Article

Let Us Build a Table: Decolonization, Institutional Hierarchies, and Prestige in Academic Communities

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Abstract: If global higher education is truly committed to decolonization, there will have to be some radical changes. A decolonized university would increase the freedom of students and staff through undoing the legacy of the past, a past which was exclusive and homogenous. In order for this to materialize, universities must adopt a different consciousness. They must move away from the current culture that has privileged global north epistemic and pedagogical frameworks that serve to alienate the student from the global south. For universities to be able to undo the effects of the epistemic injustice that indigenous students have faced, the academy must approach education with a new mindfulness of whom it is that it is designed to serve. When we approach higher education with a consciousness of decolonization and a recognition of the identity of whom the education system is meant to serve, then management systems and epistemic and pedagogical frameworks in our universities cannot remain abstract in nature. Rather they must be fully cognizant of the students' backgrounds, their social needs, and their academic needs. These cannot be mere considerations but must be the information which directs what is taught and how it is taught, for a just education system is not and can never be decontextualized. As Afro-communitarianism prescribes, decontextualization disregards the necessity of, and integral relationships to, others and the world. Any just pedagogical system must acknowledge the legitimacy of, and draw from, contributions in culture, knowledge, and perspective that come from the students themselves—both as individuals and as insiders of a particular class, culture, and indigenous group. It is in this symbiotic relationship where both the student and the educator can begin to be humanized again.

Keywords: decolonization; Afro-communitarianism; university rankings; epistemic injustice

1. Introduction

This paper will address the prestige question in relation to an Afro-communitarian philosophical framework and decolonial context. In particular, it will be argued that academic prestige should take into consideration whether the institution caters well to its particular student population and social context.

If global higher education is truly committed to decolonization, it must undergo radical changes. A decolonized university would increase people's freedom by undoing the exclusive and homogenous legacy of the past. To achieve this, universities must adopt a new consciousness, moving away from the current culture that privileges epistemic and pedagogical frameworks from the global north and which alienates students from the global south.

To undo the effects of the epistemic injustice faced by indigenous students, academia must approach education with a mindful awareness of who it is designed to serve. Embracing a decolonization mindset and recognizing the identities of those within the education system means that management systems and epistemic and pedagogical frameworks cannot remain abstract. Universities must be fully cognizant of the students' backgrounds, their social needs, and their academic needs [1,2]. These cannot be mere considerations but must be the information which directs *what* is taught and *how* it is taught, for a just

education system is not and can never be decontextualized [3]. They must be fully aware of students' backgrounds, social needs, and academic needs.

Afro-communitarianism emphasizes that decontextualization ignores the essential relationships individuals have with others and the world, that is, as embodied human beings carrying cultural traditions that have been shaped by Euromodern epistemologies rooted in the global north and to the exclusion of the global south. A just pedagogical system must acknowledge and incorporate contributions from the students' cultures, knowledge, and perspectives, recognizing their legitimacy. This symbiotic relationship between student and educator is where both can begin to be humanized again [4].

2. Situating My Context

In order to understand the argument of this article, it will be useful to introduce the reader to my own context. My career in academia has been mostly anchored in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, first as a student at the university currently known as Rhodes in Makhanda, and then as a staff member at the University of Fort Hare. Fort Hare is a historically black South African university. The university comprises both a rural and a city campus. Most students are isiXhosa speakers and hail from the former apartheid "homeland" in the rural Transkei. Since this article engages with prestige in academic institutions, it is important to note that the University of Fort Hare is deemed as a prestigious university in terms of the plethora of black political leaders among its alumni. Former students include Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Oliver Tambo, Julius Nyerere, and Kenneth Kuanda, to name a few.

However, this prestige does not necessarily reach beyond Africa—in the global north, most people would never have heard about the University of Fort Hare. We are also not a prestigious university in South Africa if ratings are taken into account; we do not make it onto the top ten universities in South Africa. This means that the University of Fort Hare is a special case which cannot easily be compared to other universities in terms of prestige, seeing as it is deemed as prestigious in some senses and not in others. This begs the question of what we mean by prestige and what it means to be a prestigious university.

