

‘Life is Not Simply Fact’: Aesthetics, Atmosphere and the Neoliberal University

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to reflect on the way in which a certain neoliberal logic and rationality have become common-sense and to contemplate the possibility of a different aesthetic. The tone or mood of this piece draws on recent work on atmosphere, affect and complexity, which will be used to explore the theme of neoliberalism within the context of the university. In the course of this discussion, I will consider questions such as: how could a different aesthetic influence the university as public space; the curriculum and academic community and friendship? How could a different aesthetic respond to epistemic, ontological and, inherently tied to them, spatial injustice?

Keywords Affect · Atmosphere · Complexity · Epistemic injustice · Neoliberalism · University

Introduction

I engage with the theme of neoliberalism by reflecting on how it has played out within the context of the university. In doing so, a number of aspects come to the fore: the extent to which the university can be thought of as a ‘public space’—how university management, in many cases a mere extension of the state, responds to protest and dissent; the issue of the curriculum; and the tragedy of the loss of academic community, intellectual friendship and collegiality under neoliberal conditions. My reflection on the neoliberal university within the South African context takes place against the urgent demands of spatial and as I argue, related to it, epistemic and ontological injustice. I contend that a certain neoliberal aesthetic present within most South African universities continues and deepens epistemic, ontological and spatial violence and injustice. I find Fricker’s (2007) exploration of epistemic injustice helpful. She identifies two forms of epistemic injustice, namely testimonial and

hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when someone is not believed when speaking. Hermeneutical injustice is when someone's experiences are deemed unintelligible. I understand both these senses of epistemic injustice to relate inherently to ontological injustice—if one's voice and experience are deemed incredible and unintelligible one's being as such is also negated. As Massey (2005) has argued, space is not abstract, but interrelational—as epistemic and ontological injustice do not occur in an abstract space, they are for me inherently tied to spatiality and connected to spatial injustice. Two other features of Massey's (2005, p. 9) approach to space that I find of value for an engagement with the connection between epistemic, ontological and spatial justice in the context of the university are (1) that space is the 'sphere ... of coexisting heterogeneity'; and (2) that space is 'always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed'.

I draw on the work of Böhme (2017) on atmosphere, and Anderson (2009; 2016) on affect, as theoretical frameworks through which to make sense of some features of the neoliberal university and to think about possible responses. What could a different aesthetics, in particular the notion of 'new aesthetics' or one that pays attention to bodily presence, affect, complexity and slowness, disclose? Could it counter, or at the very least problematise neoliberal power by exposing its limits, its failure to respect and be just fully to the minds and hearts of all? My argument unfolds as follows: I begin by looking at the neoliberal aesthetic driving the university, before reflecting on the possibilities of an alternative aesthetic. Throughout I draw on the related notions of atmosphere and affect, in order to reflect firstly on the kind of atmosphere and affect present in the neoliberal university and secondly, to contemplate alternatives to the current situation.

Part I. Neoliberal Aesthetics

Neoliberal Injustice

Anderson (2016, p. 734) reflects on how the notion of 'climate' has been used by authors to designate certain neoliberal themes. He refers to Milton Friedman's reflection after returning from the 50th anniversary of the Mont Pelerin Society: 'To judge from the climate of opinion, we have won the war of ideas. Everyone—left or right—talks about the virtues of markets, private property, competition, and limited government.' Anderson refers also to Stuart Hall pointing out in 1979 a change in climate involving a turn to a number of neoliberal themes. What is at stake is the way in which collective affects are to be seen as part of neoliberalism; that neoliberalism is conditioned by multiple collective affects. He defines affect as 'an umbrella category that encompasses qualitatively distinct ways of organizing the feeling of existences' (2016, p. 735). Neoliberalism should not be seen as something 'singular, coherent ... with a simple origin point. ... New hybrids are formed as neoliberal styles of reasoning and techniques encounter diverse political-economic forms and logics of governing' (2016, p. 735). Anderson warns that we should not rely on neoliberalism as a catch phrase to capture anything. He explains his own use of 'neoliberal affects' as firstly referring to atmospheres that

influence neoliberal reason and secondly referring to the ‘structures of feeling’ that ‘accompany the translation of neoliberal reason into policies and projects’ (2016, p. 736).

Anderson’s comment about the relation between neoliberalism and everyday life (or as he calls it ‘contemporary affective life’) is of significance for the purpose of this article’s engagement with the neoliberal university or the neoliberal atmosphere of the university. He explains this connection as ‘a commonly felt and identifiable mood’ (2016, p. 736). As done also by others, he links neoliberalism with the present form of capitalism. He quotes Hall and O’Shea, who highlight ‘the individualisation of everyone’; ‘the privatisation of public troubles’ and ‘the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn’ as ‘structural consequences’ of neoliberalism (2016, p. 737). What is most troublesome is the extent to which neoliberalism becomes ‘common-sense’. Even though this neoliberal common-sense is ‘incoherent’ and ‘contradictory’ on the one hand, when it becomes ‘common-sense’ it ‘feels coherent and becomes intuitive’ (2016, p. 738). It is exactly this notion of common-sense that negates other epistemologies and ontologies. The university then, instead of being a space where multiple views and knowledges are celebrated becomes a space where only a certain way of knowing, being and doing is recognised—the university becomes a very specific place of exclusion and limitation.

