Dossier: Decolonising the University

The combination of entrenched racism, the structural legacies of slavery and colonialism, and neoliberal austerity, together with far-reaching changes in the way students and teachers are encouraged to understand the purpose, provision and 'consumption' of higher education, has exacerbated the crisis of the public university in the UK and beyond. Needless to say, its consequences are being magnified and intensified with unprecedented speed by the impact of Covid-19 and the government's responses to it. The short articles that follow, along with further articles that will be collected in a dossier in a forthcoming issue, aim to engage with some of the many aspects of this complex and highly charged situation.

Neoliberal antiracism and the British university

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While debates over race and higher education in the UK have long focused on questions of access, in recent years a host of campaigns have drawn attention to the alienation of students and staff of colour who succeed in entering white-dominated institutions. Their claims, often articulated on social media with the pithiness that hashtags require, have shone a light on the content and pedagogical premises of syllabi (#whyismycurricullumwhite), the underrepresentation of students and staff of colour particularly in more prestigious institutions and in the upper echelons of the profession (#whyisntmyprofessorblack) and the hostile built environment of British universities that reflects their entanglement in the histories of slavery, colonialism and apartheid (#Rhodesmustfall). Progress has been slow. Rhodes may indeed fall, but a recent *Guardian* investigation revealed that only a fifth of British universities have committed to reforming their curriculum to acknowledge the harmful legacies of colonialism and fewer than 1% of professors are Black.[1]

Decolonisation movements in British universities have been shaped by broader struggles around race relations in the UK and US. But the influence of African thinkers and student movements has also been palpable. At SOAS, the student society that has pushed most concertedly for a decolonisation of the institution – Decolonising Our Minds – takes its name from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's landmark text.[2] Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Oxford was directly inspired by the movement of the same name that had erupted at the University of Cape Town in 2015 and counted among its leaders some of the South African students who had participated in that earlier mobilisation. Important as these genealogical antecedents are, it seems vital to think through the differences between the structural contexts from which movements for the 'decolonisation' of the academy have emanated.

Decolonisation versus antiprivatisation?

Provoked by a deep frustration with the failure of South African universities to dismantle the legacies of apartheid in the academy, RMF Cape Town had also pointed to the whiteness of the curriculum alongside the still skewed racial demographics of staff and student populations. Yet six months after it burst on the scene, the wider student movement that it ignited across South Africa was

asking questions about higher education funding, student fees and financial aid. Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo point out that while the 'decolonisation' protests predominantly took shape at elite historically white universities, antiprivatisation protests tended to be more popular, sweeping all national public universities including Black and working-class institutions.[3] RMF quickly morphed into a nation-wide movement called Fees Must Fall whose central demands included the scrapping of fee increments, insourcing of workers and a progressive shift in student funding from loans to scholarships. These movements in turn grew out of disillusionment with the failures of the ruling African National Congress. They reflect larger tensions in South African politics between those still beholden to its postapartheid nonracialism and neoliberal rapprochement with the market, and those especially from the 'Born Free' generations of young South Africans who are more enamoured of the Black Consciousness advocated by Steve Biko and the economic populism of Julius Malema.[4] As FMF activists explained, 'when we say fees must fall we mean we want the land back.'[5]

In the UK, by contrast, the movement against university tuition fees reached its apogee in 2010 before being defeated that year. Led by the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, the movement was triggered by the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's decision to triple undergraduate student fees to £9,000 per year. Student anger manifested itself in a wave of occupations at more than fifty universities as well as a series of demonstrations, at one of which protesters briefly occupied the Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank in London. More than 50,000 students occupied Parliament Square on the day of the vote to raise fees. Despite being the largest instance of student unrest in the UK for decades, and indeed constituting the vanguard of an emerging opposition to the programme of cuts and austerity that would ravage the country over the next decade, the protests failed to avert the fee increase. But the issue of tuition fees has arguably remained of totemic significance for younger voters, peeling them away from the Liberal Democrats and fuelling the rise of Corbynism within the Labour Party, whose 2017 manifesto commitment to abolish tuition fees proved to be extremely popular.[6]

