DECOLONIZATION: TOWARDS A MIDDLE GROUND

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Sammendrag

Avkolonisering *har vært et slags moteord i en rekke akademiske disipliner så vel som i aktivisme de siste årene. I sin opprinnelige oppfatning refererer det til den formelle slutten på kolonistyret og politisk suverenitet, men begrepet kan ikke reduseres til dette. Det er imidlertid et avgjørende skille mellom (a)* avkolonisering *og (b)* dekolonialitet*. Caset jeg vil bruke her er* #RhodesMustFall*-bevegelsen i Sør-Afrika i 2015–16. Jeg argumenterer for sentraliteten i å studere oppfordringer til avkolonisering, og spørsmålet om hvem som mobiliserer rundt oppfordringer til avkolonisering og deres tilhørende konsepter, og for hvilke formål de gjør det. I tråd med Mbembe (2016, 2019, 2020) argumenterer jeg for et produktivt engasjement med, snarere enn en fullstendig fordømmelse av, oppfordringer til å «avkolonisere» og av avkoloniserende og/eller dekolonial litteratur. Jeg identifiserer dette som en «mellomvei» for dekolonisering.*

Nøkkelord

Avkolonisering, dekolonialitet, antikolonialisme, #RhodesMustFall, Sør-Afrika.

Abstract

Decolonization *has been something of a buzzword in numerous academic disciplines as well as in activism in recent years. In its original conception, it refers to the formal end to colonial rule and to political sovereignty, but the concept cannot be reduced to this. There is a crucial distinction to be made between (a)* decolonization *and (b) the* decolonial/decoloniality*. The case I will use here is the 2015-16* #RhodesMustFall *movement in South Africa. I argue for the importance of studying calls for decolonization, and the question of who mobilizes around calls for decolonization and their attended concepts, and for what purposes they do so. Following Mbembe (2016, 2019, 2020), I also argue for a productive engagement with, rather than wholesale condemnation of, calls to "decolonize" and of decolonizing and/or decolonial literature. I identify this as a "middle ground" of decolonization.*

Key words

Decolonization, decoloniality, anticolonialism, #RhodesMustFall, South Africa.

Introduction

Decolonization is by no means a new concept. The conceptual genealogy of the term stretches back to the French settler colony of Algeria in the 1840s (Shepard 2008), and it was a key term and rallying cry for anticolonial thinkers and activists in the 'global South' who worked for political independence from colonial powers in the 1940s and 50s, culminating in the Bandung Conference of 1955. But in its current iteration, a starting point may be the 2015-16 #Rhodes Must Fall movement which emerged out of Black student activism at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. In the current context, calls for decolonization also often invoke so-

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called *decolonial theory*. In this article, I argue for the importance of studying calls for decolonization in specific societal and historical contexts (1), and for distinguishing between the decolonial/decolonial theory (2). With reference to the work of Achille Mbembe, I also make the case for a "middle ground of decolonization" based on a constructive engagement with, but not wholesale and uncritical acceptance of, central tenets of decolonial theory. The article is divided into four parts. First, I introduce the #Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) movement and its calls for decolonization. Secondly, I discuss the term decolonization, and its changing usages. Thirdly, I provide a critical introduction to decolonial theory. Fourthly, I conclude with a call to explore what I refer to as a "middle ground" of decolonization, as articulated in the works of the 2024 Holberg Laureate Achille Mbembe. In terms of the contribution this article makes to the extensive literature, much of the literature on decolonization and decoloniality is either (a) overly celebratory or (b) unduly critical. This article is an attempt to identify a third way somewhere between those countervailing approaches.

#RhodesMustFall, Cape Town, 2015-16

South Africa was by virtue of the fact that the racist apartheid regime only fell in 1990, the last African country to "exit from colonialism" (Pillay 2024, 8).

On March 9th 2015, a then thirty year-old student of political science at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, Chumani Maxwele, emptied the contents of a portable toilet (known as a *portaloo*), filled with human excrement, over the statue of the British arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902) at the Upper UCT campus.