Focusing more specifically on the neoliberal university Brown (2011, p. 113) notes the shift that has occurred in university politics and mentions that a few years ago the ‘crisis of the humanities’ meant declining numbers of students enrolled for humanities courses, or it may have referred to one of many struggles of the ‘culture wars’. However, in present times the humanities face the possibility of extinction and are under pressure from both outside and inside the university. Outside forces demand that all knowledge should amount to what is affordable and marketable and inside the university everything must measure up to what can be counted. Universities are ‘run as and for business’ with the value of ‘well-educated citizens’ declining, to be replaced by ‘technically savvy and entrepreneurial citizens’.

At the heart of neoliberalism is how it negates the ‘very idea of a public good’. Brown (2011, p. 119) describes three ways in which this happens. 1. Public goods are outsourced with the goal of making profit rather than having public benefit. 2. Public goods are placed on the market and priced as individual consumer goods with the effect of public-funded transport and education disappearing. 3. Within the university departments, teachers, students and office workers are expected to pursue their own interests and give up on all ideals of working towards a common or public good. Neoliberalism thus rejects the idea of a public good per se. Neoliberal rationality challenges the governing principles of democracy and equality and emphasises only individual interest. Brown identifies a number of issues that flow from the process of neoliberalisation. These include: decreased commitment to equal opportunity, because access is made possible by family income rather than merit; increased inequality within the university amongst staff members who receive different salaries based on marketability; decreased support for disciplines deemed to be non-entrepreneurial or non-profitable; academic freedom being jeopardised; and a retreat from public and common values and concern with the public good. Brown (2011, p. 124) observes that

it is not only medieval English poetry, Sanskrit, and political philosophy that disappears from the curriculum, but thinking, teaching, and learning that pertains to questions of what, apart from capital accumulation and appreciation, planetary life might be about or worth. This is the disappearance of the humanities, to be sure, but also of an educated citizenry and hence, of the soul and sinew of democracy.

For Brown (2011, p. 125) the task for the humanities is to persuade a public that it cannot do without it. Our research problems and our teaching should turn to the world, connect, value and enrich human life (2011, p. 127). But within the neoliberal logic it is only a certain instrumental knowledge that is recognised; being should be functional, not aspirational.

As mentioned in the introduction, a main concern for me is the extent to which neoliberalism within the context of the university continues past and constructs new forms of epistemic and ontological injustice. My call for justice here is not in the guise of a Rawlsian notion of distributive or social justice but rather an idea of justice as an unattainable ideal. However, the call for justice in the South African context is very much an urgent demand that pertains to the material and the symbolic. The notion of epistemicide has been invoked in particular by scholars focussing on the causes and persistence of colonialism and coloniality. Epistemic violence refers to the extent to which local, indigenous knowledge systems have been rejected and in some instances wiped out by Western hegemonic forces. The ways in which all experience different from that of the Western male has been othered can also be understood as a form of epistemic violence. But of course ways of being, our ontologies, are inextricably linked to our epistemologies, so that epistemic violence involves also ontological violence in a certain sense. In my view, within the South African context both epistemic and ontological injustice relate to spatial injustice. When thinking about the university and in particular the neoliberal university we understand and experience how this triad of epistemic, ontological and spatial injustice works. Below, I discuss Achille Mbembe's reflections on the decolonisation of the university and highlight his reference to the oppressiveness of apartheid architecture seen at many South African universities. The protests that started about the presence of the statue of a colonialist, Cecil John Rhodes, on the campus space of the University of Cape Town soon became a protest about not only access to universities as such, but extended to encompass challenges over the way in which students are treated once they have entered these institutions and of course, over the content of the curriculum. For me the student protests underscored the interrelatedness of ontological, epistemic and spatial (in)justice. I want to draw on a case that was decided in 2016 on the change of street names in the City of Tshwane that, for me, similarly to the student protests, involved all three forms of justice, namely spatial, epistemic and ontological.

In the matter of *City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality v Afriforum and Another* (2016) ZACC 19, the Constitutional Court had to decide whether to uphold a restraining order that was granted to Afriforum (a self-described 'civil rights' organisation advocating for the protection of the Afrikaans language) against the City of Tshwane that prohibited the City from removing old street name signs in

Tshwane/Pretoria to replace them with new names. In the majority judgment delivered by Chief Justice Mogoeng the Court set aside the restraining order, allowing the City to proceed with changing street names. Mogoeng CJ starts his judgment by referring to the Constitution. The gist of his narrative is how apartheid as a system of institutionalised oppression based on an irrational differentiation between black and white that rendered black people as intellectually inferior and lesser beings, resulted in a situation where there was hardly any city, town, street or institution named after black people's historical leaders with testimonial and hermeneutical justice resulting. Virtually all recognition and honour was given to white people and the history of white people, rendering the history, the knowledge and being of black people as non-existing. The chief justice remarked that 'South Africa still looks very much like Europe away from Europe' (Mogoeng CJ *City of Tshwane Metropolitan Council vs Afriforum* Case CCT 157/15 par 120). Afriforum's main argument ironically rested on their sense of belonging being infringed by the removal of the old street name signs.