Calls for the decolonisation of the academy have

been articulated largely in the wake of the defeat of the movement against fees and somewhat separately from it. This is not to imply that they lack a materialist dimension. It is difficult to see how demands for greater access to the academy for Black students and staff are realisable without a significant redistribution of resources. And it is striking to see the prominence of redistributive demands on the agendas of decolonisation movements. In its latest iteration, the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign has called for reparatory scholarships and fellowships targeted at students and scholars of Afro-Caribbean and African descent, the latter in direct reference to the colonial provenance of the endowment that supports the Rhodes scholarships.[7] Yet the decolonisation agenda has also become deeply imbricated with the increasing marketisation of higher education in the UK in ways that are troubling.

The pitfalls of neoliberal antiracism

This imbrication is starkly evident in Kehinde Andrews's account of the advent of Europe's first Black Studies programme at Birmingham City University (BCU) in 2017. Andrews argues that the university's receptiveness to the programme stemmed from its potential to enhance its attractiveness in the increasingly competitive student market and the distinctiveness of its submission to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the periodic exercise whereby UK universities are awarded public funding in accordance with their performance on an audit purporting to measure the quality of their research. Andrews further points out that the rise in tuition fees was accompanied by a lifting of the caps that previously allocated universities quotas for the number of undergraduates they could admit. He surmises that BCU might have been reluctant to support Black Studies in the circumstances of the steadier recruitment guaranteed by caps, for fear that it might have taken students away from more established programmes. By contrast, in the more thoroughly marketised environment enabled by the lifting of caps, universities were anxious to expand offerings to reach untapped markets. His conclusion in respect of BCU is unambiguous: 'we have a Black Studies degree as a direct result of the massive increase in fees for students.'[8]

If the REF offers universities a financial and market incentive to showcase their research on race, the

Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) does something analogous in respect of pedagogy. Purporting to measure teaching excellence in the areas of 'teaching quality', 'learning environment' and educational and professional outcomes achieved by students, the TEF awards participating institutions gold, silver, bronze and 'provisional' ratings that have become yet another rubric by which universities are judged in the higher education market. Teaching quality is estimated via a range of metrics including graduate employment and earnings and 'student satisfaction' scores in a National Student Survey administered by the Office for Students (OfS), a quango largely modelled along the lines of a consumer protection agency that purports to safeguard the interests of students. The quality of learning environment is judged through data measuring student progression and retention. The OfS has recently set an ambitious target to eliminate awarding gaps between white and minority racialised students, in light of evidence that the latter are less likely to graduate with a first or upper second class degree than their white peers.[9] While attention to the racial awarding gap is long overdue, measures to close it will rely on a regulatory logic premised on market-based rewards and punishments.

Andrews is clear eyed about the risks of piggybacking on a neoliberal agenda. He points to the gentrification of Black Studies in the US as it became more professionalised and disengaged from Black communities, as a warning about the likelihood of its deradicalisation in the academy. Indeed appearing to view the institution of the university as irredeemably racist, he insists that the aim of Black Studies is not to decolonise the university so much as to infiltrate it and use its resources in the service of Black communities. He defends his engagement with the university as realistic rather than cynical, suggesting that 'the interests of Black communities are advanced only when they converge with those of mainstream society'.[10] Yet Black advancement that is contingent on a coincidence of interest with market neoliberalism is likely to be shallow, fragile and easily reversed.

At no time has this been clearer than in the current moment in which the financial shock of the Covid pandemic has exacerbated prior structural weaknesses, bringing many universities to the brink of unviability.[11] This has placed significant elements of the decolonisation agenda in jeopardy. Ngũgĩ's ideas may have inspired decolonising work at SOAS, but his identification of language as a primary terrain for the decolonisation of the mind has not insulated the teaching of African and Asian languages from curricular cuts on grounds of their putative financial unsustainability. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd, British universities were eager to proclaim that 'Black Lives Matter' on social media even as they proceeded to fire significant proportions of their academic precariat, whose ranks are disproportionately populated by women and racialised minorities, in anticipation of Covid-induced shortfalls in revenue.[12] That such contradictions are possible is illustrative of the fact that institutional commitments to decolonisation waver the moment they begin to entail a serious redistribution of resources.