Rhodes was historically seen as something of a benefactor by white South African elites, having donated much of the land on which the University of Cape Town (UCT) was later built, and also due to the Rhodes scholarships for study at Oxford University in the UK. He was also a classical British racist and White supremacist (Venkatesan 2024, 141).

Chumani Maxwele had been born in the village of Mthatha in the Eastern Cape and grew up in poverty. In a society in which access to higher education was - twenty years after the formal end of apartheid in 1994 - still very limited for students born to low-income parents, Maxwele was rare, having succeeded in obtaining a scholarship to study at UCT in 2011.

"Where are our heroes and ancestors?", Maxwele had asked before emptying human excrement over the Rhodes statue at UCT. The provocative form that Maxwele's protest assumed came from specific places and times; so-called *poo wars* had formed part of South African social movements' repertoire of protest against lack of service delivery and access to sanitary facilities in underprivileged areas in South Africa for years prior to #RMF (Robins 2015). In Cape Town, a local councillor for the ANC in Khayelitsha, Andile Lile, emptied portaloos filled with human excrement on the stairs of the Provincial Parliament in central Cape Town in protest against poor service delivery in June 2013 (Robins 2015). It was Lile's protests which inspired Maxwele (Ahmed 2020, 288). Mbembe references Maxwele's acts by noting that "the age of urgency" is also an age when new "wounded bodies erupt" by "speaking with excrements, asking to be heard" (Mbembe 2015).

The portaloo must be understood as a metaphor: it symbolizes the living conditions of the many South Africans who regardless of the rich promises of post-apartheid authorities remain forced to live in unsanitary conditions. "We want white people to know how we live. We live in shit. I come from a poor family; we use portaloos", Maxwele declared to the media (Fairbanks 2015). Maxwele said that his actions were informed by "Black pain" (Maxwele 2016).

Maxwele's pain was undoubtedly both raw and real. For Nyamnjoh (2016, 83), Maxwele's reference to "Black pain" must be understood as a form of *strategic essentialism*. Maxwele's protest was swiftly and roundly condemned by the leadership of the UCT, a chorus of letter writers in local newspapers, and prominent Black South African intellectuals (Nyamnjoh 2016, 72, Fairbanks 2015). But in the weeks that followed, students at the UCT supportive of Maxwele mobilized behind demands that the statue of Rhodes on campus be removed, and the #RMF movement started to crystallize. On March 20th 2015, a group of student activists from #RMF and the Student Representative Council at UCT occupied the Chancellor's House at UCT – the so-called Bremner Building – renaming it "Azania House".[1] The occupation would in the end last for three weeks and involve some sixty occupants (Daniel and Miller 2024a, 502). Five days into the occupation an #RMF mission statement was issued outlining a set of demands to the university management at UCT:

> (1) Implement a curriculum which critically centers Africa and the subaltern […] – and only examining Western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience;
> (2) Introduce a curriculum and research scholarship linked to social justice and the experiences of Black people;
> (3) Re-evaluate the standards by which research areas are decided […] to areas that are relevant to the lives of Black people locally and on the continent" (#RMF 2015 as cited in Daniel and Miller 2024a, 507).

There was in the #RMF movement a strongly felt critique of a curriculum in many disciplines which the student activists regarded as Eurocentric, but also deep discontent with, and distrust in, an historically White South African university. Twenty years after the fall of apartheid UCT had only a very limited number of Black academics in tenured positions (Ramaru 2017, 90). Decolonization is here first and foremost understood as *deracialization*. The demand for such deracialization plays out in an historical context in which elite universities in South Africa had to a large extent been preserved for South Africans who were identified as White, and universities' role having been to educate colonial administrators, whilst Black South African intellectuals were consigned to a marginal existence outside the portals of the university (Pillay 2024, 7).

