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Southern African Review of Education

Special Issue

The University in Techno-Rational Times: Critical Universities Studies, South Africa

Editors: Shireen Motala, Aslam Fataar, and André Keet

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Editor of SARE: Ewelina K. Niemczyk - North-West University
Tel: (018) 299-1111, e-mail: ewelina.niemczyk@nwu.ac.za

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Editorial notes

The university in techno-rational times: Critical universities studies, South Africa

Shireen Motala, Aslam Fataar, and André Keet

Introduction

This special issue is founded on the view of the "public good" university as slowly receding from our horizon of possibilities as a function of the speed with which digital governance and techno-rationality have achieved hegemony in the higher education sector in South Africa and elsewhere. Furthering the depoliticisation of the university, techno-rationality has emerged as an interplay of technological, economic, affective, and socio-cultural forces that are imperceptibly de/recomposing the presumptive grounds on which the contemporary university is being re/assembled.

As a collection of articles, the special issue highlights the implications of techno-rationality for social justice work in higher education and the identity of the modern university. These ideas emerged from the Symposium on Critical University Studies in South Africa (CUS-SA) held at University of Johannesburg in August 2022. The presenters at that symposium, who have also contributed to this special issue, concluded that there is a need to re-imagine emancipatory possibilities for the South African university. This re-imagination resulted in several suggestions, as highlighted in a summative overview by Fataar et al. (2022), ranging from knowledge as epistemic freedom, to how the planetary can help us work through modernist linear developmental tropes, how neoliberalism structures and processes have resulted in a kind of tunnel vision (focusing our attention in the past when the present is recasting itself in profound ways), and also highlighting how South African institutions prepare for crises. Disruptions are constantly grounded in a context of persistent economic and social deprivation.

This focus of this special issue is paramount for two compelling reasons. First, higher education globally, has always played a foundational yet contradictory role in society. On the one hand, it is a platform for critical thinking and intellectual growth; on the other, it is complicit in producing the crises it purports to address. In a context characterised by increasing technological advancements, including the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence and the proliferation of knowledge, it becomes more critical to ensure higher education institutions cultivate a kind of humanity that can respond to the wicked challenges of our times. Advancing the university as a public good then

becomes a critical pursuit. Second, the techno-rational university, characterised by an overreliance on data-driven decision-making and techno-solutionism, overshadows the humanistic dimensions of education. Disclosing and critiquing these normalising trends and their dogmatic dimensions serves as a counterbalance and emphasises the importance of nurturing empathy and critical thinking, which includes a deep understanding of the human experience. This is even more important to higher education institutions given that they should facilitate the emergence of generations of leaders, citizens, and thinkers who are ethically grounded, socially responsible, and capable of addressing the profound moral and philosophical questions at the intersection of techno-science and society. Each of the articles in this issue makes a unique contribution to CUS-SA and, by doing so, highlights the vastness of current debates.

Dina Zoe Belluigi's article entitled, "De-Idealising the Problem of Academic Freedom and Academic Autonomy: Exploring Alternative Readings for Scholarship of South African Higher Education," is set against complex and problematic legacies of institutional and academic autonomy. Her article cautions against curtailing the recognition and study of de-idealised and alternative practices of academic freedom. What she considers, is the possibility of opening the concepts against the limits and the purposes—including in South African higher education research. She offers counter-narratives including those from the longer struggles for freedom within and beyond the academy.

In their article, "In Search of the Holy Grail: Social Justice and Funding in Higher Education in South Africa," Shireen Motala and Kirti Menon argue that funding and support for teaching and learning in higher education must be prioritised. They explore whether the emphasis on research and extreme performativity have detracted from developing teaching and learning that prioritises education goals. The development of a pedagogy for a new age has been derailed despite the urgent need for higher education futures that are contextually grounded and socially responsive. Their article argues that the techno-rational has led to the further displacement of social justice, reinscribing existing inequalities, and creating new ones.

Lis Lange's article on "Rethinking the University: Notes for an Epochal Critique" contends that throughout the centuries and in different geographic settings, universities have evolved historically, responding to the demands and expectations made on them by the state and society and, in the main, have a utilitarian function. These expectations have shifted due to economic, societal, and political changes. She asks critical questions about the history of universities and their purpose, the social composition of the university, and how and under what circumstances the university plays a crucial role in society with transformative consequences. Her article does not provide answers to these questions. Instead, it creates an agenda of work for those committed to revising their practices as academics, professionals, managers, leaders, and students at the university.

Premesh Lalu's, "Re-Imagining the University After Apartheid," foregrounds the issue of race, arguing that *if* there is a threat of the contemporary university being overwhelmed by a techno-rational tendency, the humanities and social sciences ought to be concerned that such a

situation threatens the onset of reconfigured ideas of race in the context of South Africa. This is because the sources of techno-rationality are more deeply embedded in the discourse of the university than we care to imagine, and apartheid "cynically" mobilised these resources to the ends of racial modernisation. The effort to reconstitute non-racial subjectivity at the end of apartheid incidentally revealed the deeply entrenched sources of the techno-rational tendencies enveloping the spheres of knowledge as the latter was placed in the service of a racial formation of the state, capital, and the nascent bourgeois public sphere with which South Africa had become synonymous. Under those conditions, race effectively came to operate as a place-keeper for technical beings, a mark of subjectivity stripped of desire, potential, and creativity.

In her article on "The Redistributed University," Sarah Nuttall poses the question that, as the university constantly reconfigures itself in response to multiple pressures and struggles—including economic constraints, shifting knowledge economies, social justice imperatives, rapid technological change, and climate crisis—how do we approach the institution in its present and historical configurations? Using the notion of the distributed university, she suggests our analyses should address issues of the distribution of belonging and, thus, the undoing of conditions that produce symbolic injury and the loci and imaginative modes of habitability. In the last section of her article, she offers a brief analysis of depictions and entangled imaginaries of African universities in African novels—partly to draw on modes of thought that are less prone to the technocratic and neo-liberal.

Crain Soudien's article, "Transformation Dynamics in South African Universities: Emergent Trends," raises very relevant issues by analysing how documents speak to the ideals of transformation, change, reform, inclusion, and decolonisation—all in the name of social justice—but questions what theories of change sit behind these commitments. How do institutions describe and explain the circumstances in which they find themselves—the sociological contexts to which they form a part, and the range of forces to which they are subjected, and to which they have to respond—and what this means for the role of a knowledge-producing institution? This contribution works specifically with universities' strategic and transformation plans to lift out and analyse how they work with the idea of change. What emergent end-points begin to surface and how the procedures, practices, and logics that begin to rationalise and objectify them and so take shape in the form of theories of change is the focus of this work.

In "'Emergencies' and Techno-Rationality: The Tasks of Decentred Critical University Studies," André Keet, Luan Staphorst, Michaela Penkler, and Nobubele Phuza explore the relationship between the notions of *emergency* and *university* from two angles. First, the university is seen as being in a state of emergency. Second, the university is a state of emergency. Both these readings, they argue, are deployed to uncritically advance the dominance of techno-rationality within higher education in South Africa and elsewhere, which places the social justice possibilities of the university at a distance from itself. An essential task of decentred critical university studies is to provide, amongst others, a disclosing critique of these processes as a basis for which alternative praxes can be imagined.

In the context of increasing neoliberal rationalisation, austerity, and market-orientated approaches to teaching and learning, Marcina Singh in "Rationalising Learning Analytics in Higher Education: Insights From the South African Academy," discusses the university's limited ability to centre the affective as a measure of quality teaching and learning experiences. She explores the effects of incorporating learning analytics in teaching and learning in higher education through the views and practices of two academic professors working at a university in South Africa. Her findings demonstrate that responses to increasing techno-rationality are ambivalent. One values the approach, while the other feels learning analytics disregards the affective dimensions of teaching and learning. The article also highlights how universities have become fixated on collecting information, resulting in a datafication drive. Still, the one-dimensional nature of big data is seldom used to transform university engagements. Her findings raise critical epistemological questions about the university's role and how it grapples with being a public good on the one hand, and complying with prevailing neoliberal institutional philosophies, on the other.

The final article, "A *Musical Offering* to the Recomposed University," by Willemien Froneman and Stephanus Muller focuses on the use of the term "recomposition"—in a musical sense—as an alternative methodology for university-making in the 21st century in South Africa. The authors discuss the governing logics of the contemporary South African university and their proposition that one emancipatory possibility for thinking about the university in the present is to consider the aesthetic of the university. Provocatively, they do so by considering aesthetics not as a branch of philosophy countered by a decolonial aesthesis that offers a critique on aesthetics, but by considering aesthetics as the result of (re)compositional choices that, showing certain consistencies over time, propose certain styles, which then become the basis for re-imagined value judgements (aesthetics or aesthesis). Their aim is to discuss a vocabulary and technique radically outside existing discourses about the future of the university and even the planetary scale of techno-rational reckonings with the posthuman, and the digital and datafied futures, driving the re-composed decomposing university.

As a concluding piece, Lauren Davids' review of Aslam Fataar's recent edited book, *The Educational Pathways and Experiences of Black Students at Stellenbosch University* (2023), highlights the contemporary experiences of Black students at a historically White university in South Africa. She underscores how critical university studies is foundational to Fataar's work given that the book astutely captures Black students' misrecognised educational subjectivity within an elite university with historical ties to Afrikaner nationalism.

The editors thank Marcina Singh for her meticulous coordination of this special issue, liaison, and communication with the authors, reviewers, and editors—ensuring its high quality and scholarship.

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Editors

Shireen Motala is the DST/NRF South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Teaching and Learning, and Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.

Address for correspondence: smotala@uj.ac.za

Aslam Fataar is Distinguished Professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies at Stellenbosch University. He is currently seconded to a research and development chair position in the university's Transformation Office. He is the former editor-in-chief of this journal.

Address for correspondence: afataar@sun.ac.za

André Keet currently holds the Research Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (*Cri*SHET) and is Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Engagement and Transformation at Nelson Mandela University.

Address for correspondence: andre.keet@mandela.ac.za

De-idealising the problem of academic freedom and academic autonomy: Exploring alternative readings for scholarship of South African higher education

Dina Zoe Belluigi
Queen's University Belfast, Nelson Mandela University

Abstract

Set against difficult and problematic legacies of institutional and academic autonomy, this paper cautions against curtailing the recognition, and the study, of troubled and alternative practices of academic freedom. What is deliberated is the possibility of opening the concepts of *academic freedom* and *academic autonomy* against the limits, and the purposes, to which they have been recounted in many conflict-affected and postcolonial contexts. The paper begins by raising questions about the state of enquiry within post-conflict and postcolonial academia. It discusses observations that silence and silencing of engagement seem to be case in South Africa, where troubled legacies of the concepts' operationalisation have had a chilling effect on scholarship. To wrestle the narrowed, dominant discourses away from imperialist and technocratic interests, in this speculative paper the lens of *ugly academic freedoms* allows for international counter-narratives to be drawn upon to de-idealise and problematise the concepts. This serves to situate recollections of fragments of South Africa's past and present intertextual engagements with the internal and external threats to its higher education institutions and its academics' freedoms.

Keywords: academic freedom, academic autonomy, institutional autonomy, South Africa, conflict, colonial

Belluigi, D. (2023). De-idealising the problem of academic freedom and academic autonomy: Exploring alternative readings for scholarship of South African higher education. *Southern African Review of Education, 28*(1), 10–31.

Introduction: The state of enquiry

A complex phenomenon (Abdel Latif, 2014) and a value central to the modern academy's identity, *academic freedom* is used as a normative concept in relation to the agency and autonomy of both academic citizens (academics, scholars, students) and organisations (universities, institutes). Attainment of the virtues of freedom continues to be aspirational (Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum, 2018) and are rarely enshrined in policy or law. There has been a lack of sustained, scholarly engagement on academic freedom both on the African continent (Adu & Odame, 2023) and beyond (Matei, 2023) since the end of the Cold War, with the state of enquiry characterised as being in both an empirical and intellectual crisis (Matei, 2023). Renewed attention internationally has emerged because of ineffectual responses to repression by the United States of America (USA) and the European Union as so-called powerful authorities of democracy (Parmar, 2019), and impositions from neoliberal higher education (HE) norms (Landy et al., 2020) to which critical university studies has contributed.

However, this paper focuses its cautions on the erasures, misrecognitions, and hidden curricula that the dominant discourses of these concepts have spawned. To counter these, I propose the language of ugliness for a two-headed purpose: to push "past the idealized practices of freedom to see what forms of damage they legitimate or incorporate" (Anker, 2022b, para. 2), and to explore the emancipatory potential of dismissed or demeaned practices. Constructions of academic freedom, unfreedom, and the complexities between them—as part of the struggles for freedom—are marginal within dominant scholarship on HE. They are also marginal in the scholarship on freedom, perhaps because those referential frames sprang from, and were sustained by, sources exogenous to the colonial academy. This marginality similarly characterises the state of enquiry in post-conflict and post-conflict HE.

In this paper, I speculate that post-conflict academic authors in postcolonial contexts face risk of guilt-by-association with past immorality and irresponsibility if they evoke academic freedom or academic autonomy as referential frames in the present. One of the priorities in contexts with legacies of division is to establish the legitimacy of academics and institutions as authorities (Taylor, 1988). However, the turn away from risky self-critical knowledge production about the academy creates conditions for re-establishing long disputed techno-rational fictions of omniscience, objectivity, and rightness (Peters, 2020). This continues the shrinkage in the scope of judgment in academic freedom, from deep public and philosophical deliberation of trans-disciplinary worldviews to that of an expert or authority, which was particularly noticeable in Western Europe after the First World War (Fuller, 2009). A more recent case that this paper considers is contemporary South Africa. This young democracy is informed by past and present commitments to various notions and discourses of (non-academic) freedom, with extensive change and scholarship focused on the peoples, practices, and governance of transforming HE. Yet, as I discuss in the next section, enquiry on academic freedom and autonomy has been characterised as unhealthily silent. This is despite the significant lessening of surveillance and threat imposed by the apartheid state, the inclusion of such concepts of freedom in the current constitution, and the

continued opportunities created for debate (such as by the Council on Higher Education). It may be that continued suspicion of the concepts of academic freedom and academic autonomy as idea(l)s always already entangled within colonial and apartheid institutional foundations, has produced something of a taboo on their operationalisation as tools of scholarly engagement, deliberation, or dissent by academics practicing within the country—including those in South African higher education studies (SAHES).

In this paper, I suggest that deliberating these concepts askew holds generative potential for studying the ways in which academic freedom is exercised individually, collectively, and institutionally. I hold that this conversation is worthy of dismememberment and re-membering (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021) for transformative postapartheid and postcolonial discourses and praxis as academic formation is renegotiated within and outside the university.

On prohibitions: Post-conflict HE studies in South Africa

Contemporary SAHES is distinctive in that its dominant formulation sprang from critical orientations. This has included (a) recognition that educational, social, and knowledge authorisation of the South African universities were (in)formed by colonial and apartheid political interests, (b) belief in the transformative social justice potential for the country's future through mass access to HE learning and democratising institutions, and (c) concerted investment in projects, persons, and centres whose raison d'être is studying and informing academic change. Yet the state of engagement with the concepts has required public bodies to intervene—such as by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) an authoritative body established by the democratic state to analyse the sector, which released a call soon after this paper was accepted, stating that:

> Ongoing developments within the higher education sector serve to confirm that indeed there is a need to deepen the national discourse on academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability . . . [and that the] . . . dialectical juxtaposition of these concepts requires interrogation and critical analysis . . . given the influence they have on the health and functionality of higher education systems. (CHE, 2023, pp. 3–4)

This paper does not take the opportunity to critically analyse the attempts to vilify the practices of academic freedom and autonomy, and the ways in which their lack of protections have enabled unfreedoms, repression, and oppression. Rather, my point of departure is the characterisation of the state of enquiry by those well informed. This includes two volumes produced on the subject by the CHE (2008, 2013) and the systematic review of peer-reviewed African scholarship published between 2004 and 2022 undertaken by Adu and Odame (2023). As I discuss in this section, authors therein have noted both omissions and disengagement with the concepts in South Africa's present. I, too, noticed my own reticence to engage—despite my academic formation as a researcher of South African HE having occurred within the postapartheid period.

Metaphorical and figurative language is evoked in those authors' assertions (as was observed about writing on HE in transition, see Belluigi et al., 2019). Essop's foreword to *Academic Freedom: Kagisano No. 8* (CHE, 2013) utilised the metaphor of noise as indicative of healthy democratic debate about academic freedom and autonomy within universities. In contrast, he

expressed that "worrying, then, is silence around these issues in young democracies such as South Africa, where threats to academic freedom and/or institutional autonomy may be becoming more commonplace?" (Essop, 2013, p. vi). The metaphor of a canary in a mine was offered by Sitze (2017) when evoking the purpose, and the foreign nature, of academic autonomy to contemporary democracies. The bird is not natural to that ecology; however, vigilance about its health serves the important purpose of forewarning. Longer than the short memories (and often short-sightedness) of national political figures in liberal democracies, are the intellectual, intergenerational memories of critical consciousness about universities—even if marginalised within. Included in that CHE (2013) anthology, was the contribution of a SAHES scholar ousted in 2022 from a university loudest in its claims of liberal ideals. Her freedom of expression was initially suppressed during the very colloquium wherein I presented my intention to engage on this topic in this paper. Lange's canary song, according to McKenna, called

> for more rigorous and ongoing engagement with issues of academic freedom by the sector as a whole and at the level of individual academics . . . [without which] . . . academic freedom will fail to protect not just academics but also the democratic project. (2013, p. 3)

What these authors asserted, is that this is a legitimate topic for discussion and that, in contemporary South Africa, the current state of enquiry is perplexing.

State-imposed scrutiny of such scholarly engagement during the apartheid era may have played a role in establishing what seems to have become a hidden curriculum inhibiting SAHES. Political dissenters experienced surveillance and sanction including censorship, bans, and exile in the late apartheid era. This curtailing of engagement extended to criminalising the publication, citation, and teaching of their scholarship. Such overt impositions of state power were removed in the 1990s. However, it is possible that the legacies of this are intergenerational vacuums within schools of thought. Such vacuums grow in conditions of social sanctions, when enquiry on certain topics or concepts is deterred or ostracised. The anxiety that debate is itself legitimisation, underpins the argument for social sanctions. In contemporary university discourses of the concepts in the USA and the UK, such fears underpin moralistic arguments against platforming problematic stances, as if doing so is "too shocking to retain a pure conscience" (Rumney, 2014, p. 184). Arguing against collective academic abstention on contentious topics, Rumney (2014, p. 190) drew on the same metaphor as Essop when stating that "silence does not explain, educate or change minds." Prohibitions that limit dissent hinder "the identification of weak ideas and the debate necessary to develop resilient arguments" (Rumney, 2014, p. 185). Herein lies the paradox on which this paper rests. If "controversy is at the heart of the free academic inquiry" (American Association of University Professors, 1970, p. 3) and if the contemporary South African academy does indeed pride itself on engaging in challenging conversations about its pasts and present for the future, should those researching the university be deterred from scholarly engagement with these troubled concepts?

In the next section, I offer a lens through which the troubled and ossified concepts may be opened and utilised for nuanced explorations of academic practices in the past and present, and for

imagining academic futures.

Opening to the realities of ugly freedoms

I have spoken before of the ugly truths of HE (Belluigi, 2020) to acknowledge that academia in search of truths is itself often prepared to maintain falsehoods; and that its truths and its truth-tellers are often neither pure nor omniscient but rather, sometimes disgraceful, flawed, or banal. Similar, is Elizabeth Anker's (2022a) thesis of *Ugly Freedoms*. However, she located an unexpected second type of ugly freedom in practices and situations often dismissed as demeaning, offensive, or ineffectual which, nonetheless, hold emancipatory potential.

Anker's departure point was a reckoning with the difficult legacy of freedom in liberal democracy, and the ways in which modern, Western, individual-oriented liberty has always already been entangled with white supremacy, settler colonialism, climate destruction, economic exploitation, and patriarchy. She posited that, at their very conception, these freedoms were ugly because they legitimated the right to exploit and subjugate others by not extending the rights of autonomy of those shackled and subjugated. Moreover, scholarship that continues to idealise freedom, misses and misrecognises "the ways in which practices of freedom have included enslavement and exploitation as much as independence and emancipation . . . [thereby producing] harm and subjugation as freedom" (Anker, 2022b, para. 2).

Such is the difficult legacy of practices of the ivory tower. Its institutionalisation of academic autonomy legitimated entitlement by the colonial university (and with that, the atrocities of empire) to objectify and discipline the non-academic world and its peoples. Thereby, in the name of civilising freedoms, it justified its execution of control. The classification regimes of the modern university enact themselves in macro and micro ways, not unlike the grand and petty apartheid technologies of geographic to minutia partitions (Crompton, 2007). Critical work is required to complicate our desires of the idealised, and our expectations for the idealised, so as to eschew the power and magnetism of colonial freedoms (Zembylas, 2022).

Engagement only with nostalgic or normative discourses both decreases vigilance of the actual state of play, and invisibilises alternative freedoms already in practice. Thus, de-idealising freedom in scholarship does not translate to discarding it altogether. Not all is ensnared, nor entirely consumed (for resistance practices by the Cornish in England, see Camps, 2020, and in Kenya, see Johnson & Hirt, 2011). This is not fatalistic defeat in the face of "post" realities but rather, as Inayatullah (2018) elegiacally reminds us, a call to think otherwise by drawing from our archives of ethico-political wisdom. Doing so may disrupt the entrapment of uncrushed hopes that have us continually pit (and thus make deficit) present realities against normative ideas (and states) fabricated for and by elite Western ideals, which may never be. The dialectical use and double meaning—that while freedom can be ugly, that ugliness can be a resource for unconventional, world making freedoms—is both counter-narrative and an alternative not necessarily formulated in opposition to the first. Although dismissed, uncelebrated, and undervalued by conventional constructions of freedom's individualistic desire for, and practice of, autonomous control or ownership, more heterogeneous constructions of collective, cooperative modes of freedom and

free action exist.

Dominant discourses and counter-narratives of academic freedom and academic autonomy

The only way out of this crumbling infrastructure, is to inhabit the space and then rethink it (Lalu 2022). Attempting that here, I position dominant discourses of academic freedom (and the figures, institutions, and states they construct) against counter-narratives of the internal and external threats to academic autonomy and collective freedoms. This situates the later discussion of South Africa's ugly wrangles within a layered, de-idealised international narrative.

When conceptualising a contemporary index for which to measure academic freedom globally, three aspects were delineated by Hoffmann & Kinzelbach (2018).

1. Academic freedom as professional freedom: A state without constriction to doctrine, discussion, opinion about the institution or system, and from censorship (International Labour Organisation, 2008). Included, are substantive elements of the freedom of what and how to teach and research and the supportive elements for academics to safeguard those freedoms, such as through self-governance and tenure.
2. Socially-engaged academic freedom: A state of the enjoyment of freedom extending from, to beyond, the physical and virtual bounds of the campus. This construction of academic citizens as societal actors with responsibility for societal interaction and the social goods was catalysed with the incorporation of democratic ideals into HE values—such as equity, access, civic rights, and accountability. It underpins the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics (1990), and has re-emerged in recent works concerned with social transformation and human emancipation (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2015).
3. The human rights of academic citizens to "internationally recognized civil, political, social and cultural rights applicable to all citizens" (UNESCO, 1997, Article 26). Violations are infringements on academic freedom, despite not being an absolute right within international human rights treatise law nor strictly about academia.

Such formulations of academic freedom frame the structure of relations and practices as those between the university and its external constituencies. Normative academic citizens are constructed as worthy moral subjects deserving of protection from outside interference, and capable of self-governance and authority. The relationships among the university's own internal constituencies are, for the most part, unmapped in dominant discourses, thereby maintaining intact the figure of the academic as disinterested omniscient. Such formulations marginalise counter-narratives of the politics of academic citizenry and governance, which feature strongly in postcolonial, global feminist, and race conscious scholarship, including much SAHES.

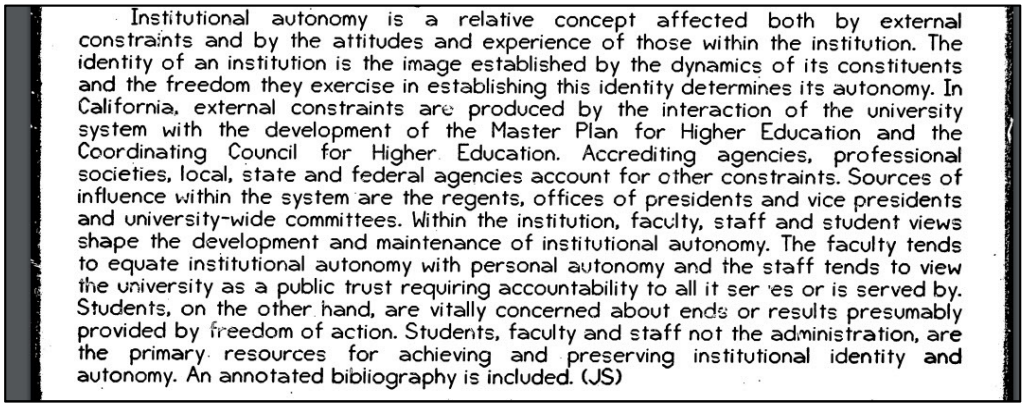
Delinking academic autonomy from institutional autonomy

Constructions of academic freedom and autonomy are framed, not only through positive freedom,

but also, its negative—unfreedom, repression, and oppression. Most existing indices do not measure the extent of the protection of academic freedom but rather, its infringement. The dominant constructions of institutional autonomy were initially formulated in Western Europe and later the USA to "protect universities from being co-opted for the purpose of political repression" (Hoffmann & Kinzelbach, 2018, p. 2). The discourse of protection was strategically associated with institutional autonomy, as if ignorant of the many problematic interests served by those evoking "security" (Sajjad, 2023). Scholars of the various critical traditions have long problematised educational structures' co-option and collusion with the apparatus of the state, organised religion, and imperialism, wherein social engineering (re)produces (dis)advantage and oppression. Without caution from such scholarship and historical precedents, the dominant formulation offered by the United Nations places the protections for freedom within the autonomy of institutions' governance (International Labour Organisation, 2008, p. 31).

Yet, interpretations of the relation between academic autonomy and institution autonomy have long been in flux. Produced over 50 years ago for US readership, the description in Figure 1 points to the differing constructions, cultures, interests, and investments in institutional autonomy that may coexist within a given context.

Figure 1
Aldrich's (1966) note on institutional autonomy as a concept


Institutional autonomy is a relative concept affected both by external constraints and by the attitudes and experience of those within the institution. The identity of an institution is the image established by the dynamics of its constituents and the freedom they exercise in establishing this identity determines its autonomy. In California, external constraints are produced by the interaction of the university system with the development of the Master Plan for Higher Education and the Coordinating Council for Higher Education. Accrediting agencies, professional societies, local, state and federal agencies account for other constraints. Sources of influence within the system are the regents, offices of presidents and vice presidents and university-wide committees. Within the institution, faculty, staff and student views shape the development and maintenance of institutional autonomy. The faculty tends to equate institutional autonomy with personal autonomy and the staff tends to view the university as a public trust requiring accountability to all it ser es or is served by. Students, on the other hand, are vitally concerned about ends or results presumably provided by freedom of action. Students, faculty and staff not the administration, are the primary resources for achieving and preserving institutional identity and autonomy. An annotated bibliography is included. (JS)

Because institutional autonomy is meant to protect against the erosion of conditions that enable academic freedom, it requires the consideration of the matter of the erosion of institutional autonomy. The UNESCO (1997) formulation recognises exogenous forces. Economic and political relations with the state bring overt dynamics of interference in addition to more covert relations, co-option, or collusion between HE institutions and national agendas. This is why institutional autonomy, in particular, was drawn upon in historical economic analyses of neoliberal interference in the Western academy's governance habitus by critical university studies scholars (see for instance Williams, 2012). De facto internal threats to academic autonomy are characteristic of global technoscientific rationalism (Khoo, 2022). Relentless assessment regimes

(review, promotion, funding, publications, peer review, mentorship) shape the everyday life of affective effects through their methods and habits of validation (Zembylas, 2022). The yearning for freedom becomes a prolonged submission to processes of exchange, disciplining, and subjectification of the academic and their production as objects of the hidden macro-curriculum of global academic capitalism.

Institutional autonomy is complicated by its relation to the nation-state, and contingent on the health of the state of the nation. While institutional autonomy is "often thought of as absence of interference by public authorities . . . neither academic freedom nor institutional autonomy can be a reality unless public authorities allow this" (Bergan et al., 2016, p. 4). Dominant contemporary constructions conceive of the public good as that which is in the national interest. The state is positioned as the authority and trustee of such goods, with public authorities having responsibility through funding, legislation, and quality assurance frameworks for regulation of such goods (Bergan et al., 2016) and of equality in employment. The state is also positioned as the duty bearer for human rights, including the human right to HE, within international law.

This deck of cards crumbles under the conditions of failed or captured states, repressive regimes, and the geopolitical erosion of the nation-state. Who has authority over how the public good is defined, and who determines whose interests fall within the public, are questions very much contested in most postcolonial contexts. State definitions are not necessarily transformative (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016). In some cases, nationalistic political agendas have infused public goods with insularity, undermining the human rights of non-citizens, and reneging on global obligations. Moreover, institutions' responsibilities to provide the conditions of academic autonomy and to fulfil their social mandate may pit them against state authorities. In certain situations, there is a "moral obligation to oppose and seek to influence public authorities and/or the prevailing public opinion" (Bergan et al 2016, p. 4). The concern to reinsert such conceptions of the public good into HE, were an early feature within South African transformation initiatives (see for instance Singh, 2001). To move beyond limited conceptions of the public goods in dominating neoliberal discourses, bodies such as UNESCO (2015) have widened conceptions of the social and civic good to include both local and trans-national goods. The *global common good* reasserts principles of justice in recognition of the non-elitist and non-rivalrous goods of HE, including knowledge, education, and critical consciousness to recentre human rights and development principles.

Repressive actions by state actors include delegitimising academic freedom and eroding institutional autonomy and academic autonomy through "the criminalization of academics, the use of 'foreign agent' or anti-terrorism laws, the securitisation and militarisation of campuses, negative public discourse by governments and (mis)use of national emergency laws" (Lyer & Suba, 2019, p. 12). Recognising state–institutional tensions, attempts have been made to conceptualise and implement measures of academic freedom per nation to raise consciousness and strengthen global communities in support of the conditions for academic freedom. However, the state is only one exogenous influence on the institution's ability to provide conditions of academic

freedom. Armed conflict, limited statehood, and non-state local and international actors may have a significant impact. Conspiracies of third-force interference feature within the discourses of postapartheid South Africa.

As an institutional formulation on which to base critical efforts, academic citizenry has its limits. The politics of belonging excludes the bestowing of rights on those at the margins of institutionalised citizenry. Global academic citizenry is similarly limited, despite extending the bounds beyond individual institutions and nationalistic gains. Those experiencing mobility, migration, displacement, diaspora, exile; job precarity, shortage, loss, and retirement; and purged, sessional, and independent scholars may be only granted the right of freedom of expression. Exposing the limitations of socially engaged academic freedom and lack of protection within formulations of extramural academic freedom, these intellectuals are operating outside of institutional *murus* (literally, outside the university's walls; Zavale & Langa, 2018). Against a backdrop of state repression on the African continent, Zavale and Langa (2018) questioned idealisations of institutional autonomy, asking "do African academics need to be in diaspora to exercise their academic freedom, including freedom of expression and free speech, particularly beyond the walls of the university and its consecrated freedom of teaching and research?" (p. 1).

Such counter-narratives reckon with the positing of idealised public authorities and institutions as protectors and providers of the conditions for academic autonomy. What they reveal is that delinking notions of academic autonomy from institutional autonomy has already been productive for the practices of ugly academic freedom in our times. Knowledge about such practices is our inheritance of crushed hopes.

Individual versus collective orientations to freedom

Discourses of academic freedom and autonomy contrast markedly when conceiving of freedom as about individualistic, collective, or common practices and states. As with contemporary discourses that collapse freedoms, academic freedoms are often reduced to individual choice or entitlements. To catalyse consciousness in South African readership, Lange (2013) drew on forewarnings of reductions of academic freedoms in neoliberal England. A continuum is offered in that vision by Marginson (2009): from strong control (at the micro-level of the individual academics' choice of focus), to restriction (through policy, limiting the range, and means by which such choice is exercised), to the severely reduced means of (re)framing choice—thereby weakening the possibility of radical critical breaks and disruption.

Collectivity is conjured for solidarity in defence of adverse conditions. Examples of this are the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility (1990, last line), which called on "African intellectuals to develop solidarity and supportive networks to defend the collective interests of the intellectual community," and exiled Syrian academics' calls for solidarity from those who have weathered and learnt from conflict (Belluigi & Parkinson, 2020). It has been evoked for resistance against threats to disciplines, institutions, and social groups. However, such resistance is undermined by dominant constructions of academic freedom and academic autonomy as only about exogenous relations. Recognition of the university as a

socio-cultural institution is resisted, because it seemingly weakens the surety of its claims to authority and of being peopled by authorities above worldly interests, bias, or desires.

Within the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), academic freedom is included in rights to freedom of expression extended to everyone. Was this because the struggle for academic freedom was understood as one of the many struggles for citizenship (the powerful metaphor of Sall, 1997)? That would link academic freedom to the long struggles for freedom of the oppressed. The torchbearers of this struggle have been those marginalised and minoritised by the dominant intellectual elite, bearing the brunt of the absence of, and struggle for, rights and powerful participation within broader society (Zeleza, 2003). Unpacking the politics of belonging and the politics of participation exposes the bounds and costs of such citizenry against the norms of those in positions of power.

When it comes to such critical work about the academy in the minority world, various outsiders within the Euro-American academy worked considerably to show the limits of the logics of knowledge production and de/legitimation on autonomy (Foucault & Deleuze, 1980; Said, 1993; Spivak, 2008). Feminists looking at injustices have created compelling counter-discourses about the relation of academic freedom and academic autonomy to gender, with increasing consciousness being raised about intersectional subjectivities and the experience of oppression through the radical work of Black feminists. Considering the impossibilities of solidarities in the techno-rational present of the UK academy, Tate (2022) reasserted Stuart Hall's distinction between intellectual work and academic production, when exposing the dynamics of white feminism's extraction of Black academic work. Responses to such erasure, and that of geopolitical academic racism, include unmasking the locus of enunciation in academic knowledge-making (Diniz De Figueiredo & Martinez, 2021) to contextualise productively and enable critique.

Those situated in, or identified with, the majority world encounter sticky geopolitical webs in global academic citizenry. Authorship is limited by the access to, and the production of, the supposedly global common goods of knowledge. Asserting that a radical break is needed for knowledges in contemporary African universities, Mudimbe (2023, p. 40) articulated this as "a political problem: which master to choose? The imperialist ideology of the West, or service to the future of Africa?" The struggle for control being suggested therein—of ownership, autonomy, governance, sovereignty as part of the intellectual pursuit towards the unshackling of knowledges—enlivens much of the current renewal to decolonise, Afrikanise, or indigenise intellectual world making in our times. This is other than the individualised possibilities of academic choice as freedom (without power or possibility of radical break), which Marginson (2009) sketched about the neoliberal UK academy.

However, the challenges to such collective freedom are many. Geopolitical neocolonial assessment regimes are often reinscribed on a national level. An example is how constraints to both institutional and academic autonomy are imposed by South Africa's research funding oversight body. It imposes the bibliometric coloniality lorded over by the Global North's commercial academic publishing houses (Mzileni & Heleta, 2023) to the direct detriment of

Africa-based growth. Such technologies reassert the colonial trap of techno-rationality over our autonomy as academics (Chiappa, 2022). In the section following, grey and academic literature are interwoven genealogically to expose the complexities of ugly academic freedoms as acts and conceptions troubled and alternate.

South Africa's wrangles with these concepts in policy and practice

Intertextual referents of the concepts and practices of academic freedom and autonomy in South Africa have been selected for this section, from a critical review of peer-reviewed papers and the influential sources they referenced. They reveal that international discourses have been intertwined with idealised conceptions espoused locally. Additionally, within authoritative texts and processes of the transitioning democracy post-conflict, silences and omissions are identified to build uncertainty and hesitation about that which has been taken for granted (Meskus & Tikka, 2022).

Explicit from the universities' inception have been ugliness and harms, including unrecognising the intellectual freedoms practiced by those indigenous prior to the establishment of formalised missionary institutions and settler universities. Early settler, enslaved, indentured workers, and many migrants' knowledges were also either suppressed or undeveloped. Here, I discuss how the initial idealised Western European Protestant interpretations were almost entirely collapsed into fictionalised concepts of institutional autonomy during the growth of the apartheid regime. Resistances to institutional interference during apartheid were largely ineffectual although acts of academic freedom continued, often for opposing ends. Later, with trust in the stewardship of the African National Congress as leading the government in the early apartheid period, the relation of academic-institutional autonomy was soon recast as adversely associated with the ivory tower.

The settler colonial, and later apartheid, regimes designed their institutions to segregate and impose two linguistic sections of the colonial population (English- and Afrikaans-speaking) in support of their control over the Indigenous populations. Scottish interpretations of the Enlightenment mission of the intellectual pursuit of truth and justice, which ran through many of their missionary and educational institutions (Muller, 2021), were espoused by English-medium establishments. This orientation differed fundamentally to the social order structured around the advancement of the white Afrikaner volk in Afrikaans institutions (Koen, 2003). Trained at the latter were the initial selection committees who appointed academic staff for the African, Coloured, and Indian universities (Gwala, 1988), established from the early period of apartheid onwards. Those had far less institutional autonomy to govern academic aspects of their work than that of the majority white institutions, whose systems had faculty-led senates ("Academic Apartheid," 1960).

However, the threat of state-imposed political interference was such that it led a vice-chancellor of one of the "white" English-speaking institutions to mobilise a public challenge (Conference of Representatives, 1957) to race-based regulations imposed by the Nationalist Party. In that text, constructions of South African academic freedom were set against academic racial segregation

practiced in the USA (Sitze, 2013). The authors criticised the policy of apartheid by showing it to be reducible to the United States constitutional doctrine of "separate but equal," which at that time was the controlling legal precedent for United States HE (*Plessy v. Ferguson, 1895*). Threats to academic freedom were therein constructed as only external (du Toit, 2005). Institutional autonomy became conflated in the argument they made that

> academic autonomy and academic apartheid . . . [were] . . . mutually exclusive: either it will be the case that the open universities will remain able to pursue the ideal of academic nonsegregation or else it will be the case that they will lack any academic autonomy at all. Between Lehrfreiheit and Lehrnfreiheit on the one hand, and apartheid on the other, there can be no coexistence. (Sitze, 2013, pp. 772–773)

Explicitly injected into discourses of freedom at that time, was ethical social responsibility. To construct the notion of the "plain duty" of the institution to oppose academic apartheid "unless they wish to become party to the betrayal of their own ideals and traditions" (Conference of Representatives, 1957, pp.25–26), the authors drew on the precedent of the *studium generale* in England's institutional history:

> It is almost axiomatic that a university should be more diverse in its membership than is the community in which it exists. This diversity itself contributes to the discovery of truth, for truth is hammered out in discussion, in the clash of ideas . . . diversity is essential to our ideal of a university. (Conference of Representatives, 1957, pp.14–15)

Drawing on Lalu's (2007) analysis of universities' collusion with the state, Sitze (2013, pp. 776–777) revealed the ugly truth about the liberal South African HE tradition that this iconic act obscured. This was that "even the open universities that mourned the loss of their academic freedom under apartheid" were, in their practices, staff, and student compositions, and inter-institutional relations "apartheid universities" (Sitze, 2013, p. 777). The legacies of that obfuscated, failed praxis are of interest. While some may accuse the dominant proponents of critical university studies in the minority world for ascribing to dangerous melancholia of academia's past, it may be that a state of mourning has bedevilled South African HE too.

> No one likes mourning the loss of ideals that were never fully realized in the first place. But the academy's best students always have remembered to do just that. (Sitze, 2013, p. 778)

By stating this, Sitze suggested that "unsatisfactoriness" imbued South African HE with critical consciousness—which SAHES has arguably reinvoked again and again (for instance, see Idahosa & Vincent, 2018; Singh, 2001; Tendi, 2008). How then does one engage with this notion of academic responsibility in the aftermath of histories of the practices of ugly academic freedoms?