The case raised technical issues—whether an interlocutory order may be appealed or not, as well as issues concerning separation of powers, and proper consultation—that I do not address here. For my purpose it is important to reflect on the notion of belonging. The Chief Justice—rightly to my mind—challenged Afriforum's reliance on belonging by invoking the sense of belonging of black South Africans living in Tshwane. The majority judgment speaks to how epistemic violence coincided with spatial but also ontological injustice. Black people in Pretoria were not only forcibly removed, evicted from their houses and given space only on the outskirts of the city, but their history, memories, way of being, and their humanity were denied. Following Lefebvre (1996) one could argue that they were not only forcibly denied habitat but also inhabitation. I will expand on this distinction below. It is also this denial of inhabitation that came to the fore during the student protests—students are 'allowed' in, but none of their ways of knowing or being are made part of the university curriculum, culture or way of life. Just as black people living in Pretoria feel that they do not belong because none of their histories are represented in the city, black students on former 'white' campuses experience alienation.

Not Conducive to Breathing

Drawing on Mamdani (2016, p. 69) I want to look at the history of the 'modern university' that came to the fore as a Western, post-Renaissance European institution in Berlin. If we look at the history of the modern university we see a tension between two forces, one being the idea of universalism coupled with a certain understanding of the human, the other pertinent nationalist responses to it. An important point made by Mamdani (2016, p. 70) is that the modern African university was and still is a product not of pre-colonial institutions but of the colonial modern. But what does it mean to refer to the university as 'modern'? Praeg (2017, pp. 6–7), drawing on Readings, argues that the 'University becomes modern when it takes on responsibility for working out the relation between the subject and the state'. Two ideas influenced and directed the path of the university, namely reason and culture.

Praeg (2017, p. 8) explains that the concept of reason, associated with German philosopher Immanuel Kant, demarcates the ways in which various disciplines and faculties relate to each other and that provides the basis of disciplines. He underscores that a Humanities Faculty is the space where the grounds on which disciplines base themselves are critiqued. It is maybe important here to underscore law as a humanities discipline, something that is contested viciously by those asserting law's autonomy. Law faculties in South Africa (and probably faculties in many other parts of the world) have been going through a number of curriculum changes over the past two decades. In my experience the demands for the LLB degree and the law curriculum to be devoid of critical engagement and deep theory and to fulfil predominantly functionalist aims and objectives are ever increasing. Those who share Douzinas and Gearey's (2005) lamentation of law's decline and impoverishment are scarce and getting scarcer. In a recent faculty discussion a member of my faculty argued for the introduction of a course in Ethics that should have no ties with the Humanities and have no philosophical content. All faculties and disciplines are probably under this kind of pressure, but my sense is that law faculties could have and should have been in a stronger position to resist the tropes of neoliberalism.

Constable's (1994, p. 551) writing on how legal theory has become social-legal might be helpful to make sense of why law faculties did not stand up against the influence of neoliberalism on their discipline. Following Nietzsche in *The twilight of the idols* she tells the story of how ideals, and in fact justice disappeared from the world and for my purpose from the university. Constable distinguishes between six phases in modern legal thought, namely a phase of virtue, followed by one of divine/natural law, third by one of moral law, fourth by one of positive law and, in the fifth phase, by one of social policy and distributive justice. For Constable the abolishment of the ideal is completed in this phase. The sixth phase for her is one in which the distinction between is/ought and reality/appearance is noted by critical legal scholars. She raises the question of 'what remains ... what world is left' (1994, p. 588).

Praeg (2017, p. 9) explains that reason was replaced with culture when it became pertinent that the university should fulfil a function of the state by taking on the moral task of training 'its subjects as future bearers of that cultural identity'. The result of this shift was that students no longer perceived themselves in the first place as 'rational subjects, but rather as representatives of culture'.

There is also the moment when the university shifted from culture to the global and through this move embraced a number of features and demands that we could define as 'neoliberal', adopting the 'logic of managerialism, corporatism', 'a multinational entity' that serves 'clients', and, as referred to above, what Wendy Brown calls 'neoliberalized knowledge'. To bring all of this back to the African university for a moment, as already indicated it was the modern colonial university that was established in Africa with an initial aim to reproduce the European model and accordingly students who could further metropolitan culture. As we know, as part of anti-colonial struggle the university became a site of contestation that can also be described in two main phases, namely one of 'Africanisation' and later 'Transformation' (Mamdani 2016; Praeg 2017).

At South African universities since 2015 we have experienced a third shift namely from ‘Transformation’ to a discourse on ‘Decoloniality’ and calls for decolonisation. Student protests became prominent when students at the University of Cape Town demanded the removal of the statue of the colonist Cecil John Rhodes. These protests can be seen also as a resistance against the extent to which the university has become neoliberal and as an example of the possibility of challenges to neoliberal authority from below. Mbembe (2016) starts off a reflection on the notion of decolonisation by recalling the issue of the Rhodes statue. He unequivocally states that such a statue has no place on the campus of a public university; neither do other symbols, pictures or images that represent figures or people who negated humanity to black people. Following his argument, these statues, images, and symbols should be removed. A more pragmatic view could be that one could diversify a campus by not removing the old but rather adding also images of struggles heroes or renaming buildings after alternative historical figures. The problem of the latter approach is that it might end up treating all of these symbols as equally representing past histories without challenging enduring legacies of exclusion and marginalisation.

