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Student activism against the neocolonial, neoliberal university: Exploring a sociology of absences, emergences, and hidden fires

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THE WORD 'KNOWLEDGES' does not commonly appear in the English dictionary. Indeed, word processor spelling and grammar tools insist on correcting the word to the singular form ('knowledge') or the possessive case ('knowledge's'). Therein lies the conundrum that drives scholarship and struggle to seek cognitive justice. For Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, cognitive justice is about the recognition of 'the coexistence of many knowledges in the world and the relation between the abstract hierarchies which constitute them and the unequal economic and political power relations which produce

and reproduce increasingly more severe social injustice'.¹ In other words, the struggle for cognitive justice is an integral part of decolonising education: it seeks to destabilise the grip that Western thought has over the world, and pay more attention to other forms of knowledge that have been deliberately marginalised as part of the colonisation agenda. Aotearoa New Zealand is certainly no stranger to debates and struggles regarding the decolonisation of education. The highly revered work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and the recent collection by Jessica Hutchings and Jenny Lee-Morgan, are just two examples of scholarship that have made significant contributions to scholar-activism in this area.²

To extend these debates further and link them to a parallel set of critiques about the neoliberal university, I employ the tools developed by Santos, who encourages us to engage in both a 'sociology of absences' and a 'sociology of emergences'. The discussion hinges on an example of the recent student protests in South Africa, dubbed by some as the 'fallist movement'. The reason for selecting this example is two-fold. First, the student uprisings highlight the mutually constitutive nature of neoliberalism and racism, and underscore the need to frame the global struggle against the neocolonial, neoliberal university as an intersectional one. Second, given that learning from one another's struggles is a critical aspect of social movement praxis, the use of this example aims to encourage a 'north-south' dialogue between scholar-activists in Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa. Aotearoa New Zealand is usually compared with other developed nations that constitute the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations or countries that form part of the

- 1 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., "Preface" to *Cognitive Justice in a Global World: Prudent Knowledges for a Decent Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007): xv.
- 2 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Jessica Hutchings and Jenny Lee-Morgan, eds., *Decolonisation in Aotearoa: Education, Research and Practice* (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2016).

Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, South Africa is usually compared with other nations in the ‘global south’ or located regionally within the context of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). While comparing like with like has obvious conceptual and practical advantages, it also has certain shortcomings: it undermines the potential for the exchange of knowledges across socially constructed global divides, and denies the internal contradictions and diversity of experiences within nations. In other words, by engaging in ‘north-south’ dialogues, we can encourage academic and activist learning across global and regional divides. This starts from acknowledging and accounting for the fact that typically ‘global south’ experiences of poverty, exclusion, and marginalisation are not uncommon within the ‘global north’, and that the typically ‘northern’ experiences of wealth, privilege, and dominance are evidenced in certain parts of the ‘global south’.

Written largely as a conceptual piece, this article draws on second-hand literature about student protests as well as first-hand experience of being a university academic in South Africa and Aotearoa New Zealand. The discussion begins with a brief clarification of the aspects of Santos’ work that are relevant to the argument. Then, it documents some of the ways in which university life has been distorted by corporatisation, while also exploring the intertwined nature of neoliberalism and racism. Following this, the bulk of the discussion is devoted to an overview of the student protests that have engulfed South African campuses since 2015. Relying on Santos’ sociological approach, the discussion highlights the ways in which a new generation of student activists—both through their triumphs and their shortcomings—is helping to shape the struggle for global cognitive justice.

A sociology of absences and emergences: A compelling invitation by Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Santos' prolific work is becoming increasingly important in the struggle to decolonise education. In a series of four edited volumes under the rubric, *Reinventing Social Emancipation: Towards New Manifestos*, Santos and his collaborators explore counter-hegemonic understandings of the Western- and Euro-centric concepts of democracy, capitalist production and education, and other ways of knowing and seeing, which derive not only from the local lived experience of those located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but are also shaped significantly by struggles against 'the oppressor'.³ Their findings from the global south echo loudly the lived realities of Indigenous scholars everywhere, who have had to juggle the often-contradictory prescriptions and protocols of Indigenous culture and academic research. The quest for cognitive justice begins with a recognition that Western thought, on its own, is ill-equipped to create a more just world; further, it has often constrained such efforts. It encourages us to take more seriously existing ways of knowing that offer alternative epistemologies for achieving global justice in the 21st century. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, Mera Lee-Penehira points to the importance of 'giving voice to material previously not recognised as valid in terms of research documentation [such as] the historical and contemporary narratives contained in tradi-

3 Respectively, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Democratizing Democracy: Beyond the Liberal Democratic Canon* (London: Verso, 2005); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Production is Possible: Beyond the Capitalist Canon* (London: Verso, 2006); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (London: Verso, 2007); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Voices of the World* (London: Verso, 2010).

tional carving, song and performance'.⁴ In other words, cognitive justice is not necessarily a project of inventing new conceptual tools and lenses through which to understand and transform the world. Rather, it urges us to look more closely at what is already there; it urges us to harness the untapped potential of *existing ways* of knowing and seeing that have been dismissed by those who hold power. Given the ways Santos' work resonates with the work of Māori scholars, it is likely that the four central tenets underpinning his notion of cognitive justice will be useful in the pursuit to decolonise knowledge in Aotearoa New Zealand. These points are:

1. The understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world.
2. Alternatives are not lacking in the world. What is missing is an alternative thinking of alternatives.
3. The epistemic diversity of the world is infinite and no general theory can hope to understand it.
4. The alternative to a general theory is the promotion of an ecology of knowledges combined with intercultural translation.⁵

This fourth point serves as further validation for the use of a South African example of resistance for a largely Aotearoa New Zealand audience. To clarify: by 'ecologies of knowledge', Santos means that 'different types of knowledge are incomplete in different ways and that raising the consciousness of such reciprocal incompleteness (rather than looking for completeness) will be a

4 Mera Lee-Penehira, "Native Agents: Navigating Indigenous Research Across the Borders," in *Decolonisation in Aotearoa: Education: Education, Research and Practice*, eds. Jessica Hutchings and Jenny Lee-Morgan (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2016), Kindle edition.