Idealised forms of academic freedom, academic autonomy, and institutional autonomy were recognised as severely violated during apartheid—globally and then nationally after apartheid ended, informing the insertion within the Constitution. Activism in defence of those ideals, and continual practices of various ugly academic freedoms, occurred throughout the colonial, apartheid, and Cold War periods, both within and outside of institutions. Evidence and public discourse engaged with how academic citizens were displaced, exiled, endured censure,

surveillance, attacks, and torture. Yet neither the perpetration nor experiences of harms by academics or institutions were included in the scope of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/). However, one of the goals of the postapartheid Department of Education's (1997) influential *White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education* was to signal change to the adverse conditions that academic citizens had endured, with a goal "to establish an academic climate characterised by free and open debate, critical questioning of prevailing orthodoxies and experimentation with new ideas" (Department of Education [DoE], 1997, p. 9). Specifically, protections against exogenous interference to academic autonomy were articulated as the condition for the principle and constitutional right to be practiced:

> The principle of academic freedom implies the absence of outside interference, censure or obstacles in the pursuit and practice of academic work. It is a precondition for critical, experimental and creative thought and therefore for the advancement of intellectual inquiry and knowledge. Academic freedom and scientific inquiry are fundamental rights protected by the Constitution. (DoE, 1997, p. 8)

Texts such as these contributed to national bodies' interpretation of the Constitutional right as an attempt to institutionalise academic freedom "as a core principle for the governance of higher education" (Academy of Science of South Africa, 2010, para. 2). Discourse adopted within the White Paper brought to the fore state–institutional tensions in governance about the public goods, with idealised commitments, tenets, and conditions to be held in balance "for a vibrant system" (DoE, 1997, p. 27). Explicitly articulated was the concern that institutional autonomy may be at odds with state's "steering mechanism for transformation of the higher education system" (DoE, 1997, p. 8). SAHES scholars have similarly characterised historically white institutions as resistant to transformation (for instance see Booi et al., 2017). Threaded across these discourses are both idealised and moralised virtues, duties, goods, and freedoms:

> There is no moral basis for using the principle of institutional autonomy as a pretext for resisting democratic change or in defence of mismanagement. Institutional autonomy is therefore inextricably linked to the demands of public accountability. (DoE, 1997, p. 8)

Sitze (2013) highlighted how the ethical dyad of no academic freedom without a corresponding academic responsibility was entangled in misinterpretations of the iconic open universities text, within what became the classic formulation of the USA. This dyad was retranslated in the early postapartheid period by returning exiles who assumed assigned leadership of HE. It has become a dogma of individual responsibility and institutional accountability. Tabensky also pointed to virtues, evoking sources "from the Ancient Greeks and Romans, developed long before the Enlightenment era" to focus on the conditions for "our ability to act in accordance with the virtues that define our professions" (2013, p. 87).

While some early postapartheid policy texts explicitly acknowledged the internal "struggles for control, lack of consensus and even conflict over differing interpretations of higher education transformation" (DoE, 1997, p. 26), missed was the opportunity for addressing internal threats by authorising conceptions of academic freedom in relation to academic citizenry. The dangers of this

omission were soon exposed. The sector continued towards corporatisation in its governance arrangements (a trajectory noticed from the 1980s onwards in research, see Desai & Bohmke, 1997), despite the association of transformation discourses with democratic values of participation (one of the central principles of the 2009 White Paper). As managerialism grew, in some cases, institutional autonomy empowered abuse by bureaucrats (just as du Toit, 2005 foretold). Three decades later, rampant capitalism, lucrative payment packages for executive administrators, tenderprenuerial habits and "political squabbles" (Sebola, 2022, p. 10) threaten the health and reputation of public universities. The concerns extend beyond leadership ethics through to corruption, nepotistic hiring and firing practices, and assassinations (Vaughan & Ncayiyana, 2020). The state, meant not to micromanage their co-operative governance with institutions, has at times intervened by initiating forensic investigations, and paternalistically taking nine errant institutions into administration.

The effects of not heeding early cautions (such as those by Habib et al., 2008) about too close an acceptance in the new democratic period of a relation to the state with the university have emerged. Academic agency, voice, and critique became entrusted to those in assigned leadership roles in support of national imperatives in the early postapartheid period. Academic unions' agency in early 1990s' policy formation was eroded and organisationally fractured. In 2008, Habib et al. worried about damage to employment conditions, staff remuneration, weakened free speech, and the deference to internal authority. Over time, the vestiges of the few faculty-led structures once prized as an enactment of academic freedom from the bottom up in the liberal tradition, buckled under the weight of top-down, top-heavy, and often authoritative managerial structures. The latter were supported by compliance pressures from the national audit culture and the increased performance management. The erosion of the professional academic freedoms was such that by 2010 it was no longer controversial to claim that "the right of academics to criticise university administrations has been particularly contentious" (Academy of Science Of South Africa, 2020, para. 6).

Less in the limelight are the ways academic citizenry has morphed. Perverse incentives within employment and equality legislation have allowed for exploitative and exclusionary institutional practices. By 2020, only 38% of academics enjoyed the safety of tenure (CHE, 2022). In/visible to the state's monitoring and reporting, and thus not prevalent in public discourse, is the casualised labour of postdoctoral researchers (Kerr, 2022). Hostile visa policies and nationalistic entitlements have been experienced as harms to African migrant academics, including those in assigned leadership positions within historically Black institutions (Belluigi et al., 2022), without regard to protections called for within the Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility (1990).

Contemplating how this may advance the critical study of the South African university

Between freedom and unfreedom are many complications and moments worthy of struggle, study, and deliberation, despite problematic histories and disappointed realities. In this paper, I have drawn from and adapted Anker's (2022a) language of ugliness as a lens that recognises that many

enactors of moments of freedom are not ideal subjects, and avoids the pretence that the push for freedom may not be at the expense of others' oppression or harm. Wisdom sees that not all freedom is entitlement, nor is all resistance acts of freedom. Exploring, understanding, and studying the practices of ugly academic freedom—from whence they come and for which purposes—may engender situated knowledge about how such freedom is enacted.

However, global pressures for demonstrating scientific efficiency and production outputs (in the game of technology and its goal of optimal performance) threaten to subordinate conditions that value engagement with complexity, truth, and justice (Peters, 2020) within and through the practices of the university. In the current climate of impatience within South Africa (see the rhetoric played with by Jansen, 2023), the desire for efficacy may limit opening the concepts of academic freedom and academic autonomy—particularly given that these are concepts already eschewed. The effect may be dismissal. Anker (2022a) raised cautions about measuring ugly freedoms against the criteria of efficacy. I too, hold there is value in deliberating and studying the conditions for the possibility of practices of ugly academic freedom.

I utilised this lens to dialectically disrupt dominant international narratives of academic freedom and academic autonomy. In relation to the South African case, I propose that it may offer critical and creative ways in which scholarship critiques, witnesses, recognises, and thereby collectively moves forward into the silence. The South African university, its academic citizens, and SAHES have had a robust tradition of calling out the ugly truth of what occurs within institutions, even when such voice was criminalised. Parallel to this, have been the active and impactful social consciousness of student activism and of academic responsiveness to equity, both within the educational functions of the university and in service to the third mission (articulated as community engagement). These are counter-archives worthy of critical mapping. Exploring the academic functions, traditions, and scholarship askew may enable more just and complex comprehension of the conditions for, and practices of, ugly academic freedoms where they are, before they are dismissed as deviance, immoral, non-institutional, or illegitimate. That in turn, may enable us to probe in what ways these relate to distinctions drawn between the conditions of individual, institutional, and collective freedom and autonomy to be, to do, and to represent. The lack of constitutional clarity about the relationship between academic freedom, public good, and democratic accountability (du Toit, 2013) may thereby be opened to more radical speculation, particularly given that the state linked this responsibility to the common good (DoE, 1997, p. 9)—an under-utilised term in SAHES.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that the aversion to academic freedom and academic autonomy by HE researchers may be (in)formed by the recollection of these ideographs' weaponisation and their failure, or because of professional risk within the current milieu. Academic freedoms are ugly in many ways—the form they take, the agents that struggle for them—and the practices themselves may be neither ideal nor beautiful. I have posited that engaging dialectically with academic

freedom and academic autonomy necessitates recognising that the complexities of such ugly freedoms (Anker, 2022a) neither can nor should be expunged. Revealed as threadbare, are the dominant idealised conceptions undergirded by liberal, Enlightenment ideals of progress and the civilising mission of universities, problematically conflating academic autonomy with the institutional, and entrusting protections to idealised notions of the institution and the nation-state. Rather, approaching the subject by recognising it as part of the struggles for freedom, allows for deliberating the problem of academic freedom otherwise.

With this lens and recognition of ugliness, the paper considered intertextual referents, gaps, and omissions in grey and published literature on South African HE. More in-depth and situated exploration of the handling of academic freedom and academic autonomy in different post-conflict and postcolonial contexts would be beneficial, as would analysis of practices. The influence of formal and hidden institutional curricula on the construction and operationalisation of these concepts could be unpacked in relation to policies and assessment regimes, the formations of academic citizenry (including by academic development units), and student and staff unions—areas of enquiry aimed at social change.

Persisting in raising questions about the problem of academic freedom enables us as scholars and, in turn, as agents within academia, to engage in critical dialogue about how we might comprehend, analyse, and reshape un/freedom and all that is betwixt and between relations of dependence, autonomy, interference, and situatedness. Doing so, might enable better consciousness of the limits of the university and its functions to serve global ecologies for the common good—and the conditions for collective possibilities of freedom.

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Notes on the author

Dina Zoe Belluigi is Professor of Authorship, Representation and Transformation in Academia at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland, and a visiting professor of the Chair for the Critical Studies of Higher Education Transformation, Nelson Mandela University. She serves on the Scholars at Risk Ireland Committee, the Council for At Risk Academics (Cara) Syrian programme, and the Council of the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE).

Address for correspondence

d.belluigi@qub.ac.uk

In search of the holy grail: Social justice and funding in higher education in South Africa

Shireen Motala and Kirti Menon
University of Johannesburg

Abstract

Since 1994, the South African higher education sector has wrestled with access, equity, and social justice despite interventions geared towards systemic reform. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 disrupted the sector by surfacing deeply layered barriers to access, arresting the pursuit of educational equity, and distorting advances made in social and cognitive justice. The restraints and constraints of lockdowns and the vagaries of the pandemic made it impossible to underplay the impact of rampant inequality on staff and student wellness, access, and academic achievement. Universities went to inordinate lengths to ensure that teaching and learning would continue, engaging in hybrid modalities that have since increasingly normalised the role of technology in the educational encounter (Crawford et al., 2020). As universities grapple with the complexities of returning to the contact mode, and absorbing the lessons of hybrid teaching and learning, the question of how to foreground equity and social justice continues to bedevil the sector (Atherton et al., 2020; Chatterjee et al., 2020). The performativity entrenched in higher education forces outdated measures of academic excellence and performance. This paper argues that funding and support for teaching and learning in higher education must be prioritised. It explores whether the emphasis on research and extreme performativity have detracted from developing teaching and learning that prioritise education. The development of a pedagogy for a new age has been derailed despite the urgent need for higher education futures that are contextually grounded and socially responsive. It is argued that the techno-rational has led to the further displacement of social justice, reinscribing existing inequalities, and creating new ones. The system of the techno-rational masks the real operations of inequality by reducing these to numeric indicators and distorting the true impact of enhanced performativity on the most marginalised of students and staff.

Keywords: funding of South African higher education, techno rational, inequality, teaching, learning

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Introduction

There has been an ongoing quest for the holy grail[1] of social justice in higher education in South Africa. Consistently, since 1994, the widening of access across race, gender, and class has been foregrounded in policies and accompanying regulatory instruments. However, access without success, and a higher education sector beleaguered by financial constraint, makes turning the tide of inequality post apartheid a Herculean task. Managerial and operational systems embedded within neoliberal reform processes have become commonplace in higher education, despite these being subversive to the social justice agenda (Wolhuter, 2023). What is meant by this, is that whilst government funding requires accountability, lost in the complex machineries of counting, measuring, and reporting are layered and complex understandings of what is required for teaching and learning given the contexts of students and their experiences within a disparate, unequal, and uneven sector.

The paper begins with a theorisation of inequality, social justice, and digital inequality. It then discusses inequality in the South African context, making the argument that education equity and social equity are linked. Next, it considers higher education funding, noting that in SA, this has not kept up with inflation. In real terms, higher education funding and the allocation to teaching and learning has not increased, despite increases in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allocation. This calls into question whether the resourcing of teaching and learning is adequate for the current needs of the system and considering the vast changes in the modalities of teaching and learning necessitated by Covid-19 pandemic, what the implications of the techno-rational turn are for higher education.

In a country context where race had cumulative effects on advantage post 1994, higher education has had a complex role to play in addressing the deep inequities resulting from apartheid and colonialism. Higher education needed to meet the goals of widening access, increasing participation generally and in scarce skill areas such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), reducing skills shortages, contributing to social development, and meeting core national development indicators. These priorities seemed to naturally lead to managerial and operational strategies that rewarded performance and prioritised clear indicators of effectiveness and efficiency.

Funding of higher education in South Africa needs urgent revisiting given the failure to examine whether institutional funding matches the teaching imperatives of different universities. As the functions and purposes of higher education are framed and reframed, it can be argued that increasingly, students are viewed as products that are required to contribute to the economy, or consumers paying for excludable goods and services (Altbach et al., 2009). Their experience of institutions is measured in terms of their contribution as economic units or paying consumers/future donors—but rarely in terms of the lived experience of increasing managerialism and liberalisation of the public sector (Altbach et al., 2009). Whilst access and social inclusion are

1 A mythical object, near-impossible to obtain, but which confers great benefit and reward if found.

embedded in policy frameworks, the growth of the public higher education sector since the turn of democracy has continued without the concomitant growth in financial resourcing—with adverse effects for equitable and sustainable funding within the system. The under-resourcing of the higher education sector impacts its ability to flourish as a strategic lever in the development of the country, with the need for an effective transition from widening access, as the first point of redress, to undergirding widespread student success and throughput (Naidoo & McKay, 2018). Although government has increased its share of funding for higher education since 2015 through block grants and NSFAS finance in response to the #FeesMustFall movement, the real value of this increase must be taken alongside a significant expansion of student numbers in order to alleviate access demands (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training stated that:

> A particularly important area of focus with regard to expanding student access and success is the development of the scarce and critical skills needed for South Africa's economic development. Universities must provide for the education of sufficient numbers of professionals and other graduates in scarce skills areas. (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013, p. 33)

This emphasis is distilled through policy instruments and the availability of funding at the national level and at the institutional level through strategic plans, the development of enrolment plans that signify an alignment with the goals and objectives of the government, and the availability of university funding for students in high-demand categories like STEM (Maka et al., 2021).

These interventions signal awareness of the need to meet multiple interlocking goals including reaching demographic parity, increasing enrolment for the previously disadvantaged, and meeting economic and labour market needs through graduate output (Mncayi & Dunga, 2016). However, they occur within the context of increasingly limited state funding for universities, contemporary and inherited inequalities between these institutions, and constrained labour market realities (O'Reilly et al., 2015). For example, during the pandemic and the resultant lockdown periods, both government and universities expressed the commitment that no student be left behind. Whilst this unprecedented era set in motion the machinery to disperse digital devices to students and provide data, the delay in government provision to students was evident, with institutions assuming the responsibility for meeting delays and gaps in supply. This was despite vast differences in what different universities could afford to provide, in turn affecting the quality of their blended learning delivery (Menon et al., 2022).

The postapartheid government's efforts to introduce additional funding to meet equity gaps in universities culminated in the establishment of two grant mechanisms in 2004: the Teaching Development Grant and the Research Development Grant, which later were incorporated into the University Capacity Development Programme in 2018 in recognition of the need for coordinated development support for higher education (Moyo & McKenna, 2021). In part, this was because the inherited equity gaps from apartheid resulted in historically disadvantaged institutions redirecting funding support for teaching and learning towards the much-needed improvement of infrastructure

and procurement of resources, resulting in lagging improvement in actual teaching and learning quality. In recent years, government has recognised that funding and support need to be intricately connected given that university managers and staff need to make informed and critical use of scarce state resources.

Funding as a blunt instrument

Whilst policy rhetoric continues to foreground the social justice agenda with calls for the transformation of the higher education sector, widening of access, and success, there continues to be the insidious creeping in of the instrumentalist view of higher education in how policies are interpreted and implemented. What emerges from an analysis of the funding of the sector is the existence of a distinct lacuna in stimulus funding that can be purposefully directed at supporting and enabling teaching and learning at universities. The share of government expenditure on tertiary education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) almost doubled from 0.7% in 2011/12 to 1.3% in 2020/21, while tertiary spending as a percentage of the total education budget increased by over seven percentage points in the last 10 years (DHET, 2023). But, in real terms, this has had no measurable impact on universities in terms of outcomes and outputs.

A low return on investment continues, compared to other middle-income countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022) and fellow members of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) bloc (Rena, 2019; Wolhuter, 2023). Cross-country comparisons of educational spending are not always a useful indicator of where South Africa is located because these fail to capture differences in education systems and how higher education is positioned within them, population size, and socio-political drivers of education participation. Within the Southern African Development Community, it is notable that the proportion of government spending committed to education overall in 2021 was higher in states emerging from protracted conflict or some form of authoritarian government in the last 40 years: Namibia (24.1%), Democratic Republic of Congo (21.61%), Mozambique (18.76%), and South Africa (18.42%; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). This highlights the politically and socially embedded nature of education spending and the way it is mobilised towards changing societies, rebuilding institutions, and unlocking opportunity in contexts where access to labour and financial markets is constrained by inherited (dis)advantages. Implicit in this wielding of social spending is the notion of achieving social justice through careful prioritisation of the mechanisms that maximise equity. For similar reasons, education and other key social priorities such as healthcare and social welfare are regularly in competition for increases in state funding, given the importance of these sectors for the overall social health of society.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the persistent nature of inequality in South Africa, bringing to the fore how access and success in universities continue to be shaped almost 30 years post apartheid. Moreover, it signifies the enormous pressure placed on a higher education sector that emerged from the consolidation of multiple racially designated education departments that together, were designed to further entrench White supremacy epistemically and materially

(Mncayi & Dunga, 2016). This was not a system designed to unlock opportunity and social mobility for all students—nor was it fit for the purpose of a modern democracy and economy. It is likely for this reason that the association between higher education and social mobility is assumed to be particularly strong in South Africa, given the relationship between race, education, and economic advancement (Brooks et al., 2021). This echoes the stratification within the basic education sector where school quality is mediated by proximity and economic status, which themselves are a product of racial histories. Brooks et al. (2021) approached the question of the purpose of higher education by undertaking focus group discussions with students. It is perhaps not surprising that student respondents viewed higher education primarily as a route into the labour market. This view was supported by Altbach et al.'s (2009) work developed during the 2008 financial crisis.

Reflecting on learning for an unknown future, Barnett (2004, p. 1) reminded us that "the way forward lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human being and focus on human qualities and dispositions and not knowledge and skills." New questions that have arisen since the pandemic include how the transition to online teaching and learning produced new barriers to access and implications for institutional resourcing. These include the cost of devices, internet connectivity, and learning resources; the impact of load-shedding on scheduling, attendance, and quality of connection; as well as whether the pedagogies currently being deployed in online education are effectively attuned to the nuances of the online realm, rather than simply a transposing of traditional contact methods.

Public universities in South Africa interface with government through the provision of data and reports that speak to the use of state funding. The arsenal of information available to universities is vast given that metrics are applied to all core functions of the university. For example, learning management systems produce and can provide learning analytics that can be used as a measure of student engagement, interaction, provide data on assignment submission and plagiarism, and track attendance, among other features. All that is required for this to have negative equity implications is for this contextually specific teaching and learning resource to be "reduced into an input–output system which can be [further] reduced to an economic production function" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324). Effective reporting on the use of public funds, as well as exploring and implementing measures and indicators to enhance efficiency in the sector, is arguably the only recourse for government given the massive demand for higher education and the effect of low graduate throughput and cost recovery (Altbach et al., 2009). The search for an alternative to this process requires a nuanced delving into the core work of universities and their role in promoting equity and social inclusion.

Theoretical framework and literature

This paper uses the concepts of equity and social justice as its starting point. It also addresses digital inequality. The 2016 Oxfam report and the work of Thomas Piketty (2014) and others, have placed global inequality in sharp and uncomfortable focus. The provision of public goods,

including education, currently occurs in a global context where the form of the state is changing, and where inequality rather than poverty has become the defining feature of political, social, and economic life (Bhorat et al., 2012). Poverty is described as the unacceptable face of inequality, although the latter is in fact also the result of the maldistribution of resources, privileges, entitlements, and profits over time. Inequality has significantly negative effects on health and life expectancy, crime, investment, and democratic participation, with Bhorat et al. (2012) cautioning that in contexts where economic growth occurs without closing the gap between rich and poor, the foundation of democratic authority itself may be challenged.

South Africa today, is the most unequal country globally where the richest 10% of South Africans receive 65% of national income and 90% of national wealth (Cassim, 2022). The persistence and intractable nature of inequality in South Africa is illustrated by continued income inequality and a shift from a racial hegemony to a market-oriented democracy that allows for a modicum of social mobility for the historically disadvantaged. This has resulted in an unequal system with the focus on race changed to one that is now inclusive of class. The broader political economy suggests that currently the state cannot be described as capable, with a political will for fundamental change, despite a wide suite of social development policies. Thus, whilst government's goal setting can often be described as aspirational, the provision of adequate resources to achieve these goals has lagged acutely, resulting in trade-offs that can undermine equity through, for example, widening access but not making sufficient funds available to support disadvantaged students throughout their educational trajectories. Recent statistics show that South Africa spends a lower percentage of its GDP (5.9%) on education than Botswana (9.6%) or Namibia (8.3%), which have a similar GDP per capita to South Africa (UNESCO, 2019).

Higher education sociologist Martin Trow's (2007, p. 243) analytic framework described three kinds of systems: elite systems where participation by the eligible age group of young people was between 0 and 15%, mass systems where the participation rates were greater than 15% per cent but below 50%, and universal systems where more than 50% of the eligible population were enrolled at a university or college. Using Trow's definition based on participation rates, it can be argued that the South African system became a mass system in 2013 when 16.3% of the eligible cohort among people classified as African enrolled in higher education (DHET, 2013).

Equality has to do with sameness or, in public policy terms, non-discrimination (Rawls, 1972; Secada, 1989), whereas the concept of equity that informs this research necessitates differential distribution to achieve its goals, which encompass social justice (Samoff, 2017, personal communication; Sayed, 2002; van der Berg, 2001; Weber, 2002). Increased and diversified higher education participation in postapartheid South Africa was to be achieved through the use of equity levers, such as admissions policies and financial aid, with the aim of producing graduates for a future defined by social cohesion, equity, and civic responsibility. This resonates with Nancy Fraser's (2008a, 2008b) definition of social justice, which encourages a multidimensional perspective to addressing social injustice. Distinguishing different kinds of injustices—economic, cultural, and political—is critical because they need to be challenged at their root (Fraser, 2008a).

In Fraser's view, injustice threatens the ability of people to participate as legitimate members of society, equal to all others.

Fraser's (2008a) theory of participatory parity can be applied to different kinds of injustices, including digital inequality. Kuhn et al. (2023) illustrated how strategies on big data and data-driven technologies are seen as separate from the discussions on discrimination and the broader forms of systemic oppression, producing mediated and unmediated forms of discrimination. Others (Gangadharan & Niklas, 2019) noted that discrimination mediated by technology exists alongside other forms of discrimination that contribute to the systemic marginalisation of individuals and groups marked by social differences, and which they refer to as data injustice.

Three dimensions of inequality in higher education covered in the literature include inequality of access (Jerrim, 2015; Polikoff, 2019), inequality of experience (Clayton et al., 2009; Naidoo, 2004; Reay, 2017; Yorke & Thomas, 2003), and inequality of attainment or outcomes (Long, 2018; Quinn, 2004, 2005). The literature illustrates the persistent class, ethnic, and gender-based inequalities in students' higher education aspirations, the type of university and field of study accessed, institutional experiences, and their levels of attainment. Historically marginalised students grow up in families and communities with very low higher education participation rates, with the result that, without targeted intervention, their higher education options are limited and sometimes non-existent (Boliver, 2017; Reay et al., 2001). Their completion rates are also comparatively lower than their peers' even if they enter higher education (Long, 2018; Quinn, 2004). In a recent study carried out in the Australian higher education system, McNamara et al. (2019, p. 85) argued that although higher education is considered a "passport out of poverty," it is the same poverty that "often creates both material and cultural barriers to this access." They further argued that childhood poverty, coupled with trauma, plays a significant role in how students will navigate higher education.

Even though the literature on inequality of access and inequality of experience has been extensively reviewed elsewhere (Masutha & Motala, 2023), for the purpose of this paper, the intention is to consider inequality of access and attainment that relates more directly to the funding issues. A key dimension of epistemic access requires sufficient resourcing of teaching and learning at universities. This includes favourable student–lecturer ratios, well-trained lecturers equipped in the use of different modalities to deliver the curriculum, investment in student academic support and advising, and fit-for-purpose infrastructure inclusive of teaching facilities, laboratories, and provision of technological devices to enable teaching and learning. Without the consolidation of these aspects of the teaching and learning process, it is unlikely that transforming the demographic profile of universities will result in accelerated improvements in learning outcomes and graduate prospects.

One indicator of return on higher education expenditure is graduate employment, which appears to be high even though it may be masking a level of under-employment in South Africa—also a growing challenge within the larger youth unemployment crisis. Higher education under apartheid

was segregated by race, geography, and institutional type, with a high degree of resource wastage, low throughput, and poor fit with economic needs (Turner, 1979). The rationalisation of higher education institutions (including universities, colleges, and technikons) in the postapartheid period was intended to address this wastage and mismatch while creating a coordinated, desegregated system of higher education (Mncayi & Dunga, 2016). However, this has not been the reality; graduate unemployment in South Africa is not only conditioned by qualification but by the demographic profile of graduates and the institutions they graduate from. Historically White universities continue to be associated with higher academic standards, and their graduates enjoy preference in the labour market (Mncayi & Dunga, 2016). By comparison, graduates from historically Black universities and technikons enter these institutions from poor educational backgrounds, often requiring greater support and academic development than these institutions can provide (Mseleku, 2022). These are the institutions most likely to rely heavily on the government block grant and NSFAS funding, with heavy teaching loads and limited available time for research and other high-status activities that demonstrate a return on institutional expenditure. In this way, the demands of a techno-rational normativity shape what is important enough to be measured, usually research and scientific innovation, while the core work of quality teaching and learning is reduced to whether or not students are employable after graduation. This undermines the breadth of what teaching is meant to achieve in the personal, ethical, and intellectual development of students.

The structural effects of segregation may have an obvious impact on the profile of graduate unemployment in South Africa, but there are also subtle and ingrained forms of preference (and discrimination) that create false fluctuations in demand or supply. For example, Black graduate respondents in Mseleku' s (2022) research questioned why their White classmates did not need internships and work experience to qualify for jobs after graduation, arguing that some hiring requirements were used to racially gatekeep access. Networks and nepotism were also highlighted as reasons for preferential entry into the labour market. It is interesting to consider whether the global shift towards qualifications-based hiring underpinned the use of qualifications as a gatekeeping mechanism in the newly democratised South African labour market, where it became illegal to discriminate based on race. Qualifications and graduating institution, instead, became a sifting mechanism in this regard.

What is missing from this framing of the challenge in higher education is the role that neoliberalism and the techno-rational turn will play in intensifying existing cleavages and inequities. This discussion has so far noted that the turn towards managerialism and performance-based measuring of progress derives from at least two bases: 1) that this allows for more effective accounting of resource usage, and 2) that it enables more effective diagnosis of where challenges and gaps exist. However, these considerations do not factor into account what happens when the gap is, in fact, the model of measuring, funding, and administering support for teaching and learning.

Additionally, and in important interventions by Lalu and Nuttall (in Fataar et al., 2022), the

university in South Africa has a longer history of technical rationality than the nomenclature suggests. Technical rationality, as Fataar et al. (2022) argued, exists at the nexus of knowledge and capitalism within the neoliberal university; it is underpinned by a focus on delivering high-quality human capital, where knowledge is positioned in service of the aspirational experience (Lalu in Fataar et al., 2022) or what young students in Brookes et al. (2021) saw as unlocking greater labour market potential. In South Africa, where access to higher education and the quality thereof continues to be stratified by race, class, and geography, the overemphasis on measuring transformation carries the challenge of cementing technical rationality at the expense of understanding the real experience of teaching and learning, and how this is undermined or strengthened through contextual support.

Current strategies to unlock equity through fiscal redistribution

The South African government has used different instruments to tackle the intractable levels of inequality, including through progressive fiscal redistribution. Efforts to reduce inequality have focused on higher social spending, targeted government transfers, and affirmative action to diversify wealth ownership and promote entrepreneurship among the previously marginalised. Despite this, inequality continues to be high. South Africa's unemployment rate is significantly higher than in other emerging markets, with youth unemployment exceeding 50% (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

Inequality in higher education

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African government has pursued equity and social justice in education in the context of increasingly limited public finances. While racial and ethnic discrimination in social spending has been eliminated except for redistributive purposes, inequalities remain because of the high costs of achieving fiscal parity in education (Motala, 2020). In higher education, fiscal inputs have improved access but are not translating into greater efficiency and quality outcomes. Questions persist about whether the current approach to equity and social justice is adequate, and whether real differential redistribution to the poor has taken place (Motala & Carel, 2019). The slow progress towards equity was brought into sharp focus by the widespread protests over the affordability of higher education in 2015/2016. Students challenged the existing financial conditions of universities and put their concerns of accessibility in higher education, decolonisation, and academic freedom firmly on the transformation agenda through the mobilisation of the #FeesMustFall movement.

The #FeesMustFall protests highlighted the financial burden of higher education in South Africa—an issue that universities contend with annually, especially at the commencement of the academic year. Although there are interventions in the form of scholarships, government funding through the NSFAS, and initiatives by individual universities, there are clear signs that there is a serious deficit in funding for students alongside the current challenge of inefficient disbursement of funds and prioritisation of resources (Moyo & McKenna, 2021; Naidoo & McKay, 2018). Despite laudable goals of widening access, both affordability and sustainable resourcing of higher education is still in crisis. Auditing firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) estimated that the cost of

delivering university education is about R50 billion annually (PwC, 2023). Statistics South Africa (2023) reported that the share of NSFAS funding increased from 20% in 2011–12 to 44% in 2020–21. The government's focus on short-term solutions for student funding is one of the reasons for this crisis. While articulating a coherent medium- to long-term solution is beyond the scope of this paper, it is suggested that this forms a critical space of possibility for educational research going forward.

Whilst several studies have shown that in comparison with other societies, there is underfunding of the public higher education sector in South Africa (Naidoo & McKay, 2018; OECD, 2022; Wolhuter, 2023), the impact on efficiency and effectiveness is uncertain. The primary sources of funding for public universities are the DHET block grant based on the system of full-time student equivalents—or headcount enrolments—and student fees. It must be noted that there are other earmarked grants for specific purposes. For most universities, state support on average accounts for more than two thirds of their unrestricted revenue. The student fee component in university budgets is typically in the region of 30–40%. The historic increases in tuition fees beyond the consumer price index (CPI) are a direct result of the fact that the subsidy allocation to universities per full time equivalent student has been in decline, and the fact that the higher education price index (HEPI) is approximately 2% higher than CPI (Universities South Africa [USAf], 2015). Thus, whilst funds have been redirected to financial aid, the funds required for teaching and learning have been limited—an example of how trade-offs in the implementation of funding and equity policies may have downstream negative effects.

Limited funding also has far-reaching effects if students qualify for funding but may not know of, have access to, or successfully secure, such support. Qualifying students who are self-funded are at risk of achieving poor academic results, increasing the dropout rate. It is estimated that more than 40% of all first-year students in South Africa do not complete their degrees. According to a government review of the first 25 years of democracy published in 2019 (Council on Higher Education, 2019), in the 2010 cohort, 22% of students achieved a three-year degree within three years, only 39% had completed their degrees by the fourth year, and only 56% of all students had completed their degree by the sixth year. Dropouts in higher education continue to follow the contours of race and privilege given that more than 60% of the dropouts were designated Black and Coloured, with these students asserting that their major reason for dropping out was lack of funding (Letseka & Breier, 2008). The findings also showed that these students could not rely on their parents to supplement what they received from NSFAS and as a result would often take on part-time jobs thus "adding to their stress levels and distracting them from their studies" (Letseka & Breier, 2008, p. 90). Failing courses was the second major cause for dropping out. Two reasons for this can be inferred: they struggled to engage during teaching and learning because the process was alienating, or the stress of income poverty and lack of time to engage with their studies because many of them had to work to supplement their finances. These experiences do not align with the goals of higher education to improve the throughput and success rate (Chiramba & Motala, 2023). Moreover, access needs to translate into success if the investment in higher education is to have wider societal impact. Many disadvantaged youth enter universities poorly

prepared for the academic environment, and although academic development and extended degree programmes may provide some scaffolding to prepare them, this occurs through specific programming and targeting that reaffirms the alienation and exclusion of poor students.

The debates on higher education funding are extensive. There are advocates of free education, and the wealth tax is viewed as one mechanism of leveraging such opportunities (Chatterjee et al., 2020). There are others who argue that free education in public universities will, in fact, benefit the wealthy students who will gain access because they meet the criteria in terms of merit (Oketch, 2015) and, at the same time, take away valuable fiscal resources from the public higher education system (Bawa, 2017). Others suggest that the overall proportion of GDP to education and higher education should be increased, and the teaching input and research output grants should be increased. The big issue is that increased access and massification has not led to increased throughput, which would also release valuable resources back into the system (Motala, 2019), which suggests that while equality of opportunity has been created, there is insufficient equity in terms of attainment and outcomes.

Releasing fiscal resources for teaching and learning

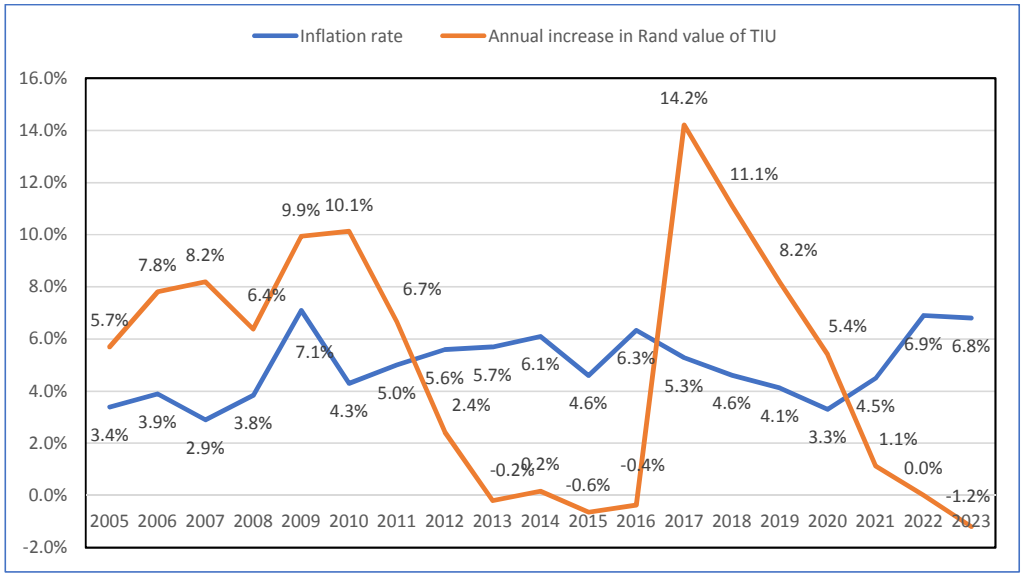
Both the pandemic and the 4IR's advances in technologies prompted universities to move towards blended or hybrid forms of learning. The costs of these technological innovations in teaching and learning have been funded primarily by institutions through redirection of resources internally. Traditional face-to-face teaching and learning had to pivot promptly in response to emergency remote teaching and learning. With the dust having settled post pandemic, universities are rethinking how lessons from the pandemic open up new possibilities for teaching and learning (Menon & Motala, 2022). In the scurry to embrace new pedagogical approaches for traditionally contact universities, it is argued that the digital inequalities deeply layered in the South African context cannot be ignored or swept aside. The argument does not exclude the usage of technology but instead posits that there are inherent dangers of creating new barriers of access for students without required foundations being in place evenly across institutions. The reality is that digital inequality in teaching and learning relates to the broader contexts and individual realities of students. UNESCO (2019), for example, highlighted the consequences of shifts to technologies given that 82% of students in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to the internet because of unaffordable data costs, poor network connections and signals especially in rural areas, and often the complete absence of access to either a device or any of the aforementioned essentials for online learning. Whilst there has been substantial research on the digital inequalities as they relate to staff, insufficient attention has been given to levels of preparedness of institutions, academics, support staff, and the required systems to support blended or hybrid forms of learning. Critical to this debate on these major shifts is whether the pedagogical transitions are fit for purpose in the context of inequalities in South Africa.

An analysis of state funding demonstrates that whilst there is a drift in shifting of resources to students as opposed to universities, there are inherent dangers in this position. The assumption that universities can draw on student fees and other third-party income streams, assumes that the sector

can equally contend with these tectonic shifts. In the current model of higher education, the teaching input grant as part of the block grant provides for the provision of the teaching services offered by universities. It must keep pace with the growth in higher education as well as inflation. Although the CPI was only used in this analysis, it must be kept in mind that the HEPI is approximately 1.7% higher than CPI according to USAf (2015).

As can be seen from Graph 1, the teaching input unit (TIU) rand value increased above inflation from 2005 to 2011, but then increased below inflation from 2012 to 2016. In the years 2013, 2015, and 2016, the actual rand value declined from previous years. In 2015, the country experienced the #FeesMustFall movement because of rapid increases in student fees resulting from below inflationary increases in the TIU rand value.

Graph 1
Comparison of the annual increases in the TIU rand value and annual inflation rates (2005 to 2023)



Note: The inflation rate for 2023 is preliminary.

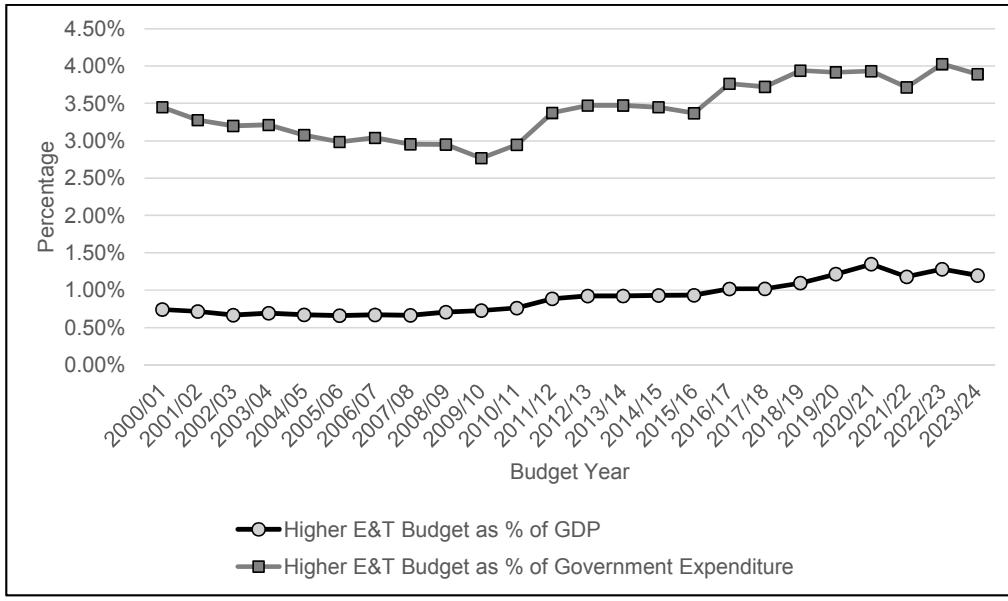
Sources: Statistics South Africa (2023), DHET (2020, 2023).

The Commission of Inquiry into the feasibility of making higher education and training fee-free in South Africa (The Presidency South Africa, 2017) recommended that government increase its expenditure on higher education and training to at least 1% of the GDP, in line with comparable economies. This resulted in an increase in the subsidy allocations to universities, which is evident in Graph 1, which depicts above-inflation increases in the TIU rand value for the years 2017 to 2020. Although these were high increases, the real rand value at the time had fallen far below par with inflationary increases. From 2020 to 2023, the increases in the TIU rand value have again

fallen way below inflation.[2] The result is a steady decline in the teaching input grant per student unit and a rapid erosion of the value of the teaching input grant per student unit.

During the period 2004/05 (year of the introduction of the new funding framework) to 2015/16, the expenditure on higher education and training was below 1% of GDP with the lowest expenditure during this period at 0.66% of GDP (see Graph 2). Following the #FeesMustFall protests which started in 2015 and escalated in 2016, the expenditure increased to 1.02% for the first time during this period. The recommendation of the Commission (The Presidency South Africa, 2017) led to expenditure that increased consistently from 1,02% in 2016/17 to 1.35% in 2020/21, which was the year of the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, whereafter it declined to 1.20% in 2023/24.

