

# SCHOLARLY PAPER

## A social realist ontology for developing Afrocentric curricula in Africa

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### Abstract

*This paper applies a social realist ontology in conceptualising Afrocentric curricula in South African universities. The analysis considers South African media reports related to students' demands for decolonised curricula. The methodology involved textually analysing various historic educational incidents in South Africa, as well as theories associated with Afrocentrism. The analysis highlights that to develop decolonised and Afrocentric curricula, simultaneous consideration is required of the powers of social structures, including race and class, African culture, as well as the agency of students and academics. The analysis concludes that for Afrocentric and decolonised curricula to emerge, it is essential to incorporate the histories, aspirations and cultural affiliations of Africans, who were previously marginalised in the nation's tertiary system. Furthermore, this research highlights that within structures of academic disciplines, it is essential to incorporate African academics and students in developing curricula to create learning experiences which enable a sense of belonging for all students in our universities.*

**Keywords:** #RhodesMustFall movement, Afrocentric curricula, social realist ontology, curriculum.

### Introduction

Over the past few years, South Africa has experienced turmoil in its tertiary domain (Angu 2018a; Langa 2017), precipitated by students' demands for a transformed, Africanised and decolonised curriculum. Evidence of these demands centred around the #RhodesMustFall movement, which received international attention and subsequently spread to universities around the globe (Nyamnjoh 2016). The movement originated at the University of Cape Town (UCT) when students demanded the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the institution's grounds (Chaudhuri 2016). The students regarded the statue as offensive and representative of the oppression of African

people under colonialism, slavery and apartheid. Chumani Maxwele, credited as one of the student founders of the #RhodesMustFall movement, stated that 'seeing the statue every day pained me [and] it made me very angry' (Newsmaker 2015). In his view, the offence was not simply that it was 'a statue, as many claim'. Instead, he recalls that 'Rhodes didn't want black people [and] at some point, UCT also didn't want black people'. Maxwele continued that the #RhodesMustFall movement was about 'black people ... , about the history of black people', which in his and other protestors' views was marginalised in tertiary spaces (Newsmaker 2015). While Maxwele was reasoning from the agential perspective of a student, he is not alone in voicing distress over the perception that South African institutions of higher learning maintain pedagogic environments that apply culturally homogenous curricula. UCT's vice chancellor, Mamokgethi Phakeng, believes that 'black pain continue[s] to be felt by students who did not even have first-hand experience of apartheid' (Etheridge 2018). Phakeng also states that in relation to South Africa's historical past, 'young, white people *also* have issues that they have to deal with' in the tertiary environment (Etheridge 2018, emphasis added). For these reasons, she 'want[s] to create a university culture where young people ... [feel] their issues ... [are] being heard, so they ... [do not] reach the levels of anger and desperation that ... resulted in various protests over the years' (Etheridge 2018). South Africa's tertiary curricula thus require evolution if *all* students are to feel included, welcome and reflected in our modes of teaching and learning in the university. There is a risk that continuing the current culturally hegemonic curriculum will not only alienate significant proportions of students, but also create future tensions which may disrupt the academic project for all students. My contribution to the debate on decolonisation thus articulates a social realist ontology within which academics and researchers can map experiences of inclusion or alienation in our universities. This, I suggest, will highlight how an Afrocentric curriculum can foster the development of plural institutions and epistemically inclusive academics.

## **Social realist ontology as a metaphoric blueprint of experiences**

The philosophical branch of ontology aims to understand and express human conceptions of what reality entails or what it means to exist (Guarino 1995). In the same manner that architectural blueprints may be utilised to map the structure of a building, social ontologies are applicable for mapping human experiences in the real world. A distinction ought to be made between physical and social ontologies. This study is concerned with the social domain. Searle (2006) describes a social ontology as a set of social facts, objects, processes and events which shape and influence the ways in which individuals mediate their reality. Within the sphere of higher education, facts include the knowledge we aim to share with our students and that which we aim to interrogate or further develop. Social objects include our curricula, textbooks and technologies which are applied for teaching and learning purposes. Social processes and events refer to teaching and learning strategies which academics and students apply as they engage content in various disciplinary fields. When conceptualising a social ontology in the higher education domain, an illustration of reality thus requires facts, objects, processes and events (Searle 2006).

