

## African feminist epistemic communities and decoloniality

### Communauté épistémique féministe africaine et décolonialité

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Decolonization as a pathway to transforming higher education institutions in the United Kingdom has led to quick fixes such as ‘diversity’ hires and reviewing syllabi thus sidestepping the fundamental structural deficits that demand these efforts. The Eurocentricism that continues to shape knowledge production and transfer processes sits at the heart of demands for decolonization. Therefore, decolonization projects require an attentiveness to how power travels within universities as sites that are argued to be arbiters of knowledge production. This article examines how decolonization projects in universities in the United Kingdom and South Africa ignore the invisible labour and penalties that accompany this work by illustrating the wider constellations of gender and racialized power operating within them. I draw on the experiences of feminist academics to offer emancipatory teaching praxis emerging from African feminist epistemic communities to rethink decolonization projects.

**Keywords:** African; decolonization; epistemic communities; feminist; pedagogy

Le parcours de décolonisation pour transformer les institutions d’enseignement supérieur au Royaume-Uni a entraîné des solutions rapides telles que des recrutements de « diversité » et une révision des programmes passant ainsi à côté des déficits structurels importants auxquels des efforts devraient être consacrés. L’eurocentrisme qui continue à dicter la production de connaissance et les processus de transfert se trouve au cœur des exigences en matière de décolonisation. Par conséquent, les projets de décolonisation exigent d’être attentif à la façon dont le pouvoir circule au sein des universités en tant que sites réputés être des arbitres en matière de production de connaissance. Cet article examine comment les projets de décolonisation dans les universités britanniques et en Afrique du Sud font fi du travail invisible et des sanctions accompagnant ce travail en présentant la constellation plus vaste de sexe et de pouvoir racialisé opérant en leur sein. Je m’appuie sur les expériences d’universitaires féministes pour proposer une pratique d’enseignement émancipatrice émergeant des communautés épistémiques féministes africaines pour repenser les projets de décolonisation.

**Mots-clés:** Africain; Décolonisation; Communautés épistémiques; Féministe; Pédagogie

### Introduction

This article is framed by an interest in African feminist interventions in contemporary decolonization debates that do not sustain an erasure of the energies and legacies from which this work

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builds on. I begin by examining the broader context of these debates in Africa. I rehearse in broad sweeps what I consider critical meta-moments on the African continent around which diverse forms of decolonization conversations have happened. The section that follows focusses on situating feminist scholarship and gender debates within this larger context. I use feminist epistemic communities as a conceptual container to examine how debates, scholarship and other forms of pedagogical praxis are emerging within decolonization of education projects in Africa and the United Kingdom (UK) challenge what decolonization work needs to look like. I draw on Lynn Hankinson Nelson's (1990, 1993) and Heidi Grasswick's (2004) conceptualization of feminist epistemic communities. Feminist epistemic communities refer to groups or communities who know and are epistemic agents (Nelson 1990). Nelson centres community as a way of thinking through how epistemic agents come to be by providing communal standards of evidence (1990). For Grasswick, thinking about 'individuals-in-communities' rather than communities *per se* enables feminists to consider relations between communities, individual knowers, and knowledge-seeking practices (2004, 86). She writes, 'Individuals-in-communities are interactive rather than self-sufficient, and situated rather than generic' (Grasswick 2004, 86). I am interested in the centrality of communities as articulated by Nelson (1990) because they have become a critical lifeline for surviving and thinking through power relations between knowers and the ecosystem that shapes the construction of knowledge.

Communities and individuals-in-communities are complementary conceptualizations of feminist epistemic realities. In centring African feminist epistemic agents as a *community* and as individuals *in community*, I draw on the tensions emerging from the active process of transforming knowledge production systems raised by the interlocutors in this article. I return to foundational feminist epistemic questions: who knows? How do you know that you know? And, how are those knowledges accessed, circulated and enabled to thrive to the benefit of the community? In speaking about African feminist epistemic communities, it is crucial that these are not read as fixed groups of feminists existing in a physical or virtual realm with specific sets of actions. Rather, like all communities, the sites from which I draw on from this paper have on occasion been momentary or sustained through virtual listservs and social connections, which ebb and flow based on need. It is not the physicality of a community that makes it real; it is the fact that across space and time there is a shared sense of politics, trajectories, and scholarship in conversation with and attuned to the question: who knows? I centre black women's experiences in academic institutions, and examine how these experiences illuminate pedagogical and theoretical imperatives that we must consider as we speak about decolonization.

Decoloniality and intersectional approaches to feminist epistemic community building are not isolated to Africa and its Diaspora; however, this article prioritizes African voices, scholarship and experiences, because its vibrant feminist knowledge community has been under-theorized in current decolonization scholarship and discourse. A key aspect of decolonial thought involves interrogating the coloniality of knowledge, which includes epistemological questions, the politics of knowledge generation, as well as questioning who generates which knowledge, for what purpose and from where (Quijano 2007). On the African continent, decolonial movements and challenges to the coloniality of knowledge emerged through Negritude, Pan-Africanism, African Socialism, African Humanism, the Black Consciousness Movement, and the African Renaissance. The coloniality of knowledge forms the basis for thinking about decolonizing education – knowledge, institutional practices, pedagogy – part of which involves paying attention to how indigenous knowledges have been marginalized.