5 Centro do Estudos Sociais, "Epistemologies of the South: Struggles, Knowledges and Ideas for the Future," accessed January 19, 2017, http://www.ces.uc.pt/ces-summerschool/index.php?id=14661&pag=14662&id_lingua=2

precondition for achieving cognitive justice'.⁶ Without wanting to negate or trivialise the particularities in the experiences of colonisation among indigenous groups in South Africa and Aotearoa New Zealand, it is fair to say that shared ways of seeing and knowing stem from the experience of a common oppressor in the form of white colonisers. This assertion supports Santos' notion of 'intercultural translation', which he regards as 'the alternative both to the abstract universalism that grounds Western-centric general theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures'.⁷ Santos is, of course, referring to Western and non-Western cultures here, but extending this point to cultures that are not often spoken or written about in the same context potentially opens up an array of new opportunities for learning from one another's struggles.

To operationalise the four core principles of his 'epistemologies of the south', Santos employs a twin technique of 'the sociology of absences' and 'the sociology emergences'. These enable him to highlight the limitations of dominant, Western ways for illuminating 'emancipatory possibilities'.⁸ For Santos,

the goal of the sociology of absences is to identify and valorise social experiences available in the world, although declared non-existent by hegemonic rationality and knowledge, [while] the sociology of emergences aims to identify and enlarge the signs of possible future experiences, under the guise of tendencies and latencies, that are actively ignored by hegemonic rationality and knowledge.⁹

6 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (New York: Paradigm, 2014), 212.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., x.

9 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006), 29.

At a time when the world seems to believe that there is no alternative to neoliberalism, Santos argues that the sociology of emergences allows for an ‘inquiry into the alternatives that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities’.¹⁰ Conducting such an inquiry into the recent struggles against the neocolonial, neoliberal university in South Africa has the potential to reveal valuable pointers for progressive social change both within and beyond South Africa. These can be taken up, contested, or modified by scholar-activists around the world in the effort to revamp the university and reaffirm its role as a key agent of socialisation and radical transformation.

Who moved my university?

The work presented here is grounded in my experience of being a university-based sociologist in South Africa (where I began my academic career in 1998) and in Aotearoa New Zealand (where I have been based since 2012). While neoliberalism’s reach was certainly palpable prior to the late 1990s, its hold over universities—which I have witnessed first-hand over the last two decades, and continue to witness on a daily basis—has led to the steady unravelling of the notion of the university as a public good. Much writing on the neoliberal onslaught on universities has tended to examine the issues in relation to economic globalisation and restructuring and the concomitant marketisation or corporatisation of virtually every facet of society.¹¹ Jamie Brownlee, for instance, offers a stinging critique of Canadian univer-

10 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 184.

11 The corporate university has been covered extensively in scholarly and popular writing, and it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive list of references here. A good starting point is the work of Henry Giroux.

sities, where casualisation of staff contracts, commercialisation of research, and corporate models of management have become commonplace.¹² Elsewhere in the ‘developed’ world, scholars have documented the ways in which the uptake of ‘new managerialism’ or ‘new public management’ steadily eroded the capacity of universities to contribute to the common good.¹³ For Rosemary Deem, new managerialism refers to ‘the adoption by public sector organisations of organisational forms, technologies, management practices, and values more commonly found in the private business sector’.¹⁴ The widespread adoption of these practices and values within and beyond the university allowed a neoliberal agenda to take hold, which, as Wendy Brown argues, has made it increasingly difficult even to conceive of the idea of the ‘public good’.¹⁵ Indeed, for many, the ‘user pays’ logic that underlies neoliberalism is accepted simply as the way things are. Certainly, most university students in the contemporary period have known no other reality than the one in which behaviour is governed by the user-pays mind-set. To underscore this point, I will

- 12 Jamie Brownlee, *Academia, Inc. How Corporatization Is Transforming Canadian Universities* (BlackPoint: Fernwood, 2015).
- 13 Rosemary Deem, Michael A. Peters, and Susan Wright are arguably some of the most prolific authors on this topic. Their numerous works are too plentiful to cite here, but useful starting points include: Rosemary Deem, “‘New Managerialism’ and Higher Education: The Management of Performances and Cultures in Universities in the United Kingdom,” *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 8 (1998): 47-70; Michael A. Peters, “National Education Policy Constructions of the ‘Knowledge Economy’: Towards a Critique”, *Journal of Educational Enquiry* 2 (2001): 1-22; Michael A. Peters, *Neoliberalism and After? Education and the Crisis of Western Capitalism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Susan Wright and Cris Shore, “Changing Institutional Contexts: New Managerialism and the Rise of UK Higher Education Plc.,” *Anthropology in Action* 8 (2001): 14-21; and Susan Wright and Rebecca Boden, “Markets, Managerialism and Measurement: Organisational Transformation of Universities in UK and Denmark,” in *University Performance Management: The Silent Managerial Revolution at Danish Universities*, eds. Jens Erik Kristensen et al. (Kopenhagen: Djøf Publishers, 2011).
- 14 Deem, “New Managerialism,” 47.
- 15 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 176.

offer a brief anecdote: during a research practicum a few years ago, I noticed that a student had turned up to class without any scholarly resources. When I enquired about why she had come to class unprepared she lowered her voice and whispered, 'I know this is embarrassing, but where do I pay for the books? Like, if I want to take a book out of the library, I don't know where I am supposed to pay for it'. My initial annoyance at the student gave way to a deep sense of frustration about a system that has forced people into believing that they cannot and should not expect to get something for nothing. Of course, the reality is that the student was already paying for tuition, some of which would go towards covering library costs. That aside, the student's decision to shy away from borrowing a library book because she was unsure of where to conduct the financial transaction in exchange for the item served as a reminder of the pervasive culture of commodification at the university; it encouraged a deeper awareness of the infiltration of aspects of the neoliberal (il)logic in everyday life, especially in my place of work.