Searle (2006: 13) asserts that to effectively analyse social ontologies or reality, it is necessary to distinguish between 'observer-independent' and 'observer-relative' entities. Observer-independent

entities, such as books, a building or a written curriculum, are tangible objects. Bhaskar (2008: 3) describes these elements as 'generative mechanisms'. In contrast, observer-relative and specifically social entities include mechanisms such as language, culture and religion. Ontologically, awareness and application of these entities requires the agency of human beings. Unlike tangible, observer-independent entities, these objects are immaterial, yet real. Without human agency or ontological narratives, what we experience and understand to be a constitutive part of culture or language would be inaccessible. Observer-relative entities emerge from the relations between collectives of human beings. Our perception of observer-relative phenomena relies on our interaction with observer-independent phenomena. These two types of phenomena interact with each other. Humans make sense of the two spheres by juxtaposing and considering their interactions. As Searle (2006: 13) states, 'the existence of consciousness and intentionality, on which observer-dependent facts rest ... are themselves observer-independent phenomena.' This is because human beings developed languages, cultures and social forms of organisation to make sense of, interact with and manipulate the natural environment for our own purposes.

A realist ontology, while only one of many ontological forms, is applicable when attempting to understand experiences of teaching and learning, belonging and alienation, and even curricula in the South African higher education system. In the case of the #RhodesMustFall movement, students reacted to both observer-independent and observer-relative entities. A prime example of an observer-independent variable was the statue of Cecil Rhodes on UCT campus. As a cultural artefact, to students it symbolised the institutional racism which pervaded the physical and social spaces of the campus, including the curricula. Referencing the ideas of Carl Jung, Nouriani (2011: 19) states that symbols, including statues, 'play a vital role in the makeup of our psyches and the building of human society'. Nouriani (2011: 20) also stresses that 'cultural symbols carry meaning, evoke emotions [and] ideas from the deep unconscious'. We may therefore deduce that the Rhodes statue at UCT had similar effects, albeit negative ones. The statue evoked strong emotions of resistance and protesting students rejected the white, colonial meanings it represented.

The statue reminded students and was symbolic of the sociopolitical culture which enabled the oppression of a significant proportion of South Africans under colonialism and apartheid. Furthermore, it kindled students' beliefs that culturally, South African universities continue to operate under and perpetuate Eurocentric principles. According to Hunn (2004: 65), Eurocentric practices are seen to emerge when 'acts of omission or commission that belittle, attempt to invalidate, and render impotent the philosophies and practices of non-Eurocentric people are committed'. The Rhodes statue represented such marginalisation of African culture in South African universities and was thus removed from the campus.

Having considered how the social domain influences and inflects ontology within the university, I now detail two modes of curricula implementation in the university. This will buttress my claim of the importance of realising the potentiality that lies in tapping into Afrocentric modes of knowing.

## Homogeneous and plural modes of curricula implementation

The (symbolic) rejection of the Rhodes statue at UCT is directly related to the history of higher education development in South Africa and how mainstream, disciplinary curricula have been

implemented. A significant proportion of South Africans generally as well as students and staff in the higher education sector, as witnessed during the #RhodesMustFall protests, consider contemporary curricula to be founded on Eurocentric principles (Angu 2018b; Heleta 2016; Le Grange 2002, 2016; Van Wyk & Higgs 2012). The consequence of such western-oriented homogeneity in the classroom is that some students feel excluded or marginalised as they interact with course content, expert voices and teaching methods that do not reflect their lived realities. As Le Grange (2002: 68) argues, since the emergence of our democratic dispensation, South Africa has failed to 'provide alternative frameworks for knowledge production, to those provided by the dominant western knowledge system'. Le Grange (2002) laments the absence of a plurality of epistemologies in our curricula and the resultant privileging of argumentation as preferred in western contexts. The effects of this epistemic hegemony in mainstream departments of South African universities deserve critical attention. Angu (2018a: 18), referencing Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), argues that 'Africa as a whole is still defined by colonial matrices of power, culture, and knowledge'. If Africa and all Africans are to progress from the historical clutches of colonialism and coloniality, then universities throughout the continent, including in South Africa, must incorporate both currently accepted epistemologies as well as those knowledge traditions and ways of arguing which emerge from the local contexts in which we find ourselves. To continuously uphold western, epistemic homogeneity as the sole pedagogic tool for developing mainstream disciplines is to deny the African continent the opportunity to tackle its numerous challenges by drawing on its own problem-solving mechanisms. Nyoka (2013) addresses these tensions in African institutions of higher learning by applying the concepts of negation and affirmation. Indeed, due to the morphostatic cultural content which continues to be embedded in curricula, a significant proportion of African students experience processes of negation. Rather than being affirmed by learning experiences which incorporate their cultures, traditions and histories into mainstream curricula, their identity is relegated to the margins (Angu 2018b; Nyoka 2013). From this position, it thus becomes necessary to consider the role of an Afrocentric curriculum in the context of contemporary African universities.