In this article, I will argue that prestige and hierarchy do not need to be obstacles to building community, diversity, and inclusion. It will depend on what kind of hierarchy, and what kind of prestige, we are talking about. So, if the prestige and ranking was built on, for example, the positive impact that the university has had in its local context (such as the example of the University of Fort Hare mentioned above), that might be good in terms of community building. If the prestige was built on a particularly humanizing pedagogy, that would also be a positive feature in terms of building community. If the prestige was built on a caring approach to students and staff, that would similarly support the building of community. These are, however, not the ways in which universities are currently ranked, and I will thus focus on the present-day ranking systems and the concomitant prestige that goes with that in this article. I will then make a case for an alternative ranking system which takes into consideration the positive impact of a university on its community, as well as a humanizing pedagogy which is built on a caring approach to students and staff. This humanizing pedagogy, I will argue, requires universities to pay attention to the context of their students and staff.

For the purposes of this article, I therefore focus on the kind of prestige that comes with being a highly ranked university on global ranking systems, and I will compare that to the alternative ranking system I propose. In terms of this, the University of Fort Hare is not a prestigious university according to current rankings, but it is clear from new policies and its current five year plan that it has the vision to become more prestigious, i.e., higher ranked. I will, however, argue that in terms of an alternative ranking system, that the University of Fort Hare ought to be a highly ranked institution.

3. Academic Prestige, Hierarchy, and Its Effects on Diversity and Inclusion

In line with new policies that are being set up at the University of Fort Hare, as at other South African universities, it seems there has been an acceptance that the pressures of globalization require a change in the nature of academic institutions in their drive for global competitiveness. As a result, the governance and managerial system instituted in post-apartheid universities is one geared towards corporatization and commercialization. This is a global phenomenon. The rationale is that this focus should produce graduates with skills that are competitive and marketable on the global market economy. This management of the university, according to a neo-liberal model, takes an individualistic, capitalistic, competitive understanding of the person. Ivor Baatjes makes the claim that this kind of economistic democratization "redefines citizenship as consumership . . .where the rights of the consumer replace the rights of the citizen" [5] (p. 3). Consequently, as Achille Mbembe asserts, "universities today . . .have turned higher education into a marketable product, rated, bought and sold by standard units. . .", all the while "turning students into customers and consumers" [6] (p. 30). Accordingly, persons are understood as consumers within an economy based on competition.

It is my contention that the pursuit of prestige in terms of current global university rankings therefore has the result of moving the focus away from what the particular needs of a university's students might be in their local context. This will be emphasized particularly in terms of community building later in the article. This shift in focus is the case since universities focus on the development of external criteria as set by international ranking systems instead of ascertaining what the needs of their particular students and local community are when deciding on what to prioritize as a university. It is my contention that an alternative ranking system based on positive impact in the community and a humanizing pedagogy would be better placed to develop universities striving to take into consideration the context of their students and staff.

But why should we not welcome the development in universities which aims at securing jobs for its students, which is partially the reasoning behind international ranking systems? I will argue that we should not welcome this development (amongst many other reasons) due to the negative impact the managerial focus on prestige has, namely in terms of diversity and inclusion, and particularly in terms of community building projects.

First, let us investigate why we should aim for diversity and inclusion in our higher education institutions. This will support my claim that we need to rethink the way in which university rankings are conducted. Kirsty Dotson writes that

> . . .[di]verse practitioners will offer new ideas and alternative methods of philosophical investigation. Philosophy simply cannot survive as a discipline without the continuous creation of new ideas. Hence, it is in the best interest of the field to encourage practitioners who can aid in the survival of the discipline [7] (p. 408).

It is my contention that this insight of Dotson can also be applied to other disciplines within the university setting.

4. Person and Community in African Philosophy

In this part of the article, I will argue that community building as a goal (which requires diversity and inclusion) is a necessary objective for universities within the framework of African philosophy. This means that an alternative university ranking system based on the positive impact of the university on its community, as well as a humanizing pedagogy, would be better placed to develop universities that would support the Afro-communitarian framework. I will first set out the relationship between person and community in some African philosophies, and will argue from there that building diverse, inclusive academic communities is crucial for our morality according to this worldview.

In this section of the paper, I therefore look at an alternative understanding of personhood from the ones prevalent in the current neo-liberal university. Afro-communitarianism is an umbrella term that refers to different but related theories of personhood and ethics

in African philosophy. (Examples of authors who espouse Afro-communitarian views of personhood include Menkiti, Wiredu, Gyekye, Tutu, Masolo, Eze, Molefe, and others.)