Linking new managerialism to the rise of the neoliberal university, Michael Peters offers some useful insights into what the neoliberal university entails:

The vice-chancellor, deans and heads of department have increasingly become 'knowledge managers' in a knowledge corporation charged with running the university through a strategic planning process in accordance with targets, new incentive structures, and policy directives at the expense of traditional collegial and democratic governance. Governing councils have become corporate boards further side-lining academic forums.¹⁶

16 Michael Peters, "Managerialism and the Neoliberal University: Prospects for New Forms of 'Open Management' in Higher Education," *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 5 (2013): 13.

Benjamin Ginsberg fleshes out this picture in his polemical account of the managerial grip on universities. He suggests that ‘institutions of higher education are mainly controlled by administrators and staffers who make the rules and set more and more of the priorities of academic life’.¹⁷ Although Ginsberg has come under fire for being unnecessarily cynical, the managerial takeover of universities is a reality in many universities the world over. In the face of declining public transfers to universities, governments have placed corporate tycoons at the helm of university councils and pressured them to run universities like profit-hungry enterprises pursuing the commodification of knowledge. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, in 2014 an amendment to the Education Act proposed to reduce university council sizes, and remove staff and student rights to elected representatives. Citing increased flexibility and efficiency as the reasons for the change, Tertiary Education Minister, Steven Joyce, put pressure on universities to shrink their councils within two years of the amendment being made. Representatives of the New Zealand Union of Students Associations (NZUSA) and the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) fought back, calling the move a ‘power grab’ that would ‘reduce the independence of universities and give Mr Joyce too much influence’. TEU spokesperson, Stephen Day, raised the concern that the proposed changes to university councils would result in ‘the country ... los[ing] out on an important, democratic voice that protects it from being dominated by the minister and the government of the day’.¹⁸

The amendments passed in early 2015, but the struggle continues to unfold across university campuses, with the NZU-

17 Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty and the Rise of the All Administrative University and Why it Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Kindle edition.

18 Radio New Zealand, “Students, Staff to Lose Seats on Councils,” *RNZ*, February 11, 2014, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/235842/students,-staff-to-lose-seats-on-councils>

SA and various TEU branches around the country launching a campaign in March 2017 to urge university councils to take it upon themselves to ‘ensure that at least one-third of their seats are independent, democratically elected staff and students’. In response to the suggestion that staff and student representatives be appointed (rather than elected), NZUSA president, Rory McCourt, speaking at a rally at the University of Otago, said, ‘There’s no point in replacing the current genuine, critical voices with lackeys and yes-men. It’s a dangerous fool’s paradise, and will damage our institutions’.¹⁹

New managerialism is also illustrated by the proliferation of administrative roles and the way this erodes faculty voice. Ginsberg offers this rather sardonic characterisation of university middle management:

Every year, hosts of administrators and staffers are added to college and university payrolls, even as schools claim to be battling budget crises that are forcing them to reduce the size of their full-time faculties. As a result, universities are filled with armies of functionaries—the vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, deanlings, each commanding staffers and assistants—who, more and more direct the operations of every school. Backed by their administrative legions, university presidents and other senior administrators have been able, at most schools, to dispense with faculty involvement in campus management and, thereby, to reduce the faculty’s influence in university affairs.²⁰

19 New Zealand Union of Students Association, “Students stand up for democratic universities,” *NZUSA*, n.d., accessed March 20, 2017, http://www.students.org.nz/tags/council_changes

20 Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty*, 2.

Arguably, the voices of the teaching and research staff who have not been co-opted into positions of ‘meddle management’ represent one of the biggest ‘absences’ in the corporatised university today. While I recognise that academic staff are in a very privileged position relative to the most marginalised and silenced people in the world, the struggle against the neocolonial, neoliberal university cannot take hold without the voices of academics who have been silenced for so long, for fear of being overlooked for career opportunities, for fear of losing their jobs, or worse yet, for fear of being repressed, as has happened recently in Egypt, Turkey, Iran and elsewhere.

Having witnessed the gradual obliteration of the university’s role as the ‘critic and conscience’ of society, some scholars have begun to revisit the idea of the university as a public good.²¹ Raewyn Connell challenges us to think about what a ‘good university’ might look like. She presents five approaches to defining the ‘good university’. These approaches include: wish lists of what we would like to see; an analysis of scholarly texts on the matter; horror lists (i.e. identifying the current ghastly features of neoliberal universities and then defining by antithesis the good university); a structural approach ‘that aim[s] to be realistic about [the university’s] everyday working, and to generate alternatives from possibilities that exist in the current situation’; and finally, modelling good universities on ‘shining examples from history’,²² such as the free university or ‘free skool’ projects that were inspired by the Freedom Schools that

21 Simon Marginson, “Higher Education and Public Good,” *Higher Education Quarterly* 64 (2011): 411-433; Melanie Walker and Alejandra Boni, “Higher Education and Human Development: Towards the Public and Social Good,” in *Human Development and Capabilities: Reimagining the University of the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Alejandra Boni and Melanie Walker (Oxford: Routledge, 2013); Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Raewyn Connell, “What Are Good Universities?” *Australian Universities’ Review* 58 (2016): 67-73.

22 Connell, “What Are Good Universities?,” 67 and 70.

emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement,²³ and the Flying University in Warsaw, which Connell describes as ‘illegal, co-educational, and very seriously intellectual’.²⁴ (It earned its name because it quickly had to move from one location to the next in order to escape the reach of the law.)

