

Book review

Rodriguez, CO. 2018. *Decolonizing academia – poverty, oppression and pain*.
Nova Scotia: Fernwood.
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I have mixed feelings about South African higher education. On the one hand, there are some universities that go to great lengths to empower their students and staff through a variety of funding and support programmes. On the other hand, there are still vast amounts of corruption that prevail at these very universities and at the hands of 'transformed' leadership. I define corruption here, broadly, as favouritism, racism, misconduct, colonial teaching, colonial teaching insisted upon by black academics, black students undermining black educators, abuse of power, neglect of students, and neglect of ethics, to name a few. These views are seldom expressed publicly in any academic work and yet are well known by many who work at these institutions. This book bravely highlights the injustices that prevail at universities long after the apparent end of colonialism.

At first glance, the title of the book *Decolonizing academia – poverty, oppression and pain* can seem a little confusing, especially to those who see the decolonisation debate strictly from a curriculum perspective, which is often the case in South Africa given the recent #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements in higher education. However, this book does a lot more than reflect on curriculum. Its unconventional, poetic, first-person tone highlights injustices experienced from all angles in higher education which makes it a valuable read. Besides, many of these injustices are incredibly relevant in most workplaces across post-apartheid South Africa. The main narrative in the book is written from the perspective of a female, person of colour, and is an emotional account of how people of colour, mainly in academia, are subjugated by the white, and typically male, culture at universities.

Coming from a commerce background, the book was difficult to follow at certain points. Nevertheless, the structure of the book eases the reader into the notion of "unlearning" which forms the basis for

chapters thereafter. The author expresses unlearning as comprising twelve layers, each exploring inconvenient truths about people of colour and their experiences in higher education. The book goes on to describe the epistemic violence that is embedded in the production of research and the hypocrisy of top universities in the global North. I have no doubt that these are ideas that have crossed the minds of many in South Africa, particularly in academia. The book also offers creative coping mechanisms for young people of colour entering academia.

Apart from boldly providing a safe space for behavioural reflection between its covers, the book encouraged me to reflect on my own teaching practice, and even on my own hypocrisy as a researcher. One statement in particular helped me realise that decolonising efforts, in higher education and elsewhere, need not only to be strongly documented and soundly argued for in research, but also empathised with from the heart in order to enact real and informed change: “we can’t keep criticizing the neoliberal system while continuing to retain superficial visions of solidarity that cover up old models of charity efforts without striving for a more in-depth understanding” (Rodriguez 2018:33).

Most importantly, the book helped me to reflect on academia in South Africa and find comfort in the fact that I am not alone in my quest for academic liberation. As academics, are we being true to the people (mostly youth) that we serve as academics? Are we being true to South Africa, given its violent past and turbulent present? Are we striving to break colonial norms in African academia that deliberately disadvantage our students? Are we being true to knowledge creation or are we simply creating knowledge on paper that has almost no benefit to our people and country in practice? Are we maintaining academic norms that bear no fruit for the generations to come? Are leaders of colour in higher education simply striving to catch up with the global North or are they tirelessly empowering our youth to solve domestic problems and, in doing so, surpassing the scholarship of the global North? Is the notion of a ‘decolonised university’ simply a tactic that academic leaders in South Africa use to keep student councils appeased and student strikes at bay? More than 20 years since the end of apartheid, what have we truly decolonised, in higher education and elsewhere?

Readers should be aware that the book makes many references to Latin American culture and norms, which may not always be similar to African or Asian cultures and norms, and may at times be difficult for readers from these areas to understand. Nevertheless, it provides important insight into poverty, oppression and pain from a Latinx perspective.

Clelia O Rodriguez, I salute your bravery in exposing the academic injustices that prevail in the ‘free’ twenty-first century. ***Te saludo.***



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