Graph 2
Higher education and training budget as % of GDP and government expenditure



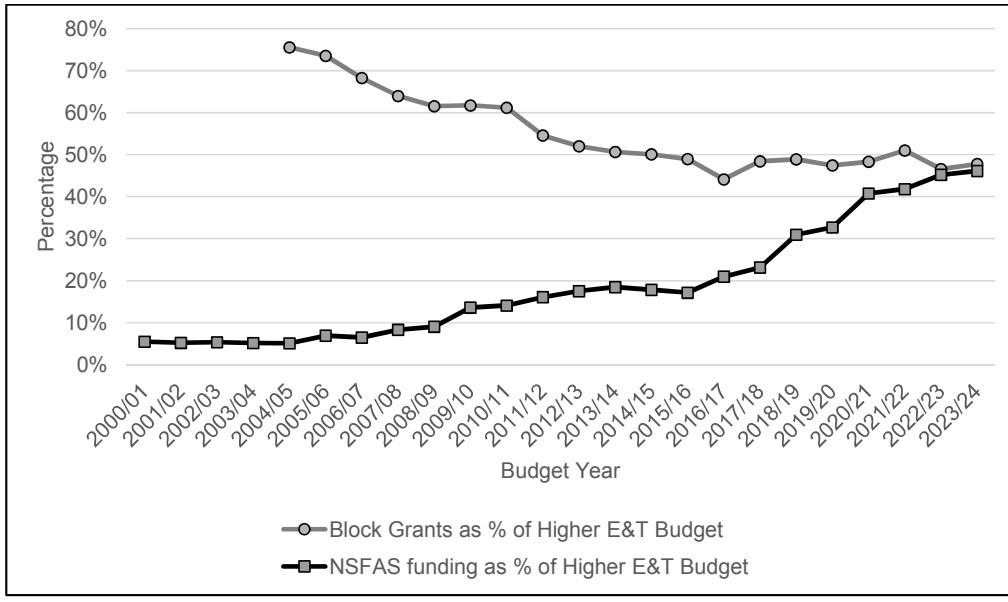
Source: The Presidency South Africa (2017)

Graph 3 demonstrates the decline in block grants and the rise in support for NSFAS. Whilst the

2 Another way to look at whether the increases in the TIU rand value have kept pace with inflation is making use of the South African Inflation Tool, which is available on the internet. According to this calculation tool, the inflation rate in South Africa between 2004 and today has been 167.93%, which translates into a total increase of R167.93. This means that 100 rand in 2004 is equivalent to 267.93 rand in 2023. In other words, the purchasing power of R100 in 2004 equals R267.93 today. The average annual inflation rate between these periods has been 5.32%. Making use of this cumulative inflation, if the rand value of R6,268 was keeping pace with the cumulative inflation over this period, the rand value in 2023 should have been R16,795 (R6,268 x 2.6793). The actual rand value in 2023 was R15,816. This is a difference of R979. The teaching input units that were funded in 2023 were 1,581,607. Multiplying this shortfall with the TIUs shows a shortfall of nearly R1.5 billion just on the teaching input grant for inflationary increases. This is only for the CPI and excludes the 1.7% higher education inflationary rate (Charles Sheppard: Individual calculations based on https://www.inflationtool.com/south-african-rand/2004-to-present-value) and communicated to authors on 15 June 2023).

focus on affordability and provision of access to finances for students is laudable, it is questionable whether sufficient resources are being allocated to universities to contend with increases in student numbers and the rising costs of providing a quality teaching and learning environment. During the last two decades, NSFAS funding as a percentage of the higher education and training budget increased from 5.10% in 2004/05 to a staggering 46.16% of higher education and training spending. This erosion of the block grant, which is reflected at the below-inflation increases in the unit rand value of the block grant subsidy units as well as the capping of student fee increases, means that universities have fewer resources available to offer a quality teaching and learning experience.

Graph 3
State expenditure: Block grants and NSFAS



Source: The Presidency South Africa (2017)

Discussion and concluding remarks

The social justice agenda has been co-opted by performativity and complex accountability instruments that government wields without them being finessed or nuanced for the social contexts and realities of the highly differentiated higher education system in South Africa. The techno-rational turn has brought celebration from university and government leadership with the promise of launching the South African higher education system into new worlds that are contemporaneous with technological developments, and on par with the developed world.

The question is whether the Global South and developing world contexts are primed and ready to

be agents for meaningful change. Our contention is that they cannot be viewed in isolation from societal conditions given that the structural inequalities of society are mirrored in higher education. Participation parity (Fraser, 2008a, 2008b) has been difficult to achieve, and digital inequality has contributed further to mediated and unmediated forms of discrimination. Part of the challenge can be attested to the political shifts that have characterised changes to higher education funding in South Africa and globally, with the demand for enhanced access and equity in the system occurring simultaneous to real declines in state expenditure on higher education and the deepening of accountability regimes that require concrete indicators of success.

Moreover, epistemic access is secured through both the social and the educational dimensions of the teaching and learning experience, meaning that improved resource allocation and management in higher education is a critical dimension of meeting equity and throughput goals (Moyo & McKenna, 2021). Many of the factors mentioned require creative or medium- to long-term strategies in order to consolidate the impact of improved resourcing. For example, increasing student–lecturer ratios may require the hiring of additional staff, the exploration of hybrid teaching strategies, or the micro-financing of successive blocks of infrastructural expansion through fundraising, leasing of institutional facilities or services, and savings. Foregrounding teaching and learning may demand a shift from the research-intensive cultures of many elite and some comprehensive institutions towards the creation of a framework for university teaching that rewards high quality teachers, attracts promising lecturers into the system, and encourages them to prioritise their teaching alongside any research interests—which in turn, requires a massive shift in the nature of performance measurement for university staff.

There is a huge distance between government and the teaching and learning environments of universities mirroring the vastly differing contexts of rurality, demography, and economic and social development. These are by no means homogenous—different contexts, different capabilities, and different challenges and strengths. The playing field for universities is uneven. Applying Trow's (2007) definition, higher education has massified, and resource allocation has not kept pace. What this has meant is that equity of access, attainment, and outcomes has not been achieved. There is little understanding in the blunt instruments used by government of the vastness and complexities of the teaching and learning environment, the immeasurable distance between access and success, and that this should not be viewed as an industrial production line with the input and output paradigms dominating. Holistic development requires all the resources that centre on teaching and learning and social justice discussions. These include academic development and support, well-qualified teachers, favourable staff–student ratios, a package for learners that accommodates social and academic needs, and a movement amongst universities and government to locate teaching and learning at centre stage. This radical shift has the possibility of the quest for the holy grail of social justice in higher education being achieved. It can be viewed as a critical manoeuvre if teaching and learning environments at universities are funded optimally sans the indicator-focused current environment, and new funding that is aimed directly at improving outcomes and outputs at universities.

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Notes on the authors

Shireen Motala is the DST/NRF South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Teaching and Learning, and Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.

Kirti Menon is a research associate affiliated to the DST/NRF South African Research Chair in Teaching and Learning (PSET), and Senior Director of the Division for Teaching Excellence, and Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.

Address for correspondence

smotala@uj.ac.za

kirtim@uj.ac.za

Rethinking the university: Notes for an epochal critique

Lis Lange
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

This paper uses Bernard Stiegler's and Nancy Fraser's work to present a critical reading of higher education as a social institution within capitalist society. Its main argument is that no critique of the university is sufficient to change practices unless it engages first, with a critique of the society within which the university operates. The argument is presented in three sections that engage with critique of the neoliberal university, the challenges of techno-capitalism, and the political economy of capitalism. The paper proposes five areas of exploration for the re-imagination of the university in the form of questions that constitute the basis for the construction of an agenda for change that needs to be taken forward in a collective.

Keywords: informational-capitalism, neoliberalism, universities, critique

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Introduction

This paper engages critically with a paper developed by the emerging network of critical university studies in South Africa (Fataar et al., 2022), proposing an approach to the critique of the university that takes, as its point of departure, an epochal (Stiegler, 2019) analysis of our time. The argument of that paper is that critique of the university is both incomplete and insufficient to transform the social relations of power that underpin the university as institution. Only a radical critique (a critique focused on the actualisation of change) of capitalism as the social system (Fraser, 2022; Gills, 2010; Harvey, 2007, 2014, 2017; Sadin, 2018; Satgar, 2015) within which the university exists can create horizons of hope to imagine a new institutional form, and a new purpose for the university itself.

For the last 20 years, I have been involved indirectly and directly in higher education management and leadership in South Africa. I, together with many colleagues, have argued and worked for a transformed or decolonial university while simultaneously knocking our heads against the limits of the system, becoming increasingly normalised and conscripted, and, often, ending up explaining the reasons as to why there is no alternative to endless negotiation with the givens within our institutions. This paper is one more attempt at de-conscription, one more effort at bringing into higher education strands of thinking that, I believe, need to become part of a new DNA of the university.

The paper is organised as three moments of one single critique. The first moment engages critique of the neoliberal university flourishing within the field of higher education studies since the 1980s. The aim of this section is to show how most arguments against the neoliberal university are limited by institutional navel-gazing and the desire to go back to a golden era when the university was thought to be an institution for the public good. The second moment looks at a description of our times, following the work of Bernard Stiegler and Nancy Fraser; I describe the components of capitalism as social system through two different but complementary angles: a philosophical political critique of technology, and a political economy analysis that goes beyond classical Marxism. Finally, in the third section, I reflect on the implications of the analysis presented in the second movement, and I identify some questions needing to be asked for the reconstitution of the university in our times.

From the evaluative state to the abolitionist movement

Since its creation, the university as institution has been utilitarian. It has always had purpose beyond its own reproduction. These purposes of the university, what the university is for, which in turn defined its identity in different historical contexts, have been presented as neutral or non-partisan in the sense of being at a distance from both state and civil society. When this has not happened, as in the case of several colonial universities in the post-independence period, the critique has doubted the status of the university as university (Mamdani, 1993, 2016). The image of the ivory tower best represents the university as a neutral/uninvolved institution observing the

world outside it. However, the university has been far from neutral in relation to knowledge (the elevation, since the 16th century, of Western knowledge as universal knowledge, the deployment of that knowledge to justify imperial expansion, and the exploitation and marginalisation of Black people and Indigenous populations). This 300-year-old position of the university morphed in the 20th century into struggles for access to, and acceptance by, the university of working-class students, and populations racialised beyond Whiteness, women, and non-heteronormative people. Nor has the university been neutral in relation to politics (Western society was presented as the pinnacle of the evolution of socio-political organisation, which justified the exportation of Western political systems outside Europe and the United States). In the postcolonial context, the university was often involved in the development and support of nationalist agendas that were decidedly partisan in their fight against Empire, and their contribution to local development agendas.

Discourses of the neutrality of the university manifest as the conservation of the social and epistemological status quo. This is manifest in the alliance between university and government, and the university and business, in terms of research and skills development through which funding is channelled—and also in the ways in which elites are constituted and reproduced across the globe. It exists in that the university will not invest itself in changing the world as is and in this sense, the neutrality of the university constitutes a hypocritical discourse. It must be noted that the explosions of critique concerning the status quo—whether they came from students, academics, or both—erupting notably in the 20th century, do not invalidate the unstated principle that the university as social institution does not deeply critique the social political/economic system within which it functions.

Over 10 centuries, the Western university, which has become the model university through colonial expansion, has been constantly preoccupied with itself, making and remaking itself with and against the changes that took place in technology, production, social mores, and culture (Delanty, 2001; Scott, 1993). Throughout history in different national settings, universities have evolved responding to and, at times, resisting the demands and expectations that state and society had for them in relation to support for elite reproduction, economic development, citizenship development, or the delivery of social justice. Of course, this varied widely from country to country but, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a strong conviction (supported by investment) of the connection between educated populations, development, and competitiveness. Higher education was considered a public good and as such, it was the duty of the state to support it. Soon enough, this was going to change as universities (especially students) became more critical of the status quo and the reproductive role of the university while the financial crisis of 1973 opened the global door for the rise of neoliberalism.

The progressive retreat of the public funding of universities' core functions was the origin of two important changes: firstly, research and education became exchange values sold in an open market. Secondly, this change made it necessary for the processes that led to the production of research and graduates to be scrutinised and assessed within a market logic (de Sousa Santos,

2010; Torres, 2011). New technologies were developed or adapted from the world of business to manage universities (Neave, 1998; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; UNESCO, 2004). Both changes had enormous consequences at a variety of levels that were captured in the evolution of the literature critiquing the neoliberal university and its unfolding, especially in relation to research and teaching and learning (Ball, 2012; Collini, 2011).

The organisational logic of the university founded on discipline-defined departments, which evolved with the developments of the disciplines, determined a fundamental independence in the setting of the knowledge agenda, and reinforced the notion of personal choice in the exercise of academic freedom among academics (Derrida, 2004). Despite this, the emergence of transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies crystallised in the creation of new intellectual departments (for example, cultural studies and gender studies). This was supported by the fact that the state was prepared to fund the public university—especially in Europe, the United States, and Latin America—because it was regarded as a public good (Marginson, 2016).

The deployment of neoliberalism and its market logics within the university since the 1980s in the form of state disinvestment, competition for private and state funding, corporatisation, and managerialism, influenced important alterations in the discourse of neutrality and had an impact on academic freedom itself. Under neoliberalism, the discourse of neutrality becomes part of an economy of choice that has several manifestations, among them, the competition for students to whom universities sold a variety of futures, and the accretion of funding to those who are prepared to make use of the new opportunities of directed funding and bespoke programmes (Rhoades & Maldonado, 2007).

Of particular interest for the argument of this paper, is the reconstitution of the academic and of the university itself into entrepreneurs whose opportunities are limitless within the market. Put differently, within the logic of the market as allocator of opportunity (read, for example, academic rankings, research assessment exercises) and the ethical and social parameters of the capitalist system, the possibilities for academics and universities as such to thrive are putatively endless (Henkel, 2005, 2007; Kogan & Teichler, 2007; Marginson, 2008). According to Marginson (2009), under neoliberalism the role of the individual academic in choosing their focus (freedom as control) is strengthened. The range of the choice and the means to exercise it (freedom as power) are restricted by the policy frame, and the capacity for the reframing of choices (freedom as radical critical break) is severely affected due to the homogenising effect that rankings, accountability, and accounting of outputs have on the definition of the research agenda (Mcquarrie, 2006). What happened during and post the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of the positioning and repositioning of universities is a particularly good example of the notion of new possibilities within the market, and I will refer to this in more detail at the end of this section.

The critique of the neoliberal university included several areas of research: the progressive commodification of education, including the disappearance of the notion of public good (Calhoun, 2006, 2009; Habermas & Blazek, 1987; Jonathan, 2001; Leibowitz, 2012; Marginson, 2016; Singh 2001); the emergence of the student as consumer/client and the vocationalisation of university

education (Nixon et al., 2018); the rise of academic capitalism especially in relation to the research enterprise (Slaughter & Larry 1997; Tilak, 2008); the progressive development of a global higher education market with the blessings of the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (Noble, 1998); the impact of new public administration on university governance and management; the bureaucratisation of institutional and individual performance (Marginson, 2008); the rise of rankings and league tables (Brink, 2018; Hazelkorn, 2011, 2017); the rise of managerialism and its impact on collegiality and academic freedom (Billot, 2010); the increasing precarity of academic staff and the rise of casualisation (Altbach et al., 2010); the decrease in the public funding of higher education, the abolition of free education where it existed, or the increase in fees and, depending on countries, student indebtedness. Under this latter heading is also the preoccupation with the de facto regression in the democratisation of the university (Brown, 2010, 2011) that had seen, especially in the post-Second World War period, massification of higher education systems across the world and a process of class mobility and inclusivity in access terms for people previously excluded as students.

However, none of these critiques of the impact of neoliberalism on universities encompasses a critique of contemporary capitalist society, nor do they offer analysis of the extent to which universities themselves are subject to a globalising culture and, especially, market transactions in the definition of their purpose and identity. Interestingly, this critique, which authors like Henry Giroux (2006), have been voicing consistently for decades in America, erupted with the #FeesMustFall movement, deeply influenced in South Africa by Latin-American decolonial thinking (Booysen, 2016). This movement profoundly touched other higher education systems; students in places as different as Chile and the United Kingdom critiqued the university as a colonial and capitalist institution (Bhambra et al., 2018) and had to be engaged institutionally. Sadly, much of the intellectual and political energy of the student movement was rapidly normalised by universities (Barnard-Naude, 2022; Jansen & Walters, 2022) that could not find modes of negotiated engagement with students, which could both manage the violence and anger and benefit from the critique being levelled at them.

During and post the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a brief resurgence of the notion of higher education for the public good in the context of the realisation that online education under pandemic conditions worsened already differentiated access to higher education along class and race lines and that the crisis of enrolments, briefly experienced in some traditional universities, especially in the United States (Dua et al., 2020), might become a feature of the times to come (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Gunter et al., 2020). This was followed by the proposition that the university as we know it is no longer effective in a world transformed by technology and by the pandemic itself (EY, 2020). Yet, the impulse to rethink the university in relation to the affordances of technology (Gyamera & Burke, 2018; Knox et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020) within a social justice framing was drowned by the need to rethink the business of higher education so as to increase profitability through technology. The notion of the new normal of the post-Covid university goes hand in glove with the new normal of capitalist economies focused on stakeholders, the green economy, the inclusion of minorities and future proof institutions—which share notions such as

network, flexibility, and innovation. The notion of the new normal, however, leaves untouched the fundamentals of the capitalist political economy while it adds to it the techno-bureaucratic layer that defines informational/surveillance capitalism (O'Neil, 2016; Sadin, 2018). It is telling that the main sources of this discourse have been global consultancy firms like McKinsey and Company, KPMG International, PricewaterhouseCoopers International, and Ernst &Young and authoritative fora like the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020), which in their weekly and monthly briefings, flood readers with the virtues of a new normal built oblivious of the structural limitations of the capitalist system to deliver social justice, equality, inclusivity, or even a green economy.

What is particularly worrying about this discourse is the speed with which higher education institutions, nudged by endless webinars sponsored by *Times Higher Education Supplement* and education technology companies, adopted uncritically the discourse of innovation and the new normal without stopping to think about consequences and without exploring what the discourse actually meant. The message was clear: either institutions, their academics, and leaders accepted the endless opportunities of the new game, or they would be forever atrophied, irrelevant to the future. Despite some critical voices, the official discourses of higher education leaders and managers and those within the field of higher education did not engage critically with the contradictions, risks, and political and ethical problems of the new normal.

Among the critical voices, Stein (2021), presented a sharp critique of the field of higher education studies from a decolonial and abolitionist perspectives, showing that the limits of the field lay in the lack of attention to the relationship between the university, capitalist expansion, and colonial domination—a relationship that has consequences for Indigenous populations and Black people. The radical critiques of the university tend to focus exclusively on the continuous logic of exploitation and exclusion of Indigenous and particular racialised groups (all groups are racialised in the Western world) in as far as universities, especially in the context of settler colonialism, were built through their exploitation (slaves, forced labour) or on their lands (Indigenous populations). One of the limitations of this approach is its exclusive focus on Indigenous populations and particular racialised groups; it does not extend the critique of capitalism to the current and historical position of the people who fall in neither category but whose lives are variously influenced negatively by the workings of informational and surveillance capitalism. We need a more capacious critique of our times if the aim is to effect change in the university and in the society it inhabits. My argument is that thinking through the meaning of our times is a precondition for rethinking the university, or abolishing it as a privileged institution for education and knowledge production. The next moment in this critique is to outline the basic elements of an epochal critique.

An epochal critique: Techno-capitalism and the threat to a common future

Technology has played throughout history a crucial role in bringing about social change. The ability of humans to intervene in the dynamics of the environment, and invent machinery and technics to sustain the production of commodities and the rate of profit in capitalist society are at

the very origin of the notion of the Anthropocene. As Burawoy (2013) remarked, the third wave of marketisation of the capitalist system, which began in 1973, is unique in its impact on the degradation of the environment into ecological catastrophe. The commodification of nature in its many variations is at the heart of capitalism as we are experiencing it.

Nanotechnology, the ability to synthesise DNA, the development of computation, artificial intelligence, digital communication, the internet, are extraordinary feats of human capability. However, unfettered and uncritical technological development in the aid of commodification and profit has also produced horrifying results, and not only in relation to climate change (Bridle, 2018; Crary, 2013). Digital technology and the development of a logarithm economy has made data the new commodity, increasing the financialisation of the economy (O'Neil, 2016) and the level of political surveillance (Zuboff, 2019), and is changing at a devastatingly fast pace the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other.

Since the appearance of social media in 2004/2006 and the growing importance of digital technology in every aspect of our lives, a number of publications, blogs, movies, have engaged more or less critically with what technology means, and the possibilities and problems it raises from a social point of view, as a business model, politically, neurologically, and psychologically. Yet, seldom have all these lenses been brought together into one interpretation that is concerned also about technology and education from a philosophical point of view. I have, however, found many of these elements in the work of the French philosopher, Bernard Stiegler (1952–2020).

Stiegler was not only a theorist of technology (his oeuvre is extensive) but was also an activist, the co-founder of the groups, Ars Industrialis (in 2005) and Collectif Internation (in 2018), which made important political interventions in France and Europe about the possibilities and dangers of technology; he was also an educator, deeply concerned with philosophical education. He created his own school of philosophy (https://pharmakon.fr/wordpress/) in provincial France, which offered courses at lycée level, and an online doctoral programme, which was open for the general local population. This is not the place to summarise Stiegler's contribution to the study of technology or to 21st-century philosophy, assuming that was possible. However, I would like to highlight three areas of concern in Stiegler's work that are relevant to the argument of this paper.

Stiegler (2019) saw technology as an exteriorisation of human organs, that is, the creation of apparatus and technics that allow humans not to do, to do very little, or to do things they cannot organically do. This exosomatisation becomes organic itself: technologies turn out to be not just extensions of the human body but part of it, and Stiegler called this organology. He saw technics as inorganic matter that, over time, act as a form of human memory and are therefore constitutive of human beings in their temporality. Stiegler's concern was the uncontrollable evolution of this development, which he called exosomatic organogenesis. When, in this evolutionary trajectory, the controllable and predictable becomes unpredictable and asserts itself in a negative way, the result is absolute and irreversible entropy: self-destruction.

From an ideological point of view, Stiegler (2019) observed that this movement in the evolution of technology is argued for by the state, business, and the university through the notions of both

disruption and innovation, which spur the system along by taking every failure, every mistake (think in terms of crops, fertilisers, the pharma industry, the financial system) as opportunities to tweak, to improve the system. One of the features of the impact of technology on our time, that Stiegler explored in some detail, is what he called the reticulated society. Reticulation is the separation of human beings, through the use of technology especially (social) digital technologies, into reticules that isolate them from one another. This has two fundamental consequences: individuals cannot develop their psychic individuality (their ego), nor can society generate processes of transindividuation that make sense of the individual in the collective and create community. In analysing this from a historical/philosophical perspective, Stiegler used the concept of epoch.

An epoch is a historical period within which humans share intragenerational (horizontal) and intergenerational (vertical) knowledge and the experience of being in the world; this enables humans to inhabit the world together. This sharing of knowledge and experience within and across generations is what Stiegler (2019), following Heidegger, called retention. An epoch does not only imply shared references but also implies sharing of a common horizon of possibilities that define a joint future. Humans living together in an epoch create/foster hope for desirable futures, that is, a tomorrow worth working for. In Stiegler's terms, this constitutes a collective protention, a common dream or aspiration. Put differently, for an epoch to be identified as such, humans existing together in time and space require collective retentions, which connect them with previous generations and collective protentions that constitute the hope that living is worth it. In a society where individuals live isolated from one another, in the reticulated society described above, the impossibility of recognising inheritance and dreaming only weakness as future leads to madness, as indeed, the rise in mental health problems and suicide, especially among the young, suggests (Stiegler, 2019).

As dark as the argument seems so far, there is a way out in Stiegler's philosophy. He argued it is necessary to repoliticise the transhumanist discourse (which is the opposite to what states and universities have been doing), and to abandon the idea that there is no alternative. It is urgent to raise the question of "disruption as a disadjustment between the technical system, the social systems and biophysical systems" and there is an urgency for a new form of public power and public intervention to carry out this collective interrogation (Stiegler, 2019, p. 143). As compelling as Stiegler's technological argument is, for it to have traction in the repoliticisation of transhumanism, it is necessary to understand the underlying constitutive elements of capitalism as a social system, before its algorithmic/financial incarnation, and to think a little more about how it has affected notions of being and work historically and about how it affects in the present those who are marginal in—or outside, as Castells (1996) predicted in relation to the network—the logarithm economy.

In order to understand what we are up against in the attempt to repoliticise transhumanism, and to recover transgenerational transmission (in Stiegler's language), I follow Nancy Fraser's (2022) latest analysis of capitalism as social system. This helps us to expand Stiegler's gaze from the

European experience to a global scale, bringing forward the material conditions of possibility for the expansion of financial capitalism and the algorithm economy by foregrounding its need for expropriation and exploitation, gender oppression, and racism.

It is easy to forget that although algorithm capitalism relies on data, it also needs to feed, clothe, reproduce, and educate its workers, and much of this happens outside or, at least, in the geographic and social periphery of the system. This new stage of development, this epoch so poignantly presented by Stiegler, encompasses not only the operation of logarithmic capitalism with its 24/7 market, its server farms, its cloud technology, and its culture of endless possibility for the innovative entrepreneurs (Bridle, 2018; Crary, 2013) but it also requires concurrent modes of exploitation, expropriation, and indebtedness taking place in a distributed manner across the world (Fraser, 2022; Harvey, 2014, 2017). To understand what is at stake in a radical epochal critique we turn now to an analysis of the underbelly of capitalism as a social system with a history spanning five centuries.

Capitalism, as a form of production, required the commodification of labour, the emergence of a free proletariat, nature's permanent abundance to be plundered, circuits of exchange in the form of markets, and a state that ensured the rule of law. These basic historical components in the development of capitalism from the 16th century onwards were all the more effective in the exploitation of nature and the generation of profit by accelerated technological development between the 19th and the 21st centuries. However, as feminist scholars have amply demonstrated, social reproduction, which takes place at home, is a necessary condition for capitalist production. Essential forms of work performed by women become privatised and unrewarded, and unrecognised as work in the formal economy, and disappeared from public sight, while enabling the work of the visible economy. Thus, as Fraser (2022) put it, capitalism as a social system requires the convergence of three spheres: a political sphere that constitutes capitalism as a social order, an ecological sphere that separates humans from nature and allows for its indiscriminate exploitation, and a sphere of social reproduction that guarantees the availability of labour. The relationship between these spheres varies historically as a result of both technological developments and social struggles—and manifests differently in the imperial core and in the colonial periphery. The tensions and contradictions between these spheres vary historically, giving rise to what she called *boundary struggles* (Fraser, 2022) that often force re-accommodations of the social system for capitalism to continue functioning.

According to Fraser (2022), what has occurred in the latest phase of capitalist development is that the system is devouring itself. The implosion of the system is caused by its own internal contradictions: economic, political, and ecological crises, which manifest differently in the former colonies and in the centre. All crises are felt more strongly in the former colonial world, which in turn cause migration from the former colonies to the centre, with these unwelcomed migrants becoming non-free exploitable labour in their new "homes." At the centre itself, the persistent dismantling of systems of social care for its worker-citizens also causes a crisis of social reproduction in the centre. Under current conditions (financial capitalism), the political boundaries

between expropriation and exploitation are expanded at global scale provoking an epochal crisis or, as others argue, a civilisational crisis, which itself coincides with imminent ecological collapse. The system is no longer sustainable if the planet needs to be preserved. But it is not sustainable either in terms of the demands it makes in the reproduction sphere.

In the cases of both Stiegler and Fraser, the work that needs to be done involves the surfacing of analysis about the system, the creation of spaces and knowledge that can create the possibility of a movement against, in Stiegler's words, the entropy of financial capitalism, in Fraser's words, cannibalism, and the creation of an alternative path for the formation of the individual and the collective based on different notions of self, society, knowledge, and nature.

While this must be done in very many different spaces simultaneously, education, and the university, in particular, is one space where such politicisation is essential if this institution is to contribute to change the direction of the crisis through knowledge development and curation. In the next, and last, section of this paper, I explore what would this entail in conceptual and tactical terms.

Rethinking the university

In the previous section I presented, based on Stiegler's (2019) and Fraser's (2022) work, an epochal analysis of techno-capitalism that shows, in the vocabulary of both authors, that we have reached a limit as civilisation: individually, collectively, ecologically, and in terms of knowledge (noetically) defining our ability to interpret and understand the world. In the face of this analysis, rethinking what the university as institution does, its purpose and organisation, becomes urgent and unavoidable. In presenting the different elements and focus of the critique of the neoliberal university, I argued that over the centuries of its existence, the Western university, as institution, has presented itself under the false pretence of neutrality in terms of the knowledge it taught and developed.

In reflecting on the 1968 French student revolt, Stiegler (2019) went back to Marx's idea of the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie in disinhibiting society (and knowledge) and exposing the mechanisms of the hidden abode through the separation of workers from the means of production. As the argument about neutrality suggested, up to now the effect of the university as institution, as distinct and different from individual academics' work, has been the opposite of disinhibition of the self or knowledge. Universities have actively participated in every aspect of logarithm capitalism, the new normal and stakeholder capitalism that involved them in international rankings, market share competition, futures, financialisation, the managerial bureaucratisation of academic work, commodification, and pedagogic de-individuation through the unexamined incorporation of digital cultures into teaching and learning and communication.

If disinhibition, in the sense of bringing to the surface and making visible what is, is a necessary step in the creation of the a new horizon of possibilities it seems important to develop a conceptual frame that helps to identify the questions that need to be answered to make effective a radical

critique. In developing this frame, I combine Fraser's (2022) and Stiegler's (2019) theorisations. I take from Fraser, her nuanced analysis of the spheres of the capitalist system and her concept of boundary struggles between those spheres; I take from Stiegler, the concern with individuation and transindividuation and the role that the reticulated society has in impeding both. I identify five spheres that make up the contemporary university: regulatory sphere, noetic sphere, the social reproduction sphere, the psychic individuation sphere, and the collective transindividuation sphere.

The regulatory sphere manifests as global governance; unlike the state in the capitalist system exercising strong regulatory powers, this governance is soft, almost capillary, in Foucault's sense. It happens tacitly on two parallel markets: an unlimited relatively unregulated market that operates mostly, but not exclusively, at the local level, and an international, exclusive market that is highly regulated and ordered around international rankings as adjudicators of exchange value and actual capital (fees, endowments, grants, etc.). The regulatory sphere deploys in both markets an economy of desire and creation of need. What would it take for the top 1,000 ranked universities to step out, for example, of regulatory rankings systems? What difference would this make to universities in developed and developing economies from a regulatory (credential) and financial perspective? How would the research focus, publication patterns, regime of academics' appointments, and student selection change if these universities stepped out of the market? What consequences would this have for their national and international roles and positioning? What are the interests—financial, political, and social—that constitute the counterforce to any change of the status quo? What needs to be done to break this down?

In the noetic sphere, universities have for centuries, been a realm of relative freedom, in which academics decided what to teach and research uninhibited by external or even managerial pressure. This, of course, has changed through the regulatory power of professional councils, international accords, research assessment exercises, and competition for research funding, and neoliberal accountability among other mechanisms. Yet, despite this, the range of freedom afforded to the academic enterprise is large. I contend that in a world on the brink of collapse (not only ecologically), it is time to rethink the noetic sphere in a much more purposeful way. The role of the university in disinhibiting society, in the sense used by Marx and Stiegler, needs to be taken seriously. And, undergraduate teaching and research should be thought in relation to a collective responsibility for the future of states, regions, and the global society. What would be the organisational, curricular, and financial implications of rethinking teaching and learning and research at the university around the university's commitment to help develop an alternative to the capitalist system? What if the "innovation, entrepreneurialism, and disruption" mantra were engaged at every step in their consequences and underlying interests as a focus on the imagination and design of a future? What consequences can/should this have in terms of pedagogic relationships, organisational designs, curricula, research strategies? How does the university wake up from the noetic amnesia that colonialism and capitalist expansion brought into its organisation? How is all of this done without falling into Orwellian nightmares, without annihilating creativity, without disrespecting passion and the element of madness and neurosis involved in thinking?

The social reproduction sphere, as the set of relations that allows the system to function, also operates at the university and has a variety of manifestations and components. In this section, I am mostly thinking of brick-and-mortar universities, which are usually contact and residential, but it also applies to distance/virtual universities. The academic enterprise has become so complex in the last 50 years that new functions, roles, and jobs have been created to respond to the evolution of the core functions, and the myriad support functions, that make possible the university. The role of these support functions at the university are regularly underestimated and undervalued. Insecurity of employment is a common feature in higher education and lives through the exhaustion of the academic workforce, the invisibilisation of support staff, the casualisation of staff, the exploitation of teaching assistants and junior academics, and the rollback of benefits. Universities have a high carbon footprint, and tend to be more concerned about water, electricity, and recycling than with the impact of servers, food security, investment, and financial capitalism as an ecological threat. In the case of universities whose endowments originate in the profits from slave, forced, migrant labour, and whose campuses have been built on the dispossession of local populations, the relationship between expropriation and institutional reproduction becomes all the more clear. What labour regimes, and by implication, political economy, should sustain the university to make it viable and fair? What is the point of restitution statements translated into scholarships for the descendants of displaced or exploited populations, or even of actual restitution of land, if the existing political economy will make it nearly impossible for people to succeed in escaping their circumstances? What kind of political economy should the university be helping to think that would result in fair social relations between itself and its employees, and between itself and its hinterland? What modes of collective organisation and culture of participation are necessary and possible to redefine the "hidden above" of the university?

Psychic individuation is the sphere of the university in which it takes responsibility for the care of the young both at generational and individual level. While it is true that the formation of the subject/ego starts much earlier in life, and that the university cannot undo or replace what has already happened, there are two fundamental responsibilities that need to be exercised: not to accentuate despair/hopelessness, and to help build a critique of the social system and its impact on psychic individuation while, at the same time, offering an alternative praxis. In relation to the first responsibility, it is an often-repeated experience of students and university employees who come from minority or historically dominated groups that the university as organisation is built on a culture of exclusion that excludes even when it says it will not. The range of the subtle and not-so-subtle exclusions varies from institution to institution and country to country but familiar parameters of de-individuation include gender, sexuality, race, religion, language, and, of course, class in its broadest possible understanding as well as its intersections with the other categories. There are just too many examples of policy failures in higher education systems across the world in dealing with these problems to think that the problem is solvable without turning on their head the foundational principles of the university as Western, White, heteronormative, patriarchal, and Judeo-Christian. In relation to the second responsibility, which is less familiar and, to my knowledge seldom addressed, we need to go back to Stiegler's concern with the reticulated society

I mentioned earlier. Digital technologies, especially in the cultural/educational/consumer sphere, are designed in such a way that every individual (youth) is tacitly taught to live in isolation, in a virtual world of relationships and desires built around endless opportunity and endless possibility of performance. This performance is certified and guaranteed by an expandable audience whose approval has to be secured in order for the ego to exist. Not only is the narcissism that derives from this a source of mental illness and toxic sociability, but it prevents the exercise of our capacity to know (the algorithm always takes us to the place where we want to be, to the idea we do not want contradicted), the exercise of the right to differ (cancel culture is a tragic example of digital intolerance and group thinking), and obliterates development of politics (outside social media campaigns) that are based on argument and consensus. By not addressing directly the psychological and socio-economic underbelly of digital technology as part of what they do pedagogically, universities have failed in their duty of care for young adults.

What processes and mechanisms should be put in place for universities to go beyond the perfunctory engagements with their history and institutional cultures and into an encompassing critique of the epoch? How should the university as institution present and represent itself in society simultaneously engaging with itself and the processes that made it possible? What kind of pedagogies and understandings of teaching and learning need to be developed to avert and revert the impact of the reticulated society in the younger generation? What kind of research should the university do, not only to help disinhibit knowledge about technology, but also to use it to create a world that moves exactly in the opposite direction and rhythm to the one we inhabit now. What kind of self-reflection should the older generations embark upon and how, to take responsibility for the narcissistic epidemic—the despair and mental illness which are the extreme negative manifestation, but not the only one, of a society where, as Stiegler said, there are no collective retentions tethering the new generation to its ancestors, nor collective protentions affirming the possibility of futures together.

The collective transindividuation sphere is the sphere of relationality where the university exists not just in relation to itself and its specific core functions but in relation to society. This is the sphere of hospitality where the university opens its boundaries to a fluid, porous relationship with its outside. Up to now, the university has defined its relationship with society as a third mission not necessarily built around teaching and learning and research but in a continuum between voluntarism and problem solving. Collective transindividuation presupposes developing a different relationship, where society and university are not separate. This implies the possibility of a political project in which the university is not neutral but an active agent of change and a collective political actor, together with others, in looking for solutions and alternative ways to the manner in which we live, work, think and feel, and are to each other. What are the governance modalities of such a relationship, what are the potential pitfalls in higher education systems where universities receive state subsidy? What are the implications of work in this sphere for the notion of the democratisation of the university, its spacial organisation, its role as employer in/of communities? How do we develop an interface between processes of individuation and transindividuation as part of teaching, learning, and research and how is this implemented through

graduates who are now largely far from the work-ready, future-proof individuals advertised by so many universities?

Does this amount to the replacement of the university as we know it? In many respects it probably does. Yet I am sure, in conclusion, that the status quo is not an alternative. Our epoch, capitalism as a social system, is self-destroying and taking in its wake people and the planet. The urgency is too great, and the risk of not reacting too high.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued the limits of any critique of the university that is not simultaneously a critique of capitalism as a social system. I have engaged with existing critiques of the neoliberal university, including the more radical analyses provided by the decolonial and abolitionist approaches, and found them incomplete for the main proposition of this paper. Using Stiegler and Fraser, I have provided two complementary perspectives: one, a philosophical analysis of technology and, the other, a Marxist and feminist analysis of the political economy—of how 21st-century capitalism continues to alienate human beings from the natural world, from themselves, and from broader social communities in order to fulfil its own reproduction. Against this backdrop, I proposed a thought experiment in which the university actively engages with understanding and contributing to challenging the functioning of the capitalist system as it manifests locally. I doing this, I identified five areas of exploration in the form of questions that constitute the basis for the construction of an agenda for change that needs to be taken forward in a collective.

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Notes on the author

Lis Lange is Special Advisor to the Deputy Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching at Stellenbosch University and an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the same university.

Address for correspondence

lislange@sun.ac.za

Re-imagining the university after apartheid

Premesh Lalu
University of the Western Cape

Abstract

This paper revisits earlier arguments about the university of the South by asking how the latter both implicates the modern university in the discourse of race and potentially points to ways of surpassing its emergence in an aesthetic education. Drawing on examples of the rise of the disciplines of psychotechnics and psychophysics in South Africa and the American South, respectively, at the turn of the 20th century, and their implications in projects of rescripting race to the ends of labour efficiency and a society of control, the paper distinguishes between the ordering of race and its dispersal as a problem through systematic developments in the disciplines of the mind, economics, and the philosophy of science. It argues that this combining of psychology with the methods of physics drew on a methodological orientation of the sciences around the idea of a consilience of inductions in the 19th century. An aesthetic education is perhaps one way to conceive of the indispensability of the university of the South in negotiating the ordering and subsequent dispersal of the idea of race that defined the techno-rational university. The article asks whether the university of the South, haunted as it is by the spectre of race, may yet offer us a concept of freedom, which would prove indispensable for the survival of the modern university globally.

Keywords: race, W. E. B. Du Bois, apartheid, psychophysics, disalienation, aesthetic education, aesthetic ideology, uncanny, consilience, sensory training

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Introduction

Bill Readings' (1996) posthumously published *The University in Ruins* paints a somewhat melancholic picture of the modern university, one that leaves us with an image of a revered institution of modernity steadily emptied of content and unrecognisable in form. The drift from a university founded on the reign of reason, towards one preoccupied with enunciating on the meaning of culture, and culminating more recently in an apparently vacuous marketised notion of the university of excellence, he suggested, has left institutional sites of higher learning bereft of purpose and, somewhat ironically, open to redefinition. This is precisely the sense of possibility that solicited a response to a conference convened by Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, and Raffaele Laudani in 2017 in Bologna on the Critical Tasks of the University Today (https://aghct.org/critical-tasks). In keeping with the affirmative spirit of the conference, I ventured a question about whether the South as supplement bearing the critique of race may have something specific to contribute to the conversation on the tasks of the university today. An early working out of an essay titled "What is the University For?" (Lalu, 2019) proposed that we attend to the two ways we hear the preposition "for" as questions that invite commentary on the political standpoints of the university but also what it ought to be doing now in respect of a discourse on education. Of particular interest was how the problem of race tended to drop out when the moniker South is invoked, and how both questions of institutional standpoints and educational discourse animate the complex conjuncture in which the university finds itself, but to different ends. Briefly, I suggested, the moniker South may productively accent the critique of the problem of race to parse both senses of the question "what is the university for?" in their simultaneity and the differing speeds in the demands placed on the contemporary university.

Since the Bologna conference in 2017 and the subsequent publication of the essay that later appeared in *Critical Times* (Lalu, 2019), there have been several responses to the question, "what is the university for?" These include a comprehensive treatment of the question in an edited volume of *Kronos: Southern African Histories* edited by Ross Truscott and Maurits van Bever Donker (2017) based on a year-long lecture series in the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape and an equally potent reflection on the question by Ian Baucom in a 2023 seminar presentation titled, "The Future Claimant's Representative: Or, What is the University 'For'?" (https://global.virginia.edu/events/future-claimants-representative-or-what-university). Invited to reflect on the techno-rational university, I have an opportunity to revisit my initial thoughts on the "for" of the university, especially in a manner that systematically probes the impasse registered by ideas of race and the university marked by the inheritance of apartheid. Perhaps the framework of a techno-rational university helps to clarify the aim to shift from the arena of standpoints of the university to a discourse on education attentive to the creative intuition entailed in education. Put as a question, I am eager to ask how a university authorised by the orders of race might embark on a project of education so that it may exit the impasse of the problem of race? This is a question that is often eclipsed by capacious critiques of neoliberalism, which in turn, disperse questions related to the discursive constitutions of race in the project of the university.