While some of these experiments are indeed laudable, perhaps a bit of caution needs to be exercised with regard to the ‘free university’ model that has emerged in some cities around the world (including Dunedin). If we continue to expand these ‘free skool’ experiments the implication is that universities can continue unabated on their neocolonial, neoliberal trajectories as there will be other outlets for anti-neoliberal, culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, critically-minded scholar-activists who are employed at universities, and who support the efforts of free universities, may find themselves having to double up on their labour in order to participate in both modes of education. Surely something is not quite right when the act of simultaneously holding onto one’s employment and one’s principles demands the occupation of dual roles in separate spaces. Further, the audiences in these distinct spaces may have quite different expectations. I have spent most of my career teaching in a structured university setting, but based on my admittedly limited experience of ‘free universities’ and ‘community education’ initiatives, I would argue that fee-paying university students are more inclined to want vocational training in exchange for their fees. In contrast, those who participate in free universities are more open to having their ideas challenged, more eager to ask provocative questions and engage in serious debates, and less fussed

23 For an impressive account of the important and emancipatory work carried out by the Highlander Folk School, which helped to drive the Civil Right Movement, see Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

24 Connell, “What Are Good Universities?,” 70.

about where they can access the podcast or lecture notes. This assessment is not intended as a criticism of formally enrolled, fee-paying university students. Instead, the characterisation is intentionally exaggerated to throw into sharp relief an education system that has changed significantly, especially in the last 35 years, changed in a way that has demanded little else from students other than finding their place in an increasingly unequal world. Changing that world requires much more than adopting the ‘adapt or die’ message in Spencer Johnson’s *Who Moved my Cheese?*²⁵ In the neoliberal university, it is precisely the pressure to adapt to increasingly vile and destructive measures aimed at boosting productivity and efficiency (read: squeezing more out of less) that will sound the death knell of education.

Neoliberalism and racism as mutually constitutive processes

Critiques of the neoliberal university tend to focus heavily on the ideological tensions between those who regard the university as a public good and those who wish to turn universities into profit-generating enterprises. At the heart of these debates lies a deep-seated concern with the user-pays model, something that exacerbates class inequality. Although important, many of these analyses gloss over entrenched racism within universities. A parallel set of debates about the decolonisation of education centres focus on the legacy of colonialism and calls for racial redress within universities through increased diversity among staff and students and an overhaul of Euro-centric curricula. Moving

25 Spencer Johnson, *Who Moved my Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1998).

beyond these limited politics of inclusion, efforts aimed at transforming the university must confront the intertwined nature of neoliberalism and new forms of racism. Henry Giroux makes the case that, in its insistence on individual freedoms and successes, 'neoliberalism negates racism as an ethical issue'.²⁶ Neoliberalism's colour-blind approach creates the myth of 'an era "free" of racism' in which 'race becomes a matter of taste, lifestyle, or heritage but has nothing to do with politics, legal rights, educational access, or economic opportunities'.²⁷ As such, neoliberalism can coexist quite amicably with employment equity policies, yet this nod in favour of representation and recognition does very little to address the politics of redistribution. David Roberts and Minelle Mahtani capture the issue succinctly in their assertion that 'neoliberalism modifies the way race is experienced or understood in society'. They encourage an analysis that 'clearly delineates how race and racism are inextricably embedded in the neoliberal project'.²⁸

The student protests that have been raging on South African campuses since 2015 highlight the mutually constitutive nature of neoliberalism and racism. These protests have a lot to offer in terms of bridging the gap between scholarship on the neoliberal university and on the decolonisation of education. As the project of transforming the neocolonial, neoliberal university is a global one, the South African student protests are potentially relevant beyond national borders. Moreover, given the ongoing efforts to decolonise various aspects of society in Aotearoa New Zealand (including the university), and with a total student loan

26 Henry Giroux, "Spectacles of Race and Pedagogies of Denial: Anti-Black Racist Pedagogy Under the Reign of Neoliberalism," *Communication Education* 52 (2003): 196.

27 Giroux, "Spectacles of Race," 199.

28 David J. Roberts and Minelle Mahtani, "Neoliberalizing Race, Racing Neoliberalism: Placing "Race" in Neoliberal Discourses," *Antipode* 42 (2010): 250.

debt of almost NZ\$15 billion,²⁹ dissenting voices on campuses across Aotearoa New Zealand (with the exception of the University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington) is noticeable in its absence.³⁰ Historically, in Aotearoa New Zealand—from the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and the protests against the 1981 Springbok tour to the protests in the mid-1990s against university fee increases and on to the more recent Occupy Movement—students have been visible and vocal in their censure of political machinations that have gone against deeply held values of fairness, democracy, equality, and peace. Yet, in the contemporary period, faced with an average debt of about NZ\$21,000, and the reality of being lifetime renters and ‘permatemps’, it is surprising that students have not been more outspoken and confrontational.³¹

The South African example is by no means intended as a blueprint for student protests. However, insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the campaigns may be valuable for how we think about and engage in struggle in Aotearoa New Zealand. The next section gives an account of some aspects of the campus unrest in South Africa. At a descriptive level, the aim is largely to address some of the oversights in the international media reports on these issues. Analytically, relying on Santos, it highlights the ways in which the student activists engaged in a ‘sociology of absences’ by uncovering and giving meaning and expression to a range of experiences that were obfuscated by the

29 Holly Ryan, “Student Loan Debt: 728,000 People Owe Nearly \$15 Billion,” *New Zealand Herald*, June 9, 2016, accessed April 19, 2017, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/personal-finance/news/article.cfm?c_id=12&objectid=11653066

30 @ReclaimUoA, “About,” accessed April 21, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/pg/ReclaimUoA/about/?ref=page_internal; @ReclaimVic, “Manifesto,” accessed April 21, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/pg/ReclaimVic/about/?ref=page_internal

31 Patrice Dougan, “Student Loan Debt ‘Balloons’ by 37 per cent, with Average Student Owing \$21,000,” *New Zealand Herald*, January 24, 2017, accessed April 20, 2017, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/personal-finance/news/article.cfm?c_id=12&objectid=11787574

‘massification’ and ‘deracialisation’ of higher education in South Africa. Further, the discussion uses Manouchehr Ganji’s concept of ‘hidden fire’ as a metaphor to highlight the importance of studying the *not yet actualised potential for social change* that is evident in struggle. Doing this enhances the ability to undertake a ‘sociology of emergences’ as proposed by Santos.

The ‘hidden fire’ on campus

Although some campuses were literally on fire at the height of the protests, here I use the term ‘hidden fire’ to convey something more meaningful. The expression is taken from the English translation of the title of a book by Manouchehr Ganji, human rights activist and former Minister of Education in Iran (1976-1979). A student of Iranian origin brought this concept to my attention during a postgraduate class where ‘cycles of protest’ and abeyance in social movements were being discussed. She used the expression to explain that even when movements appear to have been suppressed, ongoing mobilisation that occurs beyond the public eye constitutes a ‘hidden fire’ that has the potential to spark the next wave or cycle of contention. I am very grateful to the student for sharing this concept, as it captures very eloquently the mood on South African campuses, where the embers of revolution continue to glow.

