

## Reparations, Knowledge and the Decolonial University<sup>1</sup>

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In the introduction to *Decolonising the Academy* (2003), an intellectual project developed to place African Diaspora Studies as one of the major vectors of the unfinished decolonising process, I asserted that the academy, the university and the larger knowledge production apparatus is perhaps one of the most colonised of spaces. In every discipline, one is confronted with a production of knowledge that assumes European epistemologies, ideas, timelines, as the defining frameworks for intellectual work. This thereby creates a hierarchy of knowledge in which African peoples' experiences still remain at the bottom or outside of consideration, in the same measure as are Black Lives still today.

A few other related and relevant texts must be indicated here. Sylvia Wynter advanced an ideological position that arose through her work at the Institute of the Black World in the 1970s, along with her generation of scholars, including Sterling Stuckey, Howard Dodson, Vincent Harding, Walter Rodney. The larger context was an understanding of Black Studies as an insurgent field organised to provide the knowledge component of the various political and social movements demanding correction at the epistemological or knowledge-production level. Thus, in succeeding years, best described in her chapter, 'On How we Mistook the Map for the Territory and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our

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Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project*', Wynter saw the current iteration of Black Studies as having lost its way. She recalls some of those aesthetic and political movements that actually wanted a 'whole new system of ideas' and concludes that, instead, we never arrived at the 'new territory' and remained without the connection from the 'map' to this new place (Wynter 2005).

Never fully arriving at that territory or place where we could claim to rewrite the script of anti-Blackness, we ended up still being re-territorialised under whiteness in the Euro-American model of the university with its assumption of the control of knowledge. This status remains particularly salient when the university is often that assemblage of theoretical positions that inform and cohere state practices. Thus, in my view, is enacted a continued violence at the epistemological level, which also leaves a variety of subjects defined as non-conforming to the 'mythical norm' (Lorde 1984) unable to breathe, i.e. to live fully in the world. The graphic representations of the visual 'I

can't breathe' suffocations ended up having symbolic resonances and multiplicative effect, as we saw during the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the activism that followed.

In this context we can indicate relatedly as well the caution offered by Walter Rodney, that the academics in the neocolonial or postcolonial context are the ones often creating the limits. For Rodney, the caution had to do with the fact that:

Black people are here in these institutions as part of the development of Black struggle, but only as a concession designed to incorporate us within the structure ... I am thinking also of the books, the references, the theoretical assumptions, and the entire ideological underpinnings of what we is taught and studied in every single discipline. (Rodney 1990: 112–113)

We can conclude, therefore, that the ideas of a certain acceptance of the status quo are built into the academic enterprise if these ideas are not challenged. For example, Africana Studies as a field has not extended to match the current scholarship and knowledge in African Diaspora Studies. Its geographical reach contains only partial coverage of the United States and perhaps a little or no African history. There is miniscule Caribbean coverage except in relation to larger topics, but without really accessing the

full range and breadth of Caribbean Studies as representing not just the archipelagic islands but also the circum-Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora (Boyce-Davies 2013). Afro-Latin America is often not included in the frameworks of the larger understanding of what is African American in hemispherical context.

Cornell University's Africana Studies, for example, the founding unit in the field, is emblematic of the inability of the field to move outside of the reductions into which the academy has placed this unit. Illustrative of this is the rejection of a Caribbean Students Association request for a minor (Stamm 2020). In this writer's view, this rejection comes across then as amazingly short-sighted in a field which was founded by student demands for studies that challenged the Eurocentric education that was then and still is dominant in the academy. Thus, the current chair's assertion, even as he has written articles about 'global Africa' (Taiwo 2015) in the past, that the Africana model has 'worked for the last fifty years, it has continued to inspire others both within the country and in other parts of the world' (Stamm 2020), leaves no room for innovation or extension or elaboration. Indeed, in the current version of Africana Studies at Cornell, administratively managed by continental African scholars, the rejection of a Caribbean Studies minor indicates a certain myopia, perhaps along with a conservative political orientation or, more generously, a limited understanding of the breadth of the African diaspora, or global Africa as it is called in the Social Sciences. The importance of a field organised then to create an intellectual paradigm that challenges Eurocentric knowledge dominance comes across as not

having evolved. In other words, an innovative field is no longer to innovate again or move out of a colonised status in the academy.

So how do we repair this continuing damage that accepts limitations and begin again to reclaim some of the lost direction, i.e. to go back to our map as it were? First of all, every discipline in the current university context needs minimally a counter-discourse (internal and external) represented within its curricular and research frameworks. Anthropology, for example, cannot continue to deny its gendered colonialist beginnings but should also include the work of Black women anthropologists like Zora Neale Hurston, who still has no real place in the discipline. One can say the same for History and Political Science and the range of fields in Arts and Sciences.