Engaging with African philosophy, it becomes evident that many African philosophers propose a metaphysical and normative conception of the self that is distinct from the dominant views in global north philosophy. Antjie Krog suggests that "ubuntu or interconnectedness is not an isolated exceptional phenomenon (only present in South Africa), but part of a much broader, more general context found in various forms and under various names across the large African continent" [8] (p. 360). This claim is not essentialist and does not imply that all sub-Saharan Africans subscribe to this understanding of the self or the ethics derived from it. However, this broader, more general context could be seen to function as a cultural undercurrent there to be taken up and activated, even if it is not always seen and appreciated by all. In this article, I will use the works of Mogobe Ramose, Kwasi Wiredu, and Michael Onyebuchi Eze to elucidate the central features of what I refer to as Afro-communitarian personhood.

The particular strand of Afro-communitarianism I focus on first is ubuntu as philopraxis, as set out by Mogobe Ramose [9]. He focuses on being and becoming a part of a whole, which is in line with what Antjie Krog calls "interconnectedness-towards-wholeness" [8]. What this basically means is that we are all interconnected, as part of a whole, and that we cannot become "whole" without the support and engagement of others and our environment.

Mogobe Ramose claims that ubuntu (another form of Afro-communitarian personhood) is vital in Africa, asserting "It would profit us little to gain all the technology in the world and lose the humanist essence of our culture" [9] (p. 706). Ramose explains that ubuntu, often understood as "I am because we are" or "I am a person through other persons", consists of the prefix ubu- and the stem -ntu. Ubu evokes the idea of being in general, an enfolded being before it manifests in the concrete form of a particular entity. Ubu is always unfolding, continually manifesting through particular forms and modes of being, oriented towards -ntu. There is no strict separation between ubu- and -ntu; they are not radically separate or irreconcilably opposed.

Ramose elucidates the concept of ubuntu by exploring the etymology of the word. He contends that ubuntu should be comprehended as more than just the commonly interpreted phrase "I am because we are." Instead, he asserts that ubuntu must be contextualized and examined as a comprehensive ontological and epistemological framework, rather than merely through specific proverbs. Ramose writes:

> . . .ubu-ntu is the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in the African thought of the Bantu–speaking people. It is the indivisible one-ness and wholeness of ontology and epistemology. Ubu as the generalized understanding of being may be said to be distinctly ontological whereas ntu, as the nodal point at which being assumes concrete form or a mode of being in the process of continual unfoldment, may be said to be distinctly epistemological [9].

This means that ubu encapsulates the essence of human beings in general, which exists before it is instantiated in the particular individual, or -ntu. However, this generality is not an essence in the Platonic sense but rather like Brahman being the essence of Anatman in Buddhist philosophy. The being of an African person is embedded in both the community and the universe as a whole. The interconnectedness of humanity and the individual means that their actions affect each other, as the individual is constituted by the whole. Ubuntu signifies that everything is interrelated, part of a whole that manifests in particular beings. Ubu represents the universe containing and comprising everything, while -ntu represents the process of the universe unfolding through different forms and modes of being, including the emergence of speaking and knowing human beings. This interconnectedness emphasizes that our freedom and capabilities depend on the cosmos and others as part of the cosmos for their realization.

According to my interpretation of Ramose, ubuntu signifies that an African individual is profoundly connected not only to their community but to the entire universe, encom-

passing the environment, other animals, society, community, and the structural aspects of our social context. The universe (ubu) represents an ongoing process of becoming, which includes and integrates everything. The stem -ntu refers to the unique individual process of life, highlighting one's particular way of becoming part of the universe.

Within the ubuntu ontology and epistemology, a human being is viewed as a specific manifestation of the universe, inherently connected to it in an ontological sense. This perspective opposes the notion of individual separateness and the ensuing competition with others. Instead, it emphasizes our interconnectedness, suggesting that gaining something by taking it away from another is a fundamental misunderstanding of our nature. Depriving you means depriving myself, as to be human is to recognize our interconnectedness, understanding that your flourishing is as crucial as mine, and more importantly, that my flourishing depends on yours.

Recognizing interdependence and the significance of interpersonal relationships for the self, this worldview sees the individual as inherently socially embedded and profoundly influenced by their context. However, it also acknowledges the existence of individuals and emphasizes that their well-being and development are essential for fostering healthy relationships.