Returning to Connell’s good universities wish list, one of the traits that she mentions is that universities must be ‘epistemologically multiple’.³² While many of the other features that she and others have named are worthy of further elaboration, this

32 Connell, “*What Are Good Universities?*”, 68.

one is of particular relevance to this discussion.³³ The campaigns that took hold on South African campuses in 2015—popularised as RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and FeesMustFall (#FMF)—sparked much debate and media attention, both within and beyond South Africa. I will briefly summarise the events, and offer some insights into the potential of the South African student protests to enrich debate and enhance the global struggle against the neo-colonial, neoliberal university.

On 9 March 2015,³⁴ disgruntled students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) gathered under the bronze statue of Cecil John Rhodes,³⁵ demanding its removal. They regarded the statue as a symbol of colonisation and racism that had no place on the modern campus. One of the protestors emptied a bucket of faeces on the statue garnering significant attention. While some criticised his actions, others were fired up and threw their weight behind the mobilisation efforts that followed. On 20 March student demonstrators occupied the main

33 Participants attending a conference on the onslaught of neoliberalism on Australian universities in November 2015 collectively developed a ‘wish list’ of what good universities entail. This document, now known as ‘The Brisbane Declaration’, can be found in the conference proceedings, published as a special issue of *Australian Universities’ Review* 58 (2016).

34 The exact date and event that triggered #RMF is disputed. Some of those involved attribute the start of the movement to discussions about oppression and racial inequality that were led by a small group of feminists at UCT prior to the gathering under Rhodes’s statue. Others suggest that the inception of the movement occurred only after the gathering, when the movement was officially launched online under the name #RhodesMustFall. Others still have argued that #RMF is merely the latest expression of ongoing struggles about poor infrastructure and financial exclusions that have been raging for years at historically black institutions. For more on this point see Sandile Ndelu, “Liberation is a Falsehood”: Falism at the University of Cape Town” in *#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMust-Fall Movement at South African Universities*, ed. Malose Langa (Johannesburg, Centre for Violence and Reconciliation, 2017), accessed 28 March, 2017 <http://www.csvr.org.za/pdf/An-analysis-of-the-FeesMustFall-Movement-at-South-African-universities.pdf>

35 Rhodes was a 19th century imperialist who founded the De Beers diamond empire and led the corporation that annexed Zimbabwe (formerly southern Rhodesia) and Zambia (formerly northern Rhodesia) as British colonies.

administration building on the UCT campus, renaming it ‘Azania House’ in reference to the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s. They reiterated their demand for the removal of the statue and called for the transformation of the curriculum and all university spaces.³⁶ A week later, the UCT Senate voted to remove the statue; it finally came down on 9 April 2015.³⁷ The widely publicised protests generated much support and sparked similar uprisings both nationally and internationally.³⁸ However, a parallel movement at the University of Oxford, #RMF Oxford, was less successful in its demand to have the statue of Rhodes at Oriel College removed, after wealthy benefactors threatened to withhold donations and gifts to the value of about £100 million.³⁹

Opinion has been divided on the matter of renaming buildings and removing remnants of the past. Some of the students at the forefront of the #RMF protests in South Africa and beyond have argued that colonial icons should be torn down because they symbolise white supremacy and disregard the histories of the oppressed.⁴⁰ At the height of its campaign to remove Rhodes’s statue from Oriel College, #RMF Oxford protestors proclaimed:

36 Brian Kamanze, “Rhodes Must Fall”—Decolonisation Symbolism—What is Happening at UCT, South Africa?” *The Postcolonialist*, March 29, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://postcolonialist.com/civil-discourse/rhodes-must-fall-decolonisation-symbolism-happening-uct-south-africa/>

37 BBC News Africa, “Rhodes Statue Removed in Cape Town as Crowd Celebrates,” *BBC News*, April 9, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-32236922>

38 Kamanze, “Rhodes Must Fall”.

39 Jack Grove, “Must Rhodes Fall?” *Times Higher Education*, December 15, 2016, accessed on March 20, 2017, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/must-rhodes-fall>

40 Ntokoze Qwabe, “10 Useless Responses to #RhodesMustFall,” *Thought Leader*, March 29, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://thoughtleader.co.za/mandelarahodesscholars/2015/03/26/ten-useless-responses-to-rhodesmustfall/>

[T]he veneration of a racist murderer on our campus violates the University's own commitment to 'fostering an inclusive culture' for its black and minority ethnic students. It is also an overbearing, visual reminder of the colonial apologism rife in one of the world's most esteemed educational institutions. So long as these statues are allowed to stand, we as a society can never begin the process of recognising the violence of our past.⁴¹

Those with more conservative views, like Tony Abbot (former Australian Prime Minister) and F. W. de Klerk (the last serving apartheid era Prime Minister of South Africa), weighed in on the debate insisting that the statues at UCT and Oxford University remain standing to commemorate the Rhodes's impact on history.⁴² Others have suggested keeping the memorials, but using them as a teachable moment instead of engaging in a denial or obliteration of history.⁴³ Aotearoa New Zealand Rhodes scholar, Max Harris—although supportive of the students' right to question what colonial icons and statues might say about their identity—makes the point that 'many of the statues and symbols on show in Oxford are

41 #RMF Oxford, "Protest: Remove Cecil Rhodes Statue," November 6, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/2015/11/06/protest-outside-oriel-college/>

42 Bridie Jabour, "Tony Abbott Defends Threatened Statue of 'Father of Apartheid' Cecil Rhodes," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/dec/24/tony-abbott-defends-threatened-statue-of-father-of-apartheid-cecil-rhodes>; Susan Svrluga, "Former South African President Calls Campaign to Remove Rhodes's Statue to Protest Racism 'Folly,'" *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/12/28/former-south-african-president-calls-campaign-to-remove-rhodes-statue-to-protest-racism-folly-and-protesters-laugh-him-off/?utm_term=.fc8ea250f2be