In this regard, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter activism following the killing of George Floyd, calls from students to #DoBetterCornell led Martha Pollack, president of Cornell University, to welcome institutional anti-racist projects. As members of one of the departments that historically maintained an entrenched British imperial white supremacist framing, faculty of colour proposed a change of the name of Cornell's English Department to the Department of Literatures in English. With that change was also assumed a redistribution of its curricular representations, so that medieval and pre-eighteenth-century England would not be the dominant required mandate for students who were majoring in English. My colleague Mukoma wa Ngugi and I argued then, following Ngugi wa Thiong'o et al, 'On the Abolition of the English Department' (1968), that English Departments

have tended to be linked to the advancement, maintenance and acceptance of the culture of the British Empire and are thereby among those institutions complicit in maintaining dominant structural inequities by the very nature of their naming and orientations in terms of what they teach and how they teach that literature. The faculty responses were overwhelmingly favourable and we were pleased that, in a department which included a vibrant body of subjects of inquiry not captured by the current naming, a series of discussions to challenge ourselves and our contexts resulted in a document that our colleagues affirmed, by their signatures, as demonstrating precisely this need to create a 'more just and equitable department'. We asserted then that a move to a Department of Literatures in English would do the following:

- Present a more accurate description of the wide range of literatures that we teach and study already;
- Open the Department to a wider pool of students who see English as limiting their study with us (it leaves us always explaining that an English Department actually does literary studies);
- Move beyond the privileging of 'English' rather than 'Literatures' as the primary descriptor.

We saw this move, while being first among the major universities in the United States and Europe, as also following similar moves at the University of the West Indies, which created a Department of Literatures in English, and other universities like University of Brasilia, which created a Department of Literary Theory and Literatures, both in the early 1990s. This formal change to being named Department of Literatures in English was fully approved

by all levels of the university in February 2021, though we learned subsequently that Bryn Mawr College had approved a similar name change in November 2020, influenced by the Cornell move but actually formally occurring in advance of our final approval. They describe the basis of their change as also wanting to demonstrate their ‘commitment to de-colonial approaches to literary studies’.

Reparative justice, then, becomes a major and substantial point as we think of an imagined decolonial university. The CARICOM Reparations Commission created a plan, which represents a renewed aspect of an ongoing historical conversation about what is still owed to Black people, approachable from a variety of viewpoints, from the demands of the enslaved for reparations and return to the continent, to Rastafari’s continued articulations of the need for those reparations and returns, to those of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) and the current CARICOM reparative justice claims. In fact, if we use the lens of the Black Lives Matter movements, we can assert that all these continuing claims carry at their core the argument that Black lives are often without value in the scheme of national projects and are therefore simultaneously subject to police brutality on the streets and subordination in the academy, and these two sometimes converge. The normalising of Black abjection, then, always has to be challenged and a new reclaimed humanity put back on the table, it seems historically. Thus, it is worth recalling Frantz Fanon (1963) on this point: ‘Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.’

The CARICOM Ten Point Reparations Plan is listed as follows:

1. Full Formal Apology
2. Repatriation
3. Indigenous Peoples Development Program
4. Cultural Institutions
5. Public Health Crisis
6. Illiteracy Eradication
7. African Knowledge Program
8. Psychological Rehabilitation
9. Technology Transfer
10. Debt Cancellation

The claim specific to this discussion of reparative justice is Number 7, an African Knowledge programme. Yet, we hasten to assert right away that a reconfiguration of ‘African Knowledge’ is one among the group of reparative items that conscious academics in the various iterations of Black Studies can do themselves. While we recognise that several of these reparative justice claims, like debt cancellation, require government intervention, reparations clearly cannot assume that it is only a government-to-people process or the stereotypical handout. Instead, a series of reparative steps to reverse the conditions in which African peoples globally still find themselves must come from multiple directions, including the academy or educational complexes.

Though often still a site of necessary contestation in the institutional academic context in which we work, what is under our control, is the knowledge-production area, the epistemic, therefore. I want to linger on knowledge here as it is the centre of what this discussion asserts.

Under the category of African Knowledge, this is what CARICOM states (my emphasis):

The forced separation of Africans from their homeland has resulted in **cultural and social alienation from identity and existential belonging**. Denied the right in law to life, and divorced by space from the source of historic self, Africans have craved the right to return and **knowledge of the route to roots**.