Michael Onyebuchi Eze explains that an ubuntu perspective on personhood appreciates both individual subjectivity and community. To understand a person as entirely defined by the community is to use the "false metaphor of simunye to describe ubuntu" [10] (p. 387). Simunye means "we are one", and according to Eze, it features prominently as a politicized interpretation of ubuntu in the socio-political discourse of post-apartheid South Africa. Ubuntu has been mistakenly interpreted as having only a collective meaning—that I am a person solely through other persons. For Eze, it is crucial not to confuse these two concepts, as ubuntu does not deny the significance of individuals and their rights; it recognizes these while also heavily emphasizing the importance of community. The confusion of these two concepts turns ubuntu into an idealization that takes us away from the actual being with others, through which collective senses emerge. The distinction between ubuntu and simunye is a vital and often overlooked aspect of ubuntu, which values unity in diversity and aligns with Desmond Tutu's metaphor of the rainbow nation. Thus, valuing "otherness" and diversity is inherent in an ethics based on ubuntu, as the existence of different individuals is necessary for meaningful and valuable relationships.

Desmond Tutu's metaphor of the rainbow nation [11], emphasizing the affirmation of difference and celebration of diversity, offers a way to understand the nature of the community in question. According to this understanding, it is the diversity of opinions, cultures, and interests that fosters development and growth within the community. This celebration of difference necessitates equal power relations among various parties, ensuring that diverse views contribute meaningfully to the community's evolving values. Without recognizing others as equals, their perspectives and contributions will not be valued adequately to achieve the ideal of the rainbow nation. When all parties are acknowledged as equals in this exchange and dialogue, it enables a continuous conversation about reconciling differing opinions, cultural beliefs, and worldviews in a practical manner. The goal is not to create a homogenous community, but rather one where the human rights of all are respected and can flourish within the context of diverse cultures, perspectives, and worldviews.

In other words, fostering and nurturing individual subjectivities are essential for developing well-rounded characters. Relationships become richer and more profound when the individuals involved are well-developed, enabling harmonious interactions. Conversely, the less developed an individual is, the less likely it is that they can form deep and meaningful relationships. For instance, in an unequal romantic relationship, a person who sees themselves only as a supporter may contribute less value. On the other hand, a partner with their own interests who can challenge (without overwhelming) the other fosters growth, encouraging critical reflection on values important to both the relationship and the individuals involved.

An analogy that illustrates this concept is the human body, which requires various organs and limbs to function properly. Similarly, a communal self thrives on diversity and needs to focus on the health of each individual (and distinct) part, as well as the harmonious interaction between these parts. Just as the body depends on the proper functioning of its different organs, a community relies on the well-being and cooperation of its diverse members, and also allows for disharmonies to be brought into greater harmonies. The metaphor of the body is not meant to suggest that there would be no dissent or critique present in the Afro-communitarian society. Instead, it is meant to highlight that such dissent and critique should always keep the overall health and well-being of the community in mind.

Kwasi Wiredu states that "It is a human being that has value, 'Onipa na ohia'". He notes that the English translation of "ohia" needs clarification, as it means both "which is of value" and "that which is needed". Thus, Wiredu asserts that "all value derives from human interests" and that "human fellowship is the most important of human needs" [12] (p. 194). Understanding that human fellowship is paramount means recognizing that our personhood depends on our relationships with others—we need others to become fully human. This concept of personhood, which I term Afro-communitarian personhood, is explained by Wiredu as follows:

> For the Akans, a person is social not only because they live in a community, which is the only context in which full development, or indeed any sort of human development, is possible, but also because, by their original constitution, a human being is part of a social whole [12] (p. 197).

Wiredu implies that we are born with inherent relationships—our needs are met as children, and as we grow, we also grow to care for the needs of others with whom we have relationships. This mutual care is not only because others are needy but also because to become complete human beings, we need to care for others. Without providing for others' needs, we remain incomplete as human beings. It is our responsiveness to others' needs that makes us human.

In light of the above, a just pedagogical system, informed by Afro-communitarian personhood, cannot remain abstract but must recognize the students' backgrounds, social needs, and academic needs. Afro-communitarianism posits that decontextualization ignores the necessity of relationships with others and the world. Our freedom is always situated within a historical and social context, requiring us to consider others' needs and whether they have the agency to manifest themselves in the world. Our projects, whether individual or collective, are embedded in a social and historical situation and need others for their fulfilment.