These illustrations call to mind Sara Ahmed's account of campaigning to persuade her institution to take sexual harassment and sexual misconduct seriously at the same time as it was applying for an Athena SWAN award to showcase its efforts at advancing gender equality. Ahmed uses the term 'white feminism' to describe a liberal feminism that seeks inclusion in existing structures while leaving intact the structures themselves, including whiteness as a structure.[13] Catherine Rottenberg mobilises the term 'neoliberal feminism' to describe forms of feminism that acknowledge the fact of gender inequality while purporting to address it through mechanisms that entrench neoliberal commitments to individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism.[14] Neoliberal antiracism shares aspects of white feminism and neoliberal feminism. As we have seen, neoliberal antiracist initiatives rely for their effectiveness on the very market structures that produce racial exclusion. Ironically, they may also end up leaving intact the structures of racism and whiteness that they purport to attack. Think of the increasingly ubiquitous practice of anonymised marking which, although intending to correct for the 'unconscious bias' that produces racial awarding gaps, simply screens out information that triggers bias rather than recognising and rooting it out, while also assuming that individuals grading academic work are white or have internalised whiteness.

Central to the advent of neoliberal antiracism has been the move away from collective and materialist demands towards individualised, self-help models of change in struggles around racial justice.[15] Beginning in

the UK in the early 1990s, these shifts were consonant with broader ideological trends evident in the demise of the welfare state and the reframing of progressive politics as a 'Third Way' between capitalism and communism. The renaming of student welfare as 'wellbeing' services strikes me as a metonymic instance of this shift in the everyday life of the university. When I queried this semantic change at SOAS, I was told that students were more likely to access these services if they were divested of the stigma associated with welfare. But the rebranding obscures troubling tectonic shifts. Wellbeing services bear the increasingly heavy burden of supporting students suffering the consequences of poor housing, schooling, healthcare and debt. It is possible that the epidemic of anxiety, learning difficulties and mental health crises that university students currently report may be the result of better diagnostic criteria and institutional awareness. An alternative reading would be that the individualised and pathologising frames of these diagnoses are ideologically preferable because they redirect activist energies away from struggles against the failures and abdications of the state towards a cultivation of individual 'resilience' as a means of coping with those failures. The decolonisation agenda confronts a similar tension between structural and individualised models of change. For all the attention that has been devoted to transforming structures such as curricula and hiring practices, an equal amount of energy has gone into initiatives such as mentoring schemes and workshops driven by the well-meaning but self-defeating aim of enabling Black students and staff to more comfortably inhabit those structures.

To criticise neoliberal antiracism can be politically difficult given that it is itself a besieged formation under attack from an unrepentant or unreflective whiteness in the academy. Within such an institutional landscape, even neoliberal antiracist initiatives can appear to offer respite from the pervasive whiteness of the university. But we might learn something here from Black feminism, which is unsparing in its criticism of white feminism despite their shared experience of subjection to patriarchy by demonstrating how that patriarchy is not experienced in the same way by differently positioned subjects because of their location at different intersections of race, class, ability, sexuality and other markers of (dis)advantage. As such, the argument against neoliberal antiracism is not simply the doctrinaire (white) Marxist claim that class has slipped out of the analysis, but the intersectional one that racism is not experienced in the same way by differently classed subjects. Categories such as BME or BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic), popular in the UK as umbrella terms for people of colour, are of limited analytical utility in capturing differences in the kinds of racism that might be experienced by class- and caste-privileged students of colour from a transnational elite paying the higher rate international fees on which British universities have increasingly come to depend, and those graduating from poorly resourced state schools and hailing from backgrounds that may be historically underrepresented at university.