This marginalization occurs not only on the level of scholarship generated by Africans but also in relation to recognition of African feminist epistemologies. Considering indigenous forms of knowledge is not only a historical task, but a contemporary creative project to grasp how pedagogical and epistemic communities emerge in response to the demands of the

moment. The task of this paper is not to argue that there is a uniquely African feminist epistemic intervention. Rather, I argue that African feminist experiences, and epistemic communities and exchanges, generate emergent ways of knowing, teaching and learning. In the next section I offer some historical context to the larger trajectories of decolonizing higher education in Africa to situate the 2015 student-led struggles in South Africa in their history of struggle. I also examine the evolution of Women and Gender Studies centres as part of the decolonizing higher education history. This historical context frames the sections that follow which argue that feminist epistemic communities as they have emerged from decolonizing movements in South Africa specifically offer some lessons for the UK context, where I am located.

### **Africanising, transforming, decolonizing higher education**

On 9 March 2015, what is now known as the #RhodesMustFall movement began at my alma mater, the University of Cape Town (UCT). Led by black students, a set of demands was presented to the University administration calling for institutional change and the symbolic removal of the prominent statue of Cecil John Rhodes.<sup>1</sup> The removal of the statue was symbolic of the structural issues, which the students framed as the racialized, gendered systems of socio-political and economic power. These systems of power are reflected in the exclusionary education policies and practices that affect the black majority in South Africa. These energies percolated across South Africa in 2015,<sup>2</sup> crystallizing in the collective call for free, decolonized, and therefore equitable access to education through the Fees Must Fall movement. Inevitably, the neo-liberal model of running institutions of higher learning became a site of interrogation, thus moving from what may have been perceived as a singular call for no fees to one about just and equitable labour. The Fees Must Fall movement re-centred a long-standing debate about the state of higher education in Africa (Mama 2003; Mamdani 2016).

Across Africa, the demands to rethink the nature of education can be traced to a post-independence agenda to reflect on the place of inherited university structures in the growth trajectory of African countries. It is possible to map four major phases of higher education debates in Africa. I use phases not to suggest linearity of experiences but to map some of the major debates that have framed higher education across Africa. The first phase was marked by the immediate post-independence period where Africanising research, faculty and students to meet the demands of newly independent countries was foregrounded. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Adebayo Olukoshi (2004) and Mahmood Mamdani (2016) have written extensively about the trajectory of the 'African university', historicizing the development of higher education systems in Africa. Zeleza and Olukoshi (2004) offer a rich account of the historical sites of intellectualism in Africa that were found in religious traditions such as Christian monasteries or Islamic mosques in various parts of North and West Africa, including sites such as Timbuktu in present day Mali. This trajectory challenges the notion of the university and intellectualism as an invention of empire in colonial Africa (Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004). This pioneering tradition of learning and reflection is important in a context where the idea of Africans as thinkers has largely been constructed as a post 'flag independence' tradition bedevilled by colonial legacies. However, the 'African University' as we know it today is a colonial construct designed largely for the purposes of extraction and exploitation. Consequently, most Africans, on reclaiming independence, did so with institutions and curricula that were largely designed to benefit former colonial powers and a small local elite.

The imperative at independence therefore became one of training Africans who could take over the task of governing newly independent countries (Mamdani 2016). The Africanising universities conversation therefore converges with the second phase that enacts this objective. This phase is one that sees the rapid growth of national universities in the 1960 and 70s,

which are challenged in the 1980s and 90s by debates about academic freedom informed by broader democratization contestations across different countries. The tensions between regime interference in public universities and academic organizing to protect academic freedom marks a definitive part of the struggle for decolonizing higher education. It challenges the notion that African-led institutions are immune from larger constellations of power that control how we know what we know. Universities were sites to drive nation and state-making processes. Therefore, political elite intervention in the running of universities becomes a way to manage dissent and orient the labour (students) and knowledge (nature of degrees) produced by universities (See Zeleza and Olukoshi 2004; Mamdani 2016).

The second phase coincided with the third phase, which I argue is marked by the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) instituted by the Bretton Woods Institutions that resulted in the divestment of resources from higher education under the guise of rolling back the state through a cocktail of privatization and market-led proposals for resolving Africa's debt crisis (Mkandawire and Soludo 2003). The result was a legacy of university decay across many African countries. The structural adjustment environment reignited debates about the place of research and universities due to neo-liberal policies that placed the market at the centre of growth, and de-prioritized investment in research and higher education, privileging basic education (Mamdani 2016). These programmes left many countries with little choice in determining the place of universities and intellectual investment at the centre of said development.

While South Africa was largely immune from the SAP onslaught on higher education specifically, the resurgence of decolonizing higher education since 2015 marks the fourth phase. This phase looks different across Africa. For instance, in some countries debates on decolonization of higher education have been animated through public discourse on moving financial resources from social sciences and humanities, to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and therefore encouraging more research and enrolment of students in these courses. This discourse is often shaped by analysis that frames STEM as the driver of development and growth. It is accompanied by a discursive and financial investment on entrepreneurship and therefore the market as key sites of training and research (Blom 2014). In South Africa in 2015, decolonization debates instead arose as a critique of the ruling party and unresolved legacies of apartheid.

In these four phases, it is important to set out how the inattentiveness to gender is evident as a category and as a theoretical framework for understanding inclusion, exclusion, and investment in higher education and research. This inattentiveness emerged powerfully in the student-led movement in South Africa through the parallel debates on #PatriarchyMustFall that insisted on interrogating the heterosexist attitudes that permeated the #FeesMustFall movement (Ndelu and Boswell 2017). As the next section outlines, African feminist interventions on decolonization offer a nuanced understanding of institutional cultures, norms and the evolution of feminist scholarship as a critical part of thinking decolonially.