The search for a critique of the problem of race unfortunately appears to have receded alongside the securities of the standpoints on which the university was founded—enlightenment, progress, development, truth, verification, academic freedom. This has occurred in line with the economising of knowledge in an age of informational abundance. In this version of the techno-rational university, the conclusions can be deduced from Friedrich Hayek's *The Sensory Order* (1920, 1952, as cited in Vanberg, 2017), a text that lays out the theoretical claims of neoliberalism. Effectively, Hayek's theory reroutes the paradigm of physiological psychology that underpinned racial science in the early 1900s to the current determinations of the market. Implicit in Hayek's neoliberalism is a story that helps us make sense of how the reigning ideas of the university were surrendered to the determinations of the presumed rationality of the market, so that truth claims are subject to the determination of plausibility rather than the protocols of observable verifiability established by previous models of scientific reason.

Sources of the techno-rational university

The shift transformed the university into an agency of veridiction circumscribing truth claims (best exemplified by the debate between Thomas Khun and Karl Popper about the nature of scientific change and progress) coinciding with a rise of nomothetic approaches to scientific reason that augmented the demands of a military industrial complex after the Second World War. Neglected in this exchange was Norbert Wiener's concern in his *Human Use of Human Beings,* published in 1950, about the rise of a scientific administration of society, two years after his breakthrough on communication and control in the form of the science of cybernetics. In Khun and Popper's different perspectives on scientific progress, it is possible to trace a particularly restrictive understanding of freedom internal to the method of the inductive sciences forged in the early 1800s. This related to the alliance forged between scientists and the bourgeois public sphere in Europe, which established the hegemony of scientific reason. However, their exchange completely bypassed Wiener's (1950) caution that scientific progress had become the new mantra of a class of administrators of science by the mid 20th century. To the extent that the emergence of a techno-rational university effectively ordered and subsequently dispersed the problem of race, it became increasingly difficult to identify the discursive emergence of race in the idea of the university. The critique of the problem of race was thus not only overshadowed by shifts in the techno-rational university, but also made infinitely more difficult to locate with such an altered standard of proof and verification.

Concern with this ordering and dispersal of race certainly informs Michel Foucault's (1984) unprecedented genealogical studies of modern institutions formed through the power/knowledge nexus. Foucault mapped a shift in the idea of freedom from the agencies of veridiction that gave us the subject of modernity (what he called biopolitics) to the veridiction of the market (or what was named neoliberalism). Interestingly, the problem of race seemingly dropped out of focus in Foucault's search for an exit from the entrapments of the capillary webs of power and the shifts from race war to the rise of *homo oeconomicus*. By contrast, a postcolonial critique of imperial

reason was left to contend with the faint traces of the problem of race on which the institutional site of the university rested, while exploring truth claims sustaining ideas of race and the conditions under which such claims were authorised. This subsequently stalled postcolonial critique of imperial reason with its emphasis on the critique of imperial reason rather than the politicisation of the ontology of the subaltern, which will now need to be recharged if we are to account for the racial foundations of the techno-rational university and find our way out of its racial entrapments.

Notwithstanding some noticeable exceptions, the stalling of critique in a largely depoliticised context of American cultural studies tended to take up the question of race at the point of its relativisation and, in so doing, concede the grounds of the university to the paradigm of progress in the sciences. The work of critique was on occasion redirected to the point where the very procedures of humanist reason and public responsibility were rendered unrecognisable to the university. If this dispersal results in an image the university as composed of atomic parts, its romantic anti-authoritarian precursors now conjure an image of being lost at sea, with no bearings to return to the disciplinary securities out of which the modern university emerged.

Recapitulating the problem of race

Adrift at sea, or perhaps carried away into a vortex of amorphous market forces, the university is destined to confront its image in the spoils of freedom strewn on the shores of a South where reason ended in repeated and untenable enactments of mythic violence. Here, the postcolonial critique of imperial reason and, by extension, the problematisation of race, will need to once again recapitulate what it might mean to reverse reason's implications in the technical distortions of sentient life that unfolded with the birth of 20th-century disciplines of the mind. It was, after all, in the economic sciences where the shifts in human and physical sciences were most explicitly registered in the discourse of the university. If race thinking, for example, flourished with the advent of apartheid in 1948, its precedents should be traced to efforts such as those of Fredrich Hayek and other major theorists of neoliberalism after the First and Second World Wars to reverse the planned economics of wartime Europe at the turn of the 20th century by conscripting the disciplines of the mind to the ends of labour efficiency. In the colonial world, the university was thus drawn into an increasingly deceptive plot of recoding race based on extending 19th-century methods of the physical sciences to new fields of psychophysics or psychotechnics.

The birth of ethno-psychology, psychophysics, and psychotechnics, disciplinary fields associated with Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig in Germany between 1879 and 1920, were perhaps singularly important in remaking a modern concept of race in the 1900s. The study of psychic life at the level of sensory energetic loops inspired by Wundt now invites the question of whether the South might offer a new model of veridiction, somewhere between the scholastic and Socratic, where an apprenticeship in freedom may be enacted to displace the supplement of race specific to university discourse. Can it, for example, name a form of veridiction that completes the pathways charted by Monique Wittig, Michel Foucault, and Frantz Fanon, randomly selected for their critique of the anticipations of a technologically mediated neoliberal capitalism from the 1960s to the 1980s. Can

we avoid the fates of each as their thinking succumbed to the very forces to which they were opposed as neoliberalism usurped the meanings of freedom to the course of an entrepreneur of the self?

As if the turbulence of being at sea was not enough, the shores of politics seemed less welcoming at the institutional site of the contemporary university. Acts of subterfuge of the procedures of knowledge emerged with greater frequency as the university grounded its raison d'être in stubborn habits of moribund colonial reason. Demands ranging from repatriation to reparations, to more recent demands for decolonisation expressed outrage at the erasure of the geopolitical descriptor of the global South. This is a story of the university's continued implication in slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and the Cold War. A Kantian distinction of the faculties, once hailed as an answer to a university caught in the transition from feudalism to capitalism and fuelled by the Atlantic slave system in the late 18th century in Europe, aided a gradual instrumentalisation of reason. With these shifts, the meaning of freedom was subsumed under the universalism of a capitalist modernity (Lukács, 2021). And ultimately, the most revealing consequence of this tendency towards instrumentalisation and marginalisation resulted in the placement of the human sciences in the service of the order of things.

Remiss in those critical attitudes formed around the alignments of knowledges of the university to authoritarian drives is a question of how the South alters the stakes in the debate about university discourse. This is more pertinent today as the moniker South appears to be increasingly available to mark the structural malaise resulting from development discourses of a neoliberal globalisation in the aftermath of the Cold War project of area studies. Unfortunately, both area studies and neoliberalism whittled away the political commitments of the university through decades of structural adjustment policies. Whichever way the question was to be decided, the South it seemed, was less positioned in relation to the universal than it was to a working out of a distinct conceptual terrain on which to reimagine the university. Could the South name something specific about the impulse encouraged by the enlightenment, that is after the injunction to criticise all one wants, provided one learns ultimately to obey (cf. Kant, 1798/1992) or encourage an attitude towards resisting the blackmail of the enlightenment (cf. Foucault, 1984), or lead to an ab-use of the very inheritance of the enlightenment (cf. Spivak, 2012). A 19th-century hermeneutics of suspicion has been admittedly indispensable for traditions of criticism to which the university played host, not only in the face of the rising tide of fascism that paved the way for the traditions of critical theory of the sort advocated by the Frankfurt School, but also in the coincidence of the student-worker movements of 1968 and the anti-colonial movements that had gained momentum across the world in the midst of the Vietnam War. While I have elsewhere drawn inspiration from this very hermeneutics of suspicion in studies of the history of apartheid and colonialism (Lalu, 2008), the standpoints to which it gives rise now seem less than adequate. The larger issue at hand appears to be what are we to be doing with the university now in respect of its racial inheritance? Dealing with this impasse, it seems that a second order reading of what we believe the university to be for ought to be foregrounded. In contemplating how the critical theory espoused by the Frankfurt School shifted towards consideration of the altered relations between the psychic life and

mechanical existence, or what was given as the dynamics of subject-object relations, the question of the tasks of the university now seems better suited to an education on the cultivation of freedom from the orders of race inherited from slavery, colonialism, and more recently, apartheid.

The university reimagined

As we ask what it might mean to reimagine the university from the vantage point of the South, the project of disalienation that defined a movement of psychopolitics in the late 1960s in the colonial setting of North Africa may well inspire thinking about the educational function of the university in our times. For this, I turn to Nancy Luxon (2011, 2016a)—especially her deft reading of meaning assigned to freedom in Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon's discourses on psychiatry and madness. For our purposes, a key question posed by Luxon (2011) asked what lessons might be drawn from institutions such as the psychiatric hospital founded in reason when their protocols of knowledge are discovered to be mere extensions of the exercise of disciplinary power to the ends of regulating conditions of subjection. Luxon provided us with a suggestive re-reading of a discrepancy between Foucault and Fanon's approach to madness that might alter how we think about the institution of the university. She proceeded by suggesting that while for Foucault, the experience of madness was the indispensable passage to the exercise of freedom, for Fanon, the psychiatric hospital in Algeria was a necessary institutional location to work out the resistance to the material and psychic effects of colonialism, especially as it provided a space for disalienating encounters.[1] Luxon draws attention to the way the question of the institution is posited differently in two discourses. Crucial for our purposes, is the openness to an element of surprise in the Fanonian model of the psychiatric hospital as a space for disalienating encounters.

This was the latent question of a series of focused studies convened by the University of the Western Cape's Centre for Humanities Research in partnership with Homi Bhabha and the Mahindra Institute for the Humanities at Harvard University, tasked with arriving at the outlines of a global humanities curriculum. Determined to surpass the limits of a Cold War-distribution of the meaning ascribed to the humanities in the formats of areas studies and geopolitical comparativism, the workshops explored the tropes of temporality constituted in the interstitial crossings indicated by notions of the global. In one interpretation of the brief, the workshop brought together an inquiry into the urgent tasks of the university and the possibility of constituting a way out of its techno-rational precedents. Given that it offered an opportunity to work our way through the parsing of the for of the university, it may be helpful to cite the full extent of the plan for the Cape Town segment of the 2018 workshop.

> The first session of the Cape Town workshop will think "the curricular" as distinct from a "report" or "syllabus" by contrasting tropic and taxonomic approaches to "the global." If the taxonomic approach tends towards the definitional, the tropic approach leans towards the discursive. In this

1 This apparent discrepancy is also the focus of contemporary art interventions by Abdeslam Ziou Ziou who offers us a rare glimpse into the experiment of bringing psychiatry into relation with arts production to surpass the condition of alienation wrought by colonial rule in Morocco (https://ehess.academia.edu/AbdeslamZiou).

> open discussion we will address the relationships between the curricular and the interdisciplinary, the suturing of disciplinary boundaries, and the range of inter-, trans- and post-disciplinary practices included under the rubric of "the humanities." In what ways, we will ask, does a curricular practice emphasize the interstitial, intersective, yet-to-be-named object that emerges from the inter- or trans-disciplinary process? To what extent is the ongoing aesthetic and ethical work of translation, transition, and technological advance integral to a curricular approach, which seeks to run interference in the generative process of interdisciplinary thinking?
>
> The second session of the workshop will build our curricular thinking by engaging the global as a concept and a mode of critical thought that is imminently and mediately produced. The global—or can we say the "trans-hemispheric?"—as a practice and site of translational thinking will be discussed as we interrogate the symbolic accuracy and currency of the "trans-" with its potential, if not implicit, undercurrents of spatial sovereignty, geopolitical frameworks, and narrative architectures of progress. When contouring the sutured methods and practices of the global, difference and the multiplicity of perspectives from which we speak are a central concern. What does the global become, or emerge as, when it is founded on a commitment to difference, to differential thresholds of thinking and practicing? Are there existing frameworks in the humanities and social sciences—disjunctive and intersective—that can sustain this differential, curricular approach to the global?
>
> What, if any, humanistic constellations emerge beyond the comparative, in the perceived breaches between disciplines, which contour and nuance interstitial approaches to the global while generating new tools for discursive, practical, and curricular reflection and implementation?
>
> The third and fourth sessions of the workshop will focus respectively on the future of the university and opportunities for instituting a curricular perspective within and beyond established arenas of higher education. In what ways will our curricular thinking embrace global and African sites of urgency—human health and habitation, environmental crises, human rights and their violation, and the ethical and educational archive inherited by the next generation—to develop new civil, cultural, and pedagogical structures that confront, and thereby expose, the limits of the university? As we interrogate our understandings of the global and the trans-hemispheric, we will identify linkages within and between civil society and the university, with the intent of articulating the relationships between citizenship and pedagogy. Will a curricular perspective offer the creative egress necessary to exceed current disciplinary and institutional stakes and claims within the humanities while generously exploring the very boundaries that undergird these claims? How might our curricular thinking, in light of these extraordinary and unexpected times, demand that the humanities "become foreign to itself," inventing the unprecedented by running interference within the disciplinary and institutional conditions that define the university as such?
>
> A tropic approach suggests that issues and problems rather than disciplines and archives might guide our thinking about implementation. Our sutured curricular approach in this Cape Town workshop aims to identify and lay the groundwork for a new curriculum—a dawning pedagogical moment that may be implemented in further stages of the Global Humanities Curriculum Project. (https://www.chrflagship.uwc.ac.za/the-curricular-and-the-global-the-tropic-and-the-taxonomic/)

In his summary of the workshop, Aidan Erasmus (n.d.) stressed how the affirmative framing of the discussion and its layered explorations revealed scales and temporalities that broke with

formations of the global linked to the conventional contours of capitalist development. Summarising the key ways the tropic and taxonomic were set up as frames for re-imagining a trans-hemispheric constellation of the global as more than that which is given in the present of capital, Erasmus noted:

> The notions of the taxonomic and the tropic—terms that would come to circulate in discussions over two days—are set up as a way in which to attend to the changing nature of the university and its increasing corporatization as much as it is also a manner in which to attend to entrenched disciplinary conditions under which the global is imagined. The idea of the global as the humanities is forced to encounter it in the contemporary university, as Bhabha outlined it, is one that must be seen as a presentist entrapment: closed to other forms of interconnectivity historically. Bhabha asked, what is it about the global that had become so marketable? In a sense, the global was a failed attempt to think about scale, one that could not escape the entrapments of its own binaries and oppositions. Suggesting that we think the global in particular ways in relation to the taxonomic and the tropic, Bhabha marked the ways in which the global acts as a claim: a claim to inclusion, a claim to justice, and an ethical claim. The global rendered in this way emphasises forms of value and meaning constituted in circulation, and circulation in various kinds. (Erasmus, n.d., para. 4)

Notwithstanding the affirmative search for the constitution of the university at the level of the curriculum, it was at the very point where the possibilities of a trans-hemispheric re-imagination of the global were being articulated that the negotiations around the tropic and the taxonomic orientations in university discourse posited a particular difficulty. Ranging from postcolonial to nationalist claims, not to mention the politics of inclusion to which the university of apartheid must specifically answer, an affirmative rendering of the global seemed unduly constrained by the script of its discursive inheritance of the racial orders of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. Much of the discussion centred on the geographies of reason that obscured the yet to be resolved implication of the university in the discourse of race upon which much postcolonial reckoning with difference rests, including those ontological differences relating to sexuality, gender, and class.

At the Cape Town workshop held in December 2018, the discussion quickly migrated to the discussion of the stubbornly intractable problem of what to do with the problem of the problematisation of race, that is, the apparent failure of reason to overturn its specifically mythic precursors. One approach was to insist on the need to track and ultimately displace the foundational fiction of race in constraining the search for a new understanding of the global. This would be an urgent matter for the humanities to take up if it were to assume an affirmative quality in naming the tasks of the university in the wake of the struggle against apartheid and the emergence of independence from colonial rule on the African continent. Like the debate about psychiatry and the experience of madness that defined the orientations of Foucault and Fanon discussed earlier, the ensuing critique was a reminder of the many attempts to pass through the multiplying contradictory significations of race in search of a passage to the trans-hemispheric reconstitution of the humanities, in particular, and the university more generally. While not dismissing the trans-hemispheric as pertinent for reimagining the potentialities of the modern university, there appeared to be a need to return to the morass of race, as Stuart Hall (2021) had

done with his formulation of a floating signifier in his reading of Kwame Anthony Appiah, as a way to anticipate uncanny returns of discursively entrenched conceptions of race. This was not merely a call to begin from where we find ourselves situated as it were in the geopolitics of the global South, but to name something in the sign that awakened the memory of slavery. To be true to that memory, the South needed to be conceived as distinct from the taxonomic orders of earlier forms of economic exchange in the wake of slavery. Rather, the aim was to ask how race as a specific effect of a taxonomical order that defined the modern university impinged on rearrangements of knowledge that might revitalise a critical concept of the global. In the ensuing discussion, we were repeatedly returned to the problematic of race and difference, which summarily refused an either/or choice of the high road of temporal flight or the low road of the securities of a return to a taxonomic order. In the end, an acute problem of race and difference in the exercise of apartheid rationality that was encountered at the institutional site of the university in South Africa posed a major stumbling block in the discussion. Specifically, at the historically Black university, race functioned both as a source of state plans for labour efficiency as well as producing anxieties about a slide into mechanised forms of life for the subjects of an administered existence. Faced with these pressures, the university would have to come to terms with mobilisations of the floating signifier of race before new constellations of a global humanities curriculum were proposed and trans-hemispheric possibilities for movements in thought, imagined.

Rethinking the problem of race

The difficulty was not without precedent. The problem of race confronting the university and its epistemic formations has a pertinent genealogy worthy of more careful annotation, especially as it highlights the blockages of desire in efforts to criss-cross the geographies of reason. A brief outline of what this might entail is all that can be proposed here. Consider the examples dating back to the early 1900s of the distributions of race in apartheid's university in South Africa and in post-slavery United States. The choices facing African-American intellectuals and early anti-racism thinkers in South Africa overlapped significantly as the prospects of a worldliness imagined through education brushed up against the limits posed by the experience of race after the First World War. In the early 1900s, W. E. B. Du Bois had understood the shadowy presence of race in the discourse of the university in profoundly enduring and suggestive ways.

> You may, [he argued] dress a query in a thousand forms and complete with a hundred problems, and yet the simple query stands and will stand: shall you measure men and women according to their [personhood] or according to their race and colour? (Du Bois, 1985, p. 76)

In 1935, Du Bois rearticulated this view in his opposition to the programme for post-slavery education espoused by his contemporary, Booker T. Washington. The core of the disagreement, from Du Bois's perspective, was whether the descendants of slaves ought to be subjected to industrial schools at the expense of an education that affirms the intellectual development to the full extent of the student's potential and desire. In his critique of the model of the industrial school,

Du Bois wished that the segregated schools established for the descendants of slaves be directed towards different educational goals. Far from approving the practice of separate education, Du Bois held the view that the segregation enforced in the USA in his time was no excuse for a lesser development or expectation of the human potential of students. "Thus," he noted, "instead of our schools simply being separate schools, forced on us by grim necessity, they can become centres of a new and beautiful effort at human education" (Du Bois, 1935, p. 335).

The discussion of race and education was to have very significant consequences for the approaches to similar questions for an early generation of African nationalist intellectuals in South Africa. Charlotte Maxeke, the first Black woman science graduate in South Africa, who was schooled in the USA around 1903, as well as Sol Plaatje, John Langalibalele Dube, and S. M. Molema, were each profoundly shaped by the debate on post-reconstruction education between Washington and Du Bois in the American South (April, 2012). In South Africa, the post-World War I industrial boom and the intensification of segregationist measures with the passing of the Native Urban Areas Act of 1924 propelled the demand for education among an emerging African intelligentsia. Upon returning to Natal from the Tuskegee Institute, John Langalibalele Dube, for example, established a version of the industrial schools in South Africa modelled on those established by Booker T. Washington in the USA. The pressure to aim for a more ambitious and speculative horizon in Black education also had a fair share of proponents in the American South. Among a generation of intellectuals who travelled to Europe and the USA to study medicine, science, and the human sciences, it was Du Bois who held out a challenge, under the spell of segregation and racial hatred, that potentially aligned education to the promise of freedom from racial and class servitude (see for example, Balfour, 2010). Rather than limiting education to vocational pursuits, and in addition to an education in modern languages and sciences, the segregationist schools would be required to engage in an aesthetic education that would work as a self-affirming strategy to counteract the consequences of violence on the psychic structure. Saddled with institutions that were the product of segregation, Du Bois believed that "a tremendous psychic history would, with proper encouragement and training, find expression in the drama, in colour and form, and in music" (1985, p. 76)—with a small caveat: that this aesthetic development not be seen as "simple entertainment and bizarre efforts at money raising" (1985, p. 76; see also Marable, 1974). The custodianship of the idea of freedom through education from the author of *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) proved critical for influencing the direction of struggles against not only colonialism but also against racial and class segregation in South Africa and the American South. The belief in education to the ends of freedom from racial subjection would influence generations of intellectuals who carried the hopes of humanism amid the rising tides of war and fascism, colonisation and decolonisation.

Evidently, this brief example also lays bare the discrepancy between standpoint and the training in creative intuition to oppose and pre-empt the threat of racial returns. Beyond all the claims made about access to institutions with foundations in separate education, it is the foundational fiction of race that has proven most intractable to breach in the arenas of education. Much has been written and enacted since with respect to the debate on the potential of education in overcoming

oppressive racial orders. Beyond the measure of successes and failures, a more hesitant attitude to the promise of education as extensions of early 20th-century USA and South African attitudes is beginning to emerge around the racial remains of apartheid.

Broadly speaking, the stakes of the debate have been neatly laid out in Garth Stevens' (2018) essay titled "Raced Repetition: Perpetual Paralysis or Paradoxical Promise." Questioning the symptom of a repetition compulsion in the recurrency of race in South African public and institutional life, Stevens asked us to consider how the iterability of race in post-apartheid South Africa recalls the everyday constitution that gave rise to new popular forms of resistance to apartheid. In this manner, the repetition of race is not merely a return of the same, but a reworking of its force for newer modes of resistance. Race then is the very ground for opposing the constitutions of subjectivity underway in the space opened between the state and the public sphere. Rather than a repetition compulsion, the return of race, in this argument, marks the onset of potentially newer forms of political mobilisation against the structural remnant of past experiences of domination. This is also the demand that I read in Stevens' (2023) otherwise sympathetic and encouraging review of *Undoing Apartheid*, a text that asks us to approach the problem of race under apartheid differently and, like Du Bois before, to undertake a project of an aesthetic education to dismantle the effects of apartheid's psychotechnics.

The difference here is slight but consequential. While Stevens (2023) correctly identified some continuity of resistance availed through the reconstituted intensities of racial feeling in the aftermath of apartheid, *Undoing Apartheid* argued that the history of the modality of race that cohered around the exercise of petty apartheid, that is the apartheid of the everyday, is the very supplement of university discourse that must be surpassed if a concept of post-apartheid freedom is to emerge (Lalu, 2022). And in keeping with the debate that preoccupied the early 19th-century Black Atlantic, the question of race appears somewhat differently from the vantage point of universities created under the sign of apartheid, rather than the English-speaking liberal or Afrikaans-speaking universities. More than an instance of a repetition compulsion, the question of race from within the instrumentalities of a racialised higher education institution presents us with the problem of uncanny returns of race, of mechanical existence, as Henri Bergson (1998) put it, encrusted upon the living.

Undoing Apartheid (Lalu, 2022) argued that race needs to be thought in a conjuncture of the aftermath of the abolition of slavery if we understand race as a remainder of slavery that was threaded through the technical systems associated with industrialisation, and subsequently, in the emergence of fields of knowledge that promoted specialisations such as psychotechnics, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence. It is not that psychotechnics produces one amongst many configurations of race, as Stevens seems to suggest, but that psychotechnics promulgates, again according to Bergson (1998), a false problem of race to begin with. To recall briefly, Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1912/2004) was an untimely critique of the emergence of a field of university study inaugurated by Wilhelm Wundt's turn to sensing mechanisms and sensory energetic loops in an emergent paradigm of experimental psychology in Leipzig, Germany from 1870 to 1920. What

Bergson (1912/2004) unfortunately missed in his critique of Wundt was the latter's overarching 10-volume *Völkerpsychologie* (1921) which would subsequently have a lasting effect for the approaches to the question of race and labour amongst the latter's followers in the USA and South Africa. The modern university, my argument goes, incubated this mythic and false problem of race as the very supplement buoying a shift in the idea of the university from being founded in the name of reason to a reductive idea of culture accompanying the age of nationalism. The modern university was thus integral to the emergent discourse of race from the 19th to the 20th century. This conscription of race to university discourse is now beginning to be revealed in several studies—Donna Jones *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* (2011) and Erica Fretwell's *Sensory Experiments* (2020), to mention only two important recent studies. Both focus on the early 20th century, when the forms of experimental psychology appeared to have gained disciplinary jurisdiction over the entropic fallout of the converging demands of labour efficiency and the overwhelming fatigue of war. In post-reconstruction USA, this disciplinary formation took the form of industrial psychology under the aegis of Hugo Münsterberg (1911) amongst others, in South Africa, R. W. Wilcocks. In the case of the latter, students such as Hendrik Verwoerd combined the shifts in labour regimes by orchestrating a discourse on psychological vulnerabilities and psychological variation that later would have a direct bearing on the disastrous political resolution ending in the "poor white" and "native questions" of the early 20th century (see Lalu, 2022, Miller, 1993).

With the abolition of slavery, the excess of race was folded into a study of sensory energetic loops in the model established by Wilhelm Wundt's laboratory in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Wundt, who set out to study the apperceptive alignments and misalignments of sense perception, drew on an ethnography of the techne of man from across the globe to lay the grounds for a story of human variation and life-philosophy. We might say that Wundt had perhaps inadvertently opened the door for the rise of what Jay Martin (1992) following Walter Benjamin has called an aesthetic ideology, one that would not only reinstall an anthropomorphism at the heart of the reigning scientific idea of the university, but also enable the translation of race into culture. Beyond the fascism that an aesthetic ideology later enabled, the onset of the disciplines of the mind also set in place the building blocks for a petty apartheid and a racialised division of labour on which a system of separate education policies ultimately rested in South Africa. In the USA, it laid the foundations for the further proletarianisation of those who were descendants of slaves and who seemed forever trapped in the circular causality of an aesthetic ideology.

Any talk of the techno-rational university needs to begin with the genealogy of race that lies at the heart of the modern university. A few pointers on how we anticipate the unearthing of the problem of race lodged in liberal trusteeship that framed policies of education for "native" and "negro" in the age of segregation may be necessary to reconfigure the debate about the future of the university. To begin with, we need a more thoroughgoing plotting of a response to the question "what is the university for?" Distinguishing between standpoints and elaborations are crucial here, in part because in one respect, the script of race is lodged in the university's rationalisation in the story of the co-evolution of the human and technology. This supplement of race that is folded into

the assumptions governing university discourse has a very particular history that may be traced to the abolition of slavery and the professionalisation of the procedures of scientific method inaugurated by a revolution in physics in 1833, on the eve of the abolition of slavery. Cohered around the idea of the consilience of inductions, which downplayed the vera causa evidential standard as a necessary condition for hypothesis formation in the method of the inductive sciences by allowing for speculative causes, the new method allowed for a greater inclusion of the results of exploration, discovery, and imagination in the work of hypothesis formation. In the process of strengthening the validity of hypothesis built on multiple phenomena, by seeking a truth to be sustained over different phenomena, Cambridge University scientist William Whewell (1840) had effectively albeit unwittingly aligned and opened the university to the enlargement of empirical basis of science made possible by colonialism and capitalism around 1840. Stated simply, the consilience of inductions through the colligating of phenomena implied the universalising of truth claims built on an expanded scientific discovery in a manner that tallied with the age of empire. In the process, with his colleagues in the Cambridge Philosophers Breakfast Club, Whewell literally loaned the methodological strides in science to the imperial world to which the university was in turn conscripted. Scientific reason, and with it, much of humanist reason forged in the age of empire, generally made common course with the mythic precursors of capitalism and colonialism to lay the foundations of what would become the precarious planetary crisis we inhabit today. The birth of the inductive sciences was accompanied by a renegotiation of the methodological contract, which bound together not only the dispersed elements of scientific study but also the disciplinary parts that served as a model for the exercise of reason. This model of the university had as its organising principle the investigation of cause and effect as the foundational and presumably time-tested cultural premises of scientific rationality, one that began by reigning in the dispersal of science at the turn of the 19th century through processes of institutionalisation (when all of empire believed it was working in the interest of science) and culminated in the conservative rendering of the preservation of the unity of knowledge in the restatement of the idea of consilience articulated by E. O. Wilson (1999) in the aftermath of the Cold War in the 1990s. In Wilson's rendition, a consilience that leads to a unity of knowledge as the reigning idea of the university amounts to the suspension of human judgment and humanist reason in the interests of a knowledge project wholly given over to societies of regulation and shorn of any substantive desire for freedom.

An over-confidence and expanding hegemony of the physical sciences in the worlds that empire made, coupled with the rising tide of nationalism and its concomitant reliance of foundational fictions drawn in part from the veridiction conferred by the university, corroded the very concept of freedom upon which humanistic inquiry is founded.[2] The model of consilience that founds the modern university, in so far as it projected itself on the frameworks of an expanded empirical base of empire, obscured the extent to which the modern university depended on mythic precursors. The mythic had always served as a resource for reason, positing relations with state and public spheres to relocate the entropic forces, for example, of racial difference in an overall effort to

2 A good place to begin in understanding this displacement is Eric Hayot's (2021) *Humanist Reason: A History, an Argument, a Plan*.

remake a biopolitics of population beginning in the 19th-century. This is ultimately what the colonial world encountered in the failed promise of liberal trusteeship, the configuration of the promise of access to modernity through education, which later resembled a programme of segregation in education in post-Second World War political rationalities such as apartheid. A gamut of programmatic possibilities aimed at moulding unevenly borne political subjectivities came to rest on this reworking of the foundational fictions in university discourse. Beyond the immediate effects of a disciplinary society, this diminishing of the human was achieved mostly by reworking and recasting race war in newer more malleable and legible nomothetic idioms of race, naturalised through forms of immaterial labour expressed in terms of the manipulation of sentient life in an age of expanded communication technologies that gained unprecedented momentum at the start of the 20th century.

Towards an aesthetic education

If the techno-rational university is allowed to repeatedly return the subject of race to the very point at which university discourse of empire was inaugurated, to the point of the unfulfilled promises made to slaves with the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean and the Cape Colony in 1834, the chances of undoing the sources of the mythic violence of apartheid at the other end of the 20th century with the birth of South African democracy in 1994 would prove insurmountable. As Du Bois alluded, there can be no rhyme of hope and history should the university falter on the need for an aesthetic education to deal with the festering wound of the partition of the sensible that has passed with each technological age since slavery. Perhaps, we are likewise charged with the very obligation to return to the matter of education, where the subject of apartheid encounters the limits of an institutional form in the most terrifying and enabling elements of surprise distributed across the spectrum from the idiographic (life, actuality, artistry) to the nomothetic (the development of general concepts and plausible laws of generality). The earlier version of the consilience of inductions gave us a form of surprise of the nomothetic, of the general law that with time became associated with a feeling of being overwhelmed by the apocalyptic. Whewell's (1840) model of surprise, we may recall, emanated from a situation where evidence from one field literally jumped into another to produce a new theory and synthesis from which to proceed, thereby marking scientific reason as an infinite discovery akin to endless imperial expansion. A surprise founded on an aesthetic education, one that veers towards the idiographic (where race is lodged in the unconscious, the uncanny, and the quotidian) perhaps invites the South into an imagining of a university that surpasses the racial paradigm of the techno-rational university. Might a critique of race that proceeds from the unconscious of the idiographic offer us a way to harness Du Bois's (1935) proposal for a sensory education for the descendants of slavery? In our times, it may well call for an education that combines Fanon's disalienating encounters (Luxon, 2016b) with Jacques Rancière's (1991) idea of teaching what we don't know.

Turning to the discursive constitution of race, it will be important to dismantle the hegemony of consilience inherited from the 19th-century scientific revolution, which displaced the critical

potential of humanist reason. In the revelation of apartheid of race at the institutional site of the university inaugurated by apartheid in South Africa from where my thoughts for a re-imagining of the university extends, Whewell's (1840) consilience of inductions that lies behind the birth of psychotechnics is one identifiable source of the uncanny returns of apartheid's racial script. As I have argued, the 19th-century revolution in physics and later, the derivative discourse of psychophysics, amplified ideas of race that now helps to explain the impasse of the university. A process of undoing the dominant structure of consilience seems to point to an education tuned into the sensory apparatus for which humanist reason best prepares us. The sensory here is not simplistically contrasted to the realm of the conceptual, but the point at which the two are reconnected through a training of memory on the element of surprise and intuition associated with the experience of race. This might well be what Rancière (1991) was asking of education and, by extension, what Nancy Luxon (2011) identified in her study of the experience of Fanon's hospital as a waystation that stalls the temptation to narrate colonial trauma so that another process of connecting memory to a different future may unfold. Each share in the call to direct the attention of the university towards the senses in what I am referring to as an aesthetic education. Rather than rush headlong into the performative, as in current forms of opposition to the techno-rational drift of the university, an aesthetic education firstly sets to work on undoing the university's selective turn to the aesthetic in its consilience of inductions. But it also sets to work on reorienting the relation between the human and technology away from mere mechanical existence associated with racialised subjectivity. This is what the return to the foundations of an aesthetic education promises, a place where the supplement of race threaded through the South is made to account for the false promise offered to the figure of the slave that sent their unwitting descendants hurtling pell-mell towards a future to face the uncanny returns of race, rather than the surprise entailed in a sense of freedom from the scourge of endless race war.

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Notes on the author

Premesh Lalu is former Director, and Professor of History, in the Centre for Humanities Research at University of the Western Cape. He is author of *The Deaths of Hintsa: Post-Apartheid South Africa and the Shape of Recurring Pasts* (HSRC Press, 2008) and *Undoing Apartheid* (Polity Press, 2022).

Address for correspondence

premeshl@gmail.com

The redistributed university

Sarah Nuttall
University of the Witwatersrand

Abstract

As the university constantly reconfigures itself in response to multiple pressures and struggles, including economic constraints, shifting knowledge economies, social justice imperatives, rapid technological change, and climate crisis, how might we approach the institution in its present and historical configurations? I suggest that we sharpen our understanding of its distributional registers across multiple sites and in as encompassing a way as possible. By this, I mean that our analyses should address issues of the distribution of belonging and thus of the undoing of conditions that produce symbolic injury, and of the loci, and imaginative modes, of habitability. Such analyses should attend, too, to where a university's inside and outside are perceived to be; in other words, how it sets itself to the social and as a place of possible refuge from that social. If capitalism perennially produces inequality along new orders of distribution, so we need to find ways of rerouting these logics towards liveability, epistemic justice, and a regional imaginary and institutional practice. In doing so, we can draw into being institutional forms that undo logics of offshoring, enclaving, outsourcing, and xenophobia. In the final segment of the essay, I offer a brief analysis of depictions and entangled imaginaries of African universities in African novels, in part, to draw on modes of thought less prone to the technocratic and neoliberal.

Keywords: redistribution, symbolic injury, belonging, habitability, epistemic justice, African universities

Nuttall, S. (2023). The redistributed university. *Southern African Review of Education, 28*(1), 87–101?.

Introduction

As universities in South Africa and elsewhere constantly reconfigure themselves in response to multiple pressures and struggles, including economic pressures, struggles for social justice, and rapid technological change, I argue that it is useful to approach the institution in its present and historical formation in terms of its distributive logics. Redistribution is, in the first instance, a theory of economic justice. It may also refer to the building of a system of reciprocities within a collective. I draw on it, too, to think about how an institution may distribute itself differently over time. Student movements have invoked the timelines of a redistributive logic relating to fee and bursary structures and staffing profiles in relation to race, gender, or insourcing of workers. These were also struggles over the temporal ordering of things, specifically the ongoing legacies of apartheid in the present—the new-old status quo (Nuttall, 2019). They were constituted, too, by struggles against symbolic injury via the ongoing colonialities of South African campuses (the names of buildings, untransformed curricula, outdated or injurious artworks) and arguments for greater belonging and more sustained conditions of habitability and care, especially for Black students and workers on campus.

The university's distributive logics also relate to shifting articulations of where its inside and its outside are to be located—debates, that is, about how to straddle the boundaries between the university and society as such. Activist-scholars try to make the walls of the university more porous; online resources make for formations less circumscribed by walls and disciplines, universities become redistributed across the globe through the rise of private universities (many of which relegate the concerns of the social to their outside). Across the African continent, a process of negative redistribution (debt crises, fewer and diminished staff salaries, and scarce resources) has frequently unfolded, leading to understaffing, brain drains, and the ceding of academic research to consultancy work. Crucially, a redistribution of what knowledge is or can be—a recalibration of the knowledge economy, addressed in part to the claims of epistemic injustice—must shape an emerging critical university studies. Here we might note how the COVID-19 pandemic both enabled open access intellectual platforms and discussions via the flight online—and emphasised the ongoing digital divide, producing new layers of exclusion along emerging orders of distribution, an argument that Garth Stevens, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at Wits University until 2022 and current Deputy Vice-Chancellor, has been instrumental in foregrounding.

A politics of redistribution is constituted by the refusal of processes of outsourcing, unbelonging, and offshoring via systems of enclaving. A university cannot be a state—but it can redistribute itself differently. The defence of the public university, based around articulations of care and critique (including critique as care, and a politics of care as critique) is essential to building durable and habitable institutions. Even as South African student movements have made gains in terms of how our universities distribute themselves in the present (insourcing of workers, more student bursaries, renamed buildings, more diverse staff composition, and curriculum reform amongst them), inequality continues to rise. Thus, it is imperative to complement decolonisation in its

current manifestations (especially as it moves North and, at times, assumes a logic of personal capital rather than collective, Southern inflected solidarities) with a focus on redistribution in multiple senses for the African university. Added to this is the rising challenge of moving the university along a further distributive order—the sustenance and repair of the earth itself, the very ground of the conditions of the ongoing social as such. The redistributed university, then, must be focused on constantly and collectively rekindling the critical project of the university as an emerging, justly transitional, knowledge commons in the making.

What the university will have been for what it is becoming

In thinking about the South African university today, we ought to keep in mind two important historical iterations, distinct yet at times overlapping, of what the university has meant to itself and to those who inhabit it. One invokes the university as site of seclusion cut off from the ordinary social and related in a powerful interpolation to the island prison or indeed, the prison university. This would include historical legacies shadowed by the conundrum of the freedom to think in the most unfree of circumstances; the idea that isolation and or imprisonment or monasticism or seclusion can and do produce forms of self-revelation of various kinds; that a university has often been a place of the withdrawn social, operating akin to an island or a place of exclusion—but also, potentially and in some instances, as a place of refuge and even asylum.

In a letter to Winnie Mandela, herself incarcerated in Kroonstad prison in February 1975, Nelson Mandela wrote that "the cell is an ideal place to get to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings" (Mandela, 2010, p. 211; see Nuttall & Mbembe, 2014). This practice of interiority is here attached to the idea that a fundamental freedom comes with getting to know the inner self, distinct from the collective, outer self often demanded by political struggles lived on the ground. Yet this freedom took place in a space of incarceration—a space, that is, that was capable of jeopardising one's personhood as such. It seems worth keeping in mind, or acknowledging at a psycho-social level, in our sometimes too presentist arguments, that there are complex and difficult attachments in the South African political and intellectual psyche between psychic freedom, the struggle for political freedom, the project of a university, and the aspects of institutionalisation that speak to histories of incarceration and seclusion. Mandela's late views on how to build a different kind of postapartheid society by personally and collectively becoming someone other than who we were before, were shaped, in his island prison turned university, by humanist notions of a redistributed self. Student protesters, and the millennial subjectivities, which they shape and are shaped by, insist that "I am not you and you are not me," in refusal of the humanism that has not been able to undo racism, sexism, homophobia, and inequality in the present.

On the other hand, we could think of the historical relationship between the university and the house or place of shelter. Sisonke Msimang (2018, p. 90), addressing her biographical subject, Winnie Mandela, in the second person on her banishment to the town of Brandfort, wrote thus: "The conditions in which you live in this place of banishment are desolate and bare—but no more

so than the conditions of your neighbours, who have committed no crime and are serving no penal sentence." So it is, wrote Msimang further, that "those who are outside prison walls are simply in a bigger prison . . . only the apartheid government could banish someone to a place where others live not as prisoners but as ordinary Black subjects" (2018, p. 90).