At the same time, the student activists' demands that university curricula should be "relevant to our own experiences" as "Black people" are potentially problematic. For "experiences" and "relevance" will in any given context be subjective, and the many references to "Black", "Blackness" and "Black people" in the discourse of #RMF also raises questions relating to what the signifier "Black" means in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, and the province of the Western Cape in which Cape Town and the UCT is situated (Shell 1994). The population which was designated as "Coloured" in the racial nomenclature of British colonial segregation and later Afrikaaner-led apartheid in South Africa, and which still constitutes a demographic majority in the Western Cape, is in part descended from the intermixing of the KhoiSan and the slaves imported from the Indian Ocean basin. In the context of resistance to apartheid (1948-1990), which relied on an elaborate nomenclature of racial classification, a more inclusionary

[1] "Azania" was the African name for South Africa introduced by the anti-apartheid and African nationalist Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and later the Black Consciousness (BC) movement in South Africa (Ahmed 2020, 294).

and expansive notion of the racial signifier "Black", inspired by the discourse of the Black Consciousness (BC) movement of the 1970s (Magaziner 2010) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) (Seekings 2000) of the 1980s emerged. Any South African from communities racialized by apartheid nomenclature and practice who identified with the struggle against apartheid could, in principle, identify as Black. However, for a number of structural reasons relating to the long afterlife of colonialism and racism in South Africa,[2] this unity quickly dissolved after the formal end of apartheid, and "Black" is generally no longer held to be a signifier with which South African Coloureds and Indians can identify. If the secondary literature is anything to go by, in the context of #RMF in South Africa, the place of indigeneity and the role of student activists who could not identify with the signifier Black, or the narrative of "Black pain" does not seem to have been theorized. This is, if anything, a reminder that calls to "decolonize" take specific forms in specific places and at particular times, and that they are profoundly shaped by the contexts in which they appear.

According to its academic chroniclers, #RMF at UCT was inspired by pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness thought, Black radical feminism (Ahmed 2020, 283, Daniel and Miller 2024b, 6), and decolonial and intersectional theory (Daniel and Miller 2024a, 508). The works of Frantz Fanon (1925-61) were particularly salient in #RMF in South Africa (Miller 2021, 11). #RMF was a composite movement, and the extent to which the student activists had actually read decolonial theory highly variable (Daniel and Miller 2024a, 508). In the actual practice of #RMF activists, theory would prove hard to "translate" into practice. Black male leaders would gradually assume dominance in the movement, and feminists and queer activists would be marginalized (Daniel and Miller 2024b, 7). Black South African feminists active in the movement were told that the movement was "first and foremost Black"; that they had to "leave gender issues and feminist politics at the door" because "feminism was un-African" and women "had to stop appropriating Western ideals" if they were to have "a serious commitment to decolonization" (Ramaru 2017, 92).

To the surprise of many of the student activists themselves, UCT's then chancellor, Max Price, characterized the #RMF protests as "legitimate" and contended that the protests "spoke to a much broader feeling of alienation in the institution which could be named colonial hegemony" in his response (cited from Fairbanks 2015). Price also indicated a willingness to expedite the process of removing the Rhodes statue from the UCT campus. And so, a mere eighteen days after Chumani Maxwele's initial protest, the UCT Senate voted 181-1 for the statue to be permanently removed from the UCT campus and "handed over to government heritage authorities for safe custody" (UCT Press, cited in The Contested Histories Initiative 2021, 6). The Rhodes statue was removed in the presence of thousands of spectators on April 9th, 2015. #RMF at UCT dissolved in mid-2016 (Ramaru 2017, 95) but inspired similar protests at a number of South African universities, elite universities such as Cambridge and Oxford in the UK and Harvard and Princeton in the USA, as well as protests in Senegal, Malawi and Ghana (Daniel and Miller 2024b, 2). Compared with the results of the activism that #RMF inspired elsewhere, the UCT's removal of the Rhodes statue must be seen as attesting to a significant success for #RMF. As for the call for broader institutional and curriculum change that was central to #RMF, studies point to these calls having been thwarted and curtailed by the UCT and other South African universities in the aftermath of the dissolution of #RMF in 2016 (Jansen and Walters 2022).