Mbembe (2016, p. 30) turns to the issue of access to the university and urges that this is not only an issue of demography. ‘When we say access, we are also saying the possibility to inhabit a space to the extent that one can say, “This is not a hospital-ity. It is not a charity.”’ In this vein he refers to buildings and argues that apartheid buildings/infrastructure/architecture ‘[are] not conducive to breathing’. Below I turn to work on atmosphere as part of a new aesthetics that is focussed on exactly how design in architecture can allow breathing. Mbembe (2016, p. 30) re-iterates the university classroom as a place where students should develop ‘intellectual and moral lives’ and critical skills. He laments the extent to which university education—and for my purposes precisely the curriculum—has become interested in delivering students who lack any interest in the ‘preservation of the intellect and advancement of the life of the mind’. Related to this point is the extent to which neoliberal universities have become ‘large systems of authoritative control’—of standards, grades, classification, credits and penalties—coupled with bureaucratic methods. The ‘mania for assessment’, methods of evaluation and the turning of students into clients and customers all contribute to the need for decolonisation.

But the main issue is that of the Western nature of the university, meaning that ‘they are local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon’ (2016, p. 32). The implication of a Western canon is that it values only Western notions of the truth and rejects all other forms of knowledge. An important feature of many Western epistemic traditions is their reliance on a certain division between ‘mind and world’, ‘reason and nature’, and on a detachment between the ‘knower’ and the ‘known’. This point does not speak only to epistemology, ways of knowing, but also to ontology, ways of being and, as I have alluded to, spatiality. Mbembe (2016, p. 35) notes that the main problem of this form of epistemology and ontology (and I add spatiality) is that they become hegemonic and do not acknowledge other ways of understanding, being in and inhabiting the world. This relates to what was noted above, namely the extent to which a neoliberal atmosphere demands a certain common sense and universality that excludes all other forms of knowing and being from coming to the fore.

Turning to Wa Thiong'o (1981), Mbembe (2016, p. 35) gives some direction to what decolonising knowledge/the university could entail. He underscores relationality to ourselves and to others, which includes 'in this age of the Anthropocene, all sorts of living species and objects'. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's notion of re-centering is pertinent to the question of diversity—he supports a questioning of the idea that the West is the 'central root' of African consciousness and cultural heritage and rejects all attempts to set up Africa as a mere extension of the West. This does not entail a rejection of all European traditions, but redefines what the centre is. Chakrabarty (2000) has in the same vein called for the 'provincialisation' of Europe. Mbembe (2016, p. 36) aptly summarises Ngugi's project as a call for 'a geographical imagination that extends well beyond the confines of the nation-state'.

Decolonising the university, according to Mbembe, has two sides. The first entails the critique of the Eurocentric model that not only privileges European knowledge, but excludes, others all alternative knowledges. The second side is to start to imagine the other model. Theorists like De Sousa Santos and Dussel argue that knowledge can only be thought of as 'universal if it is pluriversal'. In this vein the notion of 'pluriversity' is offered—pluriversity entails 'a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity', it involves a 'horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions' (2016, p. 37).

Central to this notion of decolonisation is to think about the human and humanity in entirely new and different ways. Mbembe (2016, p. 42) urges the significance of the Anthropocene that in itself also brings about a new geological epoch. This new epoch will open ways of 'rethink[ing] the human not from the perspective of its mastery of the Creation as we used to, but from the perspective of its finitude and its possible extinction'. The rethinking of the human, according to Mbembe, will confirm that we are part of a very long history and, secondly, that agency and power should be extended to non-human nature. This would ask for new ways to make sense of epistemology, ontology, spatiality, politics and ethics, and most pertinently for this article, new ways to confront the neoliberal university.

I already have referred to Brown's concerns about what is happening to the curriculum under neoliberal conditions. At South African universities and in particular law faculties, the demand for functionalism under the guise of tropes like 'excellence' and 'impact' is ever increasing. All staff are urged to market themselves, to do work that will increase their own and the university's visibility. Academic managers have become nothing but corporatists with no understanding of and care for the intellectual project. The LLB degree offered by South African law faculties was evaluated by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) during 2016–2017. A detailed discussion of the framework used by the CHE and the outcome of this process is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to acknowledge that the framework itself can be criticised for not including issues like decoloniality and epistemic justice explicitly. However, the framework did make the concept of 'transformative constitutionalism' prominent by requiring all law faculties to address this notion in

the curriculum.¹ Transformative constitutionalism has been central to constitutional discourse in South Africa and has been interpreted and applied in a number of ways, varying from a very pragmatic instrumentalism to a more critical approach. Karl Klare, in a 1998 article, argued that transformative constitutionalism could play an important but small part in bringing about the desired socio-economic transformation in South Africa. The notion of indeterminacy was central to his argument, exposing the myth of objective judgment. Another important part of his argument was to underscore the conservative, jurisprudential legal culture in South Africa. His work was used by some as a virtual blueprint for how to bring about transformation. Roux (2009, p. 258) took issue with the idea that transformative constitutionalism should be used in a critical vein and argued for a liberal interpretation and application of the idea. The way this concept was taken up through a framework imposed by an organ of the state, made it lose most of its critical potential. Indeed, the process of curriculum transformation has been dominated by exactly those functional tropes calling for more practical modules, underscoring that the main, if not only task of law schools is to train practising lawyers with very little critical or intellectual conversation. It is however difficult to understand arguments on law's autonomy and the strict distinction between law and politics while invoking Klare. My main issue with both the current curriculum and the way in which it is restructured under the guise of 'transformation' is the extent to which it fails to hear the claims of epistemic and ontological injustice. But there is another danger in the current neoliberal atmosphere: the extent to which the discourse is getting more and more anti-intellectual and the way in which the idea of the university itself is under attack. The emphasis on instrumentality and functionalism destroys not only the potential to enrich the minds of students, but also all possibility for intellectual argument—academic community, collegiality and friendship are suspended.