### **Gender in higher education – key trajectories**

An important intervention in decolonization processes occurred through the creation of Gender and Women's Studies centres across African universities.<sup>3</sup> The uptake, or lack thereof, of these centres illustrates at both an institutional and political level how African feminist epistemic communities emerge as critical interlocutors in the broader gender-neutral Africanising and transformation conversations happening across Africa between the 1960s and the 1990s. The foundational edited volume *Engendering African Social Sciences in Africa* (Imam, Mana, and Sow 1997) argued that the absence of gender analysis is illustrative of a struggle for resources and power associated with the (in)visibility of gender in higher education and in Africa's

historiography. The importance of feminist theory in social sciences is captured again in 2002 through a focus in the journal *Feminist Africa* on *Intellectual Politics* and a two-part series on *Rethinking Universities* in 2007. The thematic focus by *Feminist Africa* on higher education in Africa generated analysis on the evolution of Women and Gender Studies in Africa and enabled a deeper and comparative understanding of institutional cultures and what this meant for female academics.

Part of these institutional cultures include the role that universities played in post-independence Africa in constructing gendered post-colonial subjects through the training of bureaucrats who would deal with pressing developmental concerns. Universities therefore became spaces that were invested overtly and covertly in masculinized notions of man-as-thinker, man-as-aggressive-debater – and in turn, thinker-as-man, debater-as-man. Consequently, the transformative potential of feminist scholarship and networking in higher education institutions becomes a threat to the status quo (Mama 2003). The material consequences of this threat became evident in two main ways. The first is in the erosion of radical approaches to thinking about gender, power and freedom through technocratic demands to produce policy adaptive experts (Lewis 2008). The influence of developmental discourses on Women and Gender Studies programmes across Africa to which liberal feminism is linked, have interpreted Africa from an economic inefficiency perspective. These interpretations have resulted in the conversion of Gender Studies into the application of technocratic concepts rather than critical gender research (Lewis 2008).

Second, is the stagnation of the growth of Gender and Women's Studies centres within public universities across Africa. This stagnation is seen in a comparison of data generated from a 2002 study by the African Gender Institute on Gender Studies programmes and centres in African universities and a current non-exhaustive mapping of the status quo. I focus below on data about centres since those illustrate both financial and human resource commitments towards institutionalizing programmes and recognition of a discipline. This data also focuses on public universities and not private institutions. In 2002, out of 30 public universities where data was available (across Africa), 16 had dedicated gender units, departments or programmes, with eleven offering postgraduate degrees and undergraduate courses in Gender or Women's Studies (Feminist Africa 2002, 2007). In 2018, there were 18 independent centres within public universities in the following countries:<sup>4</sup> Uganda, South Africa, Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Malawi, Morocco, Ghana.

The non-exhaustive trends mapped above that show stagnation in the growth of Gender Studies centres is shaped by a convergence of a range of factors: the influence of a donor-driven development industry, limited funding, and weak institutional and political links among scholars and activists on the continent that have shaped the institutionalization of gender degree programmes and centres (Lewis 2008). Taken together, the ways in which power and resources circulate serves, on the one hand, to undermine radical feminist projects where they exist in universities, or on the other hand, to exclude gender conversations altogether through institutional norms and practices (Gaidzanwa 2007; Tsikata 2007; Bennett 2008). The limited growth of gender centres and programmes reflects the convergence of a neo-liberal, marketized higher education environment and an historical interest in eliding the gender power dynamics in universities. It is in this context that the decolonizing higher education movements in South Africa emerged.

In the sections that follow I use the notion of failure – neglect, dereliction of duty – a word used by Danai Mupotsa, a South Africa-based academic to describe how her students framed their demands to decolonize universities in South Africa in 2015. These failures, which I shall explore later in this article, inform how I examine African feminist epistemic communities and the epistemological opportunities that emerge from their work in South Africa. I am interested in what a conversation framed by failure offers to understanding institutional and structural racism in universities. To this end, I conducted interviews with six African feminist academics

based in South Africa and the UK,<sup>5</sup> and convened two focus group discussions, each with ten black and African women students studying at SOAS. Additional focus groups discussions were conducted in January 2020 as part of a review on Africa at SOAS that I co-chaired, which informs my analysis. Finally, I examined 13 syllabi of modules on Africa from universities across the United Kingdom to assess the representation of African feminist scholarship. The list of modules and universities are found at the end of the article. My teaching experience and engagement with decolonization conversations at SOAS underpin my reflexive analysis in this article.

### Why decolonize? The catalogue of failures

We hoped for a non-Western perspective – to engage much more with Global Southern scholarship – Student, Focus Group Discussion, April 2018.

“We only had one African reading on Pan Africanism, the others were White perspectives on Pan Africanism; why can’t we just do African perspectives on Pan Africanism?” –Student Focus Group Discussion, February 2020.

“The critical texts about Africa (written perhaps by Africans themselves) should find more space in the course content. The way the course is designed at present sentences those texts to oblivion. They come as third or fourth readings on a given topic and most often never get to be discussed in class. Students rarely make it to the third or fourth reading.” – Student Interview, February 2020.

In the past year, I audited some of the previous courses I have done and ... for four years consecutively I’ve seen the same examples, same material being presented from a professor. Some of these [reading lists] are pretty old and we know that things are unfolding so why isn’t this there? —Student Interview, February 2020.

I begin this discussion on failure from the United Kingdom, where I draw on excerpts from focus group discussions I conducted with black students in 2018 and 2020 on their expectations of studying Africa at SOAS. I organize the discussion on failure of decolonization into two major discussion points. The first failure concerns the lack of critical citation praxis, which refers to whom students read and think with as they take their courses. The second failure concerns hierarchies of knowledge, even where syllabi are purported to have been ‘decolonised’. I focus on these two areas as an entry point given that, combined, they constitute the key area of critique in student-led conversations on the decolonization of higher education.