[2] Among these structural reasons, one would have to include the persistence of racial imaginaries in which Cape Town and the Western Cape are coded as "Coloured spaces" and Black South Africans as historical "intruders" in these spaces and the marginalization of Coloured working class communities, among others.

What is decolonization?

Call to "decolonize" this or that have been ubiquitous in certain strands of student activism, as well as in various academic disciplines, over the past decade. For prominent academics in the so-called 'Global South' in particular (see *inter alia* Mbembe 2021, Pillay 2024, Jansen 2019, Jansen and Walters 2022, Nyamnjoh 2017, 2022) the term has become one with which one simply has to engage. Decolonial theory – in itself an heterogenous body of work – understands itself as distinct from postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is said to remain within the confines of "Western epistemology" (Grosfoguel 2011, 2) and to take "universalism and cosmopolitanism" instead of "pluriversality and new humanism" as their "horizon" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 491). Furthermore, postcolonial theory is said to locate theory in the Global North, with those to be studied located in the Global South (Grosfoguel 2011, 2).[3] Scholars of decoloniality such as Mignolo consider "de-Westernization" to be a part of decoloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, citing Mignolo, 2011).[4] Calls to "decolonize" are not new. As mentioned earlier, the term "decolonization" was first used in in the 1840s. Decolonization also came to be the very name in which the anti-colonial struggle for much of the 20th century was fought (Gopal 2021), and a central concept for anti-colonial theorists from Aimé Césaire via Walter Rodney and Amílcar Cabral to Frantz Fanon. These are central theorists in the postcolonial canon which decolonial scholars often claim as their own. However, they were arguably more inspired by Western Marxism than any other intellectual tradition (see for example Macey 2012, Tomás 2021), thus making it hard to think of them as not belonging to a Western epistemology. Whereas theorists of decolonization such as Mbembe (2021, 42-3) have lamented that the very concept of decolonization until recently had "grown philosophically poorer in the process of becoming "a concept for jurists, historians and international political economists"; "its multiple genealogies" and "its traces and consequences" "obscured", decolonization has received a new significance in an era in which "Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world" (Mbembe 2017, 1). There has arguably been a significant epistemological shift from thinking about decolonization as a project having to do with political sovereignty to thinking about it as a project having to do with cultural sovereignty (Pillay 2024, 9). However, as Wilder has demonstrated, Césaire, though a resolutely anti-colonial thinker, did not conceive of political independence and sovereignty of his native Martinique from France practically feasible, and cultural sovereignty was certainly central to and/or inherent in the thought of previous anti-colonial thinkers (Wilder 2015). In the world of post-colonial literature and language studies, few titles have been more influential than wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing The Mind* (wa Thiong'o 1986), which posited that one of the main roads to post-colonial liberation throughout Africa went through the replacement of European languages with indigenous African languages in education as well as in literature. In the field of anthropology, the first truly decolonial ethnographic monograph was arguably the Kenyan anti-colonial leader Kenyatta's 1938 *Facing Mount Kenya* (Kenyatta

[3] As Pillay (2024, 96) notes, the latter claim may strike one as somewhat paradoxical, in that scholars of decoloniality tend to be located in elite universities in the USA – much like their postcolonial predecessors or counterparts. See also Cusicanqui (2020) for this critique.

[4] Here, one might argue with Ba and Doukas (2024) that it is in the nature of all thought to have "a creolizing structure" and that there is therefore "no such thing as Western political thought per se" (Ba and Doukas 2024, 81). Furthermore, the advocacy of decoloniality understood as de-Westernization reveals some instructive lacunae. Accordingly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) commends "South-South formations such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa that is geared at shifting economic power from the West" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 493). In the process certain histories are erased, for example, Russian imperialism in Ukraine and Georgia, Indian oppression of indigenous populations and Indian Hindu supremacism, Chinese oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjang Province, and Brazilian settler colonialism in the Amazonas region.