Below I turn to the work by Böhme on atmosphere and Anderson on affect that are helpful in exposing the space and tone in which many of these conversations have taken place. But before I do so, let me reiterate once more an effect of academic life that under neoliberal conditions relates directly to these conversations, namely the demise of collegiality, academic community and academic friendship. Given the pressure on being the best, on top, excellent and, together with this, the endless measurement and counting, collegiality and the idea of a collective project disappear. As a young colleague said to me in 2016 'I will figure out and decide what kind of academic I will be for myself'. But the point is that no-one is allowed to figure that out: unless the system is openly confronted, with of course the risk to be 'discounted' and marked as trouble makers, academics become mere cogs in an enduring machine. Those who seemingly 'make' it are of course also cogs, but in a bigger, more visible machine; one that deserves media attention and compensation. What happens here is that the idea of university as a community of intellectuals disappears and is replaced by a production of a university as something entirely

¹ The term 'transformative constitutionalism' was coined by US legal theory Crit Karl Klare in a 1998 article.

different from its roots as a space for critical thinking and for the pursuit of the life of the mind.

Atmosphere, Living Bodies and Neoliberal Affect

Böhme (2017, p. 13) describes atmosphere as 'indefinite', as 'beyond rational explanation'. Atmosphere is at the same time 'indeterminate in a certain sense', but also 'not indeterminate with respect to what it is' (2017, p. 14). Atmosphere stands in the guise of an 'in-between' and is linked to what is referred to as 'new aesthetics'. Böhme (2017, pp. 14–16) explains that new aesthetics differ from traditional aesthetics in three ways: firstly, traditional aesthetics is focussed on judgement and has become preoccupied with supplying the way in which to speak about art history and art criticism, leaving 'sensuousness' behind. Secondly, the centrality of judgement has made language and semiotics a main focus of aesthetics. Thirdly, aesthetics is mainly 'a theory of art and the work of art' with strong 'normative orientation'. Böhme (2017, p. 16) regards Walter Benjamin's work that takes the 'aestheticization of the life world' seriously, as the beginning of new aesthetics, which can be described as the 'production of atmospheres'. New aesthetics, the production of atmospheres includes 'a complete theory of perception, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of humans, objects, and environments' (2017, p. 17).

Benjamin used the term 'aura' to describe that which cannot be understood in a rational manner—'that what makes a work of art [ungraspable] solely through its objective properties' (2017, p. 17). It is this notion of 'aura' that is taken up as atmosphere. A crucial point here is the relation between aura and bodily disposition, and the extent to which it is spatial. Another essential element of atmosphere

is the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver insofar as he or she, in sensing the atmosphere, is bodily present in a particular way. (2017, pp. 23–24)

Böhme (2017, p. 24) argues that classical aesthetics engaged only with a few atmospheres, the beautiful, the sublime and the characterless atmosphere. New aesthetics, by including a much more expansive notion of atmosphere addresses affect, including mind, mood and emotions. The 'aestheticization of everyday life' is central to an aesthetic of atmosphere on the one hand, but simultaneously it is also a critique of it. Benjamin's (Benjamin 2008, p. 41; Böhme 2017, p. 31) critique of the 'aestheticizing of political life' is of importance, in particular 'the replacement of a transformation of human conditions with their aestheticization' (Benjamin 2008, p. 41). For Böhme (2017, p. 33) an aesthetics of atmospheres can continue this critique under the notion of 'Critique as aesthetic economy'. His description of 'aesthetic economy' highlights a number of characteristics of neoliberalism and how it plays out at the university, namely

a particular phase in the development of capitalism in which the advanced Western industrial nations currently find themselves. It is a condition in which

aesthetic work counts for a large part of the work of society as a whole, that is, in which a large part of total work is no longer concerned with the production of commodities but with their staging – or with the production of commodities whose value itself consists in their deployment *for* staging – of people, of the public sphere, of a corporate image, and so on.

Mbembe (2015, p. 102) in his work *On the postcolony* examines the banality of power in the postcolony through the frame of ‘the aesthetics of vulgarity’. This for me underscores how neoliberalism plays out in South Africa. His angle relates to the approach towards an aesthetics of atmosphere as described by Böhme. He wants to go beyond the descriptions of bureaucracy, formality, arbitrary rulemaking, routine and highlights, following Bakhtin, the elements of the obscene and the grotesque. Mbembe (2015, p. 102) wants to focus not only on what he calls ‘the distinctive style of political improvisation’, but also how the postcolony consists of ‘a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence’. He regards the problem of state power as twofold: (1) the ways in which state power constructs ‘its own world of meanings—a master code ... the logics that underlie all other meanings within that society’; and (2) how state power further institutionalises this ‘world of meanings as a “socio-historical world”’, makes it part of the ‘common sense’ and ‘into a period’s consciousness’ (2015, p. 103).

