empowerment, and to hold government accountable and responsible.

The views cited above constitute only a small fraction of the multifarious understandings and expectations connected with the notion of transformation. It is important to state that the lack of consensus on the notion of transformation in South Africa does not discredit any of the understandings associated with the term. I would like to suggest that the term ‘transformation’, as it is used in South Africa, could be seen as a unique lemma in the South African social lexicon. It is, in other words, a word used within a discursive context to express diverse, but related sentiments. It could mean economic freedom for some and it could mean socio-cultural equity, political change, gender equality and racial equity (or combinations of these) for others. Nevertheless, essentialization of race (‘black’ versus ‘white’) as a logic for transformation obfuscates what in my opinion is the essence of ‘transformation’ – which is to focus ‘transformation’ on reducing unemployment, inequality

---

9 See Transformation of SA economy: What are the obstacles? Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNRqhhOaJme.
10 For example, Irvin Jim’s (president of the National Union of Metal Workers) notion that South Africa’s economy only favours ‘white’ people. He argues that the economy and the labour force do not ‘transform’ the lives of ‘black’ workers. See for more detail: Big Debate on Workers’ Rights at Big Debate South Africa https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXgbtVb-YvQ.
11 I have lived in most suburbs of Cape Town while a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) between 2014 and March 2016. I also lived in Langa township between July 2015 and January 2016 and have performed as a musician in and around other Western Cape townships.

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
and poverty – the ‘unholy trinity’ – of South Africa. Focussing on or essentializing race as the basis of transformation meant that all aspirations to ‘transformation’ among the masses could be frustrated and further exacerbates the effects of the ‘unholy trinity’ affecting South African. As such, the seemingly first step to ‘transformation’ is to ‘undo race’ as a logic for social change without denying the historic inequities that still have impacts on lived experiences today’. That is, demythologizing what is ‘white’ or ‘black’ in thinking about ‘transformation’.

Demythologizing ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’: Decolonization and Race

In the recent past, discourses and organised protests on transformation have animated the idea of decolonization and bolstered racial binaries in the South African institutions of higher learning. The idea of decolonization and racial binaries were used by some members of black student protesters as negotiating tools. Yet, what needs to be decolonized and the notion of decolonization in the twenty-first century South Africa is elusive and subject to contestation. I view the notion of ‘decolonization’ in the recent student protests as a form of asymmetric power relation that tends to express itself through racial essentialism. According to Foucault, power is distributed in social relations; it is not limited to economic forms characterized by a legal or judicial character. Rather, ‘power forms a dispersed capillary woven into the fabric of the entire social order. Thus, power is not simply repressive, it is productive’ (Baker, 2008: 92). Foucault’s notion of power was theorized against the backdrop of the twentieth century’s France social dynamic, but when considered within the context of discourses on transformation in South Africa, Foucault’s perspective on power shows how protest perpetuates and reproduces the culture it aims to challenge. Decolonization and racial discussions that inform transformation processes are ‘productions’ that nurture power. Such discourses are interlaced in ‘generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them’ (Foucault, 1980: 136), thereby reproducing their dynamics afresh in new contexts.

I suggest that these discourses and their inherent power relationships may also be a mechanism that keeps reproducing certain ‘occupational consciousness’ that limits the practicality of ‘transformation’ in post-apartheid South Africa (Ramugondo, 2015:489). Drawing perspectives from Fanon’s (1961) notion of ‘coloniality’ and Biko’s (1978) ‘black consciousness’, Ramugondo (2015) explains ‘occupational consciousness’ as an ongoing awareness of the dynamics of hegemony and recognition that dominant practices are sustained through what people do every day, with implications for the creation of more equitable privilege on personal and collective levels. She explains that the ‘occupational consciousness’ in post-1994 South Africa points to the country’s ongoing struggle with negotiating long-standing dynamics of power that were laid down during colonialism, and

---

12 For example, see Decolonising the University: Charting a path forward for anti-sexist and anti-racist scholarship and activism at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCKXeMaaSwU. This was a panel discussion hosted by the Van Zyl Slabbert Visiting Chair, the then Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and UCT’s SRC and was moderated by Prof Xolela Mangcu on Thursday 23 April 2015.