A program of action is required to **build ‘bridges of belonging’**. Such projects as school exchanges and culture tours, community artistic and performance programs, entrepreneurial and religious engagements, as well as political interaction, are required in order to **neutralise the void created by slave voyages**.

Such actions will serve to **build knowledge networks** that are necessary for community rehabilitation.

Doing quick cultural analysis as we do, some items jump out right away, as indicated in bold font above: cultural and social alienation from identity and existential belonging; knowledge of the route to roots; building ‘bridges of belonging’ and neutralising ‘the void created by slave voyages’. Cumulatively, then, building ‘knowledge networks that are necessary for community rehabilitation’ is paramount.

How does all of this matter in the current university, a site for colonised identities as we already know? The decolonial university is clearly an imagined university, an im/possibility in that larger meaning, aspirational nonetheless and therefore possible. A very detailed lecture by Rinaldo Walcott, ‘After Equity: “Another University Now”’, offers a range of possibilities (Walcott 2021).

As we consider a range of subjects for a larger advancing of knowledge, there remains an

incomplete knowledge acquisition process—that continued epistemic violence on our students in the form of missing areas of study, i.e. the what is left out. First of all, the distribution of knowledge should ensure an equality of exchange whereby the scholarship, thinkers and ideas from the global south are more readily available or sourced in the United States and Europe rather than the exportation of knowledge products in the North to South direction only.

My range of suggested reparative possibilities include:

- Going back in history to reclaim an originary impetus, by examining the Black experience throughout the last century, from the 1900 Pan-African conference in London and subsequent Pan-African conferences to the range of forums, meetings, organisation's resolutions and principles and conferences on Black Culture in Paris, Rome, Senegal, Nigeria. All of these included resolutions for the amelioration of the cultural and social alienation indicated in the wake of enslavement and colonialism.
- Studying and offering means of transforming knowledge from many different fields and angles that include full representations of all contributors from different geographies.
- Reclaiming the initial impetus of Black Studies centres, programmes, departments and institutes, many of which remain captured by sometimes very specific interests, still battling for space in that same university hierarchy.
- Creating new paradigms that go beyond the received nation-state formations that dominate now in which primacy is given to each country as opposed to studying these relationally.

- Rewriting the script of Haiti and by extension Black subjectivity in the Americas in general.
- Providing ways to examine contemporary health, food, environmental and wellbeing vulnerabilities of African peoples globally, using models such as those of the Cuban medical system, which has global impact.

Caribbean Studies is often a drop in the academic ocean and rejected even by the leading Africana Studies department. As we have indicated above, the knowledge generated in Caribbean Studies should be one of the key themes or concentrations of Black Studies units anywhere, particularly given the mobile nature of the Caribbean experience and the circulation of its ideas, which impact on the global Black condition. But what about Afro-Asia or Afro-indigeneity in a remodelled reparative knowledge framework? For example, the misguided, limited and distorted understandings of 'caste' in recent publications that deliberately ignored the work of Oliver Cromwell Cox, whose *Caste, Class and Race* is still one of the most advanced analyses of these interconnecting systems of oppression, has to be challenged. In the United States context, African-American Studies should be available in all its historical and socio-economic and cultural relations but with a knowledge that there is also another available African-American (or Afro-Latin American) community in South and Central America.

Perhaps the language of Trans-America, as with Trans-Africa, should be similarly argued. Finally, how does a university respond to its local community's needs? In any given community, the university of necessity has an obligation to represent the largest

range of intellectual interests in the broadest movement of that term but always with an eye to advancing the interests of local Black and indigenous populations in their orbit.

As we move beyond the settler-colonial university, including the University of the West Indies, we can begin to imagine and create the decolonial university. We navigate always between, on the one hand, a past of dignity and legendary greatness, and on the other, the starkness of the initial history of dispossession and economic difficulty, brought on sometimes by horrendous leadership, often in collusion with external actors—environment, climate, location. But through it all there remains an amazing resistance of its people matched by an outstanding creativity. We live with a series of conflicting representations, but above all a definition of an unrelenting humanity for African people, from what it takes to survive in the harshest conditions to how one begins again after everything falls apart, to how one lives a life of beauty and joy in spite of institutional and state-level attempts at continued subordination.

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has also published thirteen critical editions on African, African Diaspora and Caribbean literature and culture, such as the two-volume collection of critical and creative writing, *Moving Beyond Boundaries* (1995): *International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing* (volume 1), *Black Women's Diasporas* (volume 2); the three-volume *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2008) and *Claudia Jones Beyond Containment: Autobiographical Reflections, Poetry, Essays* (2011). A member of the scientific committee for UNESCO's updated *General History of Africa*, she edited the epistemological forum on Global Blackness for the African Diaspora volume. Her forthcoming contracted monograph is titled *Alternative Presidents. Black Women's Right to Political Leadership*.