The new aesthetics as described by Böhme (2017, p. 34) is a general theory of perception that goes beyond mere information processing, data provision and a recognition of situations. The presence of bodies and affect are central to the aesthetics of atmosphere. Böhme asks to what extent bodily presence can be relevant in the present time of technology. To what extent do our lives take place in virtual spaces—technical interconnections, the network terminal, the homepage, the mobile phone, among many others. It is maybe important to mention here the extent to which technology in the form of ‘hybrid learning’ is becoming pervasive at universities. The bodily presence of students is not only perceived as unnecessary, but becoming more and more of a burden for university managers and functionaries.

Böhme (2017, p. 82) argues to the contrary and underscores that people ‘want to congregate: *face to face*’. He refers to how, through philosophy and popular practices such as yoga, tai chi and others ‘a new human self-understanding concerning the body’ is coming to the fore. He argues that the present context may be highly technical, but that this in fact urges people to be much more aware of their bodily existence. As noted by Böhme, the creation of spaces traditionally did not take bodily presence into account. In this regard we can recall Mbembe’s description of apartheid architecture as not conducive to breathing, referred to above. We could ask how present university campuses and buildings take bodily presence into account? At the University of Pretoria (UP), new designs for student spaces on campus focus on providing singular benches in ‘hot spot’ areas where students can access WiFi, at the same time as a biometric system of fingerprinting-access for staff and students has been introduced. The gates of learning at the UP campus will open literally only if you can provide a valid finger print. Finger here, of course, has lost any and all connection to body. A while before the student protests started at the University of

Pretoria two tragic events occurred when first a student and thereafter an academic took their lives by jumping from the Humanities building on the Hatfield campus. A few colleagues were struck by the official response from the university informing us that ‘an unnatural death’ took place and that everyone should avoid the area. I could not help connecting the unsympathetic response to the students later that year, the inability to listen to their pleas, to this earlier response to the tragic loss of life.

For Böhme (2017, p. 91) atmosphere is central to understanding the space of bodily presence. He explains that ‘the space of bodily presence is an atmosphere into which one enters, or in which one finds oneself’. This understanding is different from traditional architectural perspective underscoring geometry by foregrounding the meaning of being bodily present in spaces. Anderson (2016, p. 743) draws a relation between atmospheres and the coming to the fore of neoliberal styles of reasoning. For him atmospheres ‘are part of the birth and momentum of neoliberalisms’. However, he insists that they are also indeterminate and vague. Neoliberal reason should be understood as not only a rationality but also a ‘thinking-feeling’. He relies on the idea of ‘tone’ to ‘refer to how any “neoliberal object” (a policy etc.) possesses an ‘affective bearing’. We should thus understand atmospheres by acknowledging their complexity and indeterminacy and realising that they ‘imbue and undo distinctions’ at the same time. Below I turn to aesthetic space and reflect on possibilities of resistance to neoliberal aesthetics.

Part 2. Aesthetic Space

Inhabitation and ‘Lived Space’

Lefebvre (1996) lamented the shift from inhabitation to the functionalist concept of habitat, which to him was central to modernism, in particular technological modernism (Butler 2012, p. 105). From this perspective habitat is focused only on ‘economic and technical questions of housing provision’ (2012, pp. 115-116). Inhabitation, on the other hand captures far more and is focused on active and meaningful participation in social life. Lefebvre (1991) famously distinguished between perceived, conceived and lived space, which Soja (2010) has reconfigured as first, second and third space. My sense is that the call for inhabitation and not mere habitat relates to the notion of lived, or third space. When we confront epistemic violence that occurred with conquest, the need for inhabitation as an insistence not on mere habitat, housing provision, land reform or reparation comes to the fore. As expanded on above in the debates on, for example, the transformation of the curriculum and the transformation of institutional culture at institutions of higher learning, a call for spatial justice coincides with a call for epistemic justice and vice versa. A call for access to campus is never only about whether fees should be charged or having physical access. It is also about how students are treated once they have been accepted and to what extent the university space is one of alienation. The content of the curriculum, the knowledge acknowledged and celebrated is as important. The demand for free education has manifold meanings. This reminds us of Andreas

Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos's statement that '[T]here can be no justice which is not spatial' (2015, p. 181).

The concept of the right to the city as formulated by Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre is central to, if not synonymous with, spatial justice. The right to the city claims an 'active presence in all that takes place in urban life under capitalism' (Soja 2010, p. 96). In the words of Lefebvre:

The right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (*citadin*) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos. (Soja 2010, p. 99)

I have explored the potential of 'the right to the city' for rethinking the university away from neoliberalism elsewhere.² My aim there was to ask how the right to the city could be used as a way to reconfigure and reconceptualise the university, but also to imbue it with revolutionary spirit. I asked what could be at stake in thinking about a 'Right' to the university against the background of the notion of the Right to the city. The potential relevance of the Right to the city, linked to the notion of 'inhabitation', is that it challenges the modern, technical and functional notion of 'habitat'. Habitat is devoid of any notion of politics, most pertinently political resistance. A contemplation of a Right to the university will have to have at its core the notion of 'inhabitation' that resonates with Lefebvre's notion of 'lived space'. This inhabitation would provide to students and staff a sense of place. By consistently thinking about and working on a curriculum that could reflect and respond to the broader student body and constructing spaces for intellectual discourse, academic community and friendship might have a chance to exist.