13 More heated debate on decolonization surrounding the John Cecil Rhodes statue was titled: Decolonising South African universities, hosted by ‘The Stream’, an Aljazeera online media. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxPQGm1Z1T0.
maintained under black majority rule (ibid., 488). This perspective links well with Foucault’s (1980) notion of power in that it explains how people who are also oppressed, propagate hegemonic structures through their daily activities in order to retain their partial privilege in the system. This understanding draws attention to the asymmetric subjectivity that informs the notion of transformation in South Africa after 1994 at both national and institutional levels.

The above position also speaks to Babat’s (2009) opinion that stasis with respect to the challenges of the decolonising, de-racialising and de-gendering of inherited intellectual spaces in higher education still continues in the post-1994 university structure (ibid., 466). It could be argued that this stasis is socially created and maintained through the agencies involved in higher education. If this is indeed the case, power production can be understood beyond racial identity as a strategy for the powerless to accumulate privilege (Ramugondo, 2015:488-489). Given this perspective, the response to Badat’s diagnosis would be to transform ‘the things people do every day, individually and collectively’, which ‘sustain systems and structures that support and promote certain occupations or certain ways of doing, to the exclusion of others’ (ibid.). In other words, the idea of transformation in post-1994 South Africa, especially in higher education, should rather focus on the socio-economic development of the South African people (ibid.). Therefore, I suggest that it is essential that discourse on transformation be purged of racial sentiments; being ‘white’ or ‘black’ in post-1994 South Africa should not be the motivation for transformation, but such motivation should rather be informed by the general wellbeing of South African citizens. Therefore, ‘transformation’ cannot be a racial affair in South Africa after 1994 (Mbembe, 2016), I suggest racialism in contemporary South Africa is a myth that needs to be demythologised.

Rethinking ‘transformation’ as a logic for Socio-economic Development:

Transforming the transformation discourse

According to Sienkewicz (1997), myth could mean collective beliefs or falsehoods that contain elements of untruth and relativity. Myths could be interpreted in different ways at different times. Thomas explains that myth could be understood from diverse perspectives, that is, sociologists and anthropologists may use the word to refer to anything that embodies the essential features of a culture, while historians and political scientists may use the word in reference to untruths (ibid., np). Thomas’ explanation of myth is relevant to understanding social categories of race, specifically regarding the creation of these categories in social sciences as racial and political signifiers (Kessing, 1994:301). Myth is understood in this section as collective belief or as tales based on fact but lacking logical evidence as a reliable social category. Pragmatically, myth represents unattainable reality; like culture, its reality lives in the human imagination (Geertz, 1973: 25). In the post-1994 South Africa, and especially discourses on transformation, race or racial dynamics manifest as ethnic signifiers that act as closed political labels. Being ‘white’ or ‘black’ has become a discursive and performative construction in everyday narratives (Erasmus, 2008: 174-176). More importantly, these labels have also been commodified as socio-political and economic commodities that serve as negotiating tools in accessing power and privileges (Erasmus,
In recent times, the performance of what is ‘black’ or ‘white’ has gained more impetus in the various discourses and protests on ‘transformation’. The use of labels such as ‘white’, ‘black’ or ‘coloured’ in South Africa after 1994 contribute to myth-making. Such myth fixes identity as unchanged within an historical continuum. I would go further, however, and argue that ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ fulfil the same functions.

In addressing ‘transformation’ and decolonization in higher education, Achille Mbembe discussed issues surrounding decolonization of the university and knowledge production in South Africa through a critical approach to decolonization and the ideas surrounding whiteness in South Africa. Reflecting upon the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes’s at the University of Cape Town, he argues that Rhodes represents a kind of whiteness that believed that being black is a social liability. Hence, ‘his statue – and those of countless others who shared the same conviction – has nothing to do on a public university campus 20 years after freedom’ (ibid., np). He further explains that bringing down the statue of Rhodes is not to erase history but that no one should ‘be asking us to be eternally indebted to Rhodes for having “donated” his money and for having bequeathed “his land” to the University’ (ibid.). In explaining his position on demythologising whiteness in South Africa, Mbembe argues that:

[b]ringing Rhodes’ statue down is one of the many legitimate ways in which we can, today in South Africa, demythologize that history and put it to rest – which is precisely the work memory properly understood is supposed to accomplish. For memory to fulfil this function long after the Truth and Reconciliation paradigm has run out of steam, the demythologizing of certain versions of history must go hand in hand with the demythologizing of whiteness...