1978, as cited by Sanchez 2023), the first book bearing the title "decolonizing anthropology" appeared as late as in 1991 (Harrison 1991). This book was later to be declared a touchstone for a self-declared "decolonizing generation" in anthropology (Allen and Jobson 2016; Bolles 2023). If the vast and overwhelming number of new academic contributions bearing the title "decolonizing" or "decolonization" in the past decade may have inspired exasperation in some quarters, this may be understandable. The term decolonization is extremely wide in scope, often left undefined, and may be used to pursue diverse and somewhat contradictory aims (Venkatesan 2024, 5). Scholars of decolonization have sometimes responded to this problem by attempting to delimit the term. Thus, for wa Thiong'o (1986), decolonization was essentially about replacing "colonial languages" such as English, French or Portuguese with African Indigenous languages in education and in literature.[5] For Smith, decolonization is primarily about research methodologies – the very term "research" being "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (Smith 2021, 1) – and "research" itself "a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting the Other" (Smith 2021, 2). Tuck and Yang, whose formulations of decolonization hark back to the ideas about political sovereignty the term originally implied, are concerned with the potential implication of racialized minorities in settler colonialism; for them, decolonization "brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1). For scholars such as Tuck and Yang, decolonization is more about the category of 'the Indigenous'[6] and 'Indigenous worldviews' than about anything else. Similarly, Táíwò wants to restrict decolonization to "its original meaning" defined as "making a colony into a self-governing entity with its political and economic fortunes under its own direction (though not necessarily control)" (Táíwò 2022, 3). But these attempts at restricting the term and its uses also raise legitimate questions about the criteria by which we delimit the term. Venkatesan argues that "decolonization is best understood as a set of demands and processes, some of them deeply contradictory and certainly not adding up to a clear-cut destination" (Venkatesan 2024, 5).

From decolonization to decoloniality

Whilst decolonial theory constitutes an heterogenous body of work, and many scholars who identify as decolonial will argue that it emerges out of 'praxis' rather than theory, we may identify theory emerging out of the Latin American context and articulated in the works of Latin American scholars, particularly in the USA, as central to what is currently understood by the term. The proverbial founding figure of this strand of decolonial theory is the Peruvian sociologist Quijano (1928-2018) (Quijano 2024). Politically, central points of orientation for many Latin American decolonial scholars include indigenous rights struggles in the Andes region, Afro-Columbian rights struggles, and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. *Decoloniality* – a key concept in decolonial theory "offers an alternative [to colonialism and coloniality], one that is rooted in Indigenous thought and practice about nature, culture and solidarity" (Appadurai 2021). For Mignolo, a key theorist of decolonial thought (Bangstad 2025), modernity

[5] The counterargument, as formulated by Mbembe (2016) and others (Achebe 2009), is of course that so-called "colonial languages" have long since become "African languages" by virtue of Africans' own use of these languages.

[6] This category is, as noted by Olsen (2022, 97), in itself a modern category, which first emerged in the context of Indigenous struggles for rights and land in the 1970s. A good recent and short introduction to these struggles is Berg-Nordlie (2024).

and coloniality are two sides of the same coin. *Epistemic disobedience* towards modernity and coloniality for Mignolo implies a *delinking* from universalistic humanism, which allegedly rests on "a modern/colonial definition of the concept of Man" (Smiet 2022). One may note here that whilst post- and decolonial theory share a fundamental critique of the lack of substantial universality in classical conceptions of humanism, postcolonial theory (as formulated by the likes of Said) wants to rectify it, whereas decolonial theory (as formulated by the likes of Mignolo) generally seem to see no other way out of its exclusions than to dispense with it altogether. It is a central contention in much decolonial literature that, in as much as postcolonial theory is for all practical purposes centrally grounded in Western academic theory and a Western episteme, "post-colonialism is viewed as the convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world" (Smith 2021, 14). This thereby reaffirms "the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge" (Smith 2021, 72). Furthermore, it is contended that "naming the world as 'post-colonial' is …to name colonialism as finished business" (Smith 2021, 112).