Political blackness versus Afropessimism?

There are at least two other reasons why the critique of neoliberal antiracism cannot simply insist on a reinsertion of class into discussions of race. First, differently racialised subjects experience racism differently in ways that are irreducible to class. Statistics disaggregating students of colour regularly report significant disparities between students racialised as Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, mixed-race and white on a range of performance indicators including secondary school results, admission to prestigious universities and final degree classifications.[16] Second, the reality of racism among people of colour also demands discussion of different experiences of racialisation. Both factors have fuelled an impatience with the very categories in terms of which earlier antiracist movements conceptualised race and racialisation.

Writing about Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, Athinangamso Nkopo and Roseanne Chantiluke describe how they found umbrella terms such as 'people of colour' and the language of political blackness to be unhelpful and damaging. By way of example they describe how critiques of patriarchy levelled by non-Black women of colour against Black men were instrumentalised in an attempt to wrest control of what had been a Black-led movement. They criticise RMF Oxford's failure to clarify its political boundaries in the way that its progenitor in Cape Town did with its explicit commitment to Black Consciousness, Black feminism and Pan-Africanism.[17] Yet elsewhere Nkopo notes that tensions between differ-

ently racialised groups also erupted in the South African movement particularly around questions of tactics and the use of violence. Writing about the multiracial Fees Must Fall movement at Wits University in Johannesburg she says:

> These were almost always racially distinct fights, with our non-Black allies holding the same contorted expressions of knitted brows and half smiling teeth: what Frank Wilderson calls the expression of 'solidarity and anxiety' … They wanted changes here and there, more staff of colour, working staff in-sourced and some Biko in the curriculum. We needed the University to shut down by any means necessary. We had no place else to go after the fee statements came in saying we would be barred from exams, after our student cards stopped working because fees had not been paid, nowhere to sleep but on toilet floors and in libraries once the residences kicked us out, no desire to continue brewing in the hate of whitewashed philosophy, or colonial political thought. We needed to bring the University to heel in order to finally take our fight to the state. They needed to manage us, the Blacks, and with each day we appeared more and more unmanageable.[18]

While much of this comes across as a materialist critique pointing to the ways in which class differences might have mapped onto racialised ones, the nature of the critique shifts later in the piece when Nkopo speaks of divergent conceptions of suffering that are 'symptomatic of irreconcilable differences in how and where Blacks are ontologically positioned in relation to non-Blacks.'[19] She elaborates:

> What has been overlooked is that we fight or struggle as chattel first (slaves, Blacks, denied being itself), and then we organise our struggles in borrowed forms: students, labourers, missing-middle, children-disabled-and-women … We, the Black, the denied beings, the anti-human are often told to struggle as the poor, the unemployed, unemployable, unskilled, social-grant recipient, the queer. All the while we are structurally adjusted for the morphing condition Saidiya Hartman terms 'the afterlife of slavery'. What is constant is that we emerge always without our own grammar of suffering … [20]

Ironically, other participants in the MustFall mobilisations were troubled by what they saw as the borrowed grammar of Afropessimism that Nkopo is evidently inspired by. Thuli and Asher Gamedze, while acknowledging that the language of Afropessimism may be useful in naming systems of power, view it as a departure from the Black radical tradition that has typically seen African cultural practices as forming the basis of Black revolt across time and space. In contrast, Afropessimism, in their view, sees enslaved Black people 'not as cultural subjects who brought entire cosmological worlds and practices with them, but as hopeless, utterly dislocated beings only existing as the sum total of their position in white supremacy'. Questioning the value of this understanding even in the Black diaspora, they argue that its problems are more pronounced on the African continent where 'although many of us are alienated from African cultural practices and contexts, those traditions persist and are more or less proximate whether or not one is immersed in them.'[21]

I have dwelt at some length on Afropessimist interventions and critiques thereof in the South African decolonisation struggles because they illustrate an itinerary of influence between the US, South Africa and the UK.[22] If Afropessimism has become a way of insisting on the primacy of a certain conception of race in struggles for social justice, it is instructive to note how audible its presence was even in the context of a movement in which struggles around class, labour and free education were more central than they have been in the UK. While there have been a number of useful critiques of Afropessimism,[23] my interest here is in thinking through some of its possible contact points with neoliberal antiracism.