### (Un)critical citation and hierarchies of knowledge

The lenses through which our knowledge of the world is framed determines how our worldview is constituted. As a primary school pupil in Kenya, my history curriculum consisted of lessons on geographical discoveries of mountains and lakes in the country. These ‘first men’ who discovered Mt Kenya, Lake Victoria and Lake Albert were British explorers, whose names we remembered so that we could regurgitate them in exams. It was in a history class in secondary school that the idiocy of the claim that the first people to encounter these geographical features were white men hit home. This way of framing the curriculum design erased local knowledge and people. I would never have known Lake Victoria as Lake *Lolwe* or *Mosi-oa-tunya*, which we know as Victoria Falls, if the curriculum was never rewritten. The process of renaming and erasing local people was an act of power – an authoritative claim by colonizers on the territory and knowledge embedded in it. It is these legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism that render some forms of knowledge invisible and therefore not recognized as vital to shaping global discourses. There are also larger exclusionary and extractive practices organized around publishing



industries, government funded research and journal rankings. Redressing the failure of critical citation therefore begins with recognizing that knowledge production processes are not value free, and any curriculum design process that does not account for this is engaged in uncritical citation praxis. I discuss below two main failures that manifest in uncritical citation and hierarchies of knowledge production.

The first failure concerns the fact that responses to changes in syllabi that are based on race alone tend to ignore the gendered ways in which knowledge production occurs. These are not new conversations; bell hooks (1994) writing from the American context pointed out how black women specifically and women of colour generally fell at the bottom of the hierarchy when male people of colour were recognized for their contributions (see also Ahmed 2010). hooks argues that who is left out of the syllabus silences alternative ways of writing and presenting knowledge that is not viewed as theoretical (1994). Therefore, the failure to cite African feminist knowledge reproduces a societal inequality in higher education, as highlighted by Desiree Lewis (2008) and Mupotsa and Lennon Mhishi (2008), which makes feminist work in universities more vulnerable to external financial exigencies unless they are dealing with 'development' concerns. The precarity of feminist work is compounded in African universities where resources to support academic research is generally limited (Lewis 2008).

My review of 13 syllabi, reveals that journal articles and books by African feminists that make it onto the syllabi are dated and consist of the same names despite a proliferation of researchers writing on the themes being examined. For example, most generic courses on Africa – if they reference gender or feminisms – will have Oyeronke Oyewumi (2002), Ifi Amadiume (1987) and a few Amina Mama articles, and always the same pieces. The modules on Africa that I looked at without a gender focus are unlikely to draw on any feminist scholarship – African or otherwise. Students also noted that the location of readings in the syllabi matters. Where material is placed as additional readings, it is de-prioritized by students and not taught in the classroom. This underrepresentation of African feminist thought in African Studies syllabi sustains the idea that African feminist scholars are not publishing with their absence in certain journals as instructive of this low publication record. Peace Medie and Alice J. Kang (2018) who tracked publishing by women from the global South in gender and politics journals, note that:

Less than 5% of articles published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* were authored by a researcher at a Southern institution, and this number is the highest of the four European and Northern American journals. Of the 947 articles published in four European and North American journals between 2008 and 2017, less than 3% were by scholars at Southern institutions. (2018, 43)

A similar study by the African Leadership Centre covering publications by African scholars on peace and security in Africa between 1960 and 2017 noted that the majority who published were senior male academics (Adegoke and Oni 2017). Medie and Kang (2018) point to an underlying structural problem in relation to women's publishing, which is linked to how a global north academic publishing industry that is inattentive to who is publishing, and the over-representation of some voices reproduces the narrative of African women not publishing, thus contributing to their erasure. This is a race and gender question. Damilola Adegoke and Olawale Oni (2017) point to the gender and age disparities with the over-representation of senior African male academics. These power hierarchies make visible the underlying gender power dynamics that shape knowledge production and transfer, which if ignored are reproduced in syllabi that inform teaching.

The second failure concerns what is understood as knowledge, and how it is distributed and consumed. This tripartite relationship in the knowledge production and transfer chain determines how different epistemic traditions (often Western) are vested with authority and credibility.

Reading lists are determined by module convenors and demands about change are often countered by invoking an infringement on academic freedom.<sup>6</sup> However, as the students point out above, syllabi end up being bound up in three sub-failures that are connected to the overarching question of systems of knowledge production. The first sub-failure is an emphasis on scholarship from the Global North discussing the ‘other’. The dominance of scholarship from the Global North manifests in the way publishing industries function to set aside academic journals and publishing houses as the sites for empirical knowledge. The status of academic journals as empirical gatekeepers and sites for ‘quality’ research, due to the peer review system, was challenged by *Third World Quarterly*’s decision to publish ‘A case for Colonialism’. The decision raised questions about the rigour of peer review processes and the assumed empirical integrity that is protected by them (Flaherty 2017). How was a paper that ignored the racialized violence of colonialism because of the infrastructure that was ‘left behind’ published? Similarly, the article ‘Age and education related effects on cognitive functioning in Coloured South African women’ published by the Aging, *Neuropsychology and Cognition* journal in 2019, was retracted (post-publication) after critiques that its conclusion was noted to be flawed and tied to racist legacies (Boswell 2019).