### **Afrocentric curriculum**

An Afrocentric curriculum is necessary to reposition African epistemologies in the centre of the learning experience. While powerful epistemologies, including those inherited from the colonial and apartheid eras, should not be eradicated, they should not occupy the centre of the higher education experience in the African context. Mignolo (2009: 175) refers to the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems and cultures as resulting from an 'epistemic force'. One of the results of this violence is that Africans, including higher education practitioners, have had to embark on a decolonial path (Mignolo 2009). In Mignolo's (2009: 161) view, these actors have one thing in common – 'the colonial wound, the fact that regions and people around the world have been classified as underdeveloped economically and mentally'. The decolonial path, in which an Afrocentric curriculum acts as an enabling tool, rejects epistemic privileges (Mignolo 2009). Significantly, one of the reasons for shifting from Eurocentric curricula to Afrocentric knowledge structures is that the hegemonic system which imposes such epistemic homogeneity in the first place denies itself the cultural and agential richness which Africa offers to mainstream disciplines. As Mignolo (2009: 162) stresses, the decolonial path aims to unveil 'epistemic silences

of Western epistemology and affirm ... the epistemic rights of the [epistemically] devalued. Maintaining epistemic silences in African universities risks the implementation of ethnocentric curricula. Indeed, Eurocentric curricula aim to cast aside the epistemologies of those categorised as 'other', alien or negated (Kumalo 2018; Nyoka 2013). Young, Haffejee and Corsun (2017) view ethnocentrism as a principle which constrains cross-cultural knowledge, interactions and adaptation. For these reasons, Afrocentric curricula fulfil the function of reducing epistemic hegemony and arrogance.

To implement Afrocentric curricula in African institutions of higher learning, a theoretical paradigm suitable to our local context is required. Nyoka's (2013) valuing of curricula affirmation and Asante's (1991) centric ideas offer concepts which may guide curriculum developers in forming structures that value the African experience. Via application of the concepts of affirmation and centrality, both scholars advocate the embracing of epistemic principles which are uniquely African in the curriculum. Asante (1991: 171) expresses his valuing of centric ideas as follows:

The centrist paradigm is supported by research showing that the most productive method of teaching any student is to place his or her group within the centre of the context of knowledge.

Asante stresses that learning experiences should value students' cultures. Eurocentric curricula, being exclusionary of African cultures, are unable to demonstrate this. Perpetuation of such a pedagogical regime in South Africa is untenable. Instead, the Afrocentric approach aims to function as a theoretical 'reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person' (Asante 1991: 171). In this way the 'Afrocentric approach seeks in every situation the appropriate centrality of the African person' in the curriculum and in the classroom (Asante 1991: 171). Nyoka (2013) articulates the same concern with respect to the learning experiences of African university students. In his perspective, they are victims of processes of 'extraversion' through which the 'knowledge production process [occurs in which] data is exported and theory imported' (Nyoka 2013: 10). Such epistemic processes are ineffective in holistically explaining local African contexts and challenges (Nyoka 2013).

The 2015 student rebellions in South Africa are evidence that our curricula continue to perpetuate epistemic traditions which engage in cultural abjection (Kumalo 2018). Students are struggling to perceive themselves in curricula spaces. South African history indicates that in a formerly colonised nation, there is still a sense that the educational institutions which have been mandated to assist in processes of redress and socioeconomic transformation in fact persist in perpetuating inequalities via their philosophies and modes of instruction (Nyamnjoh 2016). As far back as 1995, former minister of higher education Sibusiso Bengu clearly indicated that there was a need to transform higher education from its apartheid-era mandate to a new democratic focus which aims to reverse apartheid's crippling effects (Fourie 1999). The South African government urged the establishment of institutional transformation forums, and the Council on Higher Education was initiated to play an overseeing role in these processes (Fourie 1999). Twenty years later, with the emergence of student protests and persistent scholarly calls for epistemic pluralism, it is evident the transformation process in South Africa is far from complete.

If education is approached as a communicative process, as Asante (1991: 29) argues, 'students [may be] empowered when information is presented in such a way that they can walk out of the classroom feeling that they are a part of the information'. This feeling, I argue, is rooted in one's capacity to see oneself reflected in the curricula taught. Asante (1991: 29) continues that 'self-perception and self-acceptance are the primary tools for communicating and receiving communication [because] teaching is pre-eminently a communicating profession'. For these reasons, in the South African and broader African contexts, it is essential to develop curricula which enable methods that bring into lecture halls the histories, cultures, traditions, challenges and aspirations of Africans. Simply put, the curricula ought to allow African subjects<sup>1</sup> to see themselves reflected in what is taught, in what they read and in the institutional cultures which constitute these spaces of learning.