In summary, Afro-communitarian personhood suggests that enhancing others' agency enhances our own. Flourishing human beings need a world of other flourishing individuals and their projects in order to fulfil their own goals and projects. Afro-communitarian personhood can therefore be understood as the concept of "collective virtue", where communal self-realization promotes harmony. Individual virtue and flourishing cannot be realized in a society where others cannot meet their basic needs or act on their basic capabilities. The self can only flourish in a society committed to enabling the flourishing of all its members. Relationships between people and the environment are vital, and we should strive for relationships where mutual care and support are emphasized.

In conclusion, Afro-communitarian personhood recognizes the creation of a collective "we", acknowledging our intricate constitution by our relations with others. The collective "we" does not, however, subsume the individual "I", but the "I" is never complete unless it recognizes how much others constitute it and acts on that knowledge by enhancing and providing for others' needs to help them flourish.

5. How Is (Current) Hierarchy and Prestige an Obstacle for Community According to African Philosophy?

Continuing with the body analogy from the previous section, individuals who act solely for their own benefit, disregarding the community, can be likened to cancerous cells

that disrupt the overall harmony and survival of the organism. While these cells may appear to thrive initially, their growth ultimately jeopardizes the entire organism, including themselves. Similarly, individuals who prioritize their own interests without considering the community's well-being undermine their own health and flourishing, whether they realize it or not. The notion that personal flourishing is intertwined with the well-being of the broader society is often difficult for those with an individualistic mindset to accept.

The adoption of a commercial corporate culture and its associated values in universities that aim for current university rankings contradicts the broader aims, aspirations, and visions of higher education. For example, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes that one of the primary roles of universities is "the cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally" [13] (pp. 8–9). Closer to home, and arguing from within African philosophy, Magobe Ramose argues that higher education should ultimately serve as "the means towards the concrete practice of justice and peace in human relations" [14] (p. 553). Similarly, and in line with Ramose's claims, Achille Mbembe highlights that institutions of higher learning are meant to foster intellectual and moral development in students, equipping them to continually challenge established knowledge. He contends that these crucial functions are undermined by the incorporation of corporate and commercial principles in universities [6].

Siseko Kumalo advocates for pedagogical reform centered around adopting a consciousness that views education as a means to realize the humanity of both the self and the Other. He stresses the importance of our educational journey being a process that uncovers our complicity in systems of domination and oppression, achieved through acknowledging our societal position [15]. These ideas hold particular significance for prestigious universities.

Kumalo's primary concern is not the accolades and rewards associated with education, but rather the restoration of human connection, both internally with oneself and externally with others. This emphasis aligns closely with the values of Afro-communitarian pedagogy, offering a distinct perspective from neo-liberal approaches that often prioritize individualistic interventions and emphasize factors related to personal welfare, sometimes at the expense of relational values.

Some of the shifts necessary include moving away from the valorization of individualism to prioritizing the cultivation of community within the learning environment. Another is shifting from viewing progress mainly in scientific and monetary terms, and instead building culture that puts value on sustainability, interconnectedness, and interdependency. The inegalitarianism and competitive values of capitalism come into play. Universities pretend to be meritocracies, but in actual fact they are not, due to the unequal and different contexts and backgrounds of students and staff at different institutions.

Afro-communitarianism challenges the notion of meritocracy divorced from context, arguing that individual achievements are not solely attributable to the individual, but are deeply intertwined with the community that provides the necessary environment and support for success. In this view, the legacy of colonialism underscores the ongoing need to acknowledge and address inequalities caused by historical injustices to achieve true justice. In terms of meritocracy, I would like to introduce Franz Fanon's discussion of inferiority and superiority complexes. I will then apply these complexes to prestigious and non-prestigious universities.

Fanon [16] argues that the juxtaposition of the black and white races has resulted in a profound psycho-existential complex. He clarifies that his analysis is specific to his time and place, not universally applicable to every individual in similar conditions. Nevertheless, he contends that broad trends reflecting his diagnosis can be identified. I find his diagnosis relevant to the current global higher education context, where inferiority and superiority complexes can offer valuable insights when examining issues of prestige, hierarchy, diversity, and inclusion.

