What if we were to open up the university to "decolonial praxis"?
a conversation

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In the first discussion of a two-part series, **Dr Hyab Yohannes** *(CUSP N+ Academic Coordinator and UNESCO RILA Scholar) and his colleague* **Tesfalem H. Yemane** *discussed the notion of "de-colonising university" in Tigrigna. This is a translated transcript of that conversation.*

Hyab: During our academic careers, you and I have had the privilege of studying at various institutions in several different countries. For example, you have gone from completing your undergraduate studies at Asmara University in Eritrea to studying an MA at Tsinghua University in China and then another MA degree at Bradford University, and now a PhD degree at the University of Leeds. Similarly, over the last decade and a half, I went from undergraduate studies in Eritrea and Egypt to completing an MA at SOAS University of London and a PhD at the University of Glasgow in the UK. Obviously, these are quite varied experiences and have affected us in myriad ways. How do you think our educational journeys have affected our thinking and ways of being?

Tesfalem: Obviously, as part of our educational journeys, both of us have read copious volumes of academic and non-academic literature, written numerous applications (e.g., for university admission, scholarship applications, etc.) and completed countless forms (e.g., fee assessment forms, qualification requirement forms, proof of residence, ethics application forms, etc.). I think these readings, applications and forms have, in many ways, informed our thinking about knowledge production, dissemination and consumption. Based on our regular chats, it would seem that we are at a stage where we are trying to locate our thinking and ways of being and, at the same time, reflect on other modes of knowing and ways of being. So, in general terms, I would say that our professional experiences and academic journeys have shaped our insistence on decolonial modes of knowing and ways of being.

Hyab: I see what you mean. I also think that we have learned to become very efficient in doing the readings, applications and forms. To some extent, we have become like "useful machines" in the process. This, however, is not to suggest that university turns "humans" into "useful machines"; rather, we have learned to raise the questions that are asked in almost every research design and yet remain unresolved. Unarguably, universities are generators and repositories of knowledge, but whose knowledge do they (re)produce or prioritise and for what purposes? Most importantly, who decides on the production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge? In fact, to make it even more specific, what is the role of universities in Western countries like the UK?

Tesfalem: You've reminded me of an article entitled *The University's Role in Promoting Human Rights Through Nurturing Human Diversities* (2008) authored by Diehm and Lazzari. In that article, Diehm and Lazzari observe that 'universities are perceived to be at the forefront of the advancement of the humanities, the arts, and scientific and technical knowledge in society'[i]. According to Diehm and Lazzari, universities are doing their best to become spaces of 'welcoming and nurturing of human differences' thereby 'promoting human rights'[ii]. The general perception is that universities are vital not only as producers of a supposedly "independent" and critical knowledge but also as promoters of "liberal values" (link), such as human rights, the rule of law, democracy, free speech and free movement. This shows that universities are neither "independent" nor "value-free"; rather, they represent a canon of knowledge that is centred on particular episteme and systems of thinking, and, in doing so, the Western universities advance a particular set of "values". This raises the question, however, that if the Western canon is centred on a particular epistemic tradition and a set of "values", then how inclusive do you think it is?

Hyab: As you said, the university is not and has never been a perfectly inclusive place. It is not inclusive enough and has never been inclusive enough. In fact, the university has its "inside" and "outside" and 'through violence against its Others the university is able to draw its constitutive lines of demarcation'[iii]. As Bhambra et al.[iv]:

Inside is a compartment of enlightenment and progress, composed of faculty, managers, students and good citizens. Outside – beyond the pale – we find the non-student, the surplus labourer and the undocumented, wretched presuppositions whose lives, struggles and study must be continually negated in the name of reproducing the university.

According to Bhambra et al., the university draws its outside line of demarcation on the bodies, dignities and humanity of the migrant cleaners, security guards, janitors, those excluded by university entry processes, and lecturers whose contracts are terminated and who are unable to get permanent roles. In so doing, the university has become a site of production of exploitation, exclusion and domination, whose production and operation are hidden behind the university's frameworks, ethics and standards. The calls for liveable wages, pensions, permanent job contracts and academic freedom are just a few example of the demands of the Other. Similarly, the various form-filling, admission processes and application requirements often produce an unnecessary burden and inadmissibility for the marginalised and, in the process, erase the marginalised voices – epistemic or otherwise.

Tesfalem: The questions and concerns we are raising here are not new; both Western and non-Western philosophers and theorists have been grappling with these questions for centuries. Yet, none of the aforementioned epistemological and ontological questions appear to be settled, nor should they be. Our intention here, I think, is not to reflect on these deep philosophical questions but to reframe them with a decolonial question: what if the university were to open itself up to "decolonial praxis"?

