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**Book review: Timmis, S., de Wet, T., Naidoo, K., Trahar, S., Lucas, L., Mgwashu, E. M., Muhuro, P., Wisker, G. (2022). *Rural Transitions to Higher Education in South Africa: Decolonial Perspectives*. Routledge**

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### Transitioning to and Navigating Higher Education Spaces

Informed by the apartheid wrath and legacy of apartheid, as well as concomitant perpetual colonial tendencies such as inequality in access [physical and epistemological], participation continues to be a major challenge for South African higher education. As a result, academic underachievement and low success rates characterise the system. Contrary to popular tendencies, this book's findings demonstrate not only how students from rural contexts can be successful in their university journeys but also have the ability to effect significant changes in higher education (p. ix). These students, however, are not oblivious to tendencies that associate the 'rural' with the negative (pp. 32, 134). Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom and the National Research Foundation in South Africa, this project was titled Southern African Rurality in Higher Education and investigated the learning journeys of students from rural areas of South Africa.

The book is structured in a thesis format with Chapter One consisting of a pre-data generation literature review tapping into the *Historical Context of Higher Education in South Africa*. Reflections appraise the reader on the intricacies of the South African apartheid higher education system and does lay a foundation for the need to transform the institutional landscape. A case for both decoloniality and epistemic justice is made in Chapter Two. Central to decoloniality was the abandonment of a race-based funding model to a quintile system which is pro-poor (and seeks to achieve redress). A quasi-participatory methodology with a decolonial spin (p. 52) and a dash of narrative inquiry principles (p. 51) was adopted for data generation (see Chapter 4). The authors conceded that the study was not designed as participatory action research (PAR) but embraced the notion of participation in research (p. 50). Therefore, this study may not necessarily be subjected to a rigorous PAR (see Carr & Kemmis, 1986; MacDonald, 2012) scrutiny. This softer option, however, afforded the students (as co-researchers) the chance to engage with their personal histories and lived experiences (p. 52). Pondering constructive alignment which requires that all components of a study must be consistent with one another, the context seems not to conform. Whilst the title suggests that the study was conducted in South Africa, some research questions of the study refer to the *global South*, and *Southern Africa*.

Post-data generation chapters (Chapters 5–8) present findings of the study with each focusing on a theme:

5. *Negotiations of Transitions to University: Figured Worlds and Identity Transformations*
6. *Cultural Values and Practices: From Rural Communities to Higher Education*
7. *Place, Funds of Knowledge and Investment in Language*

## 8. Experiencing Higher Education Learning, Teaching and Curricula

Students from rural areas indicated that there are multiple sources of information and support including radio, television and newspapers enabling them to learn, even though access to internet limits their access to information. Given the fact that applications are now done online, many students face a challenge. Chapter Five further demonstrates how challenging it is for students from rural areas to negotiate their transition to higher education in various ways. They experienced incongruities in communitarian cultural and historical practices that differ greatly from theirs (p. 73). In addition, they found the university to be characterized by a lack of awareness to the socio-linguistic challenges for students coming from rural areas including the multilingualism of rural schools. In this way they are afforded a deficit positioning and denied epistemic justice. This illuminates the call to conscientisation for higher education to disrupt the epistemic injustice (Quantz & Buell, 2019) as universities become more digitalised (p. 74-75) in nature.

Pondering the cultural values and practices, students from rural areas indicated an existence of stronger values of *Ubuntu* (Lefa, 2015; Letseka, 2012) which are found to have been eroded to some degree in higher education spaces. For example, a basic value of sharing was found to be eroded. Regarding conceptualisation, the authors reiterate Roberts and Green's (2013) contention that the notion of rurality is multidimensional/multifaceted (demographic, social, cultural and contextual, as well as complex (p. 100). A significant but salient point regarding funds of knowledge associated with being rural was made to conscientize the readership that teachers rarely tap into this source of knowledge and how it manifests in higher education spaces.

The book describes learning at university as “new” (p. 119). “Newness”, in this book, can be traced to the use of language and different kinds of knowledges in the school and higher education contexts. In contrast to higher education spaces where the dominant language of learning and teaching continues to be in English, co-researchers indicated that at school, teachers attempted, on a regular basis, to explain the content in home language. Again, discussing knowledge about healthy eating from indigenous plants and growing plants themselves tended to be overlooked. This coincides with Moletsane's (2012) contention that rural knowledges continue to be marginalised. In a similar vein, coloniality ignored and/or marginalised indigenous knowledges to the periphery. The authors can be lauded for adopting a decoloniality lens as this illuminates the alienation of rural and indigenous knowledges.

In conclusion, the book offers some interesting thoughts about students transitioning from rural areas to higher education. Firstly, space and time shaped transitions of students coming from rural homes into cities and conurbations in very critical ways. This contention presupposes that all universities are in urban contexts. The South African higher education landscape comprises universities found in rural contexts. It would have strengthened the study if such variations were highlighted. Secondly, the book highlights the co-researchers' feelings of being/becoming “unhomed” (p. 143) in their transitioning to higher education. Vice (2015) asserts that where students ‘feel at home’, they feel secure, enabled and productive (p. 143). Another feature that may have enriched the book is a stronger focus on the diversities of rural contexts, as well as assets and how these can be tapped into to ease transitions to higher education. Finally, this book provides a significant contribution to rural education and there is overwhelming evidence that very rich data was gleaned and used. Co-researchers were also afforded sufficient time and leeway to leverage their experiences and, most importantly, reflect on their narratives.

## References

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