43 Siya Mnyanda, "Cecil Rhodes' Colonial Legacy Must Fall – Not His Statue," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2017, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/25/south-africa-rhodesmustfall-statue>; Verashni Pillay, "More Useful to Redefine, not Destroy, the Rhodes Statue," *Mail and Guardian*, March 30, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-03-30-itd-be-more-useful-to-redefine-not-destroy-the-rhodes-statue>

not accompanied by descriptions of what people like Cecil Rhodes did, so they don't offer much historical lesson-learning at the moment. Perhaps adding plaques and descriptions to provide context is a partial solution'.⁴⁴ Others have pleaded for the statues to be seen as living artworks to be redefined in creative ways that express the protestors' message and mark this significant moment in South Africa's history.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, Martin Hall, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, who later went on to lead the University of Salford in the UK, argued that 'University campuses are not museums or mausoleums—they are living environments, where new buildings are built all the time. They have to be vibrant, and that means listening to students'.⁴⁶

Indicating the global reach of the #RMF movement, students at the University of Bristol, claiming to be inspired by #RMF, recently launched a campaign to rename the Wills Memorial Tower. The tower is named after Henry Overton Wills III, a man who profited from the slave trade and used this money to finance the university. In response to the petition, a university spokesperson commented that '[it] would be "disingenuous" to "cover up" the university's historical relationship with the Wills family', and added that 'it was important to be "open and reflective" about the city's history'.⁴⁷

44 Max Harris, "Why Symbols Matter: The Case for the Rhodes Must Fall Movement in Oxford," *Huffington Post*, July 27, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/max-harris/rhodes-must-fall_b_7865308.html

45 Albie Sachs, "The Rhodes Debate: How we can Have the Last Laugh," *City Press*, March 29, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/The-Rhodes-debate-How-we-can-have-the-last-laugh-20150429>; Greer Valley, "It's Not Just About Cecil John Rhodes," *Africa is a Country*, March 25, 2015, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://africasacountry.com/2015/03/its-not-just-about-cecil-john-rhodes/>

46 Grove, "Must Rhodes Fall?"

47 Rachel Pells, "Rhodes Must Fall-Inspired Students Call for Bristol University Tower Name Change Over Slave-Trade Links," *The Independent*, March 29, 2017, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/rhodes-must-fall-bristol-university-students-tower-henry-overton-wills-memorial-slave-trade-links-a7655721.html>

The global conversation spurred in part by the #RMF movement represents an exciting moment in the debate on decolonising education. Moreover, the rapidity with which the protests in the south sparked a parallel uprising in the north serves as an important reminder of the power of social media to connect struggles and build transnational resistance. The toppling of Rhodes's statue at UCT—whether regarded as a victory or a catastrophe—has shifted the terrain of the debate on the transformation of higher education in South Africa. In a previous era of struggle, questions of access, redress, and diversity dominated debates; silenced and obscured by efforts to 'deracialise' campuses, however, was the deeply entrenched colonial nature of education. Drawing on Santos, one could argue that the 'absence' the student activists tapped into was the experience shared by many black students of being alienated from an education system that exclusively endorsed Western ways of knowing. In other words, rather than encouraging a more radical transformation of education, one in tune with the realities and aspirations of the changing student body, processes of democratisation and deracialisation that accompanied post-apartheid educational reforms demanded that black students conform to the way things had always been done on university campuses. Achieving this goal of full decolonisation may indeed be reflected in the explicitly stated demands of the #RMF campaign: namely, to transform the Eurocentric nature of the campus, by getting rid of colonial iconography, by decolonising the curriculum, and by addressing the under-representation of black and minority ethnic groups among staff and students. However, as with the goals of post-apartheid education, each of these objectives can be achieved without necessarily transforming the structural conditions that allow the neocolonial, neoliberal university to flourish. If we are serious about the radical transformation of universities—which

must necessarily entail the decolonisation of the mind⁴⁸—the important initial step of giving expression to absences must be followed by actions to ensure that other absences are not inadvertently produced. I return to this point later on in identifying some of the shortcomings of the student protests.

In the wake of #RMF, and following the announcement of a 10.5% tuition increase, students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg proceeded to shut down the university in late 2015. They blocked entrances to the university and occupied Senate House, where the University's management is located; in the spirit of decolonising physical spaces, they renamed it Solomon Mahlangu House, after the slain anti-apartheid activist. As with the struggles discussed earlier, the uprisings on the Wits campus did not emerge in a vacuum. While #FMF certainly gained momentum from #RMF, ongoing campaigns on the Wits campus against the exclusion of poor students and the outsourcing of university workers, as well as calls to Africanise the curriculum were already in existence prior to 2015. These represented the hidden fire that was stoked when #FMF kicked off. Likewise, the wave of related protests that engulfed several other campuses across South Africa from September 2015 onwards were not necessarily triggered by the activities at Wits. The atmosphere of protest in the country certainly fanned the flames, but there were already embers of resistance on the various campuses.⁴⁹ These help to explain two of the most significant successes that came from the 2015 #FMF protests: a zero percent tuition increase for 2016 and an agreement to insource university support workers (including cleaners, security guards,

48 This concept—adapted here from the title of the book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o—is credited to Frantz Fanon, whose work continues to inspire postcolonial praxis. It points to the existence of colonialism as an insidious and pernicious experience that persists beyond the abolition of settler rule.

49 Langa, ed. *#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement*.

residence caterers, and maintenance staff). Ensuring that university workers were employed directly by the university, rather than being outsourced by private companies that were known to be engaging in exploitative practices, set up ‘a direct employment relationship between the university and the workers, mandating the former to make all employee conditions and benefits available to them, amongst other legal requirements’.⁵⁰ These victories did not emerge as a result of a fortnight of protesting. ‘Emergences’ were embedded in earlier campaigns and waves of student protests. Embers were reignited in a new cycle of particularly violent struggles throughout 2016, when the government announced a fee increase capped at eight percent for the 2017 academic year. While the #RMF campaigns may have given expression to the shared experience of what some postcolonial scholars refer to as intellectual colonisation, the #FMF protests revealed previously obscured shared class interests between students and workers, stimulating intergenerational solidarity.