Central to Afropessimist discourse is the claim that Blackness is defined by the distinction between the Human and the Slave. As Frank Wilderson III sees it, in contrast to other subaltern subjects such as the worker, native, etc. whose subordination does not entail a denial of their humanity, 'the antagonist of the Black is the Human being'.[24] This has implications for both what is to be done and who it can be done with: among other things, Afropessimism is pessimistic about the prospects of solidarity with 'non-black people of colour' (NBPOC) whose relative privilege, in its view, positions them as 'junior partners' to whiteness in imperialist and racist projects. Critics have pointed out that the extrication of Blackness in Afropessimist discourse from other axes of identity such as class, gender, sexuality and nationality obscures the ways in which Blackness is crosshatched or intersected by them. This makes it impossible to conceive of the tension-ridden positionalities of, say, the formerly enslaved Black Americans who became settlers in nine-

teenth century Liberia;[25] or of contemporary Black US citizens who, even as they endure degrading conditions at home, live on land stolen by white settlers from indigenous peoples and benefit from the US state's extraction of resources abroad;[26] or, more generally, of the differences between Black capitalists and workers anywhere in the world.

Kevin Okoth argues that the resulting 'flatness of Blackness' in Afropessimist thought has made it amenable to corporate capture.[27] By way of example Okoth describes the 2018 Nike advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick as co-opting the football star's famous kneeling protest against police brutality in the US and thereby rebranding itself as a vehicle for Black emancipatory politics. To achieve this rebranding, the advertisement must delink African American struggles from those of racialised workers in the global South, on whose exploitation Nike's profits are premised. This delinking mirrors Afropessimism's denial of the possibility of anti-imperialist solidarity between differently racialised peoples, in contrast to earlier exemplars of the Black radical tradition such as the Black Panthers.[28] In offering a theoretical framework with pretensions to a radicalism that apparently 'requires no political action from Black writers and activists other than simply being Black', Okoth views Afropessimism as the quintessential product of the neoliberal university.[29]

While I share these critiques, I think materialist critics of Afropessimism have yet to come to grips with why it has such a strong affective purchase on student antiracist politics today. Even if its foundational premises cannot be widely shared, rooted as they are in the very particular history of slavery and its afterlives in the US, student organising around race well beyond the US is saturated with an Afropessimist-influenced language that distinguishes between Black and NBPOC and that commits itself to rooting out all manifestations of 'antiblackness'. It does not seem enough in the face of these trends to deploy an earlier rhetoric of political blackness as corrective without an adequate reckoning with why it lost its purchase. While I cannot offer the account I am calling for here, I am intrigued by Jesse McCarthy's suggestion that the psychic appeal of Afropessimism is a function of both the failure and success of antiracist politics. On the one hand, its appeal indexes the failure of prior frames of antiracist organising, evident in the spectre of unending

Black death as a result of the enduring racism of institutions such as the police and healthcare. On the other hand, it might speak to the 'survivor's guilt' that accompanies Black success, particularly in the predominantly middle-class spaces of the neoliberal academy. As McCarthy surmises, 'It feels good to suture your identity back to the collective, to pronounce that you share in equal measure the plight of all Black people throughout history. But that doesn't make it so.'[30]

Inside or outside the teaching machine?[31]

One of the signal achievements of movements for the decolonisation of the academy is that they have opened up a set of questions that are too big to confront from within the confines of the university. They have forced open national and global conversations on the politics of race and national belonging and on the legacies of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. The very enormity of these questions poses dilemmas about the extent to which it might be possible or advisable to address them within specific institutions. The problem is not just one of size or scale. If institutionalisation invariably transforms and tames decolonisation into a defanged neoliberal antiracism, perhaps we are better off working outside institutions.