The second sub-failure is seen in the tacit reproduction of the idea that knowledge produced in non-academic spaces is not epistemologically useful. This distinction between academic and non-academic work reproduces the artificial divide between those who act versus those who think/theorize. A 2016 study on the Department for International Development’s humanitarian research investments in East Africa revealed that African partners are not engaged in research design and planning, with research budgets rarely directed at local actors (See Development Initiatives 2016). Africa is mined for data and all the financial resources return to the Global North. As noted earlier, the absence of scholars from the Global South in journals from the Global North reinforces invisibility.<sup>7</sup> In the modules I teach on African Feminisms, Gender Theory and Queer Politics at SOAS, I draw on archival and research practices of organizations such as HOLAA! an online hub for African queer women’s experiences, research by feminist movement support organizations (such as the Association of Women’s Rights in Development and Just Associates), the work of Zanele Muholi, who documents black lesbian lives in South Africa, and None on Record, a digital platform that archives queer narratives in Africa from love to asylum stories. These – among many others – are an invitation to students to think with this material not as case studies but as work that is invested in theorizing a broad range of issues on gender and sexuality across Africa.

Finally, the third sub-failure concerns English language dominance. Students often ask me whether they can cite non-English material. The assumption behind this question is that scholarship written in other languages should not be cited in contexts where another language dominates. It is plausible that a reluctance to encourage citation outside the language of instruction in the institution is informed by academic oversight. The lecturer should read and determine whether the student has presented an accurate reading of the material. However, English language dominance is often underpinned by a much longer history of inattentiveness to knowledge produced in different languages. Much like the first man to discover Lake *Lolwe*, the dominance of English language material is a relationship to power (Chavarro, Tang, and Rafols 2017). The failure of multi-vocality is one that African feminist epistemic communities have grappled with extensively because the contexts within which we work are always multilingual, multi-cultural and multi-vocal (Bennett 2008; Matebeni 2008). However, the Fees Must Fall moment in South Africa produced similar charges such as the ones articulated by SOAS students above. South African universities were criticized for reproducing the same failures that exist in the UK context. In the next section I explore how the evolution of feminist epistemic communities in South Africa at the height of Fees Must Fall co-created



pedagogical practices that engendered a different knowledge transfer process and exchange between academics and students.

### Critical pedagogy

We worked with students to reflect on what it means to think with a canon in a way that makes sense to how they read their context. Instead of saying ‘remove Shakespeare’, we asked students to identify companion texts that they would read in conversation with the canon. The choice of companion texts was based on whatever material they felt brought them to a place of consciousness or better understanding. It did not have to be academic. This also meant that we had to be attentive to hostile institutional practices that had generated the calls for decolonisation and the anger it generated for black students. – Zenani, African Feminist Academic based in South Africa; Interview April 2018.

With the demands of failure of the syllabus came a realisation that formal teaching had to include conscientisation. It was not enough to teach a course based on a fixed set of learning outcomes; but I had to go further and develop a set of reading questions, develop alternative course outlines that were not driven by the course but on what students needed to interact with course content across the university in a less reactive but more engaged way. This involved uploading these reading lists on a shared google drive for larger public access. It meant negotiating the relationship between being a teacher in the classroom and being in solidarity in these alternative spaces of learning that were not linked to degrees and assessment but on centring “how do we know what we know?” Reading groups were set up which constituted both students and academics, who gave of their time in addition to formal teaching. – Atieno, African Feminist Academic based in South Africa.

I was drawn into debates on decolonisation in 2015 based on a range of failures pointed out by students. The failure of pedagogy: students questioning how they were being taught Sociology, Literature. The failure of the institution, because there were not enough black academics. The failure of disciplinary silos that limited an inter-disciplinary approach to learning. Why were feminist courses not available to those not registered in other departments? – Zanele, African Feminist Academic based in South Africa Interview, March 2018.<sup>8</sup>

Atieno and Zenani articulate a process that emerges from within a group of African feminist academics in a South African university in response to some of the demands articulated by Zanele. The responses by Atieno, Zenani and Zanele emerge at the height of the Fees Must Fall protests and can be linked to Grasswick’s (2004) individuals-in-communities conceptualization of feminist epistemic communities. In this work, we see two key features of epistemic communities, the first is the insistence on the co-production of knowledge and the second is attentiveness to individuals as epistemic agents. I argue that in the processes partially captured in the excerpts above, critical pedagogy deployed in its Paulo Freire (1972) formulation, emerges as an epistemic community-building practice. I explore three ways this is made apparent.

The first area of critical pedagogy is connected to citation and introducing students to a range of African feminist voices. Part of the failures articulated by students was the absence of global Southern scholarship in their syllabi. This was a broad charge that was not, and is not, always reflective of the work that individual academics do as part of building their courses. This global charge, however, illustrated the non-institutionalized nature of what it meant to take seriously the power hierarchies that are embedded in how we understand who knows and the processes we enact to affirm that – such as identifying key texts. Connected to this charge was the demand to have more engagement with feminist scholarship, to redress its absence and erasure within their disciplines. Feminist scholarship is by its nature inter – and trans-disciplinary and the absence of feminist scholarship was also a critique of the lack of inter – and trans-disciplinary pedagogy. The choices made in the co-production of reading lists through companion texts is a productive engagement with these failures.

The second area of critical pedagogy centres on the actual praxis of co-creating teaching resources rather than the product – the reading lists. This action was designed to bring students to a consciousness of their role in knowledge creation and curation that challenge systems of power. In asking students to find companion texts, the academics were not letting go of their responsibility to teach, but rather developing a dialogue with the community about how they come to knowledge about their world. The fact that this learning occurred outside the classroom re-organized the power hierarchies in classroom settings, which often position students as *tabula rasas* where information needs to be banked (Freire 1972). The action of building together and the site (outside the classroom) disrupted the ‘wise sage’ lecturer as responsible for sharing knowledge, and the reading list as the ultimate guide to knowledge acquisition. The co-creation of companion texts reoriented attention to the learning process that occurs when you build a reading list. It is a process of meaning making, a process imbued with power. In sharing the power, the community charts the contours of their learning process.