Fanon posits that the presence of inferiority and superiority pathologies among racial groups stems from a complex psychological–economic structure. His analysis focuses on the phenomenological experience and identity formation of black individuals, which

he argues is shaped by an inferiority complex. This complex, according to Fanon, arises through a two-stage process.

Firstly, there is economic and material inferiority resulting from colonial subjugation and exploitation. Secondly, this economic inferiority becomes internalized, manifesting as a psychological pathology within the individual [16]. Conversely, Fanon identifies a parallel process among white individuals, where economic and material superiority is internalized, fostering a complex of entitlement and a belief in one's superior worth. In essence, Fanon's analysis underscores how historical and economic conditions contribute to the formation of psychological complexes that affect identity and perceptions of worth within racial dynamics.

It is my contention that we can fruitfully apply these inferiority and superiority complexes to the higher education landscape. Prestigious universities can be understood to have a superiority complex, while non-prestigious ones have an inferiority complex. Note that these complexes would be driven just as much by economics as are the individual complexes Fanon conceived of.

As long as these complexes are perpetuated, we will have a context where (currently seen as) prestigious universities have an unfair advantage over academics at non-prestigious universities. While there is this unfair advantage, it will continue to limit the possibilities for discovering and living in accordance with our common humanity, since the "prestige" pursued through the current corporate model of managing universities is dehumanizing, and thus undermines the health of human (academic and other) communities. It is thus necessary to overcome these complexes to have a healthy academic community.

6. Here Is a Table: Building Community in Accordance with Afro-Communitarian Principles

So, what do we do? How do we overcome these complexes within our global higher institution landscape? Does Afro-communitarianism support a qualified defense of university prestige, or would it reject prestige altogether? It is my contention that an Afro-communitarian account of personhood would support prestige and hierarchy among institutions of higher learning; however, the ranking systems used to decide what is a prestigious university would need to change from its current criteria to criteria which measure how much the institution has a positive impact on its community, as well as a how humanizing the university's pedagogy is. To have these as criteria in university rankings would incentivize universities to not only become more integrated with their respective communities, addressing the community's needs, but would also incentivize taking the context of students into account in their teaching and learning programs. A university such as the University of Fort Hare would rate much higher on such a ranking system, given the emphasis of community engagement and addressing the needs of its community. The University of Fort Hare also emphasizes a humanizing pedagogy for its students, as evidenced by the compulsory module at the university entitled "Social Transformation". The module utilizes a humanizing pedagogy through being student-led in its discussions and through addressing issues relevant to the student's context. The final assessment in the module asks students to present a solution to a problem that the university or surrounding community faces, and, as such, students are encouraged to engage with their context and provide novel solutions to the problems their communities face. This aims to create graduates who will contribute to their communities in various ways, depending on the students' skillsets.

I will draw on a metaphor by Steve Biko in order to answer the question of how we might overcome the inferiority and superiority complexes in higher education. My mentions of tables in this section are all inspired by Biko's, as well as Ndumiso Dladla's, work.

Ndumiso Dladla's "Here is a Table" delves into the complexities of post-apartheid South African society, focusing on the ongoing struggles for justice and equality [17]. Dladla critiques superficial reconciliation processes and argues for a deeper, more substantive engagement with historical injustices. He emphasizes the need to address the structural and

systemic roots of inequality, advocating for a rethinking of South African identity and nationhood. Dladla's work intersects with themes of decolonization, Afro-communitarianism, and the necessity of recognizing and rectifying the legacies of apartheid and colonialism to create a more just and equitable society. In particular, Dladla argues that it is necessary to "build our own table" as the global south, and not focus on getting a seat at the table already in existence and which seats are occupied by the global north.

One way of saying we can overcome the inequalities caused by the superiority and inferiority complexes is to say that prestigious universities need to make space at the table for diverse practitioners, and thus be more inclusive. But this is not the only way to look at it.

Another way to look at it is to say that we (the people from non-prestigious universities) choose not to play that game, the rules for which were set by the global north. We rather choose not to be invited to a table which has been set and built for and by the people who exploited and colonized the countries and peoples we belong to. Instead, we can choose to build our own table—we will make the table to suit us, we choose to sit at that table together, and we will discuss life and death from our perspective at this table. Once we have built this table, we can invite some others to come and sit at it with us, but only if we should choose to do so.