The efforts of the ‘fallist’ activists are by no means exemplary. Indeed, some of their actions produced other kinds of absences. Critics within and outside of the movements have accused activists of misrepresenting or erasing the role of women, especially queer and trans women, whom they argue constituted the core of the movements.⁵¹ Recognising these shortcomings, some commentators have offered constructive feedback:

The way female student leaders were systematically ignored, sidelined and silenced during the #FeesMustFall movement suggests

50 Ndelu, “A Rebellion of the Poor”, 19.

51 Theto Mahlakoana, “Gender Identity Irks Some ‘Fallists’”, *Sunday Independent*, March 13, 2017, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/special-features/feesmustfall/gender-identity-irks-some-fallists-8167525>; Dan Moshenberg, “The Feminist Future of #FeesMustFall is Now! Viva!” *Women In and Beyond the Global*, October 30, 2015, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.womeninandybeyond.org/?p=19489>

that once fees have fallen, the next big issue that needs attention is our attitude towards women.⁵²

[A]ny struggle for decolonisation must be intersectional and recognise not only the role played by women, but that transformation must have gender relations as a central tenet. The constant feminist backlash has kept many movements from collapsing into reliance on patriarchal or misogynist leaders and leadership styles even if this is an on-going battle.⁵³

While some critics have been quick to suggest that the movement as a whole has faltered in its execution of an intersectional approach to struggle, intersectionality appears to be more evident in the ‘mini campaigns’ that emerged in the wake of #FMM. Acknowledging this point is useful for two reasons. First, it serves as a reminder that #FMM is not a homogenous movement. Second, it guards against a pessimistic and premature evaluation of a new wave of resistance that is only two years old. A more sanguine ‘sociology of emergences’ allows us to see the potential of the movement’s diverse expressions for challenging the twin issues of neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Indeed, awareness of this gap between the promise and practice of intersectionality among fallist activists represents another interesting ‘harbinger of whatever will be decisive in the future’.⁵⁴ A ‘sociology of emergences’ offers a much more optimistic lens, revealing the possi-

52 Pontsho Pilane, “Patriarchy Must Fall,” *City Press*, October 25, 2015, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://city-press.news24.com/Voices/THE-STUDENT-Patriarchy-must-fall-20151025>

53 Camalita Naicker, “South African Student Protests and Re-emergence of People’s Power,” *Alice News*, October 24, 2015, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://alice.ces.uc.pt/news/?p=4815>

54 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “The Left of the Future: A Sociology of Emergences,” *ALICE*, December 30, 2015, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://alice.ces.uc.pt/en/index.php/alice-info/the-left-of-the-future-a-sociology-of-emergences-opinion-boaventura-de-sousa-santos/>

bility of renewed calls for free education. Such a call should lie at the heart of the struggle for global cognitive justice, without which, Santos argues, there can be no global social justice.⁵⁵

Intersectional emergences in the spin-off campaigns

At the start of the 2016 academic year, students at UCT erected a corrugated iron shack (complete with a portalo) in a central location on the University's Upper Campus, calling the area #Shackville.⁵⁶ Sandile Ndelu, a key activist in the #FMF movement at UCT, explains the symbolism of this action:

Firstly, making a shack at the centre of the university premises was symbolic and highlighted the financial exclusion of poor, black students at the university. Secondly, the shack was a symbol of homelessness, which is a direct consequence of the university's inability to provide enough student housing to all those who need it—leaving many students homeless while at the university.⁵⁷

This form of creative activism, or 'artivism', vividly captured the deeper meaning of what decolonisation entails. It is not merely about peppering curricula with African authors or filling up the

55 Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, xiii

56 eNews Channel Africa, "'Shackville' Erected at UCT to Protest Lack of Housing for Black Students," *ENCA*, February 15, 2016, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/shackville-erected-uct-protest-lack-housing-black-students>

57 Ndelu, "'Liberation is a Falsehood'," 69.

campus with black bodies.⁵⁸ It is a process that confronts—sometimes violently—colonialism’s desire to dehumanise ‘native subjects’. Writing on the violence that ensued in the 2016 wave of protests, Malose Langa, drawing on Frantz Fanon, argues that ‘the students’ violent reaction can be understood as the rejection of a colonised mentality in order to free and liberate the spirit from the shackles of oppression’.⁵⁹ The ‘emergence’ in this campaign resides in its potential to link the movement for the decolonisation of education to the ongoing struggle for housing and sanitation that captured the imagination of the first wave of post-apartheid social movements under the rubric of ‘service delivery protests’. The value of connecting the struggles in this way is two-fold. First, by highlighting the continuity with a previous era of struggle, one can challenge analyses that paint this current wave of struggle as ‘the mother of all education struggles in post-apartheid South Africa’.⁶⁰ The first wave of struggle was not only for basic services, and this current wave is not limited to matters of higher education. Popular protest in the post-apartheid period has been focused on the neoliberal creep that has affected all spheres of daily life for the majority of South Africans, especially poor, black women. Second, by refuting the characterisation of these struggles as issue-based, one can unlock the potential for deeper and more meaningful social change that goes beyond tokenistic forms of diversity and begins to implement more intersectional approaches to transformation.

58 Musawenkosi Malabela, “We Are Not Violent But Just Demanding Free Decolonized Education: University of the Witwatersrand,” in *#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement*, ed. Langa (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017), 147.

59 Malose Langa, “Researching the #FeesMustFall Movement,” in *#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement*, ed. Langa, (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017), 7.

60 Vuyisela Msila, “After Fees Fall, a Bigger, Angrier Struggle is Coming,” *Sunday Independent*, October 23, 2016, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/after-fees-fall-a-bigger-angrier-struggle-is-coming-2082724>

Change that recognises multiple, cross-cutting identities beyond race, class, and gender.