The third area of critical pedagogy is the creation of reading circles. Reading circles have been an essential part of building communities in pursuit of change that is rooted in revolutionary theory (hooks 2003). It is the form and purpose that are important here, particularly the attentiveness to conscientization – why this material matters and what it offers to understanding the root causes and how to unsettle the power hierarchies that the Fees Must Fall movement was grappling with. Conscientization becomes a collective process rather than an individual one. The logic of the reading groups developed by Atieno, Zenani and Zanele, was not simply about consuming knowledge that was demanded by students, but a radical engagement with the contexts that produce them and theoretical work demanded by them. In addition, the community generated by the reading circle is dual: individuals-in-communities interacting scholarship, and a virtual epistemic community through scholarship. The alternative learning space created by these reading circles decentres an individualized approach to learning and knowledge consumption and resolves a systemic challenge, which is the silo-ed way in which African feminist knowledge is consumed in university settings.

In examining African feminist epistemic communities above, I suggest that decolonization debates provided an opportunity to return to a feminist practice that emerges from patriarchal institutional exclusionary practices. As noted at the beginning of this section, the Fees Must Fall moment led to the articulation of pedagogical failures by students, thus producing African feminist epistemic communities. The praxis was rooted in a recognition that it was not about increasing ‘diverse’ voices in the reading list, but turning the knowledge and learning process on its head. These approaches can be sustained as part of decolonization processes if we rethink teaching in universities. The success of this approach hinges on the positionality of academics. In the section that follows, I examine how positionality – black, feminist and woman – produces different sets of demands on one’s labour as part of decolonization processes. I return to a set of interviews I conducted with African feminist academics based in the UK to unpack the disproportionate work undertaken by black academics. In doing so, I examine the failure of solidarity and shared responsibility in decolonizing work. I argue that this failure is in part informed by a limited reading of decolonization work and inattentiveness to how racialization produces different demands for academics.

### **On recruitment and decolonization work**

There was an assumption from colleagues and students that because of my race, my politics around these issues were clear. There was an expectation that I will address race issues. Colleagues would send their students to come and see me for social support and professional support. Yet, when I don’t say the things they expected, I could see the disappointment in their faces. I was invited and /or expected to be part of

conversations about decolonising. Who will do the de-colonial teaching? Who is the constituency for this project? - Koni, African feminist academic, based in England, March 2018.

It is easy to say a university is committed to decolonizing, it is another thing to take seriously who bears the official and unofficial responsibility associated with doing decolonization work. I explore the notion of rewards and penalties to examine the failure of recruitment. The absence of a critical mass of black women academics in UK universities leads to a disproportionate burden placed on the few black academics who are in permanent employment (Rollock 2019a). Focussing on feminist scholars, I argue that the demands of care and support expected of women in our societies are reproduced via this disproportionate labour for decolonization work. As noted by Koni above, it is assumed that black women are ready champions for decolonization projects. When black women do not challenge a system that is designed to write them out and instead adopt survival strategies that make sense for them, they are constructed as sell-outs.

When black women work to challenge power in institutions, they are considered activists, angry or hostile (Rollock 2019b). This is a challenge that black women scholars seem to encounter more than black male scholars because of the visible and invisible way that gendered power relations operate. These power dynamics are reproduced in student evaluations and comments about likeability, niceness, and approachability (Mitchell and Martin 2018). A student once commented on a module evaluation that, while they could not challenge my excellence as a teacher, they thought I *looked* like I could not be approached outside the classroom. This comment was in response to whether they had enough support through office hours to succeed in their module. This was not feedback about coming to office hours and not getting effective support, this was a judgement on how I carried myself. While students may want to take black female academics' modules because you are a 'unicorn' in the university, there is an expectation that you should perform a certain version of femininity – motherly, caring, ever-smiling. These expectations create a context for both hyper-visibility and invisibility that black women academics navigate in the era of decolonizing the university.

Kristina Mitchell and Jonathan Martin (2018) argue that comments about likeability and approachability are not made of male academics. In fact, the standoffish male academic is symbolic of who academics are; they are not penalized for it. In these narratives, gender and race work together to make black women invisible because we are too few, yet hyper-visible because of the demands placed on us to actively engage in diversity work. Non-black academics do not bear the same responsibility. When they use their positions to challenge the status quo they are considered radical. Instead, the action of 'crossing the line' boosts their academic credentials. Who is rewarded – or not – for decolonization work sits at the heart of invisible labour by black women and the failure to reward it.

### **On (in)visible labour**

That black women academics take on additional, invisible, unrewarded and unnamed work points to a systemic failure to build effective systems of support for black students who find universities in the UK alienating. The extra work comes in the form of pastoral care and support demanded by students, in addition to teaching and research. This invisible labour is exacerbated by systemic racism, for which little support exists within institutions (Rollock 2019b). As evidenced by Eve, Nimo, Atieno and Sanou below, black women become a public resource, pulled in multiple directions.

The demand to do additional pastoral care beyond my students also came with assumed familiarity. Students felt entitled to me and my time. I became a public resource. – Atieno, African feminist academic based in South Africa, March 2018.