It's crucial to keep in mind these historical echoes as hauntings to our analyses. As Wahbie Long has written: "It is in the university that deprivation emerges as the political ideal of equality collides with the social reality of inequality" (2021, p. 12). In elite universities in particular, many Black students come up against White privilege in greater proximity than they might have before. Moreover, he argued, while elite universities can leave Black students with feelings of alienation, their feelings of rage may also echo or originate in "prior humiliations" (Long, 2021, p. 11). In this sense, a decolonial form of praxis is sought that will "privilege the lived experiences of the oppressed here and around the world" (Long, 2021, p. 10). The politics, perhaps one could say, of the house of the Black subject meets the politics of the university as site of seclusion/exclusion.

As for Long, so for Jacqueline Rose (2017); the inflection of historical experience and/as psychic life brings with it a temporal complexity that reveals questions about the terms of our historical understanding. This enables us to think of the university as a traumatogenic institution, laden with psychic time (see Long, 2021, p. 147), within, despite, and alongside its attempts at reparation and change, its redistributive logics, and its agendas, both liberal and radical, of transformation. We might have barely begun the work of knowing and understanding the university as a university, as neither a prison nor a house, nor as an institution quite like others, despite its neoliberal and corporatising tendencies—but as something else instead. Here we could think, adapting a phrase from Rose (2017), about what the university now will have been for what it is in the process of becoming, holding in tension a psychoanalytically inflected analysis with a more materialist one—that is, the particular past that most presents itself in the present, consciously and less so, for present purposes of thought and politics (see Nuttall, 2020).

Epistemic calibrations and crises

In thinking about the redistributed university, one can also think about its distributional regimes (economic, political, epistemic) in terms of Rosi Braidotti's (2019) work on planes of proliferation and encounter in the university. For Braidotti, this was about working in veins contrary to humanistic visions of subjectivity, including the ever-elaborating vectors of technological mediation. The distributed university in this sense thinks with the shifting status of the human and the rise of biotechnically mediated bodies in the aftermath of the nature–culture divide. Critically, the concept is operationalised via cartographies of power relations and coupled to a mode of learning and thinking in relation to the possibility of assembling knowledge differently (see Nuttall & Braidotti, 2022).

The intersection between this critical ambit and contemporary movements to decolonise the university and to develop more socially just pedagogies, is clear. As knowledge becomes more easily searchable and less circumscribed by institutions and disciplines in an advancing

technological age, the university becomes increasingly akin to a node in a network (Braidotti & Fuller, 2019). Moreover, the rising power of algorithmic reason, in its avowedly post-human modes of analysis and comprehension, challenges more traditional vectors of humanities scholarship. The latter are generally less versed in the abstractions of the algorithmic or in how to best interrupt algorithmic data and turn them towards the ends of social justice struggles in universities (Nuttall & Braidotti, 2022).

Added to this is the fact that post COVID-19, the university (in the global South but elsewhere too) is perhaps more closed and more open than ever before; it retains aspects of dormancy in some respects because so much of its core work has gone online. In this state, it becomes captive to digitality in an endlessly open field. The work of the university is increasingly enabled and mediated by the operations of corporate techno-spheres who oversee access to data and digitality. While we must ask, first, what happens in this new terrain to knowledge from the global South and its compromised regimes of distribution and dissemination, we must then also ask about the non-human technological distribution regimes of the university now. In so doing, we need to turn to a form of criticality alive to the inhuman, non-human and post-human formations of which it increasingly speaks.

The distributed university of the present can be usefully articulated along two major vectors: first, the rise, with increasing visibility but varying degrees of fragility, of other or othered epistemologies, along decolonising trajectories—and the unmaking of the colonial university (Smith, 2021). There is a proliferation of pluri-disciplinary spheres, places from which the multitude of the "missing people" of the academy can be drawn into its core, creating the conditions for a reciprocal community or commons (Braidotti, 2022). Other epistemologies and modes of pluri-disciplinarity are made even more urgent in the era of climate change, which itself decentres the remnants of Enlightenment categories and modes of thought.

Second, more-than-human technological mediation increasingly points to the need for a milieu-specific materialist analysis of media (Jue, 2020, Parikka, 2015). This in turn speaks to the increasingly distributed nature of subjectivity itself (Alaimo, 2010; Neimanis, 2017). As our epistemic environments for thought fundamentally change due to digitality as medium, so does the situation of our knowledge production and the nature of our situated knowledges. Our distributed embodiment is one that must speak to the inhuman, the human yet to come (see Wynter in McKittrick, 2015) as well as to potentially post-human orders of distributed time, subjectivity and institutionality (Nuttall & Braidotti, 2022).

Paradoxes of decolonisation

A sustained and recalibrated set of debates which both acknowledge the force of the decolonial challenge and subject decolonisation to new and urgent questions relating to the recalcitrant distribution regimes that continue to haunt it as well as advancing technological rationalities, is necessary. The question of Africa as site and substance of 21st-century knowledge production remains at the centre of those questions.

Six years after renewed decolonisation debates in South African universities, and nearly 60 years after African decolonisation processes on the rest of the African continent, the question—again—of the temporal logics of the issues before us is a potent one. Victoria Collis-Buthelezi (2020) has reflected in her writing on the importance of staying with the (past in) the present, or in the wake (invoking the work of Christina Sharpe, 2016, in particular), keeping with both loss and those lost and thus, with the potency and power of what has come before, the histories of violence that both haunt and repeat. And yet, from another perspective it can sometimes seem that the current global debate at times assigns institutional and academic processes to an endless present of decolonising, with their epistemological and political horizons not only becoming less clear with time but also with the co-optation of such processes by the academic North and the continuing brain drain of African academics to Northern institutions—including many decolonial activists themselves (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research [WiSER], n.d.). In the context of unfairly distributed knowledge regimes and economic disparities of an enormous order, it seems important to wrestle with this. Perhaps the question is, rather: "How to hold with the competing temporalities of historical and psychic time and of economic and technological time?"

The paradoxes of decoloniality as it is now practised in the North continue to rise formidably. Yet, too, substantial gains have been made since the early years of decolonisation on the African continent. In South Africa, nearly half of the $7 billion national budget for its 27 universities is now allocated to financial support for low- and middle-income students. Scholars based in the metropolitan universities continue to produce volumes of (excellent) work on the intrinsic limits of the forms of knowledge that have been produced in and of the global North, while resources of all kinds—public, philanthropic, and private fees—continue to accumulate in the same Northern institutions. Outmoded models of internationalisation mean that Northern funders and institutions seek Southern partners, yet those "partners" in the South are so under resourced that they give endlessly of their ideas and intellectual capital but gain very little in terms of the salaries and support systems that any intellectual institutional infrastructure needs not only to survive but to grow and flourish. Hence, we need to keep giving consideration to questions of decolonial theory and practice, and issues of intellectual and academic migration. This includes the difficult question, mentioned above, of when decolonial theory becomes a form of personal intellectual capital and Southern-based institutional politics and solidarities are compromised. The current institutional structures of scholarly debate often drive these geopolitical patterns of research subordination. African studies, although marginalised in European and United States universities, nevertheless speaks for scholars who are Africa-based and working to build and sustain African institutions. The charge that theory making, in particular, is not authentically African is still used by metropolitan scholars to discount the most successful research on the continent. At times, existing research excellence from this continent is seen as not being in need of resources and support (see WiSER, n.d.).

A second set of paradoxes relates to the complexities of critical practices and publics within and beyond universities. These have much to do with rekindling the project of the university itself. One

significant distributional regime in recent years has been the notion of the public humanities. This is based around the idea that there can and should be many kinds of interventions and forms of social intelligence produced in a university and that these can lead productively to a redistribution of what knowledge is or can be. It opens a terrain for knowledge produced inside the university to be transformed by forms of knowledge based outside of it. Such work potentially propels discussion in public, a key democratic practice; it also thinks of research and academic writing as a process of conversion into multiply distributed forms.

In an important intervention on these questions, Karl von Holdt (2020) at Wits reflected on attempts in his department to do the work of "public sociology" and how those failed, in his view. The latter resulted in an outsourcing, he wrote, of sociology's critical edge, and avoided the hard work of transforming the discipline of sociology itself. In this sense, it worked with a contrary impetus to calls for decolonisation. This is an important critique. On the other hand, university-based academics can become enmeshed in internecine departmental battles, unable to reach outwards into a public humanities that not only redistributes knowledge but finds publics for academic work where many academic articles attract fewer than 20 readers. The work of assembling and reassembling access to Africa-based scholarship is important in the context of the promise and critique of models of internationalisation in which too little scholarship from here is represented.

A third paradox is that while there is a wide invocation of decolonisation questions as global South questions, there is very little in a regional or continental context. I will return to this below. Even on the question of global South epistemic infrastructures, complex relationships to each other and differing refractions of the Northern academy in the South produce disarticulations. For Srila Roy (2023), the difficulties and sometimes failures of research collaborations to provide meaningful and reciprocal intellectual exchange amongst those within the South can offer us important lessons. The complexities of finding sites for the flourishing of genuine solidarity, reciprocity, and exchange are to be seen in collaborative experiences that are "not always intrinsically positive, even liberatory, given its status as remedy to" the pitfalls of Northern-driven epistemic projects, she argued (Roy, 2023, p. 14). A lack of equality or equivalence, as opposed to "intimacy, symmetry or commensurability" within the global South (Roy, 2023, p. 14) is especially true of Afro-Asian solidarities, she found in her analysis of running a major supposedly collaborative research project across South Africa, Uganda, and India. The South–South emerged, she wrote, as a terrain of *dissonant intimacies*. In other words, the absence of Western institutions and players "did not amount to anything straightforwardly decolonial in practice" (Roy, 2023, p. 15).

Curricula conundrums and trajectories

Christopher Sonn and Garth Stevens, in the introduction to their book *Decoloniality and Epistemic Justice in Contemporary Community Psychology*, argued that a decolonial project in psychology transcends the politics of identity and recognition "with the attendant re-distributed regimes that normally accompany them" (2021, p. 6). They grappled with how to draw marginal epistemic

trajectories in—placing epistemic questions at the heart of decoloniality and contesting epistemologies that are ungrounded and float above specificities (see Ratele, 2018). They, too, echoing some of the questions asked within the WiSER project, asked whether decoloniality as the new way of engaging with critical work is at risk of becoming a free-floating signifier, one "that comes to imply criticality, but with such an amorphous set of meanings that it is rendered meaningless and impotent as a paradigmatic resource" (Sonn & Stevens, 2021, p. 9). Of concern for them, too, was whether decoloniality as a concept is "being appropriated by various centres away from the margins" (Sonn & Stevens, 2021, p. 9).

Sonn and Stevens point us to two further, generative directions for decolonial scholarship now. The first is a re-engagement with "multiple knowledge archives" (Sonn & Stevens, 2021, p. 11) that have been neglected. This they refer to as a "praxis from below," which transforms "the relationship between knower and known" (Sonn & Stevens, 2021, p.15) through epistemic agency. Here we could think of an essay written quite some time before student movements and recent debates about decolonisation by Bheki Peterson (2002) on the question of the archive and the political imaginary. Petersen insisted that we must

> strongly resist the lure to underplay the imperative to discover and construct the canons of previously marginalised groups, whatever the limitations that come with canon-formation. Otherwise, we will be unable to inscribe a local and Pan-African provenance in the production of knowledge. (2002, p. 30)

Makhosazana Xaba and Athambile Masola recently wrote about how Noni Jabavu's life and work raises questions about the ways in which "Black women's intellectual labour occupies a precarious position of a constant threat of erasure unless researchers travel to and through the archives in order to prevent that erasure" (2023, p. 77). Jabavu's columns in the *Daily Dispatch* newspaper in 1977 languished unpublished in the newspaper archive, they commented, so that when Masola began writing her own *Daily Dispatch* columns 30 years later, she did not at first know about Jabavu's columns preceding her and, with them, earlier evidence of Black women's intellectual history. Although the work of engaging the Black archive has been going on for some time and was an important throughline from the late 1990s on, current decolonisation debates have given it new impetus and a wider intentional framing.

The second direction Sonn and Stevens (2021) signalled draws on Mahvish Ahmad's argument in relation to the failure of academic discussions to "engage southern social movement texts as the sites of decolonial praxis and counter-hegemonic knowledge production" (Ahmad, 2023, p. 55). Ahmad further argued that decolonial theorists from outside of academic disciplinary bases have been more insistent on centring the worlds of colonised subjects and the knowledge of their movements, suggesting that this may be why student movements, more than institutional academics, were central to placing decolonisation at the centre of university agendas (Ahmad, 2023, p. 55). While there is an unteased-out conflation between students and social movement texts here, we can draw an inference that students in the movements of 2016–2017 were interfacing with social movements across the world, including the Occupy movements and the

texts that emerged from them, drawing them into their political thinking and strategies.

Jansen and Walters, in their book *The Decolonisation of Knowledge*, asked a different question: "How does a radical idea make its way through an institution?" (2022, p. 1). Answering this question implies developing a theory of institutions (here the university), they argued, and understanding the embeddedness of what they called "the settled curriculum," a curriculum that is both "comfortably ensconced" and of "settler colonial origins" (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 9). In a further striking formulation, they described this as a curriculum "sheltered in place" (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 9). Undertaking an empirical study across numerous South African universities, they found that institutions do respond and allow for severe critique, but that substantive curriculum change runs into problems of academic autonomy—and institutional commitments dwindle when pressure for change subsides. Although curriculum changes since 2015 have not been significant on their reading, shifts in pedagogy have been widespread and substantive. That is, the degree to which students learn that knowledge is "contested versus settled" (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 149)—the importance of documenting the material culture of disadvantaged communities; the idea of public art, including the visual cultures of campuses themselves, as curricula (see Schmahmann, 2019); activities of what they called *recurriculating* (for example, re-centring the question, in an engineering faculty: what does it mean to be an engineer?); and the valorisation of students and their experiences, aimed at a more equal distribution of power in the classroom, are all seen as significant advances in South African universities.

Thus, while the curriculum itself may not be fundamentally dismantled, emerging pedagogical practices "contains radical forms of engagement with knowledge, authority and community" and students become "co-creators of knowledge—a practical, context-based application of the curriculum" (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 186). However, the tension between pedagogy and assessment remains powerful, as in the case of still prevalent terminal examinations, they found. In tracking the complex path of a potentially radical curriculum idea, decolonisation, through the university as an institution, they locates radical "enclave curricula" (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 206) on the margins of institutional life. Beyond these, institutional containment remains real and radical curricula remain "vulnerable to reversals" (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 215). In a crucial point, the identified that higher education reform after apartheid tended to be structural in orientation—and to elude sustained engagement with the politics of knowledge.

A major paradox Jansen and Walters (2022) identified, and articulated via the work of Wahbie Long (2021, p. 227), was that "even when there is extreme distress expressed about the university as an artefact of the colonial past, the institution itself is embraced." Most of all, though, the outcome of this research is that a radical approach to curriculum change has to figure out how to reconcile an abstract politics of knowledge with the hard reality of an unequal distribution of knowledge by race, class, and gender. Jansen and Walters (2022) argued that a compulsory core curriculum is the best way of advancing a radical curriculum. They added that the production of substantive Southern scholarship—versus writing that is, they averred, "rhetorical, repetitive, rehearsed and remonstrative' (Jansen & Walters, 2022, p. 233)—is key to further consolidating

such a curriculum.

From the above, we can see some of the challenges to producing sustained curriculum changes, and to redistributing knowledge systems, as well as to creating robust South-South solidarities and knowledge intimacies. Substantial gains have been made, however, in producing pedagogical changes and shifting distributions of power, authority, and knowledge. Paying closer attention to social movements texts as loci of radical transformation—in other words, to ideas that come from outside of a university's immediate institutional and disciplinary bases—emerges as significant to the work of redistributing the colonial university along other orders of thought and action. This again draws us to where a university's inside and outside are perceived to be.

Redistribution and/as entanglement

I am often drawn to the imaginative resources of African fiction to help me harness a critical and analytical vocabulary that holds open a wider ambit to our deliberations than is generally the case in sociological studies. Moreover, in rereading novels with new analytical rubrics in mind and in shifting historical moments, one can see otherwise, as oft-read texts refract and emit differently—in a magic lantern effect. Long overdue, too, and especially in the context of the recent launch of critical university studies in South Africa, would be a course module on the university in African fiction. Below I offer some initial thoughts in this direction.

In Phaswane Mpe's well-known novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), the young protagonist Refentše traverses the distance, short yet infinitely long, from the campus of University of the Witwatersrand to the inner city surrounding districts of Braamfontein and Hillbrow. In that intense journey across town, he observes and experiences multiple pressure points on an uncertain itinerary. Mounting the stairs to the university for the first time, the imposing but ugly structures erected on its premises intimidate and somewhat offend him. Soon, all the action centres on the central admissions office and the hustle for student accommodation—"you do not have enough money to pay the required deposit" (Mpe, 2001, p. 15). One weekend, a Wits University car is "successfully redistributed" (2001, p. 22) in the parlance of late 1990s Johannesburg. Some years later, now with an office in the publishing programme of the university, Refentše must shuttle between here and there, this side and that, Wits, Braamfontein, and "our Hillbrow." By now, he has "found a mission in all this omission—a mission to explore Hillbrow in writing" (2001, p. 30). The book is written in the second person, strongly implicating the reader—"You often used to think about the scarcity of written Hillbrow fictions in English and Sepedi" (2001, p. 29). The book he writes, in the second person, and some of it from heaven in what becomes an elegiac structure to the text, is a story of embrace, ambivalence, and intractability as a young Black academic and writer in a time of, simultaneously, social reciprocities, sometimes on campus and more often on the streets, xenophobia, and the vulnerabilities that come with HIV and AIDS.

Critical responses to the novel have noted the expansiveness of the "our" in our Hillbrow, to which we are welcomed, one which works against the elite overtones of the cosmopolitan; the de-pathologising of melancholia in the face of so much premature death during the AIDS

pandemic, and fiction as a way of undertaking the work mourning; profound ambivalence about city life and the stranger intimacies allowed and enabled by the streets, as stranger/foreigner/virus/African play out in complex and vulnerable ways (see Hoad, 2007). Mpe himself embraced heaven (or the ancestral realms), imagination, memory, writing, and fiction in his attempt to grapple with the university and the city. More presciently perhaps, particularly in light of #Fees Must Fall struggles at Wits in 2016 and 2017, is that in negotiating proximity and distance to and from the university as such, hospitality is also framed as the question, in fact, of student accommodation. It is wrested, too, from the corridors of high theory and drawn to a notion of admission, which offers a form of habitability and potential dwelling to those who are accepted and enter this complex social space of the university.

Here, we might draw the second person narrator of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (Mpe, 2001) into direct dialogue with Dinz, the main protagonist of Niq Mhlongo's (2007) *Dog Eat Dog*. Dinz is a Wits university student "monitoring the atmosphere" (Mhlongo, 2007, p. 27) in order to make it at Wits and to avoid having to return to life in the township. Running out of money fast and having just been refused a student bursary, he hustles his way into the financial aid office on campus and persuades a Dr Winterburton to re-open his case. Being at Wits is a way of being in the city; being in the city is a way of being at Wits. Dingz's friend Theks says to him, "once we are let loose in the real world you'll realise that life is a matter of dog eat dog" (2007, p. 218). But the novel shows that life is already like that—permeating the university walls and halls, veering between polis and necropolis, city and township. Again, questions of economic access and bursaries for working-class entrants, which in this novel centre round the production of a death certificate of a putatively deceased family member, a cipher in the larger story for being able to prove that you deserve leeway and assistance, are placed at the centre, often acerbically, of what entrance is possible and how any entrance is closely associated with blockade or blockage, a trope taken up in recent student struggles as students blockaded university entrances to protest their exclusion along multiple and often negatively redistributing vectors of who can belong and on what terms.

In the final two examples I draw on here, I signal what our debates and articulations of the university now so often exclude. These are regional and continental imaginaries—as if South Africa is, as ever, an island of its own and as if in repetition of the logic of enclosure rather than embrace. In Namwali Serpell's magisterial Zambian novel *The Old Drift* (2019), intergenerational debates about the university as an institution, and University of Cape Town during the student protests in particular, take place on the campus of UNZA (University of Zambia). Scrambling the usual generational differences, the young Lionel (studying microbiology and virology at UNZA), to whom "the Cape Town protests seemed gentrified . . . how nice for you, destroying history to make a point when some of us just want the chance to study it" (Serpell, 2019, p. 399). For his grandmother, Agnes, who had attended meetings of the revolutionary left at UNZA years before, Rhodes was not just an imperialist but a capitalist too: "Decolonising education is not just about race. . . . It's about class too. The university fees are so high precisely because of Rhodes's capitalistic ideology. Rhodes and fees must fall" (2019, p. 400). For his grandfather, Ronald, Agnes's husband (who had been a dean of engineering at the university for decades)—"attending

university is a privilege. It must be paid for!" (2019, p. 400) and, speaking to his wife: "This Marxist idealism of yours is not Zambian . . . it is imported" (2019, p. 400). Meanwhile, the lights go out: "They all waited for the generator to clunk and judder to life. . . . This is what people should be protesting! Grandpa expostulated" (2019, p. 401). Joseph, youngest of them all, had, however, "left his heart in Cape Town. He constantly checked for updates on the protests and planned to transfer as soon as possible. In the meantime, he enrolled in UNZA classes on ecology and microbiology" (2019, p. 401). How seldom do our discussions on the decolonising or the redistributing university centre (and with due complexity) on, for example, University of Cape Town in Lusaka—or, for that matter, the views of Zambian students at University of Cape Town.

Finally, and further afield from a Southern African regional conversation on universities as cultural spaces, places of contestation, and of the rituals and excitement of intellectual life, I turn to Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This takes us to the 1960s and life on a university campus at Ntsukka. Often told from perspectives of cleaners, domestic workers, or waitresses at the staff club, we encounter, amongst others, Odenigbo (maths academic), Olanna (instructor in the sociology department), and Miss Adebayo—a "university woman" (Adichie 2006, p. 19). The novel conjures up intellectual life in the university, on campus, and in lecturers' homes nearby. Heated debates take place on pan-Africanism—a "fundamentally European notion or the most sensible response to White oppression?" (2006, p. 20). Moreover, "it is *now* that we have to begin to decolonise our education! Not tomorrow, now! Teach them our history!" (2006, p. 75) says Odenigbo, in the living room that doubles up as a political club and a university evening commons, "mellowed by alcohol, languorous with ideas" (2006, p. 91). It is in these discussions that university intellectuals range across the continent, grappling with the dehumanisation of Black people in South Africa, Rhodesia, and the Congo and parsing the terms of decolonisation across Central, East, and Southern Africa. What follows are coups, calls for secession, and war. The University Women's Association organises a seminar, In Case of War—"wrap your certificates in waterproof bags" (2006, p. 169). There are fewer visitors in the evenings, the campus streets become "ghostly" (2006, p. 175), the university empty. By the late 1960s, Nigerian soldiers stand guard at the university gates, commanding returning "book people" (2006, p. 416) to change their Biafran number plates; a rusting gun lies across a half-eaten copy of *The Socialist Review* and mounds of blackened books, remnants of libraries set on fire by anti-Igbo forces, lie across the campus. How quick leaving was, Olanna thinks— "and how slow returning has been" (2006, p. 432). Not only does the novel invoke the ferment and intensity of intellectual and political life on a campus; it follows that ferment into a time of post-colonial war.

Conclusion

In the above, I have attempted to calibrate a redistributive logics for the university to come, in a language and from vantage points that refuse or exceed techno-rationalism, producing pathways to acts of recomposition of and for the university. The article has attended to ways of assembling knowledge differently, including knowledge about, and theories of, the university as an institution.

This is crucial as a Southern-inflected set of viewpoints that are drawn from the specificities of location, including specificities within South Africa itself. Questions of the university's ongoing sustenance, including in terms of environmental justice, are clearly at stake. Further, I have offered a reading of the complex temporal and spatial layerings that need to inhabit an emergent critical university studies discourse in this country and region. Timescapes of the then–now, including in its traumatogenic dimensions, are important for understanding recalibrated pasts in the present, as are invocations of the university as an island, a prison, a house, a place of refuge and of asylum. Issues of recalcitrance and dislodging are useful vectors for approaching the inherited settled curricula of most disciplines as well as the pedagogical potential of the times. Finally, the question of how we undo the nationalist logics of so many of the discussions on universities in South Africa and relearn and rethink the regional dimensions of the problematics that are emerging are important both for ongoing processes of decolonisation as well as for understanding the regional dynamics of environments and societies. Redistribution—of economic justice, of knowledge, and of imagination—across regional space becomes crucial in embracing a southern African perspective on what our universities are, have been, and could become.

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Notes on the author

Sarah Nuttall is Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Address for correspondence

Sarah.Nuttall@wits.ac.za

Transformation dynamics in South African universities: Emergent trends

Crain Soudien
University of Cape Town

Abstract

All South African universities have committed themselves to remaking themselves. This commitment is carried through a plethora of official, promotional, and analytic documents developed by institutions. These documents speak to the ideals of transformation, change, reform, inclusion, and decolonisation—all in the name of social justice. But what theories of change sit behind these commitments? How do institutions describe and explain the circumstances in which they find themselves, the sociological contexts of which they form a part, and the range of forces to which they are subjected and to which they have to respond, and, critically, the role of a knowledge-producing institution in the unfolding socio-political urgencies of a place like South Africa? This contribution works specifically with universities' strategic and transformation plans to lift out and analyse the ways in which they work with the idea of change. Proceeding semiotically, the analysis is interested in the discursive politics of the naming, describing, and framing of the key elements of the change idea: what the issues are, the analytic procedures used for making sense of them, the programmatic concepts and steps developed for working with them, and the rubrics adopted to evaluate them. What emergent end-points begin to surface and how the procedures, practices, and logics that begin to rationalise and objectify them and so take shape in the form of theories of change and the development of new practices is the interest of this work.

Keywords: South African higher education, higher education transformation, theories of change in the universities, higher education strategic planning

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Introduction

As things stand now, all South African universities say that they wish to transform. They speak of their desire to change, reform, effect inclusion and, in recent times, to decolonise—all in the name of social justice. This wish is expressed through a plethora of official, promotional, and analytic material and documents. They are replete with pronouncements and statements of intent—what institutions say they will do, the activities they indicate they will undertake, and that which they wish to be. Rarely, however, do institutions say *how* they will actually achieve what they wish for, what underpins or directs the processes and procedures they will initiate—or, specifically to the purpose of this contribution, with what theory of change (TOC) they are working.

Working with universities' strategic and transformation plans, this contribution attempts to lift out, describe, and analyse the implicit theories of change emergent in the South African higher education landscape. Can, I ask, we venture a naming of the character of the change thinking that is in gestation in the South African university? A new report on the state of transformation in South African universities by Luescher et al. (2023) quoted former Rhodes University vice-chancellor Saleem Badat commenting on recent reforms in the country's institutions. Badat said:

> Notwithstanding that the changes attempted may be far-reaching, and may unwittingly also create the conditions for more radical changes, it is not their intent to displace prevailing social relations as much as to reproduce these in new ways and forms. (in Luescher et al., 2023, p. 31)

If we are interpreting Badat correctly, are we looking at a landscape characterised by weak theories of change, or could we describe what is happening in other ways?

Towards an attempt to revisit this question, I ask in this contribution how institutions describe and explain the circumstances in which they find themselves and how they say they will change them. Proceeding semiotically, I look at the discursive politics inherent in their strategic plans, how they frame the key elements of their change ideas, what they say the issues are, the analytic procedures used for making sense of them, the programmatic concepts and steps developed for working with them, and the rubrics adopted to evaluate them. I am interested in seeing what emergent endpoints begin to surface and how the procedures, practices, and logics that begin to rationalise and objectify them and so take shape, present to us incipient theories of change. What, critically and constructively, we can say about these emergent frameworks is important for locating and dealing with the implications of where we in the universities find ourselves in relation to the important social and political challenges associated with our work.

A starting point for our thinking is that planning frameworks are never neutral. They explicitly and implicitly serve and are enlisted, appropriated and deployed in the interests of one or, more frequently, a range of political projects. These projects may, depending on one's view of the world, be either *good* or *bad*, however those terms are defined—or, indeed, both.

While universities have within them, simultaneously, the full range of good and bad projects, there is considerable concern in progressive scholarly circles about the uses to which the knowledge producing project and the very knowledges that are being produced are being put. Important global

scholars such as Giyatri Spivak (1993) and Bill Readings (1996) argued that universities have become sites for the reproduction of neo-liberal dominance. Proceeding, it is important to have a working understanding of what neo-liberalism is. A leading political economist, David Harvey (2007, p. 2) defined it as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade." Central in this definition are ideas of economic efficiency and market rationality. In higher education these ideas take expression, as Readings has argued, by metrics of *excellence* validated in and through markers of individual performance: "Who could be against excellence?" he asked (1996, p. 28). But when it "marks nothing more than the moment of technology's self-reflection [through market indicators] . . . [and when] all that the system requires is for activity to take place," then, he argued, the notion of excellence is empty and "excellence [consequently] refers to nothing other than the optimal input-output ratio in terms of information" (Readings 1996, p. 39). We must read Readings carefully. He is incorrect, though, to describe input-output activity as "empty." It is, I argue, about deep discursive legitimation—a process of securing the techno-rational apotheosis of neo-liberalism. What "we are here dealing with," said Spivak, is "the aggregative apparatus of Euro-American university education, where weapons for the play of power/knowledge as *puissance/connaisance* are daily put together, bit by bit" (1993, p. 53). Speaking forthrightly, Cedric Denis-Remis and Armand Hatchuel argued that:

> Today, global universities have the same universalist vocation [to integrate all fields of knowledge]. Beyond its graduating activities, the university also exerts a power of knowledge, one that determines global development, ethics and norms. . . . This . . . power results directly from the global dimension now assigned to the traditional missions of the most ambitious universities. (2017, paras. 6–7)

> Large universities. . . . Can now build successful alliances with governments they are interested in. . . . [They] place their "troops" everywhere. (2017, paras. 13–4)

Excellence, in this process, not only shapes what is desirable and undesirable but also authorises what is privileged, disprivileged, what is encouraged, tolerated and even, perhaps, prohibited. Read literally, the observers' comments are chilling. The academies' troops are everywhere. They authorise, explained Maria do Mar Pereira (2016, p. 102), "what tends to become *impossible* in the current scholarly context."

Even if Denis-Remis and Hatchuel and Pereira were only half correct, there is a problem. The problem, indeed, the systemic challenge, is that of how the modern university not only resists the presumptive over-determining grip of neo-liberalism but is able to sustain the capacity to produce new knowledge informed by what Watson et al. (2011: xxvi) described as "self-study and self-critical reflection." How does it keep alive the possibility of alternative imaginaries? How we come to constitute in the university alternative legitimations for the core activity of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination is what drives this contribution.

How then, in this context of an over-determining knowledge–power nexus, is the South African

university positioning itself to offer new possibility? How, firstly, does it give substance to that social justice agenda to which it is rhetorically committed, and, secondly, how does it take up the strategic challenge of charting pathways that facilitate possibilities and opportunities for keeping alive the capacity for critical reflection, and, through this, the development of new change analytics and praxes? What theories of change are evident in the South African university?

The concept of a *theory of change*

The concept of a *theory of change* (TOC) has old roots. It animated social analysis in a wide variety of forms during the European Renaissance and Reformation and, in a range of expressions, continues to inform struggles in many different kinds of settings (see Wright, 2010). It has, however, and this has pointed significance for this contribution, taken on a new life in corporate and social organisational contexts where it is used for managing processes of strategic planning.

Mainstays of how change happens have explicit sociological points of departure. The two most dominant in education, functionalism and conflict theory, begin with strong assumptions about how society works. The former, founded in Durkheimian ideas of social solidarity, is premised on the production and reproduction of social consensus. Change happens through negotiated processes of cooperation. Conflict theory, on the other hand, has as its starting proposition the idea that society is unequal. It is constructed around the macrostructural social determinants of class, race, gender, language, religion, and so on. Interest groups arise and are situated in relation to these determinants and bring with them, on the one hand, opposing and competing claims of precedence, and, on the other, complaints of subjection. They struggle with each other. They want access to the power that authorises their privilege or justifies their disadvantage. Struggle is consequently the major dynamic in conflict theory.

While the idea of consensus, and this will be returned to in our conclusion, remains a factor in contemporary considerations of change, there has been a drift in TOCs towards the apolitical. Working with and in categorical concepts of *roles*, *offices*, and sometimes, *tasks* and *responsibilities*, in often-classic Weberian idealised terms, change is conceptualised as an asocial bureaucratic phenomenon. It is about organisational alignment, coherence, articulation, and order. When the organisation is in its "ideal" state, it is entirely rational. Displaced in this analytic process, I argue, are messiness, contradiction, and, most critically, the ability to use what Gavin Andersson and Howard Richards (2015) called *unbounded* organisation as the frame for managing the movement of social structures from one state to another. Unbounded organisations and social structures explore contradiction, work with difficulty, and open up opportunity for confronting that which is thought unthinkable. It works out, through conscious and deliberate intellectual exploration, what to take away from learning about failure and how to sustain that which is in the public interest. It works with conflict in generative ways. Organisational process, by contrast, particularly as it leverages its way through hierarchy and the prohibitions of what is called line-accountability—with a chief executive officer having the final responsibility—invariably, not always, I acknowledge, constitutes the organisation ontologically as a contradiction avoidance

space. Rational thought is framed and interpreted in relation to the imperative of organisational development. The ideal organisation pivots on the reasoned behaviour of its organisational subject. They, as a holder of office, will do what is rationally appropriate for the office they occupy. Subjectivity is individualised around the dynamic of organisational efficacy and rational thought. Critiquing this model—"a planned, managed, and systematic process to change culture, systems and behaviours of an organisation" (Rush, 1973, p. 2)—Vougis (1982) suggested that most forms of organisation, and particularly the "consultative" engagements presumed to authorise it, are formalistic and based on low levels of understanding of what is at stake in the proposed change process. While members of organisations are brought into change engagements, they come with only scant information about how the organisation works and what actors and stakeholders at different points of the organisational process do. Information is mediated only as needed. The organisational subject is rationally placed. Their sphere of engagement is limited to the requirements of their office. As a subject, moreover, they are behaviourally primed to avoid conflict.

This dominant consensus building approach to making change was popularised in the 1990s in the monitoring and evaluation community. Project evaluation discussions convened by the Aspen Institute and the Roundtable on Community Change in the United States (see Anderson, 2005; Chen, 1990; Coryn et al., 2011; Weiss, 1995) came to focus on how best change processes could be monitored, evaluated, and ultimately, refined. To improve the analytic capacity of evaluations, Weiss (1995) and his colleagues effectively came to the understanding that change depended on good theory. This thinking became extremely popular and now, as a result, contemporary explanations and uses of what a TOC is have come to be dominated, as Reinholz and Andrews (2020, para. 6) explained, by theory-driven evaluation. In terms of this, a TOC begins with a clear statement of what the object of a change process is, what intervention or treatment is required, and a clear understanding of what the causal relationship between an intervention or an input and its anticipated outcomes would be. Evaluators, to describe a TOC, seek to understand "under what conditions does something work and for whom?" (Pawson & Tilley, 2004, p. 2). Involved, is a hypothesis—based on clearly articulated assumptions about a phenomenon and its causal origins and how those origins can be modulated. The TOC has become, in these general terms, a strategy or approach to solving a problem and has been assimilated into processes of strategic planning (see Pawson & Tilley, 2004). It articulates the specific interventions or inputs that will produce the desired outcomes. Conceptualised in this way, the TOC is structured as a rubric, a formulaic set of guidelines and procedures consisting of inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Input factors function as activating and mediational mechanisms for the achievement of change—the determined and measurable outputs and outcomes specified in the process (see Anderson, 2004).

Conscious of the instrumentalisation of the idea of TOC, I look at how this idea is being used in planning processes in universities in South Africa. I do so with Zygmunt Bauman's caution that what is in play here is not simply an instrument or a formula; to understand what a TOC is, he advised that we think of it as a heuristic for "find[ing] that difference which makes the difference" (1990, p. 5). With this I look at the discursive signalling, or what Oberlack et al. (2019, p. 106)

described as the "mental representations and theoretical assumptions that explain how and why activities of an initiative (e.g. projects, programmes, organisations) generate particular changes" that are present in the language of strategic planning. Examples of this signalling include the assumptions that underlie ideas of inputs and mediating or activating factors. A mission statement may provide that signalling explicitly. Often it does not. It is abstracted and articulated at a general level. Many institutions, for example, will say that they will work in *interdisciplinary terms*. This, critically, does not tell one enough about how they will actually proceed to achieve what they set out to do. One has to, as a result, search elsewhere in their plans to ferret out how they will make their plans work. In what follows, I look at the strategic plans and other relevant documents of the universities to establish how they clarify, define, and characterise what will make their plans work for them, and use this to develop a preliminary map of emergent theories of change in the South African higher education landscape.

Discursive signalling in the university: Visions and missions

Of interest in this analysis is not what institutions' stated objectives are but, more critically, what the intent behind their objectives is. To get to intent, I begin by asking what one might learn from institutions' vision and mission statements. I then take a step beyond these elements of institutions' strategic plans to look at how they talk of activity.

A review of all the strategic plans of South Africa's 26 universities reveals, without exception, significant regularities (Cape Peninsula University of Technology [CPUT], n.d.; Central University of Technology [CUT], 2020; Durban University of Technology, n.d.; Nelson Mandela University [NMU], n.d.; North-West University [NWU], 2017, n.d.; Rhodes University [RU], 2023; Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, n.d.; Sol Plaatje University [SPU], 2019; Stellenbosch University [SU], 2019, n.d.; Tshwane University of Technology [TUT], 2020, n.d.; University of Cape Town [UCT], 2021; University of Fort Hare [UFH], 2021; University of the Free State [UFS], 2018, n.d.; University of Johannesburg, 2017, n.d.; University of KwaZulu-Natal [UKZN], n.d.; University of Limpopo, 2020; Mangosuthu University of Technology, n.d.; University of Mpumalanga [UMP], 2015; University of Pretoria, 2011, n.d.; University of South Africa, n.d.; University of Venda, n.d.; University of the Western Cape, 2017; University of the Witwatersrand [Wits], 2022, n.d.; University of Zululand, n.d.; Vaal University of Technology [VUT], n.d.; Walter Sisulu University, n.d.). In these regularities, can be found patterns that portend the outlines of a general TOC. At first glance, almost all the plans share the same planning architecture underpinned by the logic of monitoring and evaluation: visions, missions, situational analyses; strength-weakness-opportunity-threat (SWOT) matrices; key performing areas (KPAs); and key-performing indicators (KPIs). This first glance suggests that we have a community of institutions thoroughly assimilated into dominance. They conform in how they present themselves to the ways of the standardised strategic planning order. Their plans are in their form and construction indistinguishable from those of the world's supposedly great universities. They are, in these terms, model members of the global normative order.

But we need to move more cautiously. They claim to be different. So, do they in the substance of what they are writing about themselves suggest something different? Let us begin with their visions and missions.

Visions correctly talk to what institutions aspire to be. This is where, at their highest level, they present themselves as they wish to be seen. A survey of all the vision statements of South Africa's universities indicates that we have, in socio-political or, more complexly, ideological, terms, a spectrum of aspirations. They range from the relatively neutral to strong expressions of social commitment. At the neutral end, they present themselves in minimally identifiable terms. While they sometimes appeal to an undefined *Africanness*, much else about what they say is abstract and generalised. More committed visions give one an indication of the significance institutions seek to place behind the idea of their location and the role they seek their institutions to play.

Visions at the neutral end of the spectrum, it is important to acknowledge, are not without value commitments. Their institutions, however, could be located anywhere in the world. Examples include TUT's (2020, para. 2) vision which was to be "a people's university that makes knowledge work," that of the University of Venda (n.d., p. 3) which described the institution as "a university leading in engaged scholarship" and that of Walter Sisulu University (n.d., p. 7) which sought to be "an impactful, technology-infused African university." Similar, but more grounded is that of the VUT (n.d., p. 26), which described itself as being "an African university that leads in quality teaching and learning, informed by research and driven by innovation and technology."

More high-minded, and sometimes locationally descriptive but still abstracted, are the visions of three of the country's research-intensive universities: UCT, Wits, and UKZN. That of UCT (2021, p. 1) was to "unleash human potential for a fair and just society." Wits' vision was that of "by driving innovation through the University, embracing the diversity of our people, disciplines and ideas, Wits will be a place where our students and staff thrive," (2022, p. 2) and that of UKZN (n.d., p. 3) was "to be the Premier University of African Scholarship."

More consistently located and more articulate about their intentionality, are the visions of CPUT and CUT. These were, respectively, "shaping the future through innovation as a leading African university of technology" CPUT (n.d., p. 3) and, almost identically, "to become a leading African university of technology, shaping the future through innovation" (CUT, 2020, p. viii). Similar, too, was the vision of the UFH (2021, Vision section) which was "to be a distinctive African university, advancing excellence and innovation in research, teaching, learning, administration, and social engagement." Redemptive, importantly, in these relatively stronger visions is a qualification of what the responsibility of being located in Africa is.