Frantz Fanon confronted this question in relation to the hospital. Taking the view that the task of psychiatry is to repair the alienation of people from their environment, Fanon concluded in 1956 that this was no longer possible in the social conditions of colonial Algeria in which the Arab subject was made 'permanently an alien' in their own country. He describes his state of mind in the famous letter resigning his post at the Psychiatric Hospital at Blida-Joinville: 'there comes a moment when tenacity becomes morbid perseverance. Hope is then no longer an open door to the future but the illogical maintenance of a subjective attitude in organized contradiction with reality.'[32] Something of this spirit of militant exit animates a long line of antiracist education initiatives in the UK from the Black supplementary schools movement beginning in the 1960s to the recent announcement of plans to set up a Free Black University. Born of a frustration that 'this idea of transforming the university from the inside and having a decolonised curriculum isn't going to happen with the way the structures of the university are', the

project envisages sustaining itself through crowdfunding but also by persuading existing universities to contribute as a means of discharging their reparative obligation to undo their complicity in slavery, eugenics and other sites of racism and racist knowledge production.[33]

Yet the work of finding spaces of reprieve and respite from the whiteness of the neoliberal academy might also unfold within the university through those unspectacular acts of refusal that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney famously describe:

> it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.[34]

At their best, decolonisation movements are 'in but not of' the university, using and abusing it for purposes that are not reducible to its mission. At SOAS, the student-run Decolonising Our Minds society has been a thorn in the institution's side, shaming it for its collaborations with the British and Israeli states, its casualisation and exploitation of labour, its complicity in the deportation of migrant workers and its complacence on questions of racism and sexism among other things.[35] In refusing the distinction between decolonisation and antiprivatisation, the campaign refuses to permit its institution to fly the decolonisation flag in light of its complicities with imperialist and capitalist violence and its implication in the market structures of UK higher education.

If decolonisation is not to be reduced to a metaphor in struggles around race in the university, then it is salutary to recall the context of its original referents. The tragedy of decolonisation movements, as Fanon prophetically foresaw, is that they were too easily content with flag independence, deferring questions of economic redistribution and social change to later 'stages' of revolution that never seemed to arrive.[36] Transported into the academy, a similar truncation of decolonisation delivers the shallowness of neoliberal antiracism. If we wish to resist this, we will need to take our fight beyond the confines of our respective institutions back to the racial capitalist state that sets the terms within which they function and compete with one another to their collect-

ive detriment. Dalia Gebrial captures well the paradox that this entails when she observes that 'contemporary struggles in and around the university have a central, unresolved contradiction … between being compelled to defend what once was from the attacks of neoliberal austerity, while fully understanding that what once was, was never truly public.'[37] The struggle against the marketisation of higher education and for the restoration of free public education will not be a sufficient condition for the decolonisation of the academy (we have only to recall the whiteness of the status quo ante to know this). But it is a necessary one.

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Notes

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18. Athinangamso Nkopo, 'Of Air. Running. Out.', in *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, eds. Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba and Athinangamso Nkopo (London: Zed Books, 2018), 159.

19. Nkopo, 'Of Air', 162.

20. Nkopo, 'Of Air, 166–67.

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22. The direction of this influence is not straightforward. It is possible that the South African receptiveness to the work of Frank Wilderson III, typically identified alongside Jared Sexton as a founding figure of Afropessimism, has something to do with his sojourn in South Africa between 1989 and 1996. Some have suggested that Wilderson's membership of the ANC and subsequent disillusionment with both the compromised liberalism of Mandela and the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary alternative that disappeared with the murder of Chris Hani, were pivotal to his conceptualisation of Afropessimism (Jesse McCarthy, 'On Afropessimism', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 July 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/).

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24. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 241.

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