The problem with this metaphor of building our own table is that materially and economically, non-prestigious universities are not necessarily able to do what it takes to "build our own table", seeing as they do not have the resources. But is this true? Can it be possible to build a humanizing pluriversity without the benefits of a lot of resources? Perhaps this is where we should start focusing on further thinking and research in the future. Addressing the ideology of (current instantiations of) meritocracy and the call to "build our own table" requires substantial changes that go beyond individual efforts. Achieving this demands concrete institutional interventions and specific structural reforms within higher education. How can this be realized?

Such structural reforms are possible with the support of the scholars and management of universities in the global south. To reshape universities in an Afro-communitarian fashion, a series of structural and institutional reforms are essential. Such reforms can help dismantle entrenched ideologies, like current instantiations of meritocracy and neo-liberalism, which often uphold Eurocentric standards, systemic inequality, and alienation. Some concrete measures and reforms that could help decolonize and reimagine higher education for liberation include curriculum redesign and diversification, thus decentering Western epistemologies. This should be accomplished through also developing interdisciplinary modules that integrate and emphasize African concepts across various subjects, emphasizing local relevance and community engagement. Universities can also rethink their admissions and hiring practices, giving more credence to community engagement, resilience, and diverse skills. Universities from the global south can also reform their governance based on Afro-communitarian values, with a focus on decentralized leadership and dialogue. These are just some suggestions that universities can implement going forward, and none of these suggestions require large capital input. Implementing these reforms requires commitment, resources, and patience, but by grounding educational institutions in Afro-communitarian values, universities can foster environments that reflect and promote the collective values, identity, and intellectual independence of African communities.

Academically, there has to be a new table, and then the global north can be invited to that table—as the fact is that the table of the global north will not likely have the global south come and sit at their table as equals as a result of the hierarchy and prestige which is a core feature of the current intellectual landscape. Instead of trying to break into these hierarchies, we should create our own community of scholars, with scholars from the global north we invite to our table as a result of the ways in which they work.

7. Conclusion: The End (…the Beginning)

If global higher education is truly committed to decolonization, radical changes are essential. A decolonized university would enhance the freedom of students and staff by

dismantling the exclusive and homogenous legacy of the past. To achieve this, universities must adopt a new consciousness, moving away from the current culture that privileges global north epistemic and pedagogical frameworks, which alienate students from the global south.

To address the epistemic injustices faced by indigenous students, the academy must approach education with a renewed mindfulness of whom it is designed to serve. Embracing a decolonized perspective means recognizing the identities, histories, cultures, and struggles for humanity of those the education system aims to benefit. Consequently, management systems, epistemic structures, and pedagogical frameworks must be fully aware of the students' backgrounds, social needs, and academic requirements. These considerations should not be peripheral but should guide what is taught and how it is taught, ensuring that a just education system is never decontextualized.

As Afro-communitarianism prescribes, decontextualization ignores the necessity of integral relationships with others and the world. A just pedagogical system must acknowledge the legitimacy of, and draw from, the cultural, knowledge-based, and perspective contributions of the students themselves, both as individuals and as members of particular classes, cultures, and indigenous groups. It is within this symbiotic relationship that both students and educators can begin to be rehumanized. It is important to see that the university as an institution today is caught up in the neo-liberal racial capitalist project, and that international rankings and prestige are part of that. Even universities who do not have prestige in the current forms aim for that prestige (e.g., academics are encouraged to publish as many articles as they can in high-impact journals). It is therefore important to change the focus of universities globally in order to recognize the inequalities in contexts within which we are working.

Kristy Dotson uses the metaphor of the concrete flower when she discusses the position of a marginalized person within the current academic context. Her point is that the plants that grow from the cracks in concrete are able to flourish despite their environment, and not because of it. As she argues, "[a] concrete flower . . . If they were to flourish, they would produce a different landscape" [7] (p. 408).

Using this metaphor, we should plant our garden in fertile soil. What our universities look like might therefore be very different, as they need to respond to our contexts and to the people and communities of those contexts. However, this is to say that these universities are different, not that they are not "as good" as traditionally deemed prestigious universities.

So, there is the need to foster and value the difference and diversity in non-prestigious institutions, instead of seeing them as lesser versions of institutions which are seen as prestigious. Our goal should be a flourishing, diverse, and inclusive global society. This will not happen if we leave it up to prestigious institutions alone—we have agency ourselves. So, let us build a table together.

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