## Note

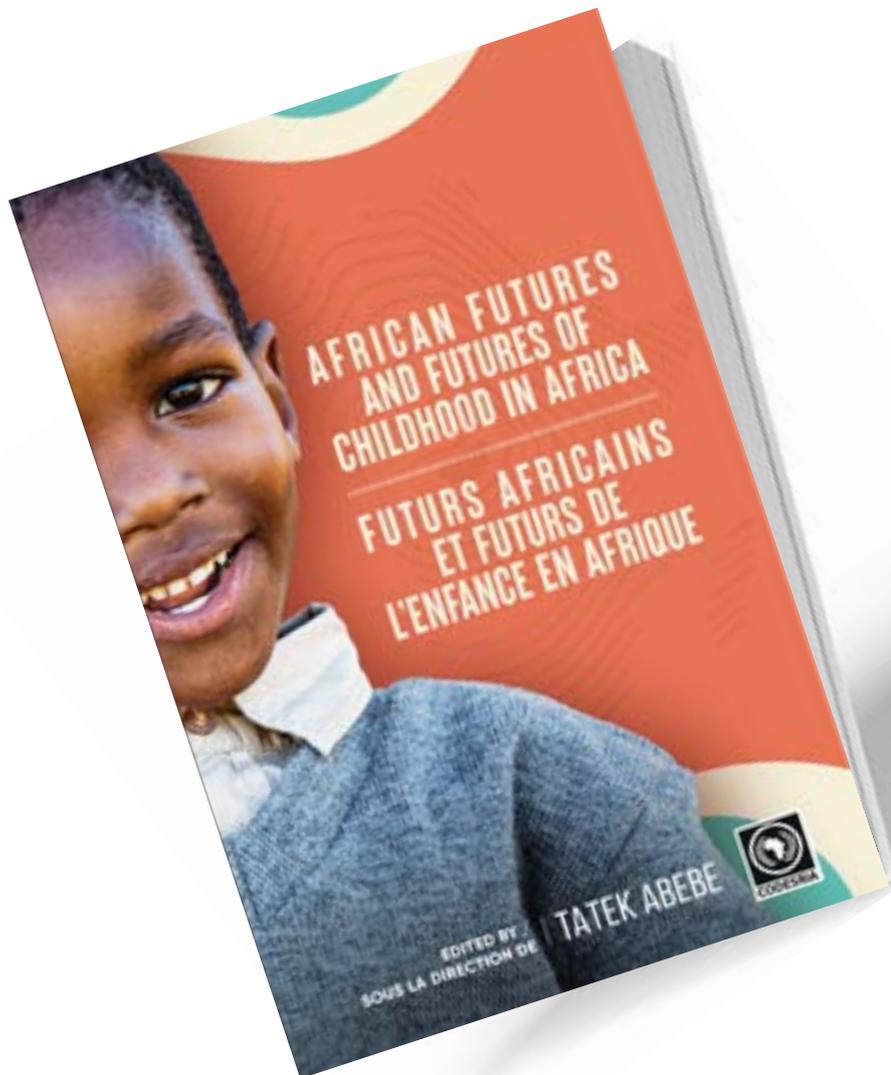
1. A preliminary version of this paper titled Towards a Decolonial University, which included the place of Haiti in academic frameworks, was presented at the inauguration of the Haitian Studies Institute at Brooklyn College in 2016, and the current version which linked it to reparative justice at the The University in an Age of Activism forum, organised by the University of the West Indies, December 2020.

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**FORTHCOMING / À PARAÎTRE**



The central idea of this book is that African children are future-makers. The book explores the connections between changing childhoods and versions of African futures to develop insights into how children are living embodiments of history and prospective agents of social change. Drawing on research in diverse cultural ecologies, the authors of ten chapters discuss findings linked to apprenticeship, learning, work, rights, schools, peace, education, aspirations, conflicts and refugee integration—and how these are encountered by children in everyday life. They describe studies in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The book moves beyond hegemonic notions on African children, affording them the capacity to aspire, widening their creative imaginations in ways that deepen our knowledge of past and present childhoods. While tracing the problems of childhood in the exigencies of society, children are conceptualised neither as victims nor heroes. Instead, they are social participants whose experiences, values, desires, practices and hopes create a fertile analytical ground from which we may theorise the future and temporality more fully.