We may with reference to Táíwò's (2022) somewhat crude categorization as a starting point usefully distinguish between *decolonization1*, defined as a process by which formerly colonized states and peoples achieve political sovereignty, and *decolonization2*, defined as an intellectual process which entails reflecting on what it means to become human subjects and to create new societies in light of this sovereignty - or in other words *decolonized knowledge*.[7] Central theorists of decolonization from Fanon to Mbembe have arguably been mainly concerned with formulating the grounds of what I here referred to as "decolonization2." We must also distinguish between *decolonization* and *decoloniality*, where the latter refers to modes of conceptualizing what decolonization should entail drawn particularly from the works of theorists of Latin American origin, who are often based in the USA.[8] In the words of one prominent African decolonial theorist, decoloniality "is not only a long-standing political and epistemological movement aimed at liberation of (ex-)colonized peoples from global coloniality but also a way of thinking, knowing and doing" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 485). Both present-day decolonial theorists like Maldonado-Torres and their detractors like Mbembe, invoke decolonizing intellectuals such as Césaire and Fanon as "chosen intellectual ancestors".[9] Many of the decolonial calls to "decolonize" have targeted higher education institutions such as universities, and have involved demands such as the removal of memorial statues of colonial figures from university campuses; demands to institute more equitable and diverse recruitment policies at universities and other institutions of higher learning; as well as curriculum reforms leading to the inclusion of a more diverse set of scholars on the curriculum in various disciplines (Mogstad and Tse 2018; Sanchez 2018). When universities have been targeted in calls to "decolonize", it is also due to the fact that universities are constituted as "sites for the reproduction of coloniality" which "continue to poison African minds" in African decolonial discourse (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 489). But the idea of a *pluriversity* geared at replacing the modern university in its current form and recognizing forms of knowledge that may be of "non-Western provenance" is *pace* Eriksen (2024, 96) an idea supported by distinctively non-decolonial scholars such as Mbembe (2016, 2021, 78-9). Furthermore, decolonial theory does not, *pace* Eriksen (2024, 96) and Venkatesan (2024, 183), advocate a view to the effect that "all knowledges are equally

[7] Shah (2024, 555) does however express reservations pertaining what she regards as the crudeness of this distinction on Táíwò's part.

[8] Among these, scholars like Mignolo, Maldonado-Torres, Escobar, Grosfoguel and de la Cadena, who all hold professorships in the USA.

[9] See Mbembe (2016 and 2017), and Maldonado-Torres (2006, 2018).

valid".[10] The decolonial scholar Santos, as cited by Mbembe (2021 citing Santos 2008 and 2014), for instance argues that "knowledge can only be thought of as universal if it is by definition pluriversal"[11], meaning that it is "open to epistemic diversity" (Mbembe 2021, 78, 79). This is in actual fact not equivalent to a "relativization of knowledge" (Wig 2018), or to "declaring all forms of knowledge equal" (Eriksen 2024, 96). But rather to declare oneself willing to adopt a "horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions" (Mbembe 2021, 79). One may, with Mbembe, take issue with the theorization of "multiplicity" as "difference" in this "decolonial project", and the understanding of that "difference" as "that which separates and cuts off one cultural or historical entity from another" (Mbembe 2021, 79, 80). But an interpretation of decolonial theory which regards its dominant strands as advocating the abandonment of science and the adoption of epistemological relativism, does in light of this seem like a form of willful mischaracterization. By way of example, a standard and much cited textbook on "decolonizing methodologies" is the Māori scholar Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith 2021). In no way does Smith call for the abolishment of scientific methodologies or standard procedures for scientific validation. "Decolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes" (Smith 2021, 43). Similarly, decolonial theorists Mignolo and Walsh, noting that "within Western thought itself, there have always been internal critiques", assert that a perspective from what they refer to as "pluriversal and interversal decoloniality … does not mean a rejection or negation of European thought" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 3).[12]