These requests also came in the form of guest lecture slots. I was aware that, as one of the very few black women faculty, my presence in the classroom as a pedagogue became much more important to students of colour in a context where most of their lecturers were white. If nothing else, they came to breathe in the lectures and in my office. Consequently, I felt greater pressure to deliver; mediocrity isn't an option. This labour is not captured in the workload spreadsheets that code our time, neither is it acknowledged as implicit knowledge that could shape how diversity programmes - that increase hiring, retention, and increase black women in leadership - should function. My colleagues don't have to deal with these extra demands that have little to do with me being an expert on a subject or a region, or being likeable, or being a convenor, but more to do with my race. Unconscious bias becomes a phrase that is thrown around often with little reflection on how those using it perform it daily. How can you not be permanently angry in such a context? – Sanou, African feminist academic based in England, Interview – April 2018.

I had students who were registered in other departments who, on discovering the feminist modules I run, begun auditing them. Given that they could not change their departmental hub, I started receiving requests for support with reading material, to read through work even though there was an assigned supervisor. I recognized the failure that led them to me, but I was also conscious that I was in effect supervising this student, yet that role was not going to be recognized because it was not officially named. As the nature of these requests increased I began to ask students to formally request that I supervise them. These students felt that they were in a difficult place because they had a senior white scholar as a supervisor, yet they were not receiving the academic support necessary. "Difficult" became the placeholder for power relations. – Nimo, African feminist academic based in England. Interview, April 2018.

The labour described by Nimo, Sanou and Atieno is an integral part of decolonization work. The extractive nature of the work described above is informed by the fact that these institutions rarely attract large numbers of black students. Black students make up only 8% of the UK university population (BBC 2018). While Nimo, Sanou and Atieno's labour is valued by students, it is not rewarded by the metrics that determine career progression, which privilege publishing where research intensive universities are concerned. Where universities are sustained by research-led teaching, that has historically relied on mining the experiences of black people, the question 'who are you building for?' creates a protective, defensive posture and enhances the feeling of exploitation (Rodriguez and Boahene 2012). The power hierarchies linked to institutions that position one as an outsider make the labour described above exploitative, extractive rather than generative.

These experiences differ markedly from the process of building feminist epistemic communities at the height of Fees Must Fall, where community building through additional work was solidarity in action. Feminist epistemic communities became spaces for mutual support and survival. Solidarity is generated from a shared recognition that the classroom, the university in question, is impossible for black people. Therefore, the emergent space holds a different political value. It is no longer unrewarded institutional labour. It is political work. The transformative possibilities created through critical pedagogical practices serve not only an educational purpose, but also offer a community building strategy that ruptures the university façade. I turn now to the failure of solidarity to examine the absence of generative feminist epistemic communities for black women academics, that do not glorify unpaid and invisible labour, nor ignore the systemic factors that reproduce cycles of exploitation.

### **On solidarity**

The failure of labour distribution is linked to the failure of real possibilities of solidarity. I draw on excerpts from focus group discussions with students at SOAS to explore solidarity, not only in relation to academics, but as that failure is also understood by black students as they navigate the university.

There was a very clear distinction during the strike<sup>9</sup> between those who were willing to do the work and those who only wanted to show up as participants. There was a divide between those organising the alternative learning spaces, who were being policed much more than those who showed up as participants. It was also interesting that many white allies were markedly absent from conversations where mapping actions for change was happening. It felt like they didn't want to be challenged. – Focus group discussion, London, April 2018.

Consistently being awake [alert to problematic analysis] in class has consequences for people of colour. The classroom becomes a hostile space. There is trauma that accompanies being an activist on these issues [of decolonisation] as a person of colour. – Focus group discussion, London, April 2018.

What does it mean to be a black woman in a classroom who is simultaneously challenging hierarchies of knowledge production by being physically there as a teacher and doing so in a classroom full of white students? I am not just teaching. I am political subject. - Sanou, African feminist academic based in London, Interview, April 2018.

The exhaustion captured in the excerpts above illustrates two main silences or tensions that riddle decolonization work. The students highlight a silence that emerges from being a gendered and racialized epistemic subject. They are forced to occupy the classroom as a subject of inquiry, rather than the classroom as a site of critical knowledge production and transfer. The classroom is a place that produces anxiety and hostility particularly where the absence of shared intellectual experience with non-white students is amplified. Where and how do they speak back? Sanou points to a second silence that constructs the classroom as a site of discomfort/disruption for the pedagogue. Sanou notes the political and material investment as a black pedagogue in the outcomes associated with disrupting normative conceptualizations of the issues under discussion.

Let me extend Sanou's point above with a personal experience. I run an exercise in class to unpack the state-centric nature of scholarship on security by asking students to share what makes them insecure. A student from North Africa said that travelling in predominantly black Senegal made her feel insecure because of her white skin, particularly in her encounters with black Senegalese men. The racist colonial trope of black men being a threat to white women has a long history that generated moral panics to economically confine black labour within particular zones (Stoler 2002). Yet, this experience illustrates how encountering racialized stereotypes in the classroom can have a different effect on a black teacher because they trigger how the criminalization of black bodies remains unquestioned. In that moment, I am not a teacher securing a teachable moment. I am a black woman teacher trying to manage her shock. I am thinking on my feet of how to unpack why that comment was deeply problematic in ways that they can learn from without being read as 'defensive' and 'reactionary'. These experiences are silent because of the exhaustion that accompanies constantly signalling what the classroom looks like for you. These silences underscore what goes unsaid and unseen in superficial decolonization work that focuses on the output rather than the process. This superficiality explains why meaningful solidarity fails.