Stronger yet and higher on the spectrum of commitment are visions that not only indicate the location of institutions but the role they wish to play. Good examples include the vision of University of the North-West (2017, p. 3) which was "to be an internationally recognised university in Africa, distinguished for engaged scholarship, social responsiveness and an ethic of care." That of NMU (n.d., p. 1), similarly, was evocative: "A dynamic, African university recognised for its leadership in generating cutting-edge knowledge for a sustainable future." SU

(n.d., Our vision) wanted to be "Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society."

The newer universities of SPU (2019) and UMP (2015) were, interestingly, more contextualised in their self-descriptions. SPU (2019, p. 11), for example, sought to be "a university critically engaged in learning, research and development—while enhancing democratic practice and social justice in society." UMP's (2015) vision was to be "An African university leading in creating opportunities for sustainable development through innovation."

Mission statements, in potential, by their nature, say somewhat more. When universities describe how they will work, it is possible to intuit what kind of university they wish to be. Making missions different and distinct from visions, however, is not always a straightforward exercise. Sometimes a mission statement is effectively an extension of a vision. That of SPU (2019, p. 12), for example, said that it seeks "to become an institution of higher learning uniquely positioned to: graduate citizens competent and capable of realising the aspirations of society." While the verb "position" alludes to the possibility of a distinct way of doing for the University, the intention was not clearly carried through. Where the missions are clearer, they provide some sense of the kind of place the universities think they are and might be. Their missions provide some insight about how they wish to operate. SU (n.d., Our mission) said, for example, that it is a "research intensive university, where we attract outstanding students, employ talented (staff)." UKZN (n.d., p. 10) described itself as a "a truly South African University of Choice that is academically excellent, innovative in research, entrepreneurial and critically engaged with society." RU (2022, p. 26) said that its mission was "to provide transformative education, rigorous scholarship and research that seeks to create a just society." The University of Zululand (n.d., p. 6) described its mission in the following way: "To produce globally competitive graduates, relevant for the human capital needs of the country." The mission of the University of Johannesburg (n.d., para. 2) was that of "inspiring its community to transform and serve humanity through innovation and the collaborative pursuit of knowledge." That of the University of Pretoria (n.d., p. 5) was "in pursuing recognition and excellence in its core functions of research, teaching and learning, and integrating engagement with society and communities into these, the University of Pretoria will use quality, relevance, diversity and sustainability as its navigational markers."

In reviewing these vision and mission statements evident is an important isomorphism. Recurrent is an aspiration to "lead" academically and to be recognised as "excellent." Less frequent but present, is the wish to be "cutting-edge" and "innovative." In assessing these, it could be argued that they are justifiable and defensible aspirations. Which university does not wish to be, as Readings said, excellent? But what is meant by excellence? What is leadership and the value distinguishing it? Compounding this, not evident in the visions and missions of South African universities is how they will change or what TOCs underpin their plans. To allow some benefit of doubt, might an examination of their intended plans give one a sense of this? To develop a better sense of what the intended leadership and excellence of the South African university is all about it

is important to look at what institutions say they will do.

Planned activity as a signal of intentions

Working with the institutions' strategic plans, apparent are the recurring intentions to focus their activity in four strategic areas: teaching and learning, research, institutional culture, and financial sustainability. Supplementing these, they also make clear their intentions to be active in developing their infrastructure, leadership capacity, their governance effectiveness and efficiency, and engaged scholarship or community engagement. In many universities of technology, but not exclusively, the area of digital innovation or information technology features regularly. Critically, they all said that they have arrived at these foci through repeated processes of consultation. Their strategic plans are all, as a result of this, legitimate.

The institutions' strategic areas, isomorphically, are presented as, variously, "themes," "objectivities," "key priority areas," "strategies," and so on. These distil, to illustrate the point, into four themes in the case of NWU (n.d.), five strategic goals for VUT (n.d.), seven for CPUT (n.d.), and eight areas for RU (2022). These distillations, to note where indications of change process are signalled, are packaged in a range of ways, from the almost pointedly detached to the strongly contextual. For institutions such as the Mangosuthu University of Technology (n.d.), at the least indicative end, little explanation was offered. Their websites offered minimal indications of how they intend to meet their stated objectives. Sefako Magkatho Health Sciences University (n.d.) had a banner indicating that there was prioritised activity but did not go into detail what this was. Indicating how they intended to fulfil their intentions, universities such as UCT (2021) used terms such as *making it real*. NWU (n.d.) and SU (n.d.) spoke of the enablers at their disposal. Critically, however, UCT's making it real, effectively, is only an elaboration of the kinds of activities they intend to pursue. For its general idea of "who do we want to be" and "what the dream looks like," it said that "it will continue to *attract students with exceptional potential from our country, our continent and the world*" (UCT, 2021, p. 9). It would "make this real" by "offer[ing] *holistic, innovative, future-oriented education at undergraduate and post-graduate level*" (UCT, 2021, p. 10). Most institutions, not only UCT, it needs to be noted, did not indicate how they will make real what they plan to do.

A small number of institutions, however, introduced into their strategic plans a sense of the nature of the "journey" on which they find themselves. They gave context to the process of making real their intentions. Through this, they provided a sense of what the purpose of their strategic plans is and the difficulties that may arise for them. SU (2019, p. 4), for example, explained that the point of their plan is "to establish guidelines, principles and parameters for university-wide transformation actions." "Transformation at SU . . . implies that all dimensions of university life are involved in the transformation and renewal process" (SU, 2019, p. 5). They explained that the process of strategic planning has to be cognisant of the "presuppositions, prejudices, attitudes, behaviours and intellectual frameworks that determine institutional processes and practices. . . . The profound change and renewal of institutional culture is at the heart of quality transformation"

(SU, 2019, p. 6).

Similarly deliberate were UMP's (2015) intentions and those of UFS (n.d.). UMP worked critically with its newness. It said, "the newness of the University in many ways provides space and opportunity for us to define ourselves as a distinct African University which does 'different things differently'" (UMP, 2015, p. 3). Newness, it explained, has given it "the opportunity to design and shape almost everything de novo—from symbols and buildings, to qualifications and culture. In short, an opportunity to learn from the past and shape a new African University for the future" (UMP, 2015, p. 4). More purposeful, in some ways, is the integrated transformation plan of UFS which said that the institution had "identified the conceptual points of departure for the task of transformation," (n.d., p. 2), which then required of it that it

> manag[e] the challenges that cut across university structures . . . [and that it, therefore, put in place] multi-functional teams. . . . Universities are complex organisations which require the management of people, processes, physical resources, and finances in such a way that they can deliver on their specific purpose. (n.d., p. 3)

The university, significantly, acknowledged that

> The massification of higher education has resulted in a complex, challenging and contested Teaching and Learning environment. In addition, the isolation of the apartheid years means that we are still in a process of catching up with disciplinary developments which form the conversations happening in the rest of the world. . . . Much of the curriculum traces back to isolation years or is stuck in a past that neither reflects contemporary global thinking nor shows sufficient respect for local understanding, experience, and problems. Students do not feel recognised in their human fullness and feel that their knowledge and the knowledge produced by their communities are not valued. (UFS, n.d., p. 6)

An important example of a self-conscious strategic plan is that of SPU which reflected on its situation in critical ways. It said, to illustrate,

> The first five years of . . . SPU's existence have, in many ways, provided the opportunity to grapple with these dilemmas . . . [of a knowledge-based university while navigating tensions of equity, quality] in attempting to set the institution on a trajectory in which it is able to make its contribution to democracy and social justice. (2019, p. 3)

These considerations have led it, it explained, to "nineteen strategies [which] have been selected to realise the overall strategic intent" (SPU, 2019, p. 3). It understood its strategic plan, as a result, as "an anchoring device . . . a sense-making schema that coheres action" (SPU, 2019, p. 4). It explained that its strategic plan is a heuristic which it has to use to resolve what it called its "strategic antinomies" so that it can make better sense of the "contradictory dualisms" (SPU, 2019, p. 13) that confront it.

NWU, like UFS, understands that it has to deal with legacy attitudes in the institution and so asked itself how it would undertake the task of transforming itself. In developing an answer, it referenced its Guiding Frameworks, which include its transformation charter and its policies for employment equity, gender-based violence, discrimination, sexual harassment, human resources, and language.

To give effect to transformation and plan and commit itself to a comprehensive journey, it, usefully, drew attention to issues of feeling, willingness. The transformation journey is, in these terms, not simply technical:

1. Include everyone, even the unwilling.
2. Foster emotional commitment.
3. Promote citizen-led innovation.
4. Focus-group sessions.
5. Look at steering committees.
6. Understand critically what success looks like from a transformation perspective.
7. Tracking and monitoring progress. (NWU, n.d., p. 45)

An understanding of the practical work which needs to be done in the change process is also evident in the strategic plans of institutions such as UFH, which make clear that it understands that next steps in its journey include the necessity for complex engagements within the university, such as giving each member of the institution an opportunity to outline their understandings of transformation. Important also, they recognised, is that "renewal therefore also means overhauling our organisational design to support our core mission" (UFH, 2022, Introduction section).

These interesting examples of SPU, NWU, and UFS notwithstanding, abidingly clear, is how "to the book" the strategic plans of most institutions are. While some package their plans in strikingly designed formats and some recompose the frame, which they use in language that is in readerly terms arresting and attractive, the rule of the standard strategic plan, primed for the evaluator and the auditor, holds sway. One sees in most institutions, as a result, the formulaic reproduction of the dominant evaluation-driven TOC template. The strategic plan is developed through a straight transposition of the standardised model. It begins with a vision, then a mission, is interlarded with a situational analysis, contextualised with a SWOT analysis, and concluded with an obligatory spreadsheet laying out the institution's key performing areas—the four, five, or eight themes, priority areas or objectives—finessed with the institution's KPIs. More sophisticated versions work creatively with the challenges of context and, as in the cases of SPU, NWU, and UFS, begin to explore the practical difficulties of searching inside themselves. Critically, however, activity is packaged in predictable strategy maps, illustrated most clearly in the goals of a relatively self-conscious university such as UFS (n.d., p. 6):

Goal 1: Student access
Goal 2: Curriculum renewal
Goal 3: Contribution to local and global knowledge
Goal 4: Engaged scholarship
Goal 5: Governance efficiency
Goal 6: Financial sustainability
Goal 7: Institutional culture.

Each is to be measured with auditable KPIs.

"Intent" in the example of UFS sits on the committed end of the spectrum. Most institutions,

however, obscure their intent in easily decodable metrics. The KPIs, the institutions believe, indicate their self-reflexiveness. They are holding themselves to account. They will be able to demand of their stakeholders, accountability.

Conclusion

Important about coming to a sense of the change discourse in South African universities is acknowledging that we have universities which are thinking deeply about the complexities of transforming themselves. Importantly, also, especially historically disadvantaged universities, they are having to work in resource-limited environments. They have been confronted with budget cuts. They bring to their thinking a self-reflective sense of the contextual realities that they face. This is best illustrated, it can be argued, in UFS' foregrounding of its sociological realities and the NWU's deliberate unpacking of its transformation journey. In thinking about its objectives of working with its students in constructive and generative ways—to produce "excellent graduates who can contribute to a sustainable, just society locally and globally" (UFS, n.d., p.6). UFS acknowledged the difficulties students bring to their learning experience:

> Students do not leave socioeconomic inequalities at home when they come to university. Black African and Coloured students are particularly vulnerable. According to a 2016 study, University of the Free State students are worse off than the national average: for example, the vast majority . . . (79%) indicated that they have run out of food without being able to buy more, with 30% indicating that this happens most days or every day. For this reason, it would be important to accommodate almost all first-year and most second-year students. In addition, . . . residence culture at the Bloemfontein campus . . . has been inherently divisive, creating residence identities different from that of the University. (2018, p. 6)

Its plans, as a result, are framed with a realistic sense of how significantly context matters. These plans, it explained,

> Firstly . . . must work at a rational level; it is important that solutions are appropriate for the UFS. Secondly . . . [they] must work at an emotional level; it must feel right for all those who will need to carry the change. Thirdly, it must work at a political level. (UFS, 2018, p. 6)

We have in this plan important elements. It is conscious and reflexive. In seeking to push the idea further, it may also be, fourthly, that a system-wide framework for how to plan, manage, and evaluate a project of transformation is for the present not made a priority. It could be argued that institutions should be exploring how, within the immediate contextual exigencies of their own environments, they could hold themselves to account and reflexively work with and through their challenges and opportunities. It may then be, after a significant period of time has passed, that an attempt could be made to aggregate individual institutional experiences to discern whether generalisable features characterising the process are evident.

In bringing this essay to a conclusion, important as the positive developments in the system are, it seems to be the case, however, that most plans work with the sociological substance of their contexts in essentially apolitical ways. While they correctly identify the major actors in the distinct

sociological universe of the university, in specifying what they will do and foregrounding the roles and activities of the academic staff and the students—their primary social agents—they regularly, however, empty out these subjects of the knowledge-producing enterprise and attach to them, in their KPAs and KPIs, the significatory indicators that will mark their subjectivities as academics. The key example of this is the meaning and deployment of the understandings of *contributions to knowledge* and how, in its excellence, it is to be identified and assessed. It is evident in how much people publish and where they publish. The determinative metric for assessing how excellent they are is in their citation rates. In the important case of UFS, one sees there how this abstraction is tempered by the qualifier of a *local* imperative. The knowledge its staff should produce, says UFS, must have relevance at both a global and a local level, but here and in all the other strategic plans, the idea of what the globe is, is worked with uncritically. The strategic plan, as a result, is at worst a relatively uncritical adoption of an unqualified global model of a "good university," and, at best, an attempt to moderate the global with inflections of the global.

Compoundingly problematic is the way this metricised excellence is legitimised by strategic planning exercises. Most strategic plans adopt the schematic architecture of the strategic plan down to its formulaic template. The whole density of the university is transposed onto the template and force-filtered through it to produce typical cookie-cut subjects and outputs. Everything in it, the people and the processes they enable, as a result, is subjected to its logic. This is the ontological imperative to which the university must respond. It authorises their identities. This happens even as institutions have to work in immensely constrained material circumstance. They rarely identify the neoliberalisation of their working environments as a problem.

How one characterises this trend towards the neo-liberal against the much more visible claim to be transformative—a combination of difficult opposites—is not immediately contained or representable in a single term. Evident here, in change terms, are institutions that wish to be, in the main, academic leaders. They regularly and frequently state the intention of deploying their intellectual gifts and capacities—their excellences—to the causes of social justice. Holding on to the possibility of working in Andersson and Richards' (2015) unbounded ways, I want to argue that it is possible for the modern university to open itself up and to work with all the contradiction and messiness that exists within it. The university is one of the most durable institutions in our long civilisational history. Its durability is the consequence of radical openness to new and transgressive thinking. Its challenge in the current moment, to hold onto its essence, is to define new accountability regimes for itself where the virtues of goodness and excellence are approached in socially relevant ways—a change impact measure, for example, through which the university could explore the knowledge–power interface in new ways would be an important alternative rubric with which to work. It would not solve all the challenges of power and its distribution, but it would push the debate about the value of knowledge away from simply that of empty activity.

I am making the argument here that we are seeing the emergence of organisations unable to embrace their essential messiness. They are unable to develop planning logics, TOCs that can bring to material form excellence, or even, the dreaded activity of "performance," in the interest of

transformation. In embedding themselves into the order of metricised accountability, institutions undermine the capacity that is there within them to explore new and different ways of changing the world. They stitch into their organisational ontologies the imperatives of performativity. It now is no longer simply "bit by bit," to recall Spivak, through which the project of neo-liberal puissance/connaisance is being pursued. It is through the complete capture of the organisational logic of the modern university.

So, if we are to characterise our TOC landscape, what do we have here before us? It is, I argue, a bifurcated and schizophrenic sensibility. Institutions wish to be "leading," "at the cutting edge." Occasionally, they make the cutting edge a socially driven concern about confronting the problems of the world. Mostly, however, they (even historically disadvantaged institutions) allow themselves to be overwhelmed by the order of metrics. Their change strategies are, as a result, rhetorically progressive but in their substance, conservative. They have not yet found a way of thinking how that which they seek to do in their teaching and learning (to decolonise, for example), and that in their research (to be relevant), can be given priority and substance in their institutions. No-one is coming forward with new and alternative accountability frameworks to assess and honour excellence outside the rubrics of dominant metricisation. Their theories of change are, in Badat's terms, weak but, more critically, inherently compromised. They do not know how to work with contradiction. They do not know how to take that important idea of excellence and to make it their own and to give it new meaning.

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Notes on the author

Crain Soudien is a sociologist and holds an appointment as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Johannesburg. He also holds appointments at Nelson Mandela University and is an emeritus professor at the University of Cape Town.

Address for correspondence

crainsoudien2@gmail.com

“Emergencies” and techno-rationality: The tasks of decentred critical university studies

André Keet, Luan Staphorst, Michaela Penkler, and Nobubele Phuza
Nelson Mandela University

Abstract

This speculative paper explores the relationship between the notions of *emergency* and *university* from two angles. First, the university is seen as being in a state of emergency. Second, the university is a state of emergency. Both these readings, we argue, are deployed to uncritically advance the dominance of techno-rationality within higher education in South Africa and elsewhere, which places the social justice possibilities of the university at a distance from itself. A key task of decentred critical university studies (DCUS) is to provide, amongst others, a disclosing critique of these processes as a basis on which alternative praxes can be imagined. The paper conceptualises the contours of a possible DCUS approach, drawing on the notions of emancipation, emergence, conviviality, and incompleteness in relation to the Africanisation, decolonisation, and Southern knowledges nexus—further differentiating it from critical university studies in the Anglo-American context.

Keywords: university, emergency, de-eventing, decentred, critical university studies, abolitionist university studies, techno-rationality, emergence, emancipation, conviviality, incompleteness, Southern theory, Africanisation, decolonisation

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Introduction

Two different and opposing notions of the relationship between the concepts *university* and *emergency* guide thinking in and of our time. The first is arguably dominant—it is the myth of our time that the university is in a state of emergency, that it is faced with an existential threat, and that this imminent threat is something that ought to be addressed with an equally imminent response. This discourse of emergency, also known as the crisis consensus, "invokes the university as the protector of time-honoured and -tested values, one whose defence requires a temporality characterized simultaneously by urgency and nostalgia" (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018, p. 434).

The second is the less often acknowledged and grappled with notion—the university not as being in a state of emergency, but as being a state, a site, a realm of emergencies. Threats are not imminent but immanent—a permanence that pervades all things university. In contrast, the first view reads emergencies as events—as singular, bounded, and non-repeatable—the second view reads it as a dimension of the university's state of being. In both instances, the notion of emergency is invoked to legitimate techno-rationality.

Emergency, it seems, has discursively become a defining feature of higher education, driving an image of risk and danger that is nowadays cloaked in the sustainability and self-preservation question. Though the university-emergency link may, at many levels, reveal some of the material challenges the sector is facing, what is of interest to us in this paper is the way in which emergency summons the frames of the technological and the digital as urgent responses to itself in ways that make the uncritical deployment of these advances appear desirable and unavoidable. That is, we are concerned about the way in which a techno-scientific ideology has interpellated higher education into a culture that "seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology" (Postman, 1993, p. 55).

This speculative paper sets out the connection between emergency and techno-rationality within the university and attempts at delayering the stranglehold this ideology exerts over our current imagination of the university and its future. Far from putting a dogmatic critique of techno-science forward, we have a key interest in how technological advances may reanimate the university's social justice potential. Our major concern is that these potentialities are progressively being eroded through the hegemonic positioning of techno-rationality as an uncritical mode of reason and thinking that streams and structures our current debates in higher education. We thus propose a disclosing critique of these processes, generated within decentred critical university studies (DCUS), as a basis on which alternative praxes could be envisioned. In short, the paper is not against technology or techno-science but rather, agitates against the uncritical advances and deployment of techno-rationality within universities.

Universities and the emergencies of techno-rationality

The notion of the "hyper-technological enframing of the life world" (Mbembe in Paulissen, 2009, para. 11) that took shape by the "continuously expanding utilization of technology in production

[that] initiates a pervasive and totalizing social logic" (Rose, 1990, p. 56) is probably the most productive angle from which to define techno-rationality. This logic also silences, in advance, the necessary critique of techno-science by uncritically hyping the presumed merits of technical efficiency in responding to the emergencies of the university and society.

This is a mistake, so we argue, because the uncritical advances of techno-rationality in higher education displace both the university's imagination and capacity for real social justice work, materially and discursively. That is, as a social logic, techno-rationality is organised in a manner that "seems increasingly capable of satisfying [all] the needs of [all] individuals" (Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 4) and is "constructed as a court which makes judgments for anything" (Marcuse, quoted in Zhang, 2013, p. 179). It "accept[s] the prevailing societal interest as the supreme law of thought and behavior" (Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. 8), "serves to coordinate ideas and goals with those exacted by the prevailing system to enclose them in the system, and to repel those which are irreconcilable with the system" (p. 16). Ideas critical of it are subsequently frowned upon. Indeed, "under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless" (1964/2002, p. 4). A techno-ideology, most evident in the current digital fetish that is sweeping higher education, is thus taking shape, fuelled by an all-encompassing techno-scientific and techno-solutionist culture that is characterised by the overproduction of solutions in search of problems. The search for problems—as opposed to research-informed social analyses—is constructed within the frame of emergency.

Mbembe (2016), initially somewhat uncritical of digital transformations and their anti-decolonisation impulses (Bernal, 2021), recently presented "a general critique of the global, extractivist and colonialist paradigm, which is driven by advances in digital computing" (Jones, 2022, p. 2537). He further argued that the general lack of a political understanding that technological advancement "is achievable only at the cost of tremendous devastation" (Mbembe 2022, as quoted in Jones, 2022, p. 2537) is, to our minds, a function of a pervasive culture rooted in techno-rationality within which technology is now also ironically "viewed as the cure to these self-inflicted crises" (Jones, 2022, p. 2537). Here again, the power and persuasion of the authorisation of technology is manufactured within the emergency frame. From a planet-in-crisis, or planetary emergencies angle, technology is now fused with a sustainability discourse within higher education where the survival of the university is not simply discursively tied to technology, but such survivability is extrapolated and integrated into the frames of the planetary crises. That is, emergencies, big and small, are both institutional and planetary; something must save us. This ideology-driven anxiety completes the totalising invasion of techno-rationality and explains the thoughtless scramble for technology in the higher education sector.

The challenge here is made more complex by the "symbiotic relationship between modernity, capitalism, and social order" (Muellerleile & Robertson, 2018, p. 187) vis-à-vis techno-rationality that points to its fundamentally homogenising and colonialist nature—its function as a totalising force masquerading as progress on neoliberal tracks. In addition, one can argue that a decolonial critique of techno-rationality—focusing on technology, alienation, and estrangement from

oneself—drives at disclosing the distance from one's humanhood. In a sense, a critique of techno-rationality may, therefore, also be read as a quest for humanhood.

The advances of techno-rationality are taking shape with the broader emergence of TechnoScienceSociety, a trend that requires careful reflections on the "ongoing technological reconfiguration of science and society—and vice versa how these are reconfiguring technologies" (Maasen et al., 2020 p. 4). Co-constituted "by vast varieties and numbers of technological artefacts and systems" that "merge, mix, and transform in complex ways" (2020, p. 5), these social changes are also reshaping "the modes of knowledge production themselves" (2020, p. 6).

Techno-rationality, as a hegemonic social logic, arises from the fact that the influence of the techno-sciences surpasses their aim of reshaping matter, life, self, and society, as Maasen et al. (2020) suggested. In addition, they further argued these sciences are entangled within complex social and cultural realities. Thus, the rise of a techno-scientific regime signifies a restructuring of the interplay between science, technology, and culture within a society that is becoming increasingly technologically driven and so the rationalities inherent in techno-science come to permeate everyday life, politics, and the public sphere.

Although the contours and nuances of techno-rationality are primarily a post-World War II intellectual phenomenon, its conceptual precursors emerged during the Enlightenment period (Bacon, 1620/1902; Descartes, 1641/1993) and were shaped by the Industrial Revolution, scientific management theories (Taylor, 1911/1915), and the rise of early computer technology. As industrialisation and technology progressed, instrumental rationality, then techno-rationality, gradually became dominant. In the context of social and cultural analysis, techno-rationality refers to the dominance of technological and instrumental rationality in shaping social structures, values, and practices. It highlights the increasing influence of technology and the prioritisation of efficiency, calculability, and predictability in various aspects of life, including governance, economy, education, and communication. And its entanglement with the neoliberal project is beyond dispute.

Accepting that rationality refers to the quality of "being based on clear thought and reason" (Cambridge, n.d., first entry), the interpretive horizon of such thought and reason, nevertheless, are socially and culturally defined. This is where the timelessness of Marcuse's (1964/2002) work announces itself. Known for his critical analysis of advanced industrial societies and how they perpetuate social inequality and control, Marcuse offered a sustained critique of techno-rationality in his work, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964/2002). He examined how modern industrial society uses technology, media, and other means of control to suppress dissent and maintain the status quo. Marcuse argued that this "one-dimensional" society promotes a false sense of freedom and happiness while restricting individuals' ability to think critically and question the prevailing social order. In short, the rationalisation and instrumentalisation of technology in advanced capitalist societies commandeer technological advancements to serve the interests of the dominant powers and, thus, contribute to the manipulation and pacification of the population.

There is, however, a gendered nature to Marcuse's understanding of techno-rationality, inequality,

and control. While Marcuse himself strove to address parts of this relation in *Eros and Civilization* (1956/2012), it is feminist science studies that truly articulated the relationship between the rise in modern science and technology and the hegemonic formulations of masculinity (see Garlick, 2013; Salter, 2018; Valiavicharska, 2017; Wajcman, 2010). The concept of the one-dimensional man is a concept of technological masculinity. As stated, the social and cultural analysis of techno-rationality reads technology not as industrial machinery, military weapons, instruments, or other external tools. Rather, technology is culture and inhabits the human in important ways. The "progress" presupposed in technological advances is simultaneously a process of emergence for the masculine subject (read as becoming technological).

Marcuse (1964/2002) also proposed that technologies are ambivalent, suggesting that technologies are not neutral or purely deterministic. Instead, they are influenced and shaped by political and social factors and become intertwined within the fabric of social conflicts. In this framework, technologies are not solely governed by their intended purposes but can be reinterpreted and repurposed by users in their actual utilisation. Marcuse would urge us to understand that technology is not simply a technique of social control. Rather, within its realm, "culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives" (Marcuse, 1964/2002, p. xlvii), including genuine equality interventions. Further, through the production of inauthentic and needless needs that bind producers and consumers through gadgets, commodities, habits, and intellectual and emotional responses, the desires that demand liberation are suffocated or simply simulated (Marcuse, 1964/2002). This is the upshot of our argument: the uncritical advances of techno-rationality within higher education displace both the university's imagination and capacity for real social justice work on a material and discursive level.

We locate our arguments in the context of the global phenomenon of the advances of techno-science that cuts across different types of institutions, whether economic, socio-cultural, or political, with an all-encompassing influence. Mbembe, for instance, argued that an alliance of technology, capital, and militarism feeds a "planetary pursuit of pure power and pure profit without any other goal but power and profit itself" (2021, p. 21). He positioned technological rationality, or electronic reason, in relation to older forms of power-logics as a defining feature of contemporary capitalism in the form of *image-capitalism*. The image, he argued,

> has become a techno-*phenomenological institution.* The circuits from affect to emotions and from emotions to passions and convictions are, more than ever before, attached to the circulation of images meant to stimulate desire, the connection of affect and capital serving to reconfigure not only "the everyday" but also the physical, political, and psychic conditions of embodiment in our times. (Mbembe, 2021, pp. 22–23)

When this "hyper-technological enframing of the life world" (Mbembe in Paulissen, 2009, para. 11) is acknowledged—with techno-rationality being not only a form of reasoned technologisation but reasoned de-affectioning, meaning a logic that negates emotion and its affective possibilities outside of technology—then any epistemic project in pursuit of knowledge democracy and social

justice has to grapple with techno-rationality as a principle. This is probably one of the most urgent responsibilities of DCUS.

Techno-rationality's salience within the "emergency" can be read in two ways. From the vantage point of those critical of the "crisis consensus" (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018, p. 432), techno-rationality is always-already part of the university-as-such. This "university is also a criminal, key in an emerging form of global, racial capitalism . . . rather than an innocent institution for the common good" (Undercommoning, 2016, para. 2). As a "criminal neoliberal and neocolonial institution," the university should be "abolished and reinvented" (2016, para. 2)—plastically exploded, annihilated (see Keet et al., 2023). In this context, the emergency of the university is threefold. First, the crisis of the liberal university, convincingly argued by Boggs and Mitchell (2018), is read as a "new" emergency in the wake of the neoliberal juggernaut and not as part of the colonial architectures that it represents. Second, its criminality, rooted in the twinning of techno-rationality and neoliberalism, annihilates the social justice ideals of universities. Third, those who think of the university a priori as a good institution regard the efficiencies promised by techno-rationality as crucial for the link between universities, innovation, development, employment pipelines, and other solutions. In all three cases, the university is entangled with techno-rationality as logic and discursive formation.

From another vantage point, emergencies as phenomenal discourse includes a number of subtexts feeding into its possible ends. That is, several possible logics underpin responses to it. Techno-rationality, we hold, is one of these central subtexts and, therefore, guides many, if not most, forms of solutionism. The techno-rational, it seems, cannot be avoided when thinking of emergency and university. It is one of the key organising principles of contemporary thinking about the university in the context of a *Risk Society* (Beck, 1992/2009) within which these emergencies are produced and manufactured. Actors within techno-sciences are mobilised into these risk perceptions through urgency and necessity (see Van Loon, 2002), a process that has been key in setting up the dominance of techno-rationality within the higher education sector. It seems then that, on all levels, the discursive production of the university as emergency to unburden its social justice promises has been replaced by the university as emergency in need of neoliberal, techno-rational solutions. There are as yet no indications that these two tracks can or are converging. Techno-rationality is thus not simply a mode of reason associated with techno-sciences. It, moreover and within the context of the university-as-emergency and tech-solutionism, connects into a massively wide network and linkages of diverse resources—"financial, symbolic, human, technological, spatial, and so on" (Van Loon, 2002, p. 49 on Latour)—and establishes itself as a matter of fact that pre-emptively wards off the challenges and critique to its logic. That is, so to speak, one of the key operations of ideology.

The critique of techno-rationality has a decades-long history (Ellul, 1954/1964; Haraway, 1984/2006; Harris et al., 2011; Marcuse, 2002/1964; Noble, 2018; Postman, 1993; Zuboff, 2019). Yet, it has not arrested the uncritical deployment of techno-driven praxes as solutions to the university-as-emergency. Instead, the COVID and post-COVID era has widened and accelerated

our interpellation into techno-ideology, with profound implications for budget thinking, the transformation of learning and teaching, internationalisation, and our conversion into the new religions of science and innovation. University politics itself is being reconfigured on techno-rational grounds.

The university-as-public-good is slowly disappearing under the weight of these developments and the seduction of digital imaginaries. We are, it seems, enchanted, and our critical posture towards these changes has been blunted. This, we argue, puts the university in peril from a social justice perspective. We need in-depth and thoughtful analyses and discussions on the role of universities in an era dominated by techno-rationality. The interpretive resources for such work, so we propose, reside in the nascent developments of DCUS, as distinct from conventional critical university studies (CUS) as defined and theorised in the Anglo-American context.

Decentred critical university studies and the possibility of beyond-techno-rationality

The study of the university is arguably as old as the university itself—for, we hold, there is no praxis without reflection. The formal study of the university, however, is a much more recent phenomenon. It was only in the late 19th century that lectures, courses, and texts began to appear with the academy as an explicit object of scrutiny. This was the start of higher education studies (HES). It would take roughly a century before HES would see a critical turn in its focus and disposition. According to Williams (2012), the late 20th century saw a rise of studies formulated by and in the annals of HES focusing on critiquing the systemic change that was taking place across the higher education landscape. This change, Williams noted, is specifically in the ethos of universities—away from a community-centric ethos and towards a managerialist, corporate-centric disposition. In grouping these studies together, Williams coined *critical university studies*.

This dichotomy—between the community-centric past and corporate-disposed present—is, however, one that has led CUS itself to become the object of critique over the past few years. Most notably, abolitionist university studies (AUS; Boggs et al., 2019) have emerged as discourse countering this reactionary view of a serene past and dystopian present, arguing, rather, that the very foundation of the university as a social institution is grounded in inequality, dispossession, and oppression. To truly think critically, AUS scholars argue, is to think abolition, and to draw on the long archive of critical, abolitionist thought relative both to university studies and broader societal critiques that predate the CUS interventions as demarcated by Williams.

Despite the differences between these two traditions of critical scholarship on the university, they could be described as providing a shared understanding as it relates to techno-rationality. Although neither explicitly critiques nor engages with this particular logic, the critique that both traditions offer of the university can be read alongside a shared understanding of the techno-rationality's link to corporate capitalism. As mentioned previously, techno-rationality in its current discursive

formulation is a post-World War II phenomenon, yet its philosophical roots go back much longer, and it is, in fact, a development of the Modernist and Enlightenment paradigm (which, in turn, forms part of the colonial matrix of power).

With CUS's critique of the rise of corporate capitalism on the one hand and AUS's concern with the foundational link between the university, colonialism, and capitalism acknowledged, one realises that both—differently, albeit indirectly—propose a critical treatment of techno-rationalism specifically, and technology more generally. Within a CUS frame, the argument can be made that we need to return to a pre-techno-rational understanding, whilst AUS would argue against (Western) technology in itself because it constitutes an embodiment of colonial reason. When these two positions are read together, the Southern, African, decolonial scholar has to think about new ways of engaging with techno-rationalism that do not simply negate it but offer radically new paradigms from which to think. There, theorisations from different vantage points are necessary, and we perhaps require more of the radical critiques of AUS and the decolonisation movement to better locate our contestations with techno-rationality.

We thus propose a programme of DCUS—a programme acknowledging the work of traditional CUS and drawing on AUS and decolonial studies of higher education—as a pathway towards such new paradigms. Although we envision this to be a non-dogmatic programme, we propose it be grounded in three central concepts that could guide its formulation. Firstly, it is emancipatory. *Emancipation* is a concept with a long and contested history, and we draw on Ranciere and Mbembe in our conception thereof. For Ranciere (2004), emancipation should not be tied to understandings of truth in the singular sense—of the triumph of an individual paradigm over another. Rather, it leads to new forms of oppression. As Mbembe has noted, this form of "emancipation [is] negation without autonomy, [one that has] led to reduplication and new forms of servitude" (2021, p. 50). See Keet et al. (2024) for further discussion of emancipation vis-à-vis DCUS.

Secondly, it is emergent. Here, we draw on the thinking of Freire, specifically his linkage of "emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (2005, p. 81). This shifts the gaze away from preconceived understandings of emancipation, critique, and praxis—rather focusing on the ways in which the emergent, particularly amongst the oppressed, constitutes valid and relevant forms of knowledge and being. Thirdly, it is convivial and incomplete. Nyamnjoh's (2017) notion of celebrating the conviviality of knowledge production in the face of incompleteness is one that we share—one that goes against an understanding of knowledge as limited, closed, or complete, particularly in relation to othered epistemic traditions. DCUS ought, therefore, not to be a space of completion nor seek knowledge for its own closed end but rather, focus on the possibilities that unsaturated epistemes bring towards emancipatory and emergent futures.

If the 1990s were a time of turning in the study of the university, another turn was taking place within the humanities generally, and Southern or Third World humanities in particular. As writers from the South ourselves, it is easy to argue for theorisation that speaks to our experience; however, as Connell (2007) argued, the South is not only a place *to* which to look from the North

but a place from which to think. This echoes Ratele's (2019) recent call to reflect on what *The World Looks Like From Here*. This dimension of decolonial theory is, as Grosfoguel argued, at the centre of what drives much of the decolonial turn today: "A decolonial epistemic perspective requires a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon" (2007, p. 212).

A second dimension of the decolonial conversation that is important in this discussion is its oppositionality to the post (Margzagora, 2016). This position flows from our earlier critique of the notion of crisis and its double of a pre-crisis temporality. In critiquing such a temporality, we argued against the notion that the crisis is an event, for, we again argued, viewing it as an event distorts the discourse in a way that obfuscates the perennial crises that characterise the existence of the marginal and subjected. In a similar way, viewing the post, such as postcolonialism, as demarcating a post-crisis moment, a moment severed from the pre- or stasis of an event, is misleading. We follow Zeleza's characterisation of such descriptions as "post-something sophistries" (2002, p. 22). This does not, however, necessarily translate into a rejection of the arguments and ideas proposed under the banner of the post, such as poststructuralism or postcolonial theory, for such a position of rejection would be counter to the convivial spirit this article argues DCUS work ought to be undertaken in—as set out earlier in our discussion. Rather, our argument is one that goes against the temporal consensus of the post that governs and classifies thinking in a reductive manner.

The third important aspect is the growing call for a self-critical disposition (see Opara, 2021; Pictou, 2020). Amongst others, Madlingozi's (2018) critique of the way in which decolonisation has become a hollowed-out, yet fashionable and capitalisable, buzzword is particularly relevant. Together with decolonial theory, we position Africanisation as central to DCUS. Here, it is important to note that Africanisation is often understood and presented as decolonisation's double (see Ratele, 2019). We would, however, accent the two as distinct, albeit co-dependent, forms of thinking—hence positioning DCUS's lineage and intellectual grounding as a decentred one. Although the thinkers and ideas relative to decolonisation just discussed are mostly African, decolonisation as a field of critique is notably complex and, importantly, spaced and contextualised in its articulation. If we, as African theorists, assume a natural relationship between decolonisation and Africanisation, we run the risk of appropriating the discourse and effectively silencing other traditions, such as the Latin-American decolonial school. Within decolonial-in-the-plural, we focus our attention on the African experience but do not want to reduce it to that particular experience.

Against this backdrop, we, therefore, argue that the decolonial-Africanisation nexus could function as the central interplay that the broader architecture of DCUS's convergence philosophy supports. In this way, the nexus becomes what Esposito (2019) termed an *affirmative negation*. Critique within the DCUS framework is, therefore, an act of productive and generative negation relative to the university through theorisation of and from Africa. Central to this framework, however, remains an awareness of an anti-emergency disposition, and hence its emphasis on convergency. Decolonisation should not be regarded as representing a moment of crisis within the

African academy, nor should Africanisation be read as an answer to a supposed emergency of knowledge production. They are, rather, always-already at play and cannot, therefore, be linked to an origin or endpoint.

The Anglo-American track of CUS sees the university as being in a recently produced state of emergency, mainly because of neoliberal and corporatist advances within the university. This interpretive horizon that determines how and for what ends universities ought to function has fused with the neoliberal tracks of managerialism and the corporatisation of academic institutions (Williams, 2012). This form of CUS scholarship theorises from the assumption that the university is a historically just institution that has been corrupted by global, managerialist capitalism—with the field offering critiques that could bring the university back into its "true" historical mould.

Our proposition for DCUS includes the neoliberal critique of university, yet sees its task as creating a space for the productive synergy of theory and critique drawing on abolitionist, decolonial, and other radical knowledge traditions in service of emancipatory futures. Such an approach to the study of the university is one drawn to critiques of the manifestation and dynamics of power, privilege, and authority in and across the higher education landscape (Keet, 2019). Mobilising the radical abolitionist and decolonial critiques of the university against the backdrop of the integration of techno-science, capital, and neoliberalism is a key priority for DCUS. This allows it to focus on the production of the discursive fields of higher education that steer our imagination of change and the limits and possibilities of transformation within higher education. The skyline of this imagination is now, indisputably and to a large extent, uncritically drawn by techno-rationality. For this very reason alone, DCUS should provide a sound, productive, unrelenting critique of the university, as the micro-dynamics of controlling power and authority are now networked and dispersed throughout the system: as reason, architecture, culture, epistemology, economy, and budget.

DCUS aims at offering alternative vantage points that neither romanticise the past nor engage with dogmatic utopian visions. *Decentre* invokes the conception of a critical knowledge project as argued within the Global (De)Centre manifesto:

> The knowledge we need to *create* a more equitable, just, and sustainable world; the knowledge we need to *understand* such things as the universe, humanity and human relations; and the knowledge we need to *translate or vernacularize* across languages, epistemologies, and cultural contexts that fosters rather than impedes understanding. (2020, p. 6)

It is the emphasis on the plural within this conception of decentredness, with our vision for DCUS, as drawing on decolonisation and Africanisation, for example, to open unto emancipatory futures in the plural—and not the singular.

The tasks of DCUS, in providing a disclosing critique of the university, should make connections between the radical social justice potential of higher education and the possibility of its absolute displacement by the "hyper-technological enframing of the life world" (Mbembe in Paulissen, 2009, para. 11) within the university and beyond. That is, DCUS is called upon to deploy the notion of technoscience in a "descriptive-analytical sense—the decisive role of technology-led

science—and a critical-deconstructive sense to analyze scientific practices" (Peters, 2019, p. 1227) as a heuristic for making sense of how within the liberal university, the ideal of truth and emancipation have been subordinated to the principles of efficiency, productivity, and power.