We may then legitimately ask what decolonization is and means in decolonial theory, and why we should be mindful of it. In the re-valorization of the category of "the Indigenous" in decolonial theory, there may be a risk of essentializing both the indigenous and the precolonial, instead of regarding these as starting points for critique (Whyte 2019). This is the recurrent problem of authenticity and essentialism in theorizing which scholars such as Mbembe (2016) caution against. This problem is compounded by the fact that decolonial rhetoric is increasingly being used by arguably far-right movements and intellectuals from India via Europe (Shah 2024, Davidson 2024a) and by nativists who declare South Africa to be a country *of* and *for* South Africans exclusively (Mbembe 2016). The idea of decolonization now even appears in the far-right rhetoric of Renaud Camus and Aleksandar Dugin (Davison 2024b).

Following Nyamnjoh (2016, 30), contexts differ, and those differences matter a great deal in thinking about where and when the framework of decolonizing and/or decoloniality may be applicable. This article is focused on calls to "decolonize" the university in particular. Much decolonial activism in the past ten years has in fact been centered on the university, seen as a site for the reproduction of global coloniality. When the university features centrally in decolonial activism, it is also due to the fact that decolonial theory is so centrally concerned with so-called *epistemic decolonization* (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 121). Theory, as Said (1983) was fond of pointing out, travels. Even well before the *2014 #RhodesMustFall*-movement in South

[10] Notwithstanding the fact that Mbembe himself has flatly refused to be categorized as either a post- or decolonial scholar (Mbembe n.d.), Eriksen wants to regard him as an exponent of postcolonial theory.
[11] For the most elaborate delineation of what "pluriversality" may entail, see Escobar (2020).
[12] For a good discussion of the applicability of Smith's framework to research on the Sami of the Nordic countries, see Olsen (2022).

Africa, decolonial theory had travelled to South Africa, and had been applied to the South African and African postcolonial context.[13] For its African proponents in South African universities, the concept of decoloniality offered "a necessary liberatory language of the future for Africa" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 485). Though decolonial theory has in the main appealed to Black students and/or scholars in what is often referred to as post-apartheid South Africa,[14] Black South Africans do not, strictly speaking, constitute an Indigenous population in South Africa (Bantu-speaking Ngunis having arrived in South Africa after the Indigenous KhoiSan). The appeal of decolonial theory for Black South African students and activists must be understood with reference to the fact that for many in the large incoming cohorts of Black students in South Africa, universities were by 2014 still experienced as sites of alienation and estrangement (Pillay 2024, 77). A mere 4.3 per cent of Black 18–24-year-olds make it to university in the first place (Venkatesan 2024, 151) and in 2015, 86 per cent of academic staff were still listed as White. The physical infrastructure of many South African universities still bears the imprint of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid in the form of everything from statues of white colonial figures and educators on campus to colonial-era names on university buildings. It makes sense in this context to think of this experience in terms of *colonial wounds* (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013). *Coloniality*, a term coined by Quijano (1992) in this decolonial rendering, is "an invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 488) which in no way ends with the formal end of colonialism in the form of the fall of apartheid. "Decolonization" is here to be understood as "a psychic state more than a political project in the strict sense of the term" (Mbembe 2015), and expressive of tendency by which "current narratives of selfhood and identity" among "the emergent Black middle class" in South Africa are "saturated by the tropes of pain and suffering" (Mbembe 2015). Mbembe is skeptical of the decolonial contention of a global coloniality intrinsically linked to modernity that outlives and overdetermines the formal end of colonialism (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 485 for this): "Hyberbole notwithstanding, South Africa today is not the 'colony' Frantz Fanon is writing about in his *Wretched of the Earth*" (Mbembe 2015).[15] However, I think one should be wary of reducing calls to decolonize to "an affect of ressentiment" (White 2019, 157), which Mbembe seems to tend towards in the cited passage. Colonial wounds and/or Black pain may