## Conclusion

Enacting or living decoloniality is instead a commodification of struggle. – Focus group discussion, London, April 2018.

This article centred the practices of African feminist scholars and students in South Africa and the UK to map the epistemic communities that emerge from decolonization demands. I used the framing of failures to understand the demands made by students and the feminist praxis generated by it. I drew on a feminist tradition of recognizing the quotidian and emergent praxis as critical sites for interrogating feminist decolonial approaches. I conclude with two considerations that link

failure as a productive site for challenging decolonial moves that focus solely on reading lists. The first consideration is linked to the pedagogical practices that emerge when we pay attention to the failure of critical citation practices. Racialized and gendered hierarchies are reproduced with the result being the affirmation of the university and knowledge production as masculine or gender neutral. Lessons drawn from South Africa-based academics interviewed for this article, demonstrate that pedagogical approaches that emerge from a moment framed by decolonization demands, enhances how epistemic subjects evolve. The approaches adopted by South African colleagues pushed students to reflect on how they arrive at knowledge about issues that matter to them, the relationship between teachers and students and the diverse sites of knowledge production.

It is this desire for reengineered relationships between epistemic subjects that is also manifest in the demands for ‘unofficial’ supervision and support from black feminist academics across both contexts discussed in this article. These demands reflect systemic failures in staffing, disciplinary silos, and pedagogical weaknesses. The lesson to be drawn from African feminist epistemic communities is the function that critical pedagogy in a hostile context serves as a much-needed political intervention. Bennett argues for the evolution of methodologies and pedagogies that respond to our contexts that ‘dialogue with worlds we want to change’ (Bennett 2008, 5). As illustrated in this article, feminist epistemic communities that build individuals-in-community facilitate the co-creation of knowledge production spaces which are generative rather than extractive. To do this, critical pedagogy requires a move away from centring individual research outputs and workloads as the basis for academic progression and accountability, which only sustain a culture of extraction and exploitation rather than collaboration (Tuhivai-Smith 2012; Aidid 2015). Thinking about individuals-in-communities can open dialogue about solidarity in action. In such an environment, practices such as collaborative writing workshops, pedagogy planning meetings, group teaching, and rethinking the nature of assignments become the norm. These practices not only shift the experience of the classroom and re-distribute labour, but they also move solidarity from sympathy without action, to tangible action that supports black female colleagues.

The second consideration focusses on racialized-gendered labour within universities and the failure to account for it as a by-product of decolonization work. Students and academics interviewed for this article point out that it is not enough for well-meaning colleagues to acknowledge the disproportionate burden borne by black people in universities. (In)visible labour has an impact on how black academics engage as epistemic subjects, which has a knock-on effect on the pedagogical space. The classroom is complicated for the black academic and student alike, with the potential to produce either rage or a negative learning experience for formerly colonized and now ‘researched’ subjects. The productivity of rage (Rodriguez and Boahene 2012) as a feminist methodological approach is complicated by the mental health implications for black women – students and academics alike – surviving these institutions. Rage in this instance cannot be effectively mined for an academic product but sits as an unresolved effect of a classroom or teaching environment that does not enable comprehensive conversations without engendering silence and fear for non-black students and colleagues. The call here is for systemic and institutional responses that share responsibility of having ‘difficult’ conversations about the breadth and depth of decolonial work, without ignoring the human and financial resources that accompany it (Olonisakin 2020).

## Notes

1. Cecil Rhodes was a British imperialist who was one of the architects of South African apartheid. In explicitly believing in the existence of an Anglo-Saxon master race he accumulated land by facilitating the deaths of hundreds of thousands of black South Africans.



2. #Open Stellenbosch, #DecoloniseRhodes.
3. It is worth noting that most of these centres and programmes are invested in the idea of woman as the subject of the feminist project. This is not the focus of this paper but it is worth flagging as part of recognizing larger and contemporary constellations Gender Studies work in Africa, which centres a broader understanding of gender that moves beyond the binary. The move beyond the binary destabilizes the idea of woman as a fixed category and therefore subject and focus of feminisms in Africa.
4. Data was generated from a survey conducted on a continental Gender and Women's Studies list serve. This list cannot therefore be viewed as representative of the entire continent.
5. All names have been changed.
6. The SOAS decolonizing working group has included questions on inclusive teaching in module evaluation forms. However, the practice remains uneven across the university. There are no real measures to hold people accountable for not doing much on decolonizing the classroom.
7. It is worth noting that African scholars have set up journals and one worth noting for the purposes of this article is *Feminist Africa*. Journals of this nature are designed to speak to communities in the African continent as well as expand publishing opportunities beyond journals in the global North whose reach while articulated as global are often limited by paywalls and limited publishing access to scholars from the majority world.
8. The work described by the South African based academics is not individual work. Rather it draws on the work of a collective of black academics who chose to support students in the Fees Must Fall movement through pedagogy.
9. From 22 February 2018, University and College Union members in the United Kingdom took sustained industrial action over fourteen days in the face of damaging proposals from the employers which would effectively destroy the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension scheme.

### Disclosure statement

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Country	University, Centre
Uganda	Makerere University – School of Women and Gender Studies
South Africa	University of Cape Town – African Gender Institute University of Western Cape – Women’s and Gender Studies Centre University of KwaZulu Natal – Gender Studies Centre UNISA – Centre for Gender Studies
Sudan	University of Khartoum – Gender and Development Unit in the Development Studies and Research Institute Ahfad University for Women, Omdurman, Sudan, has a Regional Gender Institute.
Kenya	University of Nairobi – African Women’s Studies Centre Egerton University in Kenya – Women and Development Studies
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