Our understanding of a disclosing critique is closely related to Adorno and Horkheimer's (1944/1972) ideas of interpretation that drive the uncovering of the hidden assumptions and structures of an object of study by revealing the contradictions, false promises, power dynamics, and ideological influences that shape our perceptions, biases, and beliefs. This type of critique does not present itself as absolute knowledge but reflects and absorbs its "own contingency" (Bonacker, 2006, p. 374) and simply claims a provisional status of insight that, in this case, may allow us to see better the anti-social-justice implications of techno-rationality in higher education. An example of such critique and disclosure is to de-event techno-rationality within the theorisation of DCUS as a possible pathway for a sustained and emancipatory critique of emergencied techno-rationality and its bind on the university.

We position techno-rationality as a (de-)event in two successive ways. It is an event in the sense that it does not hold an a priori position to the givenness of the world that came before it. To believe it as an a priori truth would be to be seduced by a teleology of technology as natural in the movement of humanity and knowledge over time. This, we reject. Our position echoes Mbembe's (2021) critique of notions of modernist colonialism that sees it as a blank event—as something that simply mirrors other forms of domination and imperialism over humanity's longue durée. To acknowledge techno-rationality as an event, then, is fundamentally to acknowledge its relationship to rupture. Stated differently, it is an intervention.

Secondly, to de-event techno-rationality would imply de-naturalising the idea that the rupture of technology (necessarily) leads to ways of thinking that are dictated by the rupture itself. As Badiou (1988/2005) noted in his theorisation of the event, the beingness of an event is tied to one, to the singular—a binding that brings itself to the fore through a definition as not-multiple. In de-eventing techno-rationality, we aim to propose a view of reason vis-à-vis technology that does not presuppose its oneness.

The (possible) emancipation(s) of technology and any reason linked to it is therefore not inherently tied to the techno-rational. Rather, the particularity of techno-rationality has, through a discourse of naturalisation, falsely eventualised as the only givenness relative to reason and technology. De-eventing it, subsequently, points to the need to grapple with this logic of negating the multiple, acknowledging the hegemony of its singularity, and proposing alternatives. That is, we should uncover the different choices available to us for (re)thinking about the relationship between technology and reason beyond what is on offer within the epistemic clutches of techno-rationality. Examples of these are already expressed in a vast array of emerging works such as *Algorithms of Oppression* (Noble, 2018), *The Technological Society* (Ellul, 1954/1964), and *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway, 1984/2006).

Concluding thoughts

When we think university, when we think Africa, and when we think decolonisation, it is almost impossible not to do so without the connotation of "crisis and emergency"—notions, as reasoned throughout the piece, that occlude the university's social justice possibilities. What we have, however, attempted to offer in this speculative account wherein the university, in a time of techno-rationality as an invasively uncritical mode of thinking, can be studied from a Southern perspective, is to focus on deconstructing this crisis-emergency discourse through a generative critique. The challenge of this discourse is, however, not that it pervades hegemonic forms of knowledge production but that it has the potential to infiltrate and transform even the most radical and progressive of critiques—even this chapter, through its critique of crisis, could be read as itself reacting to a perceived crisis, hence furthering the discourse.

Even so, the affirmative negation this article has argued for in relation to a converged DCUS with the decolonisation-Africanisation nexus at its core would, we posit, offer a different space from which to critique crisis. Here, the emphasis on the twinned concepts of conviviality and incompleteness within our conception of DCUS is particularly important, for this sustains both a view of critique as a continued conversation, and accentuates the importance of the deficiency of any particular argument. More could always be theorised; more could be critiqued—hence this piece's focus on foregrounding future work that could be guided by a DCUS approach.

This speculative article does not, therefore, have the aim of becoming a point of return as the source of a mythical theory but is, rather, a call, a provocation, for furthering a certain disposition towards the academy and critical thinking vis-à-vis techno-rationality—one through which southern knowledges, specifically African knowledges, could be engaged with in service of transformative, emancipatory futures.

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Notes on the authors

André Keet currently holds the Research Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation (*Cri*SHET) and is Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Engagement and Transformation at Nelson Mandela University.

Luan Staphorst is a research associate with the Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education Transformation, Nelson Mandela University, and a DPhil student at the University of Oxford.

Michaela Penkler is a project and research coordinator for the Engagement and Transformation Portfolio at Nelson Mandela University.

Nobubele Phuza is a new-generation academic and lecturer in the Nelson Mandela University Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

Address for correspondence

andre.keet@mandela.ac.za

Rationalising learning analytics in higher education: Insights from the South African academy

Marcina Singh
University of Johannesburg

Abstract

In the context of increasing neoliberal rationalisation, austerity, and market-orientated approaches to teaching and learning, the spotlight is once again, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, directed at the university for its limited ability to centre the affective as a measure of quality teaching and learning experiences. Transformation, quality, and success have become tick-box processes rather than pursuits that effect meaningful change. In that context, this paper explores the effects of incorporating learning analytics in teaching and learning in higher education through the views and practices of two academic professors working at a university in South Africa. Using semi-structured interviews, the paper elicits their views on the trajectory of techno-rationalism in education, including learning analytics and its impact on teaching and learning. This contribution expands on current debates headed by Fataar et al. (2023) about the processes of technological rationalisation in higher education that *seem to have become the university itself*. The findings demonstrate that responses to this are ambivalent. One values the approach, while the other feels learning analytics disregards the affective dimensions of teaching and learning. It also highlights how universities have become fixated on collecting information, resulting in a datafication drive, but the one-dimensional nature of big data is seldom used to transform university engagements. The findings raise important epistemological questions about the role of the university and how it grapples with being a public good on one hand, and complying with prevailing neoliberal institutional philosophies on the other.

Keywords: techno-rationality, critical university studies, higher education, teaching and learning, learning analytics

Singh, M. (2023). Rationalising learning analytics in higher education: Insights from the South African academy. *Southern African Review of Education, 28*(1), 135–153.

Introduction

Techno-rationality pertains to the application of rational and logical thinking in the context of development and technology. Particularly, debates about techno-rationalism relate to the (re)configuration of traditional society as a result of technological advancements that seek to streamline cumbersome human-based activities with rational, risk-assessed, systematic, and evidence-based approaches. The attractiveness of techno-rationalism lies in its ability to expedite solutions to modern-day challenges, particularly in the context of austerity and polarised political, religious, and cultural viewpoints. Diallo et al. asserted that there are three critical problems facing society in the 21st century, including "population growth, shortages of vital requirements for human prosperity . . . and climate change" (2013, para. 1). Technology has and can offer sustainable solutions to address these crises due to its ability to access large audiences simultaneously, process and present large data sets, and replace human activity—seemingly minimising the margin of error. Modern society has heralded this efficacy, which has, therefore, shaped public and private institutions, including how they govern, manage, and interact (Feenberg, 2011).

As extensions of the political economy, education institutions are not sheltered from techno-rationality and its effects. A common form of rationalisation in higher education teaching and learning has been the introduction of learning analytics, which "is the measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimising learning and the environments" (Society for Social Analytic Research, 2023, para. 1). Universities capture information ranging from student recruitment, to attendance, to employment. And while this datafication drive aims to improve teaching and learning, Selwyn (2019) astutely noted that idealising technology can be dangerous given that it may create fertile environments for other injustices to emerge—including unwanted surveillance and privacy concerns. Cotgrove (1975) echoed this sentiment by saying that because the science of technology has been seen as objective and infallible, it has become an instrument of domination. Furthermore, technology is a poor replacement for human interaction, particularly the affective and emotive characteristics, due to its inability to process and replicate the complexities of interpersonal relationships. Lukács' (1971) notion of *reification* or *thinghood* is useful in this regard because it highlights how this kind of rationalisation renders time and space as measurable and separates social beings from their human contents. He noted that the "phantom objectivity" of commodity structures "seem so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature" (Lukács, 1971, p. 83). In that context, this paper explores the reported effects of learning analytics, as a component of techno-rationalism, on teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa. Grounded in the discourse of critical university studies that emerged from the abrupt shift of universities as a public good to the commodification of higher education institutions (see Peters (2022), the emergence of the techno-rational university has instrumentalised and redefined teaching and learning as a technical activity rather than an emotional practice (Hargreaves, 1998).

To understand how technological rationalism, in the form of learning analytics, has taken effect in a South African university, this paper presents the views of two seasoned South African academics. The findings, through these interviews, suggest that there are mixed responses to the effects of rationalisation at universities. Whilst for some, techno-rationalism has increased the visibility of what lecturers do, and improved teaching and learning, others feel that selective capturing of information doesn't provide a comprehensive picture of what happens in the classroom and over-reporting leads to fatigue and does not result in impactful transformation. This paper argues that teaching and learning have two equally important dimensions (the cognitive and the affective) and that although technology has had phenomenal positive effects on teaching and learning as experienced during Covid-19, universities tend to centre their core functions within positivistic paradigms—undermining the complexity of what the university does. Furthermore, in the context of techno-rationalism, the corporatisation of universities and the commodification of education have led to contradictory missions at the public university.

This paper is divided into nine sections. After the introduction, a snapshot of the South African higher education landscape is provided. This is followed by a discussion about the public role of the university, and the theoretical foundations of the paper. Sections five to nine present a review of the literature, the study methodology, the presentation of the findings, discussion of the findings, and the conclusion.

A snapshot of the current state of higher education in South Africa

This section highlights some of the key changes that have taken place in higher education in South Africa since the mid-90s. It highlights how the higher education landscape has experienced considerable changes in its structure, objectives, and philosophy. Coupled with these changes has been the aggressive introduction of neoliberal policy mechanisms, which has resulted in the emergence of additional injustices such as challenges relating to access, funding, and quality education.

Postapartheid education policy reforms resulted in several key changes within higher education in South Africa. The Extension of University Education Act (Union of South Africa, 1959) had made it a criminal offence for non-White persons to attend a White university without special permission from the minister of internal affairs. This led to the emergence of non-White universities, such as Durban-Westville, Western Cape, and Zululand, amongst others. During apartheid, a total of 10 universities and 15 technikons were established. In 2003, technikons were restructured as universities of technology. There are currently 26 public universities across all nine provinces of the country. Universities are classified as either comprehensive (six), traditional (11), or a university of technology (six). Three remain unclassified. Traditional universities offer academic degrees such as bachelor's degree programmes; comprehensive universities offer vocational and academic programmes; and universities of technology focus more on vocational qualifications and offer diplomas, degrees, and higher education certificates. The Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa, 1997) also allowed for the establishment of private universities, which need to be

registered with the Council for Higher Education (CHE). In 2022, 1,093,353 students were enrolled in public universities in the country (Chawula, 2022).

Apart from the operational changes and mergers that occurred in the postapartheid period, higher education in South Africa remains fraught with challenges. Chetty and Pather (2015) argued that students who enter higher education in South Africa do so from positions of extreme inequality, particularly in terms of race, schooling, class, and financial resources, and without the cultural capital deemed necessary for their success.

In a speech, Professor B. C. Majola, Chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission, highlighted areas that need attention:

> Transformation in South Africa Universities must be reflected in all aspects of the institution such as governance, management and leadership, student environments such as reasonable access and academic success, equity in staffing, institutional cultures, progressive and inclusive teaching and learning, research and knowledge systems, institutional equity, and the political economy of higher education funding. (South African Human Rights Commission, 2017, para. 19).

This sentiment was echoed by the CHE (2022), which noted that transformation in South African higher education hinged on four dimensions: digital transformation, social transformation, curriculum transformation, and transformation of leadership, governance, and management. Some of the challenges currently prevailing within higher education in South Africa include the call for decolonising university curricula and pedagogy (Motala et al., 2021), addressing financial and fees challenges of the "missing middle"—students who do not qualify for aid but earn too little to self-fund their studies—(Tjønneland, 2017), creating quality teaching and learning experiences for all (Timmis et al., 2019), and ensuring sufficient accommodation for students (van der Merwe, 2021). While these challenges are often localised, global factors that impact or impede transformation in higher education include globalisation, democratisation, supra-statism and modelling, knowledge economies, liberalisation, regulation, and accountability (Brennan et al., 2004). This suggests that even three decades after ushering in a democratic dispensation and accepting neoliberal policy mechanisms that accompany globalisation, South African higher education is behind on its transformation goals.

In addition, the quality of teaching and learning remains problematic in South African universities and is reflective of the prevailing inequalities that have resulted from previous political eras and the current incongruous nature of the education system. Classifications of South African universities (comprehensive, traditional, and universities of technology) usually tell about the context in which students learn, with comprehensive higher education institutions (previously White institutions) still providing better teaching and learning contexts than their counterparts. The CHE (2012) highlighted key challenges to teaching and learning in South Africa, including fitness of purpose (to align its processes with its mission), value for money (ensuring the provision of education is in line with students' idea of quality education and allow students' new-found knowledge to take them out of the throws of poverty), and the marketability of students—which has implications for employment. To mitigate some of these challenges, the use of technology has

been noted as useful in this regard (Chugh et al., 2023). The use of technology has not only resulted in increased technical skills, making students workplace-ready, but it has also had a significant impact on higher education pedagogies (Azma, 2011; Hamidi et al., 2011) as well as administrative structures (Chugh et al., 2023). However, the use of technology in teaching and learning is not without its critiques, and Cabaleiro-Cerviño and Vera (2020) urged institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of these technologies before adopting them. Century and Cassata further suggested that when incorporating these technologies, we need to ask: "What are we doing? Is it working? For whom? Where? When? How? And, Why?" (2016, p. 169). In the South African context, this is particularly important given that policy mechanisms that seek to alleviate poverty and inequality have unintended consequences of reinforcing the very things they seek to change (Facer & Selwyn, 2021).

The role of the public university in a modern society

Biesta et al. (2009) noted that the role of the public university is not simply to produce active citizens, but to create a space where public concerns are centred and addressed. Consequently, it is imperative that higher education institutions develop skills and produce knowledge that is relevant to the society in which they are situated. Evident in the prominence of national agendas, higher education has become a key driver of development in the increasingly knowledge-focused global economy. The OECD (2008) reiterated that universities contribute to the social and economic advancement of society through four key missions: formation of human capital (teaching and learning), building knowledge bases (research), dissemination of knowledge (interacting with knowledge users), and maintenance of knowledge (storage and transmission of knowledge over generations). Therefore, higher education institutions need to remain current and relevant at all times, which requires the incorporation of modern developments, such as technology, in their pursuits.

Fundamentally, universities are the crucibles where knowledges are produced and disseminated. Calhoun (2006) argued that universities are understood to have public missions including equipping citizens for various occupations, advancing social mobility, and innovating and producing new technologies. They also direct the public sphere and prepare citizens to participate in it. It is thus crucial to understand what the public role of the modern university is—given its participation in the intensification of social inequality, privatisation of public institutions, and the reorganisation of access to knowledge (Calhoun, 2006). The obligation of the university to society has been noted since 1200 AD at the advent of the early university, and has justified its use of public funds on the grounds that it is a public good (Collini, 2012; Cuthill, 2012; Cuthill et al., 2014).

In the African context, Moscardini et al. have highlighted that:

> History shows that most African nations strove to establish at least one national university immediately after independence. The major purpose for establishing universities in these countries was, and still is, for the institutions to play a pioneering role in addressing problems of poverty,

> social disorganisation, low production, unemployment, hunger, illiteracy, diseases, that is, the problems of underdevelopment, which appeared to be common on the African continent. Insurmountable political, social, economic, legal, ethnic, demographic and technological problems have continued to threaten the very existence of most new African nations and their people. (2022, p. 817)

However, Maassen et al. were of the opinion that "the expectations of society towards universities and their perception of their own role are in constant flux," and are sensitive to external social and political forces (2019, p. 5). As such, society and the university share a dynamic relationship through their bidirectional influence. The fundamental purpose of the university is to create and disseminate new knowledge. This means that institutions must remain current and be abreast of the latest developments in knowledge to improve society. However, society also impacts the university and, as an extension of the political and social economy, is influenced by the political context and often kowtows to global and local cultural hegemonic forces.

Techno-rationalism is one such (global) force that has its grounding in global policy with local effects. It is here where the tensions between the university, as a public good, and the needs of local society are made visible. Fataar et al. noted that "the idea of the 'public good' university is slowly receding from our horizon of possibilities" and that "central to the contemporary displacement of the 'public good' university is the speed with which digital governance and techno-rationality have achieved hegemony" (2023, p. 836). Thus, there is a dire need to understand this reconfiguration or recomposition of the modern university as well as its implications for social justice and how it has reconstituted the relationship between the university and society.

This is particularly important in the context where countries, including South Africa, ratify international policies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Whilst these policies punt the realisation of equitable and transformed education systems (Goal 4), "efforts to realise the ambitious agenda of the SDGs are made difficult in the midst of poverty, increasing inequality, and economic disparity" (Sayed & Singh, 2020, p. 22). This is particularly pertinent in South Africa, which has been listed as the most unequal country in the world in terms of the income distribution (Sayed & Singh, 2020). In this context, how does the modern university reconcile these imperatives? As a response, Fataar et al. noted:

> The core challenge for an account of university education is to centre a broader social-structural commitment to social justice. Whether universities can transform their institutional orientation for greater justice and inclusiveness is dependent on developments in the broader social-reproductive apparatuses of society. Universities cannot serve as progenitors of social change without a more comprehensive set of political commitments to transform society. (2023, p. 836)

These tensions highlight the considerable challenges encountered by universities in the postmodern context. Competing and conflicting imperatives may result in negative unintended consequences, including perpetuating prevailing inequalities.

Theoretical considerations

The theoretical foundations of this paper are based on critical university studies (CUS), which examines the role of higher education and its relationship with modern society. Peters (2022) noted that CUS emerged from the abrupt move away from the university as a public good to the neoliberal privatised user-pays model, which rippled through neoliberal states globally in the 1980s. Instances of globalisation have intensified social stratification in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2015). The public good university, as such, is under threat from the neoliberal model of the university as an entrepreneurial hub. CUS concerns itself with, and critiques, themes such as the privatisation and corporatisation of higher education, globalisation, innovation (including the use of technology and the digital economy), unionisation of workers and students, as well as university funding and fee models and approaches. Fundamentally, CUS argues that universities should remain a public good because they create positive externalities and pursuing its longevity is, therefore, a social justice imperative (Peters, 2022).

Technology and learning analytics in higher education: Limitations and possibilities

In this section, learning analytics is used to illuminate understandings and experiences of techno-rationality as one element thereof. A review of the literature suggests that there are ambivalent interpretations, experiences, and views about the techno-rational approaches currently dominating higher education. This section highlights some of the benefits and critiques of the approach, with a particular emphasis on teaching and learning.

Benefits

Undoubtedly, technology has impacted higher education profoundly over the last three decades and has thus been a key driver in education reform processes. The benefits of incorporating technology into higher education systems have improved teaching and learning experiences and streamlined university reporting and administrative processes. Haleem et al. astutely noted that "the introduction of new technology-assisted learning tools such as mobile devices, smart boards, MOOCs, tablets, laptops, simulations, dynamic visualisations, and virtual laboratories have altered education in schools and institutions" (2022, p. 275).

Chen and Xia (2012) noted that integrating technology into classes has made teaching and learning more active and less passive. This sentiment is echoed by Papert (1970) who argued that changes in how knowledge is presented impact how students learn. Technology allows teachers to become more innovative, which helps students to develop the skills they require for a globalised world, such as the tolerance and skills for intercultural collaboration (López de la Madrid, 2007). It has created new learning paths and platforms, making education more accessible (Hamiti et al., 2014). It can facilitate learning without space and time limitations (Mahini et al., 2012). And it has reduced the cost of learning materials substantially because physical copies and books have been replaced by e-books, and assignments can be emailed or uploaded onto learning management

systems rather than being printed and submitted as hard copies (Nieto & Díaz, 2005). Libraries have also shifted online, making resources readily available for students to access without needing to travel to the library physically. Regarding reporting and university processes, incorporating technology to streamline university administration has drastically reduced administrative expenses (Ilgaz, 2015). Digital learning tools have also made marking and evaluation faster and, in some instances, instantaneous (Haleem et al., 2022). Storage of reports has also moved to cloud facilities, saving physical storage space, the fees associated with this, and maintaining the integrity of the reports given that they are less likely to get lost or damaged.

Limitations

Loads (2018) suggested that teaching and learning follows a spectrum. On the one hand, you have techno-rational learning where you can "use learning analytics to find out how many hours students are studying online and how many comments they're posting on a discussion board" and get some indication of student engagement levels (Loads, 2018, para. 5). In the middle, you have transformative learning where you can "get lecturers (and students) to re-examine their taken-for-granted assumptions about what engagement actually means" (Loads, 2018, para. 6). Then, on the opposite side of the spectrum, there is "learning through soul" (Dirkxs, 1997 as cited in Loads 2018, para. 7), that "draws on narrative, symbol and myth . . . [and] makes space for spirituality in all its forms; it draws on emotion and intuition" (Loads, 2018, para. 9). Loads' understanding of techno-rational learning was that it is instrumental and "lends itself to measurements of performance and productivity and can be presented as an objective report" (2018, para. 9). As such, it lacks soul and depth and lacks the ability and possibility of inward reflection. Further to this, by positioning teaching and learning on a spectrum, Loads (2018) suggested that the techno-rational approach is the opposite of learning through soul.

Illingworth (2016) suggested that the techno-rational approach has resulted in overzealous bureaucracy and a lack of desire for independent learning. He commented:

> The incredible number of hoops that have to be jumped through on a daily basis in terms of marking matrices, Moodle/Blackboard submissions, programme committee meetings, transferral forms etc. can mean that many academics don't have enough time to actually focus on the development and delivery of effective and inspirational teaching. (Illingworth, 2016, para. 3)

He further noted that the excessive levels of reporting and recording indicative of the techno-rational approach have also impacted pedagogies, which has negatively affected how students develop critical skills needed to flourish in academia and post academia.

Selwyn,[1] in his paper, "What's the Problem With Learning Analytics?" highlighted a common concern about the techno-rational approach. He contended that learning analytics tends to "entrench and deepen the status quo, disempower and disenfranchise vulnerable groups, and

1 Selwyn spoke about techno-idealism, which includes rationalisation through technology, and postulated that "technology-led mentality grossly underestimates the social complexity of educational settings, meaning that any long-term outcomes of learning analytics are unlikely to match the initial enthusiasms of developers" (2019, p. 15).

further subjugate public education to the profit-led machinations of the burgeoning 'data economy'" (2019, p. 11). He also suggested that university managers and researchers must converse more openly about the values and the politics associated with these kinds of technologies because analytical technologies are being rolled out en masse to universities and schools, with little known about their effects. He synthesised several critiques of the techno-idealism approach and the implications that this has for higher education:

- First, what data analytics claims to know about education and educational processes is a reduced version of reality and what actually happens in the classroom. Selwyn noted that "even the most complex models of teaching and learning contain significant grey areas" and "therefore [it can] be argued that many elements of education cannot be fully captured and expressed through data processing—even if technically sophisticated approximations are possible" (2019, p. 12).
- Second, Selwyn argued that learning analytics does not take into consideration the context in which teaching and learning take place. This sentiment was also echoed by Knight, who said that artificial intelligence "is a machine that can make a perfect chess move while the room is on fire" (2017, para. 4), highlighting the limitation that learning analytics cannot fully capture real-world contexts.
- Third, learning analytics reduces students' and lecturers' capacity for informed decision-making. Selwyn noted that learning analytic tools "separate teaching and learning processes into different components to model past behaviours with a view to recommending future actions" and, as such, limit other solution possibilities based on the combined overall process (2019, p. 13).
- Fourth, learning analytics is surveillance disguised as learning support. There seems to be increased concern over whether teaching and learning is being supported with technology or whether it is being supervised and micromanaged. Selwyn suggested that "school and university contexts are increasingly predicated around performance management, measurements, metrics, auditing, and accountability" resulting in the "dataveillance of teachers and students" (2019, p. 13).
- Fifth, learning analytics has become a source of performativity and directly influences what students and teachers do in the classroom. It has become a platform where students and teachers must account for what they do and demonstrate their efficacy. This often has implications for progression and promotions.
- Sixth, learning analytics reproduces existing social inequalities. Noble (2018) reiterated this by arguing that these systems favour those social groupings that are most represented in the system, and favours those who have access to resources.
- Lastly, data analytics serves institutional interests rather than student needs. Arguments for the use of learning analytics are often based on the idea of improving students' educational experiences, but there are often additional uses of student information that is lucrative for universities. Learning analytics is part of a global data drive that includes healthcare analysis and consumer analytics, where the end users are not students or teachers but third

parties who benefit (financially) from the data. This sentiment is also shared by Couldry and Mejias (2019) who argued that data extraction and commodification is a profitable endeavour.

Other literature on the impact of techno-rational approaches to teaching and learning cautions against putting blind faith in data, and being aware of technological limitations (Beer, 2018; O'Neil, 2016). The power invested in learning analytics has also been reported to limit individual agency and freedom of choice (Fourcade & Healy, 2017; Selwyn, 2019).

Methodology

The data used in this paper formed part of a sub-study investigating the impact of technology, including artificial intelligence, on teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa. The main project focused on teaching and learning in postcolonial settings, which is a qualitative project managed by the South African Research Chair for Teaching and Learning in Post-Schooling Education and Training. The sub-study investigated academics' views on the emergence of artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT (see Singh, 2023), as well as their views on techno-rationalism in higher education, and the effect of learning analytics on their work as lecturers and researchers. With the overall research question of the sub-study investigating views and practices of academics in the context of emerging technologies, the findings of this paper are based on the questions:

a) What are academic staff views on the emergence of techno-rationalism in higher education?
b) What are academic staff views on the use of learning analytics in teaching and learning in higher education?

The data of these semi-structured interviews were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) immersive process of data analysis including becoming familiar with the data, generating codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and locating quotes that illuminate each theme.

Ethics approval for this project was obtained via the university ethics protocol. Verbal consent to participate in the study, for the interview to be recorded, and for their views to be written up and accessible on a public platform was also obtained from each of the respondents. Respondents' details, such as names, have been changed to maintain anonymity.

Presentation of findings

This section thematically presents the findings based on the following research questions:

a) What are academic staff views on the emergence of techno-rationalism in higher education?

b) What are academic staff views on the use of learning analytics in teaching and learning in higher education?

Two respondents participated in this research. Alexandra is an associate professor in digital learning and Rachel is a deputy dean in a faculty of science. Each respondent was given an opportunity to reflect on the trajectory of techno-rationality in South African higher education, the impact on teaching and learning, and the future possibilities. The findings are structured per theme.

Theme 1: Techno-rationalism is not a new concept

Alexandra noted that techno-rationality is not a new phenomenon.

> I don't think that's a new view. I think it's always been about numbers; it's always been about money; it's always been about funding; it's always been about how many students you turn out; how much funding you get from the government, etc. . . . that's nothing new . . . that has always been the foundation of a higher education institution, and it's not anything new that everything is tracked . . . we're paying attention to the same things. So, if you're at school and the teacher [saw] the student has been absent for a long time, they would have acted. The same thing here, if a student is absent from the learner management assessment for a time, it triggers certain warning things, so there's still action, so the human act of intervening in the learning process has not changed. What has changed is the tools that we use to mark or the indicators that we've used to mark that journey; that gave us the red flag so that we could then act. . . . So, for me, it has in a way stabilised how we judge the quality of teaching and learning in a way.

Theme 2: Techno-rationalism has resulted in increased visibility and accessibility of information

Alexandra further noted that although techno-rationalism was not a new phenomenon, what is new is the visibility and accessibility of the data that universities procure. Data are no longer only accessible to a select few:

> What has changed is how whatever is being tracked has become more visible to everyone and that was the advantage of this technocentric type of a movement where we have big data etc.; where all of that was only available to a few people. . . . Now all that data is a lot more visible and is disseminated to a much larger audience.

Theme 3: Techno-rationalism has resulted in an irrational fear

Alexandra highlighted that the fear of being "governed by numbers" is irrational because it has always been this way and that the fear stems from the visibility of processes, procedures, and outcomes to a larger audience:

> I think that has it created this awareness and this fear that everything is governed by numbers, but it's always been governed by numbers, it was just invisible and through this whole . . . the whole movement in the last few years, it's all just become more visible to everyone. So, for me, it's not about that anything has changed, in essence . . . learning is a human . . . endeavour, how the learning is mediated, whether it is through technology, through human–computer interaction, whether it is through human-to-human interaction . . . the fact that learning is mediated through technology has made it a lot more accessible, because, I mean, through this recording, you can actually go back on

> it, forward on it; there's no place to hide anymore, and I think that is maybe why people are fearing technology because . . . the student can't say "oh I submitted something" but there's no evidence that you've actually submitted it on the learning management system, you can't get away with those types of things anymore. As I said, there's no place to hide, and I think that's what makes people more fearful.

Theme 4: Techno-rationalism has improved teaching and learning

It was noted that techno-rationality has helped teaching and learning immensely, particularly regarding lecturers' pedagogical choices:

> When you're looking at learning analytics . . . they're on different levels, so, if you're looking at institutional level, it's very different from on module level. On module level, you . . . can see when a student logged on, how long he spent in the module, what he was looking at when he was logging on, how he did in whichever assessment, how he did in relation to other students. So learning analytics is available on granular level alright, so . . . the lecturer then uses that data to make pedagogical choices to change what they're doing to increase student success. I think that has been very valuable, and that . . . tools have become more and more powerful so, if we . . . it depends where you're looking, if you're looking at . . . ranking on institutional levels, how do they translate to what is happening down on module level? That, I think, is more worth a conversation that we should have, but learning analytics has permeated every level of learning. (Alexandra)

Theme 5: Techno-rationalism tries to report what happens in the classroom—but falls short of the full picture

Rachel suggested that the onset of the techno-rational university stems from the institution's need for "facts" to measure what takes place in the classroom:

> I think it's because, at the end of the day, people want cold hard facts . . . unfortunately . . . there's no easy way for measuring . . . what goes on in the classroom.

Theme 6: Learning analytics requires excessive reporting, which has now become a bureaucratic process with no meaningful effects

Rachel commented that the incorporation of learning analytics results in constantly needing to report on what takes place in the classroom. Thus, reporting becomes mechanical rather than developmental and results in reporting fatigue.

> And you know . . . we report to the [senior director's] office, [and say] these are the decolonisation things we did etc. . . . I mean, the cold hard facts are easy to record, what's your pass rate, how many people dropped out, that's collected like this, you know, the computers are collecting it . . . and people sometimes also feel, look . . . [another report]. . . . Let's be honest, we're all very tired of reporting, we have to keep saying the same things over and over again, and this report and that report and that report . . . but, you know, as a lecturer myself, I'm not going to report on every single little thing I do . . . not everyone feels or deems that what they do in their classroom is worth reporting [so the reports don't hold much significance for improving teaching and learning].

Theme 7: To improve teaching and learning, interpersonal information needs to be captured

Rachel highlighted that using technology to capture and store information is not a problem but, if you want to use it to improve teaching and learning, learning analytics must capture different kinds of information—interpersonal information:

> But there's nothing for you to collect what are you doing in the classroom, you know, you smiled at the students, you listen to a student's problem, you had a discussion about something, that's not measured, and the only way for that to be measured is if people report on it [but they don't ask about that].

She also noted that the reason why this may not be happening is because data analysts are not necessarily education specialists, so they do not know what to look for:

> But, I think, the other issue is, [they are] not cognitive scientists, so [they] don't actually know, what to look out for, how to measure, what to measure, and so what [they] might say is, "oh I noticed the following trends in the answers, that's very interesting" . . . and so it means that people don't care about it being [impactful].

Discussion of findings

The feedback from Alexandra and Rachel highlights seven themes that underscore the effects and implications of a techno-rational approach and the use of learning analytics within higher education in South Africa. The findings note that the process of tracking and collecting data at the university is not a new phenomenon, but what is new is the scale (and perhaps the purpose) of what is being collected. Attendance and results have always been recorded as part of educational institution record keeping; in this case, it is just the interface that has changed. However, the literature suggests that although the intentions may be noble, issues of privacy remain a concern, and Jutting argued that whilst learning analytics have become popular to improve teaching and learning, the issue of privacy remains problematic, with some students fearing "continuously [being] monitor[ed] in a Big Brother fashion" (2016, para. 21). Further to this, as Selwyn (2019) noted, learning analytics is often disguised as learning support but, in some instances, it is more a case of universities micromanaging teaching and learning rather than supporting it. Here, techno-rationalism, through the use of learning analytics, is seen to have a dual purpose and effect.

The findings also suggest that for some in the academy, learning analytics has resulted in uniformity and stability in how we judge quality education. This is crucial to note in a South African context, where the issue of what constitutes quality education remains contested. Facer and Selwyn (2021) highlighted that although technology can be useful, on its own, it does not have the ability to transform education and improve teaching and learning in a meaningful way.

An emerging theme from the data also highlights that by using learning analytics, data about students (and the institution) are available to a wider audience, but it has also resulted in an irrational fear amongst students and staff. Although this fear of representation through statistics has been well documented, Davies (2017) noted that the view that statistics can accurately

represent the world has declined due to increasing distrust of governments. This suggests that technology is not a neutral phenomenon and while it is supposed to "diffuse controversy and polarisation, it seems as if statistics are actually stoking them" (Davies, 2017, para. 2).

The data further highlight the usefulness of learning analytics in improving teaching and learning, but it also suggest that universities are selective about what information is gathered and what they deem to be the "cold hard facts." This limited selection is indicative of how universities measure quality, which represents a very narrow view of quality and a complete misunderstanding of what teaching and learning entails.

The overzealous bureaucracy, as highlighted by Illingworth (2016), was also noted, given that lecturers are subjected to constant reporting resulting in reporting fatigue, which may undermine mechanisms that seek to transform teaching and learning.

Lastly, the data highlights that the affective dimension of teaching and learning is not given the same credence as its objective dimension, reducing the engagement to a technical process managed by technocrats rather than intellectual, sentient beings, and that reporting processes become vacant and meaningless because the true essence of transformation is never captured.

Much of what was reported by Alexandra and Rachel concurs with existing literature relating to the views regarding techno-rationalism and the use of learning analytics in higher education (see Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Facer & Selwyn, 2021; Knight, 2017; Selwyn, 2019). This suggests that the experiences in South African do not occur in isolation from what happens elsewhere. From the data, techno-rationalism has both positive and negative effects, which has implications for social justice and transformation in higher education.

Conclusion

Feenberg (2011) noted that we are accustomed to thinking that rationality is a feature of modern society and have thus signalled it as a value that requires preservation. Whilst early philosophers such as Heidegger (1977) and Horkheimer (1947) have cautioned against this line of thinking, rationality as a scientific discipline has emerged as a bastion of modern development, including how we manage our institutions. The interlocking of neoliberalism with the digital revolution resulted in a powerful and influential wave that has transformed higher education governance globally, resulting in "a performativity matrix of rankings, online delivery of teaching . . . and globalization of HE [higher education]" (Peters, 2022, para. 19). This has had negative implications for the public university as a public good.

This paper presented the views of two professors on techno-rationality and how learning analytics has impacted teaching and learning in higher education. Their responses are somewhat ambivalent, with one fully supporting the incorporation of these technologies in higher education, and the other being more cautious, questioning its efficacy and the impact on meaningful transformation. Given the extensive critiques of techno-rationalism, and in the context of this paper (learning analytics), a necessary question to ask is: "Does the threat and reported effects of

techno-rationality outweigh the advantages?" A simplistic response to this is that, whilst the increasing digitisation of higher education may be a necessary shift to reflect changes in society, it is imperative that this shift does not occur at the expense of the university as a public good and that the complexity of teaching and learning, including its cognitive and affective dimensions, are equally valued in how we choose to report about what happens in the classroom and how we perceive the notion of quality education.

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Notes on the author

Marcina Singh is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Johannesburg. She is also an independent education consultant specialising broadly in education in Africa.

Address for correspondence

marcinas@uj.ac.za

A *Musical Offering* to the recomposed university

Willemien Froneman and Stephanus Muller
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

In music, "composition" in its broadest understanding refers to choices made with regard to fixed parameters (pitch, rhythm/time(ing), sonority, timbre, texture) located on diachronic and synchronic continuums of intention and performance. "Recomposition" refers to the same activity directed to material recognised as constituting composition. Both terms are associated with creative human endeavour. This article considers the recomposition of J. S. Bach's six-part ricercar from his *Musical Offering* by the composer Anton von Webern, as a response to thinking about the term recomposition as it pertains to the university. Webern's recomposition of Bach's ricercar, through the technique of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, results in a distortion of foregrounded voice-leading and counterpoint essential to fugal treatment, but succeeds in illuminating a background of motivic structures in the work that allow for new connections and coherences to be heard. In this regard, Webern's work constitutes not a destruction of Bach's model, but a modernist explication thereof. In this process, a three-fold understanding of style comes into play: style as immanent continuity, style as authentic expression, and style as historical awareness. In considering this music as an example of aesthetic processes of recomposition, the article extrapolates semiotic, symbolic, and political implications for how the university as a public good could be imagined not only from aesthetic considerations relating to musical recomposition, but as a fundamentally aesthetic consideration.

Keywords: institutional change, recomposition, aesthetics, Peter Sloterdijk, *Musical Offering,* Anton von Webern

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Introduction

Das Musikalische Opfer (BWV 1079, hereafter called the *Musical Offering*) by Johann Sebastian Bach (1747/c. 1952) is a late work consisting of two ricercare in three and six voices respectively, a trio sonata of four movements, and 10 canonic settings. It is one of the very few compositions by Bach to receive a first printing in his lifetime, and has posed a number of research questions that have occupied Bach scholars for decades. These relate to what Ursula Kirkendale (1980, p. 88) called the "internal genesis and the state of the sources," leading to questions about the precise instrumentation of the different pieces, the desired order of performance of the pieces, and whether all the pieces constitute a unified work (Wolff, 1971). Upon the publication of the work in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* in 1974, Christoph Wolff designated these questions among "the most discussed and most difficult problems of Bach-philology" (Wolff, as quoted in Kirkendale, 1980, p. 88).

But the problems of Bach's *Musical Offering* extend far beyond score-based philology. In its strangeness and genius, its inside jokes and puzzle-like character, it has invited an array of commentary around what Greg Hayes (2017, p. 5) called Bach's "esoteric motivations and designs." These include that the *Musical Offering,* in its complex hierarchies and symmetries of order, was an overt display of Bach's musical intellect (Hayes, 2017), that it was an elaborate puzzle of acrostics and hidden meanings meant to amuse and edify a fellow intellectual (Hofstadter, 1979/1999), that the work could be read as precise allegory to the *Institutio Oratoria*—a 12-part rhetorical manual by the 1st-century Roman orator Quintillian (Kirkendale, 1980), or even that some of the subordinate motifs in the *Musical Offering* are hidden codes to the Ten Commandments (Göncz, 2011).

Of specific interest in this article is the six-part ricercar, which, scholars agree, was most likely intended for performance on a keyboard instrument (Wolff, 1971). The term "ricercar" used to refer to imitation technique in instrumental music, and had been in use since the period of the *Musica Nova* (c. 1540). The term is associated with a "free, improvisatory style as well as extremely strict polyphonic writing" (Wolff, 1971, p. 401). In its literal meaning, the term means "to seek," and, as Richard Hofstadter explained in *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979/1999), is an allusion both to the work's complexity, its near-algorithmic hidden patterning, and the cultural practice of the time of turning fugues into a musical game of discovery for the informed listener or analyst. In this sense, Bach's preference for the term "ricercar" over the more commonplace "fugue" is significant; it indicates, according to Hofstadter, an "esoteric or highbrow cleverness" (1979/1999, p. 15). "Austere as it is, "Hofstadter continued, "it is rather miraculous that Bach could use such a theme to make so pleasing an interlude" (1979/1999, p. 16). In the "musical games" of the *Musical Offering*, in other words, intellection is both truth seeking and pleasure seeking.

Like the other 12 pieces constituting the *Musical Offering*, the six-part ricercar is based on a theme that King Frederick the Great (himself an accomplished amateur musician) gave to Bach during his audience with the King at Potsdam on 7 May 1747, in order to improvise on one of the King's Silbermann fortepianos (an instrument, which Bach would not have known at the time). Bach took

this theme, which subsequently became known as the *thema regium*, and extemporised a fugue on it. The extemporised fugue in six parts was on a shorter theme of Bach's own choosing, and the King's request for a six-part fugue on his own theme resulted in the composition of the ricercar on the *thema regium*, which is now part of the *Musical Offering* (Hofstadter, 1979/1999). The ricercar in question is the largest and most grandiose piece in the *Musical Offering*. Hofstadter (1979/1999, p. 7) explained why:

> To give an idea of how extraordinary a six-part fugue is, in the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier* by Bach, containing forty-eight Preludes and Fugues, only two have as many as five parts, and nowhere is there a six-part fugue! One could probably liken the task of improvising a six-part fugue to the playing of sixty simultaneous blindfold games of chess, and winning them all. To improvise an eight-part fugue is really beyond human capability.

The piece is a text at the cusp of a late style encountering new fashions (the so-called galant style), and one that speaks to the relationship of music (and musicians) to authority and power. It also references technical skill—not only in composition, but in performance—and a response to new technologies of sound production. The ricercar, therefore, looks both forward (in referencing the galant style, and in its encounter with modern keyboard technology), and backward (in its application of a technical procedure that dates back centuries). It is both a supreme achievement of individual skill and compositional maturity, and an acknowledgement that such achievement is afforded by power. While it is an indisputably canonical work, key questions surrounding its status as work remain undecided because of the extant source materials. In short, the ricercar that occupies our attention in this article is a multivalent text.