Affective Atmospheres

Anderson (2009, p. 77), in a reflection on 'affective atmospheres', asks how we could pay attention to the 'collective affects in which we live'. He is interested in asking 'what an "affective atmosphere" is and does'. For him it is the ambiguity of atmosphere that enables us to reflect on affective experience. He notes that a number of words and terms have been used to express atmosphere, amongst others 'a sense of place' (2009, p. 78). The notion of sense or spirit of place has been used also in spatial theory. The sense or spirit of the place is a notion that can be traced back to D.H. Lawrence, which he translated from the original Latin concept of 'genius loci, a guardian spirit that watches over a particular locale' (Tally 2013, p. 83). For Lawrence 'this "spirit" informs, if not directs and controls the ideas of the people who live in a place' (2013, p. 84). He relied on the notion to explain something about

² Paper delivered at #Must fall conference at the University of the Free State, October 2016.

the character of the people of a certain place that for him played a central role in understanding writing in specific times in specific places. Virginia Woolf, Umberto Eco and others have understood the spirit of place to be of great importance in influencing readers in their experience of literary texts (2013, p. 84). The notion of sense of place is helpful for me in understanding the aesthetic of neoliberalism and contemplating possible alternatives. As noted above, the sense of place of the neoliberal university is anti-intellectual and inhospitable to everything and everyone thwarting its common-sense.

Anderson explains how the word ‘atmosphere’ is used in everyday speech to refer to, for example, the atmosphere in a room, a street, a place of worship. For my purpose here, I want to think about the atmosphere at the neoliberal university. And, drawing on Anderson (2009, p. 78), to contemplate ‘how atmospheres may interrupt, perturb, haunt fixed persons, places or things’. Linking with Böhme, Anderson also regards atmosphere as something vague and indeterminate that at the same time can carry a singular quality. Atmospheres have an ‘unfinished quality’ and are in a constant process of transforming. ‘They are always being taken up and reworked in lived experience’ (2009, p. 79). Anderson notes the ‘classic affective qualities’ as the sublime, the tragic and the beautiful, but drawing on Dufrenne mentions also certain ‘minor atmospheres’, such as ‘grace, lightness and innocence’. He notes the extent to which Dufrenne places more emphasis on the spatiality of atmospheres than Böhme and argues that atmospheres have a ‘characteristic spatial form’ (2009, p. 80). Next I turn to an argument for complexity and slowness that provides an important means of linking the work on atmosphere and affect and which could, if heeded, enhance the possibility of justice in the neoliberal university.

Complexity and Slowness

Cilliers (2005, p. 255), in an argument for complexity, has made remarks that I find significant for a reflection on epistemic injustice and the possibility of epistemic justice within the context of the neoliberal university. As noted above, his argument for complexity and call for slowness build on the idea of new aesthetics as explained by Böhme. Cilliers’s starting point is that there is no agreement on what meaningful knowledge is and that we should acknowledge that the world is inherently complex. This acknowledgement of complexity encompasses also the limitation of our understanding of the world. He calls for ‘modest’ positions when engaging with complex problems. For him any failure to acknowledge complexity amounts not only to a technical error but an ethical one. Self-assurance, which in a way is part of a neoliberal aesthetic, is problematic for Cilliers because it prevents further investigation. At universities, where investigation should be the order of the day, one often encounters fixed positions from management, support staff and, sadly, academics—as said above, there is often an anti-intellectualism that reigns. Cilliers argues for creativity and says that we should be careful and responsible about the development of the imagination. This would entail taking risks and rejecting the safety of routine responses.

In a related argument for slowness, he reflects on modernism's urge to understand and control all future events. 'This demands co-ordinated and goal-oriented action in the present. Modernism becomes a project which demands our total commitment against the forces of irrationality and chaos' (Cilliers 2007, p. 54). He explains how modernism seeks to co-ordinate time by universalising time, ensuring that 'we all live in the "same time"'. The result of this is that private and public time are synchronised and that we are forced to live our time in step with this universalised and regulated notion of time (2007, p. 55). Cilliers notes that 'a subjective ... or phenomenological experience of time has to be sacrificed in order to generate a universal temporal framework in which we can operate efficiently' (2007, p. 55). Another effect is exactly the desire to make the future knowable. A call for slowness is also a call for time and space that could allow bodily presence to be experienced. Kundera (1996), in a work titled, *Slowness*, reflects on the technical, non-corporeal relation with speed displayed by a motor cyclist and compares it to the corporeal, embodied experience of a runner. He asks: 'Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?' Kundera (1988) has described the spirit of the novel as the spirit of complexity and continuity. The spirit of the novel and the notion of slowness can be related to atmosphere and affect.

An important question raised by Böhme (2017, p. 98) in his work on the new aesthetics is how behaviours can change atmosphere. He turns to interpersonal communication and how a specific mode of communication produces a common atmosphere. He responds critically to Jürgen Habermas's 'theory of communicative action', because of the exclusion of 'interpersonal atmosphere' that leads to the impression that subjects are independent from the way they express themselves and that the expression of others does not affect them in any way. Böhme refers to the distinction made by Austin between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. For him the perlocutionary act highlights communicative atmospheres, but he argues that even illocutionary speech can modify the mood of a conversation. He emphasises that communication is not only part of a language game, but has a 'performative effect, that is, an effect on the conversational atmosphere' (2017, p. 101). His main concern is to highlight the relational and bodily aspects of communication and ultimately the importance of interpersonal atmospheres for the possibility of communication. It could be useful to think here of the importance of academic writing in the curriculum versus the demands on writing for practice. Within law faculties in South Africa students are often trained to write 'office memoranda', letters to clients and heads of argument, according to a strict format. Writing and, ultimately, communication is nothing more than the strictest formula that also contributes to the atmosphere of the neoliberal university.