While there are multiple ‘hashtag campaigns’ that derived energy from #FMM, there is one in particular that is worth mentioning for the purposes of this discussion. #RURReferenceList was sparked in April 2016, when a group of students at the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR)—frustrated with the University’s unwillingness to deal with sexual violence and the rape culture on campus—took matters into their own hands and published a list of alleged sex offenders on social media outlets, demanding that they be expelled.⁶¹ University management responded by saying that the actions of the activists violated the rights and privacy of the alleged perpetrators.⁶² Incensed by this response, #PatriarchyMustFall became the rallying cry, and students mobilised to shut down the university. Following violent battles with the police, the university eventually agreed to establish a Sexual Violence Task Team, which some regard as a mini victory.⁶³ While #RURReferenceList may have been a fleeting campaign in the history of #FMM to date, the story of ‘fallism’ is still being written. Its sentiment and energy are being felt beyond campus boundaries. On April 7, 2017, under the banner #ZumaMustFall, tens of thousands of South Africans took to the streets, calling for the country’s president to step down. It is a daunting yet exciting time in South Africa, and perhaps the next phase of struggle needs to focus instead on what must

61 Neo Koza, “Rhodes Students Threaten Total Shutdown Amid Rape Claims,” *Eye Witness News*, April 18, 2016, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://ewn.co.za/2016/04/18/Rhodes-students-threaten-total-shut-down-amid-accusations-of-rape>

62 Govan Whittles, “Rhodes Alleged Rapist Reference List a Violation of Human Rights,” *Eyewitness News*, April 22, 2016, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://m.ewn.co.za/2016/04/22/Rhodes-reference-list-a-violation-of-human-rights>

63 Oliver Meth, “#FeesMustFall at Rhodes University: Exploring the Dynamics of Student Protests and Manifestations of Violence,” in *#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement*, ed. Langa, (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2017), 101.

rise. There is certainly a very long way to go, but the strengths and weaknesses of 'fallism' have highlighted the need to shift global debate away from narrowly defined identity politics and issue-based movements onto a terrain that has the potential to radically transform universities and society more broadly.

Conclusion

Borrowing from Santos, this discussion employed a 'sociology of absences and emergences' to explore the potential of student-led struggles in the south to shape the global challenge of dismantling the neocolonial, neoliberal university. Drawing on insights from protests that took place on university campuses across South Africa during 2015 and 2016, the discussion underscores the need to make clearer connections between debates on decolonisation and neoliberalism, and to conceive of enduring racism and creeping neoliberalism as mutually constitutive processes.

Arguably, one of the weak spots in the #RhodesMustFall campaign was its insistence on three narrowly-defined demands in the absence of a broader intellectual project centred on radical structural transformation. These demands included the removal of colonial relics because they are symbols of oppression; the excision of the work of European scholars from the curriculum because Eurocentric theories do not capture the realities of indigenous experience; and the diversification of staff because it does not accurately reflect the country's demographics. While these are laudable, the achievement of these objectives could sit quite comfortably within a neoliberal framework. The capacity of neoliberalism to reduce race to a marker of cultural heritage and underplay its political, social, and economic dimensions allows very superficial and tokenistic forms of redress to occur under the

guise of transformation, without any attempt to question or subvert the underlying structures that reproduce privilege. Indeed, in a neoliberal climate, universities are quick to showcase the success of ethnic minorities and previously disadvantaged people who have ‘made it’ in spite of their race. The marketing and communication units of universities are constantly on the lookout for success stories where the moral of the tale is that anyone can triumph if they just pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

A significant shortcoming in the #FeesMustFall campaign was the marginalisation of female and non gender-conforming student activists, who played a central role in galvanising support for the campaigns. Cognisance of this ‘absence’, and a conscious attempt to rectify this weakness will be an important step in subsequent ‘fallist’ campaigns, or other efforts in South Africa and abroad to transform the neocolonial, neoliberal university. Indeed, in the critical self-reflection by ‘fallist’ activists and protest scholars, which is just beginning to occur, there are already signs that the struggle for global cognitive justice must be an intersectional one. It is a struggle that requires recognition and validation of different ways of knowing, a struggle that needs to amplify the voices of all those who want to reclaim the university as a space for critical engagement and higher learning that benefits the public.

One of the key victories that emerged from the #RMF and #FMF campaigns—but that was undoubtedly rooted in a longer history of struggle at South African universities that preceded the ‘fallist’ struggles—was the insourcing of university support workers (the overwhelming majority of whom are black). The solidarity between the students and university workers highlighted a common cause in struggles that were previously regarded as disparate. The contemporary reality is that increasing numbers of students around the world have to rather than choose to work to offset the cost of their studies, and that

many people are returning to university as ‘mature students’ once they have acquired work experience and/or saved money to pay for their education. As such, there is great potential for the next wave of campus activism both in South Africa and abroad to bridge the class and generation gap between ‘students’ and ‘workers’. Arguably, one of the greatest emergences for activism in the twenty-first century will be found in overcoming the tensions between recognition and redistribution that were evident among movements of the twentieth century.

The South African student uprisings examined in this discussion have furthered the cognitive justice project by placing the decolonisation of education firmly back on the national agenda. While earlier student struggles emphasised better access to higher education for those who were previously denied it, the current wave of protests is interrogating the nature of education itself. Although the demand to scrap European writers from the curriculum may be somewhat short-sighted, the issue underlying this demand—that existing curricula endorse and reinforce the dominant, Western way of thinking as the only legitimate epistemological tradition—is a reality that the cognitive justice project seeks to expunge. By highlighting the epistemic limitations of university curricula, South African student activists have made small inroads into achieving cognitive justice. Admittedly, there is a long way to go, but their efforts are a step in the right direction.

While the conversation about decolonising education may have been revived on South African campuses by the recent wave of campus activism, these debates are certainly not foreign to Aotearoa New Zealand. However, viewed from the perspective of a ‘South Island scholar-activist’, I would argue that the debates and struggles for decolonisation of education in Aotearoa New Zealand have yet to cross the Cook Strait. What was quite striking about the South African student protests was their impact on

university campuses beyond the immediate centres of protest, including smaller campuses that have historically displayed low tendencies of resistance. Surely, the networks forged between students with relative speed around the large expanse of South Africa are not a bridge too far for Aotearoa New Zealand?

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