At the centre of the call for contributions to this special journal edition was the idea of "decomposing" and "recomposing"—here understood as central metaphors for the new organicism of techno-rational logic (Fataar et al., 2023). This new logic, as Fataar et al. explained, is tied up with "fusions of biology, physics and the digital, which centre algorithms, machine learning, robotics, neuroscience, datafication, etc., into the productive sectors of the university" (2023, p. 837). Recomposing and digitally driven, this capitalist machine powers a new vision of digital and datafied futures in which, so it was explained, "critical university studies must shed its humanities/social sciences-only perspectives" (Fataar et al., 2023, p. 837). But what struck us as we considered how to respond to the prompt of thinking about the university against nostalgia, and given our intellectual interests as music scholars, is that composition is, of course, also a musical term, that composing (or re- or decomposing the university) might have something to do with the organicism of sound, and that the algorithmic future—from our perspective—has unfolded not primarily through STEM-based techno-rationality, but through AI interventions into human creativity. And whereas it is AI that currently holds academe spellbound in its vast and unprecedented potential, it is the "beauty and extreme depth of emotion" that Hofstadter (1979/1999, p. 719) identified in the *Musical Offering*, that concern us as integral to what this new world could mean. And this is so, because, in Hofstadter's (1979/1999, p. 719) words, the *Musical Offering* is nothing less than "a Tangled Hierarchy like those of Escher and Gödel, an intellectual construction which reminds me, in ways I cannot express, of the beautiful many-voiced fugue of

the human mind." It strikes us, therefore, that not considering music (or art, generally) as being at the very centre of the idea of (re)composing the university (also, then, in its datafied and algorithmic conceptions), is quite literally to be mind-less in a fatally flawed way. In contemplating the aesthetic, historical, and ontological questions that surround the notion of how the university could be recomposed, we wish to demonstrate how turning our attention towards art generally, and the audible surface of music, particularly, could attune us to imperatives of change and transformation in our universities in ways that recognise the creative and truth-seeking impulses of art-making—rather than the rhetoric of educational reform or political transformation—as processes deserving of time and attention.

We offer what we think of as a thought experiment to suggest how affective and cultural forces could contribute to the idea of the *public good* university (Calhoun, 2006; Marginson, 2011) and we construct this experiment by considering the case of a high modernist looking back and re-imagining of Bach's six-part ricercar in his *Musical Offering*. In 1935, the Second Viennese School composer, Anton von Webern (1935) orchestrated the six-part ricercar from this large work. James Currie reflected on this gesture by positing the Webern orchestration variously as an act of ventriloquism, a "rewriting of Bach in Webern's script," "a strange act of love in which Webern has taken a work by Bach and smeared his name across it in such a way that Bach can no longer be found," or a merely representative example of "a playful and performative *souvenir de Bach*" that poses Webern as a "kind of quixotic, postmodernist *avant la lettre*" (2002, p. 170). Currie asked the question: "Is it possible to create a critical space for the work that is not wholly taken up either with belittling it as a *curio* or condemning it as an act of interpretive guerrilla tactics?" (2002, p. 170).

We wish to usurp this question through considering Webern's 1935 recomposition of Bach's six-part ricercar, applying it to a discourse totally outside its original context: Is it possible to create a critical space for art/music in the university? And what would it take (and mean) for art to be less 'adornment' in the university, and more than a source for polemic, but both the figure and ground for creative intellection itself? We thus see in Webern's gesture a desire to consider complex, multivalent objects in the world—aesthetic structures, institutions—whose historicity and importance we recognise, but which we wish to keep alive through invigorated engagement and truth seeking. In choosing our example, we are deliberately provocative. We propose that Webern/Bach is part of our complex Africa-centred contexts, that emancipatory possibilities for the 21st-century university in the Anthropocene may well not be found in grand, sweeping ideas, but in paying attention to analytical detail and staying with the trouble of (aesthetic) complicities (Haraway, 2016), and of turning to technical disciplinary knowledge as a counter to the interment of the university's core purposes through administrative operations and market-driven logics.

In music, "composition" in its broadest understanding refers to choices made with regard to fixed parameters (pitch, rhythm/time(ing), sonority, timbre, texture) located on diachronic and synchronic continuums of intention and performance. "Recomposition" refers to the same activity, directed to material recognised as constituting composition. Both terms are associated with

creative human endeavour. For Currie (2002), Webern's recomposition project (which he termed "transcription"), cannot be understood outside the context of the stylistic discourse elaborated by Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), the senior member of the Second Viennese School. He distinguished in Schoenberg's theoretical grappling with style and idea in music composition three kinds of style: style as presentation, style as authentic expression, and style as connected to an organicist conception of historical progress—the idea that style was connected to a particular phase of historical development rather than being rooted in biography. Currie understood Webern's engagement with Bach as operating in this three-dimensional understanding of style. First, his orchestration is comprehensible in the medium-specific requirements of both the form of the ricercar and the orchestral instruments to which he turns, and Webern's treatment of Bach's ricercar demonstrates that questions of balance, time, and musical logic have been attended to. Second, in the particular manner in which Webern recomposed Bach's six-part ricercar (namely through breaking up thematic material into motifs through a technique known as *Klangfarbenmelodie*, of which more below), Webern also asserted authorship and originality in his recomposed work. Last, the looking back of Webern to Bach (as, indeed, Bach's looking back to the earlier form of the ricercar) was an acknowledgement not only that there is something about musical works that is open-ended, but also that this historical dimension and its workings-through have implications for what we can do in our present to make things, to understand things, and to imagine things (Currie, 2002).

Thinking about the university as a thing in the world that has a style (rather than a structure), and along the understanding of style as outlined above, would entail understanding the university (as an idea, as an historical institution, as a particular university situated in time and space) as behoving of a certain immanent consistency. But it would also ask how we, as South Africans, or we, as scholars and artists at the very specific university that is Stellenbosch University, co-create something akin to what Currie called the "drive toward authentic expression" (2002, p. 173). The answer to this question has something to do with decolonial ways of being scholars and artists in the university, acknowledging the moral imperative and commitment of decolonial approaches not to imitate, constantly, a model from elsewhere. Finally, it will consider the open-ended connectedness of Stellenbosch University to the idea of the university as what Currie called an "organicist outcome of a historical process" (2002, p. 175): as an acknowledgement of the complexity of agency and originality in the present, but also as a way of transcribing tradition and history in such a way that it becomes an aesthetic object of its time. Already then, the consideration of Webern's recomposition of Bach's ricercar, enlisted as an epistemology, could prompt a way of thinking about how the university (as a structure) can be both a continuation of things, an expression of new and original things, and a process that self-consciously shape-shifts between constructed pasts and possible futures. An aesthetically informed approach to the style of the university, we argue, would be different to one that emerges from notions of principles, managerial or academic, that emanate from methodological precepts and logics attuned to organisational and disciplinary well-being. Crucially, also, it would attend to the sense-based manifestation of continuation, originality, and futurity. In other words, and from our perspective as music scholars:

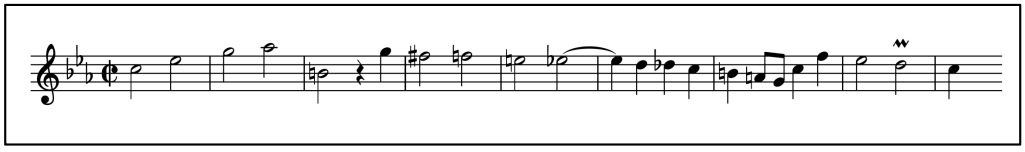
"How does continuation sound? What is authentic organisational sound? Does the future have a particular sound?"

The technique of recomposition, in musical terms, has a long history. Joseph Straus (1986) cited the 15th-century concept of imitation in this regard, as well as the later Renaissance use of parody. In the 20th century, recomposition of existing work involved ever longer historical purviews, and focussed on creating new, autonomous work somehow aligned to the artistic integrity of the original (Straus, 1986). Importantly, also, 20th-century efforts at recomposition engaged with musical predecessors as canonised figures, introducing the notion of musical succession and influence, as well as the psychology of an anxiety of influence bequeathed by the 19th-century development of the standard Western concert repertoire into a static and museum-like corpus of great composers and works (Bloom, 1973; Goehr, 1992). This, broadly speaking, is the musico-aesthetic context to Webern's engagement with Bach's six-part ricercar. Compositionally, Carl Dahlhaus described Webern's treatment of J. S. Bach's ricercar thus:

> Webern does not restrict himself to a straightforward transcription of the contrapuntal voices. Which, taking a simplistic view, seems to be the ideal way of presenting polyphony . . . while Webern emphasizes the motivic connections between the voices through his orchestration, the voices themselves—whose relationships he is supposed to be clarifying—disintegrate. . . . The emancipation of the motivic structure from the division of the texture into voice—the net result of Webern's instrumentation—means that a connection is broken that was still taken for granted in Bach. (as quoted in Currie, 2002, p. 180)

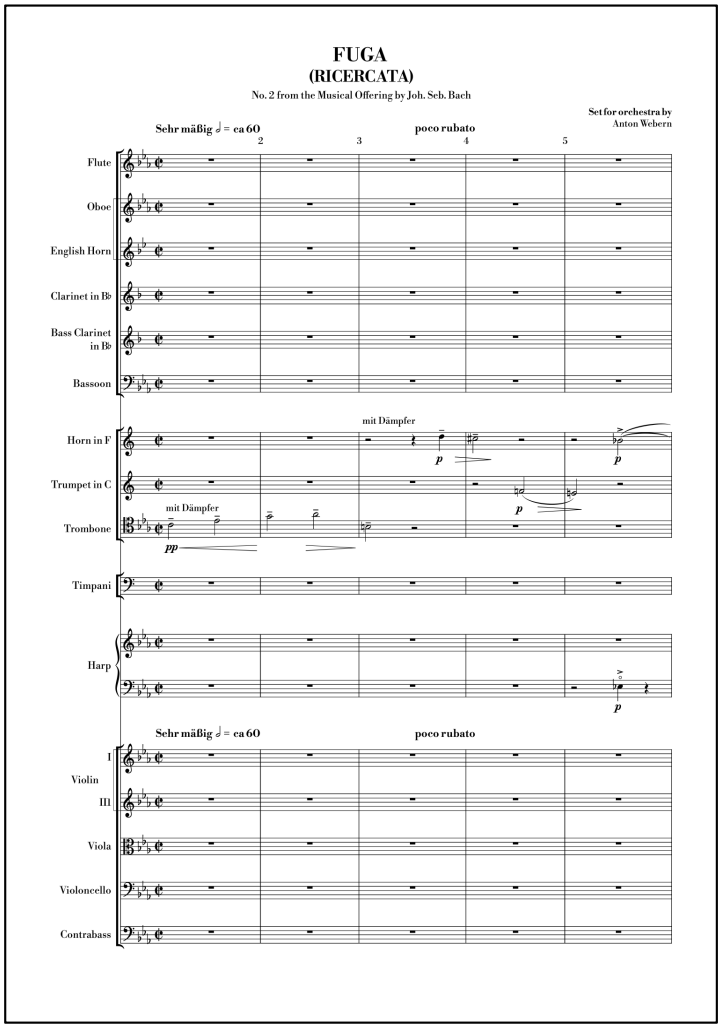
It is important to notice, from this passage, the paradox to which Currie draws our attention when considering Dahlhaus's words: "If one works against the grain of the authority of the subject's unity in a fugue, then one is undermining the 'main point' that defines a fugue *as* a fugue" (Currie, 2002, pp. 180–181). What is remarkably original in what Webern achieved, then, is that the disintegration that Dahlhaus wrote about happens without any of Bach's original notes or rhythms being changed. Webern managed to effect, in other words, an indisputable continuation of something whilst simultaneously implementing a radical break from it. How is this done, musically? By breaking up Bach's long themes into small units, distributing each melodic line among several different instruments. This is the technique called *Klangfarbenmelodie* (mentioned above) and entails, in simple demonstration, that Bach's original theme (see Example 1), is presented not by a single instrument, but is given to different instruments.

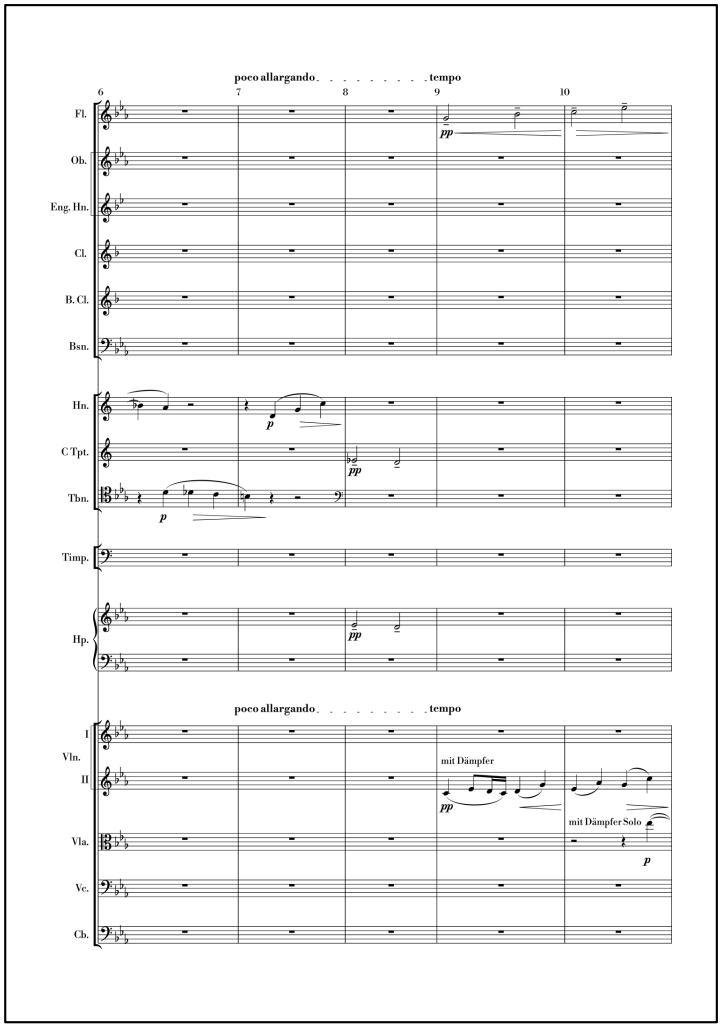
Example 1
J. S. Bach, *thema regium* (theme of the king) on which the six-part ricercar from the *Musical Offering* is based



In Webern's orchestration (see Example 2), it can be seen how the 20 notes of the fugal theme are distributed:

Example 2
Webern, fugue/ricercata, bars 1–10





Here it can be seen that the 20-note theme is divided into seven fragments: the first five notes (C–E flat–G–A flat–B) are given to the trombone, and the next two notes are played by the horn (G–F sharp), followed by two more played by the trumpet (F–E), one by the horn with the harp (the tied E flat) dovetailing with four more notes in the trombone (D–D flat–C–B), followed by three more notes in the horn (G–C–F) and ending with two notes on the trumpet and harp (E–D) and the final note (C) in the strings. This procedure is repeated throughout the piece. Richard Beaudoin and Joseph Moore described the effect of this orchestration (which they, like Currie, considered a kind of transcription, rather than recomposition), to be "kaleidoscopic" (2010, p. 108):

> Bach's original lines are all present and accounted for, but each is "sung" by an unpredictable and ever-changing orchestral voice. Moreover, Webern's coloristic choices foreground many short

> motives that are not heard as such in the continuity of Bach's original. Since much of Webern's own mature music is made up of similar tiny motivic cells, his transcription is a "Webernization" of Bach. Nevertheless, while Webern's fragmentation and often lush twentieth-century colours seem posed to break away into dodecaphonic variations, those familiar with both works will hear the Webern as a faithful re-expression of Bach's work, though its extreme timbral discontinuities point the way to transcriptions that are even looser musically. (Beaudoin & Moore, 2010, p. 108)

At play in Webern's engagement with Bach's ricercar, therefore, is a technique that brings to the fore aspects of the original (the "many short motives" that Beaudoin and Moore wrote about, or Dahlhaus's "motivic connections") that remain obscured by the compelling continuity of the theme in the original. This is a different conception of Bach's playful encoding: a modernist revisioning that stays true to the multivalence of its historical model. The technique that enables this engagement with a historical work, *Klangfarbenmelodie*, was first described by Arnold Schoenberg (1911/1978) in his *Harmonielehre*, where he discussed the possibility of creating structure centred on timbre, or tone colour. This means that the surface of the work is disturbed, or, in Currie's words, "is transformed into a fragmented and perhaps confusing montage of overarticulated blobs of color" (2002, p. 180). The smooth contrapuntal surface that depends on the traditional division of the separate voices being heard, is now "refocused into the background behind the interplay of motives" (Currie, 2002, p. 183), allowing for a change in perspective and an explication of material that would otherwise remain hidden. The explication that occurs takes place against the foil of Webern's own fascination with, and implementation of, cell-like fragments in his mature music. Hence, the possibility that the technique he applies to an unchanged Bach score can be heard as a "Webernization" without a single note or rhythm of Bach's ricercar theme having changed.

To be sure, the recomposition is not to be understood as politically neutral, or transparent. As Richard Taruskin has written on the inherent chauvinism of Webern's neoclassical interest in Bach (here with respect to Webern's String Quartet, Op. 28, based on the B-A-C-H cipher), "the immediate concern may have been the preservation of a precious heritage at a time of perceived crisis, but it was a heritage dogmatically viewed as supreme, and its supremacy was part and parcel of what was to be preserved" (1993, p. 299). In the explication achieved by Webern through his application of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, new (political) layers accrued.

The general point, however, is one about explication. The implicit motivic structure of the ricercar is explicated by Webern's application of *Klangfarbenmelodie*. This inherent aspect of the material had remained under the command of the rules of polyphony, whereas Webern's recomposition "emancipated" the motivic structure (in Dahlhaus's words, cited in Currie, 2002, p. 180). Explication (and emancipation), which is generally understood as a revolutionary energy, is clearly exemplified in Webern's recomposition of Bach, and speaks to Peter Sloterdijk's idea that "the true and real basic concept of modernity is not revolution but explication" (2016, p. 82). The price of explication, in the case of Webern's recomposition of Bach, is the disintegration of the horizontal coherence of musical voices and, subsequently, the disturbance of polyphonic clarity and shape. What Webern's explication contributes to what we know about Bach's ricercar, is

Dahlhaus's emancipation of material, or what Sloterdijk described as the "transition from the unilluminated to the illuminated, or the rise of shadow givens to foreground themes" (2016, p. 72). The result, Sloterdijk maintained, is "actual knowledge . . . the discourses that have survived the long night of implication and now romp about in the daytime of the thematic and spread-out" (2016, p. 73). Bach's "background" motivic structures reveal themselves when Webern's orchestration, a foreground process of coloration and distribution, exceeds the "burdening capacity" of this background (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 63).

If it is accepted that the principle of explication is a fundamental historical force (as Sloterdijk suggested), of which the Webern/Bach example provides us with a musico-aesthetic prototype, what can we learn from Webern's technical turn towards the explicit to understand something about how a university might be recomposed? Bringing the idea of recomposition, and the application of a technique like *Klangfarbenmelodie*, to a consideration of newly defined emancipatory possibilities for the 21st-century university, is in the first instance to suggest a metaphor, an intervention on the level of the semiotics of the university. Accordingly, the possibility of applying such a metaphor is limited to creating a new vocabulary, or different images and concepts, that might add to our understanding of one thing (the university), what we have said about another thing (Webern's recomposition of Bach's ricercar). One could argue for the need to engage in such an exercise on the basis that techno-rational vocabularies imagining digital and datafied futures increasingly inform the functional and normative coordinates of university knowledge. We have already suggested one such a term, namely, "style." In terms of our example, the immanent consistency of something like a university, or a specific university like Stellenbosch University, and its open-ended relationship with history (understood as a relationship in time, i.e. with past and future), could be accommodating of, and explicated by, the authentic expression of recomposition. In Webern's case, with respect to Bach's ricercar, this happened through the application of a specific technique (*Klangfarbenmelodie*) to a multivalent historical text, which resulted in a shifting of perspective that revealed latent material correlations.

One could, therefore, quite literally ask how the immanence of the university, and its historic and futurist apertures, could be a-historically "coloured" as a form of recomposition by agency (individual or collective) from the Global South that desires to find an authentic expression, or individual style. The techniques of explication, imported from the Webern/Bach example, would include the techniques of de-emphasising conventional parameters (i.e. allowing things are that are conventionally understood to be of primary importance to recede into the background, while encouraging "less important" things to occupy the foreground), disrupting surface (i.e. deliberately changing perceptions of order and disorder, so that disorder is allowed the freedom to function as new order), and redistributing agency in material (i.e. intervening to make evident previously unheard connections and flows of energy). All three of these strategies would leave intact fundamental parameters of style (in music, pitch, and rhythm; in the university, the knowledge of the university that engages its multiple publics' educational becoming). Whereas, in our example, this manifestation of authentic expression as a style is connected to an individual (the composer in general, and the specific composer Anton von Webern), in the case of the university, this authentic

expression could derive from a collective of management practices or strategies, or of organisational principles in libraries, or of disciplinary priorities, or of administrative or operational paths. Disrupting surfaces might deliberately cut across the voice-leading of support services and academic departments, disciplinary demarcations, and curricular core contents by emphasising different parameters not only of selection, but a different apparatus of assessment. Not interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity, in other words, but sensate explorations and discoveries directed beyond current foregrounded regimes of university knowledge, towards immanent (but background) connections, conduits, combinations, and coherences.

But in putting forward this example, we wish to do more than suggest a vocabulary and techniques of explication. We offer this example as a symbolic gesture, and suggest that fresh perspectives, emancipatory questions, and profoundly political considerations could emanate from the (musical) arts. And in proposing such a politically valent text as interesting—even useful—in searching for a form of authentic expression, we wish to challenge the view that a particular South African expression of the modern university in Africa is exclusive or limited. Recomposing institutions in ways that allow material conditions and perceptions previously latent and veiled to emerge as important, surprising, pleasing, and reality-constituting, allowing the constant movement between background and foreground, the unfolding, the operationalisation of suppositions, the "translations of dreams into instruction manuals" (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 83), require not *no* Bach and *no* Webern, but rather *and* Bach *and* Webern and a concerted engagement with art in general "to make it available for new foreground actions, unfolding and splitting, interventions and remoldings" (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 83).

Earlier in this article, we wrote about how the recognition of the word "composition" as a musical term, prompted our turn towards the consideration of the organicism of sound as a different place of response to the predominance of techno-rational logic and its exclusive disciplinary proclivities as manifest, among other things, in the profiles of university managers. Although not trivial, our proposition of considering the semiotic discoveries of engagement with art such as the Bach/Webern ricercar, could also be critically dismissed as a mere piling on of semiotic ideas, and our insistence that sound—here in the form of (re)composed music—be accorded attention as a core epistemic dimension, as merely symbolic.

Although neither of these functions is trivial, we also want to argue, in closing, that our example goes beyond semiotics and symbolism. In considering Webern's innovations to 20th-century composition, the French composer Pierre Boulez, in his *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*, pointed to Webern's innovation with regard to polyphony through his distribution of pitch fields (Scherzinger, 2017), in other words the *Klangfarbenmelodie* we have discussed earlier in the article. These ideas have not only been influential in music, but have found radical and hugely productive application in philosophy. When Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari engaged with Boulez's ideas of musical space and time, for example, their idea of *deterritorialisation*, or "notion of 'diagonal becoming' that eschews points of origin or completion," drew from musical modernism's abolishment of the distinction between vertical and horizontal aspects of pitch

organisation (Scherzinger, 2017, p. 37), in other words, Webern's innovative technique applied in his recomposition of Bach's ricercar. Similarly, their philosophical concept of the *synthesiser* as a model for combining elements and modules that resists dialectical thought, "gradually metamorphose from musical instrument to a productive methodological orientation for philosophy throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*" (Scherzinger, 2017, p. 39). Ultimately the rhizome becomes "a kind of musical synthesiser—a proliferating machine—intermingling a variety of practices, materials, and forms (both signifying and non-signifying) into qualitatively new constellations" (Scherzinger, 2017, p. 39).

What this illustrates is how an innovative musical technique with space–time implications, applied in a modernist (re)composition of a Western European canonical musical work, can be of significance in developing ways of thinking that have nothing to do with music (or art), and have far-reaching implications for other fields (like philosophy) or, in the resulting re-interpretations of such implications, for the understanding of reality as such. In Deleuze and Guattari's account of the synthesiser, they perform the "groundwork for a project displacing Kant's outmoded mechanism for distinguishing-and-then-integrating analytic levels" (Scherzinger, 2017, p. 38). Beyond the semiotic and symbolic, then, the Webern-Bach ricercar emphasises an insight that has become part of mainstream thinking in the sciences since the work of Ludwik Fleck and Thomas Kuhn, namely, that paradigmatic shifts in scholarship require perspectives developed from unconventional and unlikely vantage points.

From here, it is only a small step to recognise that this is also the case in thinking about the thing that we call "the university," and its 21st-century manifestations in South Africa. Referencing Wolf Lepenies's interpretation on C. P. Snow's distinction between the two cultures of the arts and hard sciences, Bill Readings wrote: "The arts may present models of the social orientation of knowledge, means of reflection upon its cultural implications, but such reflections are consistently cut off from any practical effect" (1999, p. 82). In what Readings called a pragmatic "dwelling in the ruins" of the contemporary university, he asked, "how we can do something other than offer ourselves up for tourism: the humanities as cultural manicure, the social sciences as travelogue, the natural sciences as the frisson of real knowledge and large toys" (1999, p. 172). His answer is a community of dissensus that seeks to make "its heteronomy, its differences, more complex" (Readings, 1999, p. 190):

> The thought of community that abandons either expressive identity or transactional consensus as means to unity seems to me to refer to what the posthistorical University can be. The University is where thought takes place beside thought, where thinking is a shared process without identity or unity. Thought beside itself, perhaps. The University's ruins offer us an institution in which the incomplete and interminable nature of the pedagogic relation can remind us that "thinking together" is a dissensual process; it belongs to dialogism rather than dialogue. (Readings, 1999, p. 192)

It is a feature of Stellenbosch University that no member of senior university management, or, for that matter, faculty management of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, has risen to their decision- and policy-making positions through any of the disciplines of the arts. As regards senior

university management, historically, representation from the humanities (let alone the arts) has been exceptional in the 21st century. In a hierarchical management structure with rigidly devolved functions to so-called responsibility centres (that includes faculties), this epistemic vacuum (perhaps even disability) means that strategic thinking and prioritisation are dominated by the languages, metaphors, and approaches of engineering, health sciences, economics (including management sciences), and mathematics in constructs and concerns seemingly oblivious to possible contributions or value that might inhere in the arts or humanities. The resultant management fictions and myths, affirmed by highly partial disciplinary fictions and myths, tend not only to find artistic (and sonic) thinking incomprehensible, but also to embrace the most trivial instances of such work in the university as confirmation of its own biases.

To return then, to Webern's recomposition of a work written 180 years earlier by a fairly unknown (at the time) Capellmeister from Leipzig, and Bach's genuflection to Frederick the Great as he extemporised on the new technology that was the fortepiano in a style not only characteristic of his own maturity as an artist, but fully in command of its technical and compositional lineage and the directions into which it was changing, we propose this remarkable re-imagining of a musical structure as suggestive of how art is not indifferent, or exterior, to what concerns us when we consider finding authentic forms of expression in our universities. Art is not incidental, but essential to the making of new things, and old (perhaps compromised) things anew. The sonic, especially, provides a way to practise thinking that takes place beside thought without any prospect of identity or unity. Whereas the Webern-Bach ricercar offers us one example of how sound could teach us dissensual dialogism through its technical demonstration of redistribution, deterritorialisation, or synthesis, and how recomposition through innovative modernist approaches to pitch could change not only the horizons of musical possibility, but of philosophical thinking, this is just a single work, and just a singular instance of how sound and music exist in the world. Other examples of recomposition would almost certainly provide different perspectives not only on thinking per se, but on what we experience as the reality of the university as an institution. And musics not reducible to notated works or compositions—popular music, folk music, improvised music, but also sound and noise—could do so too.

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Notes on the authors

Willemien Froneman is affiliated with the Centre for Creative Ethnography (https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforCreativeEthnography) at Queen's University, Belfast, and founder of **&listen…** (https://www.andlisten.com), a Cape Town-based boutique consultancy agency specialising in diversity and inclusion. She is the author of *The Groovology of White Affect* (Palgrave, 2024).

Stephanus Muller is Professor of Music and Director of the Africa Open Institute for Music, Research and Innovation (AOI) at Stellenbosch University.

Address for correspondence

smuller@sun.ac.za

Book review

Lauren Davids
Cape Peninsula University of Technology

The Educational Pathways and Experiences of Black Students at Stellenbosch University by Aslam Fataar (Ed.)

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Since the dawn of democracy, universities have interpreted widening participation to mean increased physical access for non-traditional students who were historically excluded and largely under-represented in higher education. Due to South Africa's racialised past, non-traditional students are conflated with poor, Black students. Within access discourse, such students are constructed as "deficient, high risk and problematic" (Crozier & Reay, 2011, p. 145). Herein lies the book's significance: it presents intimate insights into how Black students access, encounter, and navigate historically White university spaces in postapartheid South Africa. The book illuminates the ways in which Black students challenge, defy, and resist their social positioning and establish productive educational lives.

Aslam Fataar, a professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies at Stellenbosch University curates a book exploring marginalised students' educational subjectivities within a particular power-laden university terrain. The book bears testament to his ongoing contribution to the sociology of education and education policy.

The book's title informs the reader that they will be ushered along a literary journey exploring the Black student's misrecognised educational subjectivity within an elite university with historical ties to Afrikaner nationalism. The book features 12 qualitative and theoretically rich chapters that are neatly arranged along four topical themes of access journeys, identity constructions, university residence living, and the pedagogical domains of the academy. Themes are broad, relevant, generative, and well balanced. One of the book's key strengths is the dialectical relationship between the chapters. By way of example, the complexities of commuter Stellenbosch University students in Chapter 3, written by Jerome Joorst, are best understood in the light of institutional policy changes to residence practices and residence living in Chapter 8 by Delecia Davids.

Another strength of the book is its use of pathways. This brings into view the dimensions of student mobility, navigation, and movement. Navigation is an essential capacity to access and engage complex higher education spaces. On the one hand, it refers to the literal navigation of the physical and structural dimensions of the university and on the other, it relates to the ability to negotiate the social and cultural dimensions of the university, which are said to be unfamiliar, unwelcoming, alien, and hostile (Flint et al., 2019).

Navigation also has future dimensions and refers to one's ability to traverse complex routes and pathways to achieve goals and crystallise aspirations (Appadurai, 2004). Navigational capital refers to the skills, knowledges, and abilities nurtured in communities of Colour, which enable one to manoeuvre into and through hegemonic social institutions (Yosso, 2005). In this way, Black students deploy inventive and often unconventional navigational resources to negotiate the difficult university terrain towards achieving successful outcomes (Luedke, 2020).

The book employs a strength-based optic to position Black students as the protagonists and not merely passive victims (Crozier et al., 2019). Authors pay credence to the mediating strategies and rich capitals deployed by Black students to counter negative stimuli, and persist and persevere. The students have demonstrated remarkable agency in their pre-university lives to gain admission to the university. Upon arrival, they tap into familial support and foster supportive and affirming friendships and social networks.

The intractable reality is that Black student capitals go largely unrecognised and under-valued within the institutions they work hard to access (Fataar, 2017). Upon arrival, students learn that despite gaining admission, they have yet to gain membership. Membership goes beyond mere access to the physical goods of the academy; instead, it is demonstrated in the mastery of the institutional language, institutional facts, and constitutive rules (Cross & Johnson, 2008). Membership is intricately linked to belonging, which speaks to identification and affiliation (Chinyamurindi, 2018).

Black students in the book expressed feelings of un-belonging at Stellenbosch University, stemming from their encounters of being othered and raced (Haslanger, 2014) based on their physical appearance, geographical locations, and linguistic repertoires. These encounters led them to question their identity as Maties and ask whether the university would ever recognise their so-called non-normative expressions of studenthood (Myers, 2013). On reading these narratives, I thought about the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) within the higher education context.

Belonging is a subjective, deeply personal, and emotional process featuring symbolic boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Within the university terrain, belonging refers to the degree to which students feel at home, whether they feel connected, accepted, and wanted by the university. Those who do not belong must engage in the ontological labour of making their educational pathways visible and legitimate (Kim et al., 2020). This becomes their act of transformational resistance (Pechenkina, 2016), in which they demonstrate oppositional behaviour to challenge systemic oppression and unsettle the system from within (Yosso, 2005).

Acolytes of Pierre Bourdieu will be pleased with the many references to his work. Several of the authors concur with Bourdieusian notions of educational inequality, which filter and trap historically excluded people in the lower echelons of society. In this way, education is not an unqualified positive and empowering experience. Whether one speaks with, against, or beyond Bourdieu, his seminal work still holds immense value when exploring and explaining why education is used as a powerful instrument to maintain inequality.

The book's framing dimensions speak to the universal and compelling themes of assimilation, adaptation, alterity, and resistance. The paradox of assimilation (Pusztai & Márkus, 2019) for Black students at historically White universities is that you validate negative stereotypes if you fail. If you succeed, you may be perceived as a sell-out (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). Universities have norms and conventions that one must negotiate to attain a qualification. Of interest, is how students play the game from the shadows (Fataar, 2018).

The book spoke to me in many ways. Firstly, it affirmed my feelings of being out of place as a doctoral student of Colour at Stellenbosch University. Secondly, the book validated my research study, which explores the educational journeys of first-generation graduates from an apartheid-era racialised enclave who access a university of technology in the Cape Metropole. The book is insightful, and a must read for anyone interested in the complex dimensions of higher education, which involve people, place, practice, and policy. The book advances the argument that we need to listen, share, cry, and engage with multiple stories and realities to co-create a Stellenbosch University (and all our universities) that truly belongs to all (Stellenbosch University, 2016).

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Notes on the author

Lauren Davids is an academic developer in the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Address for correspondence

davidsla@cput.ac.za

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SARE welcomes manuscripts that are highly readable and captivating, providing critical insight and discussion of education in the Southern Africa region from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

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- Article Processing Fees (APC) is R3,500 per published article. Authors will be invoiced on acceptance of the article.

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Author Guidelines Southern African Review of Education (SARE) is the journal of the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES). It was previously published together with Education with Production (EWP), the journal of the Foundation for Education with Production. SARE will appear at least once a year. Contributors are welcome to submit articles on educational issues with specific reference to educational policy, comparative education, sociology of education, history of education, and education with production. Beginning with Volume 5 in 1999, articles submitted will be anonymously refereed. Articles are accepted on the understanding that they have not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Articles or review essays should be between 5,000 and 7,000 words (inclusive of references) and may include maps, figures, and tables. Reports on research, book reviews, and critical comments should be limited to 2,000 words. Contributions should be submitted electronically. All pages should be numbered. Authors should not use programs like EndNotes to generate lists of references automatically because these do not transfer for typesetting purposes. The manuscript should be submitted bearing the title of the paper and an abstract of 200–300 words together with 4–6 keywords on a separate page. Maps, figures, tables, and illustrations should be supplied on separate pages and not included as part of the text. Their approximate position in the text should be indicated. Maps, figures, and illustrations should also be provided as separate electronic files (jpg) with a resolution of at least 300 dpi. The title of the contribution and the names and addresses of authors should be provided on a separate page. The address of the author who will handle correspondence should be clearly indicated. Telephone and email addresses for the authors should be submitted as well. Authors should supply brief biographical material for the "Notes on the author." In a covering letter, the authors must state that the contribution has not been published, is not being published or considered for publication elsewhere, and will not be submitted for publication unless rejected by the editorial board of SARE or withdrawn by the authors.

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Call for papers

Special edition

SARE call for papers on Re-imagining Research and Teaching and Learning During Times of Crises

Guest editors

Yusuf Sayed, Rekha Pappu, Padma Sarangapani, and Shireen Motala

Call for papers

The *Southern Africa Review of Education* seeks original empirically grounded or theoretical manuscripts on the theme, *Re-imagining Research and Teaching and Learning During Times of Crises*.

A statement of the problem

Globally, there have been 771,549,718 confirmed cases of Covid-19, including 6,974,473 deaths reported to the WHO since the virus was first detected in 2019. As of 22 October 2023, a total of 3,533,465,652 vaccine doses have been administered worldwide (https://covid19.who.int). But the Covid-19 pandemic is not the only crisis. It sits alongside a crisis of environment involving a rise in global temperatures, extreme weather patterns, and deadly droughts. It is also accompanied by humanitarian crises such as conflicts and wars in Yemen, Sudan, Myanmar, and Palestine—and by economic crises and instability, with unrelenting impact on impoverished and marginalised people throughout the world. In education, such interlocking and intersectional crises have disrupted schooling and higher education, limited access to education and meaningful learning, and affected the well-being, safety, and security of teachers, lecturers, learners, education officials, and communities. The long-term learning and psychological and social-emotional detriments of crises affect marginalised and impoverished communities the most. Refugees and the population of internally displaced persons who live and learn in conditions of fragility are undeniably impacted by crises. As Sayed et al. (2021) noted, children from marginalised backgrounds were already locked out of education, even before the pandemic. The educational impact and widening educational inequities challenge the state's ability to deliver equitable and quality education.

It is against such a backdrop that this special edition seeks to understand the nature and forms of crisis, responses, and implications for building a future resilient and crises-prepared education system committed to equitable and quality education. In this context, we invite submissions with a range of theoretical frameworks to examine various crises and their effects on education, focusing on issues of epistemic and social injustice (Fricker, 2007), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and social justice (Fraser, 2009). Submissions should draw on a range of research approaches and methodologies including but not limited to critical policy analysis, discourse analysis, and mixed methods research. Additionally, we invite interdisciplinary submissions that extend across disciplinary boundaries, examining the definition of crisis, the role of the state, teaching and

teacher education, the problem and potential of technology as an educational tool, and the use of various methodologies of research during crises.

For this special edition, we call for submissions that move beyond the politics of unbridled exuberance and the politics of despair, charting a more progressive, radical social justice agenda. We are seeking papers that reflect on the role of the state and community organisations, and a different value system founded on an ethics of care, trust, and empathy to build a progressive education future.

In particular, this special edition seeks to solicit Africa- and Global South-focused research-based articles that address elements aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4's (https://www.unesco.org/sdg4education2030/en/sdg4) commitment to equitable and quality education for all:

- Policy: Exploring how the pandemic and crises, more generally, have shaped, altered, and reconfigured education policy and policymaking. The role of knowledge and science in policy formulation and its (mis)use in policy development. The influence of global education goals and architecture on education.
- Crises: Exploring conceptual and theoretical reflections of the notion of crisis and its complex intersections. How the notion of crisis is (mis)used in popular and policy discourses.
- Pedagogies: Exploring teachers and teaching and the ethics of care, empathy, and equity that foreground the sociality of learning. The use of scripted professional development, scripted pedagogy, scripted teacher standards, and a pedagogy of teaching at the right level. The idea of teacher as scholar and reflexive practitioner. The challenges and constraints on education staff and institutions in delivering quality education during crises.
- Peace: Unpacking the discourse of peace. Examining the role of education in promoting peace and the ways education relates to peace. The use and misuse of concepts of resilience, well-being, and social cohesion in conflict contexts and countries emerging from conflict. The ways in which education promotes critical resilience. The interrelationship between violence, conflict, and education provision
- Technology: Exploring the use and misuses of technology during crises. The relevance, quality, and appropriateness of technology in education.
- Conflict: Exploring conflict and the impact on education. The impact of the Arab Spring in North Africa on education. The impact of conflict in the Sahel region on education.
- Protest: Examining how protest leads to transformation. Unpacking how protest in different contexts in Africa and globally shapes education provision and delivery. Unpacking the call for decolonisation of education as it relates to curriculum, teaching, and assessment

- Methodologies: Employing new and innovative approaches to education research during crises. Assessing the experiences of researchers undertaking education during crises.
- Ethical scholarship: Exploring ethics of committed scholarship during crises. Investigating the role of academia and researchers committed to social justice researching in conflict contexts and times of crises. Assessing their role if taking an academic activist role as exemplified by Freire.

We encourage contributions from scholars in the Global South, Africa in particular, and those who are underrepresented in the journal. This includes contributions from scholars working in conflict contexts in Africa or from countries and contexts underrepresented in the journal, especially from North Africa.

For queries, please write to Professor Y. Sayed: yms24@cam.ac.uk

Journal description

The *Southern African Review of Education (SARE),* incorporating *Education with Production (EWP),* is a peer-reviewed journal serving as a forum for critical discussions of education in the Southern African region from various disciplinary perspectives, for the dissemination of contemporary research, and for reflections on education. It has a broad, cross-disciplinary audience of scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the field of education. (https://www.saches.co.za/sarejournal/)

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Timeline

Deadline for full paper submissions	28 February 2024
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Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society



Jo-Anne Koch
E-mail: joanne.adams@saches.co.za
Tel: +27 84 929 0170

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