The Rhodes statue represents a continuous presence of white supremacy in a physical form, as well as the monumentalization of this presence. This relates with the way in which certain oppressive ideologies are propagated through colonial archives, curricula, strategies of inclusion and exclusion and normative notions of truth, knowledge and ethics. Just as Mbembe (2016) argues that decolonization concerns ownership of a space that is a public common good, decolonization agendas within transformation should be focused on the common good of South African citizens irrespective of their race, creed and ethnicity.

Implied in Mbembe’s position is the commonly held notion among some black South Africans that every white person represents oppression and wickedness and therefore they are all racists. Addressing what he perceived as a threat to the notion of rainbow nation, Nyamnjoh (2016: 37) suggested that building a non-racist society is contingent on changing negative, individual and collective thoughts, and verbal expressions around issues of race. He explained:
These negative verbal opinions are often most damaging as they often result in the perpetuation of stereotypes. Stereotypes are constant and consistent and are rooted in historical imagining. ...[T]hey are relentless and are too often left undisturbed in people’s circles of intimacy and public representation. The wrath of such narrow-minded and stereotypical thinking in South Africa’s current racial turmoil has surfaced several times this year in response to racial statements made in public (ibid.)

The major challenge facing the stasis in transformation in South Africa after 1994 is to dismantle this myth that nurtures and dictates behavioural patterns in a way that resists whiteness as a possible agent of positive development. This myth could be destructive if allowed to direct social relations. Touraine asks:

… [c]an we avoid having to choose between two equally destructive solutions: living together and setting aside our differences or living apart in homogeneous communities which communicate only through the market or through violence? (quoted in Ballantine, 2004:105).

While the response to this question may not be a straightforward one, especially when considering South Africa’s past, it is important for South Africans to draw on history to put into perspective current situations if the aim is to create a more promising future rather than to indulge in the politics of power:

Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible. ... Why not the simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other (quoted in Ballantine, 2004:105).

Like Mbembe suggested earlier, this perspective is not to suggest in any way that history be forgotten; rather, it is a way to demythologise certain dynamics of the past in order to appreciate the humanity that post-1994 South Africa presents. Hence, demythologisation of this aspect of the past allows for a critical way of engaging transformation for the socio-economic development of South Africans. Kwa Pra (1999: 40) argues that the racial definition of an African has no meaning or value, and its scientific status is bankrupt:

… racial definitions as substitutes for cultural realities have meanings only for fascists. Racial definitions elevate biology over culture, when indeed, for humans, it is culture which makes us. It goes without saying that most Africans are black, but not all blacks have African cultural and historical roots (ibid.).

Discourses on transformation, I argue, should be refocused on intellectual solutions for the social development of post-1994 South Africa. Universities in South Africa therefore need to demythologise ‘whiteness’ through their discourses on ‘transformation’ and decolonise this ideology. The other side of this argument is the imperative to demythologize ‘blackness’ as a powerless position. This perspective needs to be rigorously challenged by the academe. One of the dangers of this myth is also the destructive view of compatriots from (other) African

---

14 Erasmus (2017) Race Otherwise... shares this perspective.

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
countries as competitors. While Africans from around the continent are working to make a good living in South Africa, some black South Africans keep waging war against them (Mbembe, 2015). The excuse for such attacks has often been that (other) Africans are taking the jobs and women of South Africans (Sichone, 2008; Erasmus, 2008: 179-182). The belief that blackness is synonymous with poverty, lack and backwardness is a myth, an ideology that discourses on transformation need to address critically. Mythologization of whiteness and blackness should be understood as repressive intergenerational stasis that stands in the way of refocusing transformation on the socio-economic development of South Africa after 1994. Academic institutions have an important role to play in this process, which, I suggest, will herald the possibility of a more productive interaction with the potential of transformation.