[13] A then South African-based scholar who was central in these endeavours was Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who, before becoming Professor of Epistemologies of the Global South at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, had affiliations with the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of the Free State (UFS), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and the University of Johannesburg. Ndlovu-Gatsheni was involved in the establishment of the Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) at UNISA in 2011, and the Decoloniality Summer School at UNISA in 2014, a summer school which throughout its ten years' existence has brought together decolonialist academics from Latin America and Africa. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni's ideas about decolonization and decoloniality, see Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 2018.) Another self-identifying decolonial scholar in South Africa is Tendayi Sithole, a professor of Political Science at UNISA who did his PhD in African Politics at UNISA under the supervision of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (see Sithole 2014, 2016, 2023). Among Latin Americanists who have been central to the transplantation of decolonial theory to South Africa, the University of Connecticut-Storrs Prof of Philosophy Nelson Maldonado-Torres stands out by virtue of his long-standing affiliations with UNISA and University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. He is also a co-chair of the Frantz Fanon Foundation.

[14] Which is in view of decolonial theory in itself a problematic and contestable term, in as much as it suggests that apartheid, as a racist and colonialist formation, is a matter of the past in South Africa, and that South Africa has somehow 'transcended' coloniality.

[15] There are clear echoes here of a much earlier critique of notions of 'Africanicity' informed by African nationalist modes of understanding in Africanist scholarship made by Mbembe (2002). For a critique of Mbembe from the viewpoint of a South African decolonial scholar, see Sithole (2014). Mbembe's personal experience has been one of disillusionment with the shape of African postcolonial societies informed by his experience with the authoritarianism of postcolonial governance in his native Cameroon (Mbembe 2007).

not constitute the existential reality of all calling for universities to "decolonize," but are certainly very real for some who do so - Maxwele being a case in point in the South African case. Pillay (2021, 389) argues that "when Latin American decolonial theory travels to Africa, its emphasis on colonial assimilation obscures a significant experience of colonialism that enforced difference rather than assimilation." Whilst accepting that "there are numerous diverse, critical-intellectual and political interventions in Latin America that march under the banner of decolonial theory", Pillay (2024) contends that the "particular brand of Latin American decolonial theory…[…]…that are most cited in the African turn to decolonial theory" is "*limited* in its understanding of the problem of colonialism and should therefore not be universalized as the way to theorize the problem of colonialism" (Pillay 2024, 68).

Conclusion

This article has explored calls to "decolonize" in an empirical case – and in this case the #RMF in South Africa (2015-165). Studying calls to "decolonize" in a university context in the "Global South" opens a view to what such calls entail, and what their practical and/or institutional limitations may be (Jansen and Walters, 2022). As in all human activity, there proved to be a distinction between theory and practice in #RMF. I have underlined that there is a distinction to be made between studying calls to "decolonize" in any given context – which is the task of the researcher – and embracing such calls – which should be the preserve of activists (Venkatesan 2024). Calls to "decolonize" must be studied in the specific contexts in which they appear (Nyamnjoh 2016, 30). In the South African context, it is noteworthy that the imported decolonial framework from Latin America did not necessarily fit well with the local circumstances, especially given the contestations around issues relating to 'indigeneity' and 'Blackness' in the post-apartheid context. However, in a context in which the reception of calls to "decolonize" have – as the case of its reception in the Norwegian academy since 2018 attest to – often been reflective of a blanket refusal to engage with these calls by engaging with the relevant literature in an open-minded and productive manner (as the case of its reception in the Norwegian academy since 2018), I have argued for a middle ground of productive engagement. This middle ground is *inter alia* to be found in the work of Achille Mbembe (2016, 2019, 2020), a self-described "thinker of the crossroads", who whilst adopting a critical stance to some of the claims and proposals in decolonizing and/or decolonial literature, also reserves the right to learn from this literature in an – albeit – eclectic way. This should however not distract from the fact that decolonial theory may hold much value for the analysis of other contexts than the South African, such as those of indigenous rights claims of the Sámi in Norway and other Scandinavian countries, as well as the Latin American context.

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