Hyab: Yes, that's our central question. Let me clarify what "decolonial praxis" is. We understand "decolonial praxis" to be, as Catherine Walsh puts it, 'a sowing and growing that herald life in an era of violence-death-war, and that give cause to decoloniality as a process, practice, project, and praxis of radically "other" thinking, feeling, sensing, being, knowing, doing, and living'[v]. What does it mean to open our universities to these praxes of 'sowing and growing'? As we discussed, the Other's precarious experience is constitutively excluded from Western universities' conceptions, histories and operations of reality. This is why, for example, the precarious histories and realities of the slaves and surplus migrant workers, whose bodies and labour were exploited and violated in the process of building and maintaining so many universities across the former metropolises, continue to be unrecognised, under-appreciated and under-represented; their contributions and precarious conditions of being are kept in a constitutive outside, so to speak. These selective structures of representation and modes of knowledge production are symptomatic of a monologic Western episteme, or 'one that closes possible conversations with other ways of knowing and living'[vi]. Such closed/controlled relations of power and knowledge production are cloned across various institutions and practices of knowledge production across universities. SOAS University of London, where I did my MA degree, is a prime example of a place where you can clearly see decolonial movements constantly shaking and shaping the institution.

Tesfalem: I can see that SOAS has been at the forefront in terms of raising awareness about these structural inequalities, especially through its programmes related to Africa and the so-called "Orient"; this is less so at the University of Leeds, where I'm currently studying for my PhD. Again, universities and the closed (and controlled) episteme they (re)produce are central to the promotion of so-called "liberal values". For example, Western countries often claim the "rule of law" to be one of their values. Incongruously, however, hidden within the "rule of law" rhetoric is a "rule of exception" to which Western countries require the Other to surrender [vii]. The production and operation of the "rule of exception" is, for example, not evident among what the European Union calls "our values". The EU's treatment of migrants along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea is a typical example of its application of the rule of exception. That is why I think both of us are so invested in articulating the difficulties to which forced migrants are subjected.

Hyab: I reflect in my PhD thesis on these deeply disturbing stories and memories of desperate people seeking refuge. The push-backs, deportations, abandonment and containment in spaces of abjection typify a notion of humanity that reserves bestiality for the desperate migrants. This is the reality refugees inhabit and that migration scholars like you and I read about and present to the world, for example. This is part of our lived experience. The crux of the matter is that universities are less accessible for people like us, and this inaccessibility limits the capacity for insider knowledge production, dissemination and consumption. From this perspective, the marginalised and their wretched realities, knowledge and languages are left abandoned in situations and relations that deprive them of their human dignity and epistemic voices. On a more optimistic note, I think these violent situations and relations are now being increasingly exposed to the public through the gaze of the media and critical academic work.

Tesfalem: This does not mean that we abandon the closed/controlled praxes; we should open them for critical questioning, structural reforming and systemic change. In other words, we must open them to the possibility of reconstituting the destitute forms of life and knowledge, as Professor Walter Mignolo insists[viii]. If I may return you to our central question, what do you think universities should do better?

Hyab: This is a question that raises more questions, but, I think, universities can do certain little things that can have long term impacts. As Mignolo persuasively argues, Western universities are built on the appropriation and destitution of non-Western knowledge and ways of being. If we take Mignolo's observation seriously, Western universities have to admit the need for a theory of reconstitution of the other ways of knowing and being that have been left out of their monologic epistemes. So, they can start making changes at two levels: memory and imagination. Universities have to unmask their evolutionary memories. In other words, they have to be absolutely and systemically transparent about their ontic and epistemic traditions as well as their temporal and spatial arrangements. In this way, universities could render violence inoperable, whether it be epistemic or otherwise. I think this can also render inoperable the dehumanising of the humanities and the bestialising of humanity.

The second part of the theory of reconstitution is related to preparing for the future in a way that preserves and cherishes all possibilities and opportunities, known and unknown. You know, imagination stops when we refuse to admit our own fallibility and enduring unknowability. Universities must always seek to be otherwise and know otherwise. There is no harm in rediscovering the past, learning the present and reimagining the future.

Tesfalem: And the pain is in both memories and the imagination. I mean that the marginalised and the destitute have the capacity to continue suffering from both what has happened to them in the past and from what they fear might happen to them in the future.

Hyab: Yes, that is why we need to unlearn Western hegemony that destitutes other ways of knowing and inferiorises other forms of being. This is an urgent task.

Part II of this conversation will be out soon and will look further at examples in Higher Education.

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