Aesthetic Education

Returning to the central question of how an atmosphere could respond to the neoliberal university, Böhme (2017, p. 116) explores the possibilities of 'aesthetic humanist education' under the conditions of technical civilisation and aesthetic economy. He asks: 'what does life under the conditions of technical

civilization mean?', invoking the extent to which human communication and perception are dominated by technology. In a context of technical civilisation we find a radical separation between functionality and emotion. Aesthetic economy for him refers to the phase of economic development that we find ourselves in at present. Consumption is central in the context of technical civilisation and under aesthetic economy. The human features coming to the fore under conditions of technical civilisation and aesthetic economy are objectivity, punctuality, functionality, mobility and fungibility. Enjoyment is not important, but rather consumption; people live without passion, disembodied and 'relationship-poor' (2017, p. 117). For my purposes these are also features of neoliberalism; the lack of atmosphere created under neoliberal conditions and more pertinently, at the neoliberal university.

Böhme (2017, p. 118) holds that atmospheres could play a role in aesthetic education. Relying on Ströker and Schmitz he describes atmospheres as 'attuned space' and 'quasi-objective moods'. Atmospheres are described as 'the spheres of felt bodily presence'. Of importance is the claim that atmospheres can create meaning; that they are not only something that is felt but something that can be produced by specific material conditions. Turning to education he asks if we can identify something like 'atmospheric competence?' (2017, p. 119). The first step of an aesthetic education is to learn to perceive atmospheres. He explains that this will have three consequences: firstly, it shows us how to recognise and to learn the meaning of bodily presence. Secondly, the body will be rediscovered as a way to engage emotionally. Dispositions in this vein are experienced in a physical way, and we find these dispositions always in a spatial setting. Thirdly, we develop an 'attitude of patience'. Böhme (2017, pp. 119–120) urges that 'atmospheres take time and openness, and we must allow ourselves to be involved and touched by them'. I read this also as a call for slowness. We should not only learn to be aware of atmospheres and to be involved in them, but should learn also to make atmospheres.

The challenge of perceiving atmospheres is that it will entail one to open oneself emotionally and to be more aware of bodily experience. By being aware of and by actively making atmosphere we can manage to take leave of 'slavish consumerism' or formalism and instrumentalism (2017, p. 121). It is important that the call for aesthetic education and a conscious engagement with atmosphere is not a rejection of the contemporary world. Böhme (2017, p. 121) argues that atmosphere is open to, engages critically with and contributes to contemporary life. As Anderson (2009, p. 80) argues, atmospheres cannot be neatly divided 'into either an analytical or pragmatic distinction between affect and emotion'. Their indeterminacy enables them to mix narrative and non-narrative, signifying and a-signifying elements. For him affective atmospheres can teach us something about the 'ambiguities of affect/emotion'—something of which the neoliberal university is in dire need. I want to contend that to respond to the urgencies of transformation, to address enduring racism, sexism and homophobia we need different atmospheres and as a first step aesthetic education.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by drawing on Mbembe's (2015, p. xiii) invocation in the preface to the African edition of *On the postcolony* of the words of W.E. Du Bois that 'Life is not simply fact'. He highlights the role that African music played in the writing of the book. He says that the traditions of the African novel and late twentieth-century African music taught him 'that to think is to experiment' (2015, p. xv). 'To think', he says 'is also to recover and rescue the figurative power of allegory as it applies to specific realms of human experience' (2015, p. xv). Lastly, he says that to think is 'to embark on a voyage of the mind'. He comments also on critical thinking, saying that it means 'to work with the fault lines, to feel the chaotic touch of our senses, to bring the compositional logics of our world to language' (2015, p. xv). He further describes critique as 'witnessing' and as 'endless vigilance, interrogation and anticipation'. Mbembe (2015, p. xvi) declares the role that a certain aesthetics, 'art, literature, music and dance', taught him that 'there is a sensory experience of our lives that encompasses innumerable un-named and un-nameable shapes, hues and textures that "objective knowledge" has failed to capture'.

The main objective of this piece, by drawing on work on atmosphere, affect and complexity, has been to reflect on the way in which a certain neoliberal logic and rationality have become common-sense, for my purposes, at universities. I referred in the introduction to the three features of space identified by Massey, namely interrelationality; multiplicity and continuous construction. For me these features are crucial also for contemplating a different aesthetic: one that acknowledges bodily-presence, sensory experiences, complexity and the need to slow down, to step aside from counting, competitiveness and suffocation. This kind of aesthetic could influence the idea of the university as a public space, a space of inhabitation and could offer an alternative to present day campuses where one is allowed only if biometrics are captured; where interdicts reign, preventing any form of protest or dissent. It could transform the curriculum, disclose opportunities for ideas and reflection and produce more than functionaries to further the machine. Crucially, it will enhance the world outside the university if graduates could contribute to a life-world that is not one of mere instrumentality. Imagine the possibilities for academic community and friendship if we realise that 'life is not mere fact'.

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