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# The decolonial turn: reference lists in PhD theses as markers of theoretical shift/stasis in media and journalism studies at selected South African universities

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## Abstract

The supervision and production of a PhD thesis often presents a potentially interesting tension between PhDs as conforming to disciplinary epistemologies and PhDs as breaking epistemological boundaries. No academic discipline has been left untouched by decolonial thinking in the South African university space since the eruption of radicalized student protest movements in 2015. The Rhodes Must Fall student protest movement, which quickly morphed into Fees Must Fall, precipitated a new urgency to decolonize the university curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa. A new interdisciplinary conversation in the humanities and social sciences began to emerge which challenged established orthodoxies in favour of de-Westernizing, decolonizing and re-mooring epistemological and pedagogic practices away from Eurocentrism. Whether and how that theoretical ferment filtered into postgraduate students' theses, however, remains to be established. This article deploys a decolonial theoretical framework to explore the tension between epistemic conformity and boundary transgressing in journalism studies by analysing reference lists of PhD theses submitted at three South African Universities three years after the protest movement Rhodes Must Fall. With specific focus on media and journalism studies as a discipline, this article argues that the PhD process represents a site for potential epistemic disobedience and disciplinary border-jumping, and for challenging the canonical insularity of Western theory in journalism studies. The findings appear to disconfirm the thesis that decolonial rhetoric has had a material influence so far on the media studies curriculum, as reflected in reference lists of cited works in their dissertations.

## Main article text

### Introduction

The Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student protest movements that began in 2015 precipitated a new urgency to decolonize the university curriculum in post-apartheid South Africa (Le Grange, 2018; Mheta et al., 2018). A new interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary conversation in the humanities and social sciences received a new impetus to challenge established orthodoxies in the name of de-Westernizing and decolonizing the university curriculum, and in the quest for re-mooring epistemological and pedagogic practices away from Eurocentrism in media studies (Garman, 2015). The student protest movement set in motion a lively conversation about decolonizing the university curriculum, evidenced by special seminars, colloquiums and conferences on the topic and the establishment of committees to oversee and coordinate the process of decolonizing the curriculum at various universities in South Africa (Le Grange, 2016). Since students were at the forefront of demanding transformation of university education, it would be reasonable to expect that students' own intellectual production in the form of PhD theses undertaken after 2015 would begin to reflect the theoretical ferment in the field.

More than two decades after the end of apartheid in South Africa, the higher education system had largely remained as what Heleta (2016: 2) describes as 'a colonial outpost', existing to reproduce and disseminate an unapologetically Eurocentric curriculum. In this article, I use the term 'Eurocentric curriculum' in the sense in which Patel (2014), cited in Chambers (2020), uses it, to describe the systemic dominance of knowledge production, distribution, consumption and reproduction by institutions based in the Euro-American region. A decolonized curriculum, conversely, is supposed to aim at reducing inequalities in knowledge production.

This article examines the visibility of published decolonial frameworks relative to the traditionally accepted liberal theoretical canon in the reference lists of PhD theses submitted for examination in the media studies departments of three South African universities between 2018 and 2020, looking for evidence of disciplinary conformity or epistemic disobedience and 'transgressing the boundaries of the discipline' (Bastalich, 2015: 8). The theoretical frameworks that students use in their research studies operate like regulatory and classificatory mechanisms, by means of which conceptual boundaries of a discipline are set, contested and policed (Silverman, 2013). The process of discipline formation involves theoretical delineations of a field of study – editorial boards of leading academic journals in the field play a key gatekeeping role (Goyanes and Demeter, 2020) – and the building of a corpus of texts held sacred by the adherents of the discipline (Foucault, 1977). As Bastalich (2015: 7) points out, the theoretical framework and extant scholarly literature of a given discipline exercise:

the reiterative power of discipline discourse to illuminate the phenomenon that it names and regulates, hence 'becoming academic' is not so much about discovering the new, but learning the history, language, concepts, tropes and communication styles of a field area ... This fact is at the heart of academic practice, perhaps most evident in the centrality of the literature review and of research citations more broadly, which work to delineate accepted knowledge from what is judged to be a disciplinary innovation.

Disciplines in this sense can justifiably be considered to impose 'considerable barriers to free thinking' (Krishnan, 2009: 9). This study analyses the reference lists of selected PhD theses submitted in the field of media studies at three universities in South Africa to establish evidence of what Walter Mignolo (2013) calls 'border thinking' in media studies post the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student protest movements, which created the context in which decolonial theory supposedly gained currency in the South African academy.

### Theorizing decoloniality in journalism

Decolonizing journalism implies an approach to journalism education that decentres the curriculum from the hegemonic Western model – 'It refers to the everyday and ongoing efforts to challenge persistent forms of coloniality' (Zembylas, 2018: 2). Decoloniality defines a way of being in the world that is opposed to and resists colonial subjectivity in all its manifestations, not only 'in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015: 14), but also in the concrete world of practices and relationships constitutive of, and constituted by, colonial difference. Its application to curriculum reform would manifest in an expanded reading list that accommodates other ways of knowing beyond the Western