Drawing from Reddy’s (2008: 221) explanation that ‘transformation’ functions variously: to describe, to mask, justify or vilify, or to preserve or mobilise the narrow interests of a few, it seems to me that the content of ‘transformation’ – ‘what should be transformed, by whom, by how much, in whose interests and way it should be implemented’, has been blurred by the narrow interests of a few. In addition, the status quo in terms of mythologized racial categories bolstered by historical narratives can result in interventions and negotiations of the positions of power (as happened in the student protest of 2015/2016), but it cannot progress beyond politics to the pragmatic requirements of transforming the lives of disempowered South Africans. To appreciate what lies beyond these politics, I hold, it is helpful to step back from the ‘politicization’ that contemporary discourse and events have imposed on issues and focus on the ‘unholy trinity’ instead. In other words, on issues that need ‘real’ transformation in South Africa.

Summary and conclusion

Just over twenty years into liberation, the student movements argue that anti-discriminatory legislation and democratic elections are not enough, as South Africans of color still feel like second class citizens in their own country, and the transformation promised upon the demise of the apartheid regime in 1994 has yet to be actualized. What began as an ideological debate – ‘a clash of historical narratives prompted by conflicting memories of the past’ – grew into a political movement that not only questioned the structure of the University, but that of the ANC-controlled South African government as well. Vestiges of the old order remained unquestioned, all in the name of maintaining the rainbow of peace. These vestiges are finally being questioned, perhaps for the first time since the transition into democracy (Laurore, 2017:35). Monuments like the Rhodes statue are reminders of the former glory of the colonial past (Mbembe, 2016:np). Though, at present, they may not constitute much more than vessels of an ‘uncomfortable nostalgia’ disrupting their existence mirrors a similar disruption of the whole social structure (ibid.).

What constitutes transformation in South Africa after 1994? A strategic way of answering this question is to identify what transformation is not. It is in providing such reverse answer, that this article has attempted to lay the foundation for considering a way forward. Dismissing racial binaries, the essentialization of ethnicity, ‘occupational consciousness’, the politicisation of privilege and chauvinistic approaches to power are prerequisites to

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
empowering all social actors to see themselves as potential agents of socio-economic development in South Africa. Therefore, an open social structure should be created, one that challenges and motivates every South African to participate creatively in the developmental processes of post-1994 South Africa.

The driving force of such an approach could centre on the understanding of culture, the ‘African archive’ as social capital by social actors in higher education (ibid.). By culture I mean the material, religious, linguistic, artistic and educational realities (as well as the ideologies governing them) that define the lived-world of a society. These realities are in constant flux through direct or indirect assimilation and adaptation of contrasting realities and ideologies. Decolonization of education and public space, as well as the socio-economic development of South Africa after 1994, depend on transforming ideologies underpinning discourses on transformation. That is, refocusing these discourses to how social realities and identity could be transformed to economic forces that would reduce inequality, unemployment and poverty, which are the ‘unholy trinity’ facing contemporary South Africa. Myths that reinforce repressive ideologies are best put to rest, and in this regard, I suggest that upholding the validity of race or ethnic identity functions as an impediment to transformation. Instead, differences could productively form the substance that engenders innovative approaches to a holistic transformation and sustainable development of post-1994 South Africa. That is, realigning ideologies and discourses of ‘transformation’ towards focusing on socio-economic empowerment of the South African people.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. Many thanks to Marie Jorritsma at the Wits School of Arts, Wits University and Stephanus Muller at the Africa Open Institute, Stellenbosch University for their comment and suggestions at various stages of this article.

Author Biography

Oladele Ayorinde is a TH!NK (Transforming Humanities Through Interdisciplinary Knowledge) Doctoral Fellow at the Humanities Graduate Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. His current research focuses on music, agency and social transformation in Africa. Building on his recent research work in Western Cape, South Africa, Oladele is exploring Fuji music and its agencies as emerging instruments and active agents of positive change, and as contributors to shaping social realities, institutions and structures of living in the 21st century Lagos, Nigeria. His research in South Africa, Dizu Plaatjies and the Amampondo: music, agency and social transformation explored music’s capacity to inform social and economic transformation. More specifically, how social agencies draw on music as socio-political, economic and cultural capital in pre- and post-1994 South Africa.
References


Habib, A. 2016. ‘Reimagining the South African University and Critically Analysing the Struggle for its Realization’. A paper delivered at African Voices @UCL, University College London.


Hodes, Rebecca 2017. ‘Questioning “Fees Must Fall”’. African Affairs, 116 (462): 140–150.


Langa, M. 2017. #Hashtag: An analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African universities. Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of

https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk
Violence and Reconciliation.


https://www.lucas.leeds.ac.uk