At a discussion hosted by the Cape Town Centre for Conflict Resolution, participants voiced their experiences of 'universities [as] alienating institutions, because they fail to address the needs of black students' (Paterson 2018). These concerns reflect those identified by Asante amongst African American students in the United States. They also reflect the concerns of a study by Bangeni and Kapp (2005) which highlighted students' shifting perspectives of home and self-conception after entering the university environment. The latter study found that, as social structures, institutions of higher learning are powerful entities which influence the identity formation of experts and professionals who eventually enter the workplace and economy (Bangeni & Kapp 2005). According to Karabo Khakhau, former president of the Students' Representative Council (SRC) at UCT, in reference to contemporary curricula at that institution and in South Africa more widely, 'knowledge acquired outside the context of socioeconomic and cultural realities ... [is] insufficient' (Paterson 2018). Khakhau highlights the perspective that teaching and learning experiences should embody the dreams, struggles and hopes of students, but that mainstream curricula tend to lack sufficient references to or inclusions of the daily experiences of the masses of African people. The need for curricula inclusivity, as articulated by Mashau (2018: 2), should 'allow voices of those in the margins of our communities to be heard'. As a pedagogic tool, Afrocentric curricula enable the incorporation of the voices, histories and aspirations of African people, who to date have not been included in the design of mainstream western curricula.

It is the explicit aim of an Afrocentric curriculum to be inclusive of the languages, cultures and self-esteem of all African students. This includes the masses of potential black South African tertiary entrants. Giddings (2001: 463) proposes that to implement such a curriculum, it is essential to apply methods which 'deconstruct hegemonic pillars' in the curriculum and to find ways to 'assist students of African descent in maintaining a positive self-concept'. This is achieved by incorporating the cultural heritages, academic voices and histories of African-descended people into disciplinary-based curricula (Giddings 2001). An Afrocentric curriculum should also affirm the role that African intellectuals, both on the continent and throughout the African diaspora, play in the development of scholarly knowledge. Highlighting the critical role that different types of knowledge have in implementing an Afrocentric curriculum, Shizha (2013: 3) states that, 'when it comes to school knowledge, it is those that control political and economic resources that impose

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<sup>1</sup> 'African subjects' refers to all who currently live in Africa, both black and white.

their ideas, opinions, thoughts and ideologies on those considered subordinates'. Disciplinary practitioners and curricula developers in African institutions of higher learning should be empowered to incorporate the agency of those at the sociocultural margins of the university.

While the objective of this analysis is not to deny the critical role of English in developing students in disciplinary-specific domains, the lack of local South African languages in mainstream tertiary studies, not only in the humanities but also in the natural and financial sciences, adds to a sense of alienation amongst the youth. Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011) believe that to preserve South African languages and maintain respect for them, it is necessary to create spaces in universities where students can draw on, apply and learn through the application of local languages. Scholars in South Africa are increasingly arguing for translanguaging strategies in disciplinary courses (Madiba 2014; Makalela 2015). The aim of such strategies is to incorporate indigenous South African tongues alongside English in students' learning experiences.

The following long-term demand is included in the official Rhodes Must Fall mission statement by 'an independent collective of students, workers and staff who ... [came] together to end institutionalised racism and patriarchy at UCT':

Implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure – through addressing not only content, but [also] *languages* and methodologies of education and learning.<sup>2</sup>

In the above conception, an Afrocentric curriculum is viewed as requiring and incorporating African languages into its framework. The #RhodesMustFall movement believes that applying local languages in diverse faculties across South African universities could tangibly demonstrate that they value the cultures and linguistic traditions of the majority of South Africans. Applying the local vernaculars, as embodiments of the value systems and aspirations of Africa, is an inclusive pedagogic method. Inclusivity, in this context, refers to a methodology which acknowledges and incorporates the cultural diversity that students bring to our universities and into our knowledge development processes (Nkamta & Ngwenya 2017).

There are multiple and complex challenges in theorising the implementation of an Afrocentric paradigm in the context of Africa's higher education systems. On the one hand, these challenges encompass notions of culture and identity; on the other, they express concerns related to self-awareness, self-esteem, belonging and agency of African people as manifested in the curriculum. Asante (1991) argues that educational institutions should implement curricula which reflect the interests of society. It is thus in the interests of African universities to implement curricula which draw on and demarginalise the history, culture and agency of the majority of African people (Angu 2018a; Kumalo 2018; Nyoka 2013). In so doing, universities can apply methodologies which explicitly aim to reverse the outcomes of the apartheid era. Bantu Education curricula structures, for instance, reflected government interests during the apartheid era. According to Blamires (1955: 100),

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2 [http://www.jwtc.org.za/resources/docs/salon-volume-9/RMF\\_Combined.pdf](http://www.jwtc.org.za/resources/docs/salon-volume-9/RMF_Combined.pdf) (emphasis added).

The intention and effect of the [Bantu Education] Act is to ... separate African education from European education. It is essentially an apartheid measure [which ensures] that separate education will mean inferior education. Government spokesmen have stressed the need for more 'practical' and less 'academic' education for Africans.

Undoubtedly, the educational modes introduced and validated by the apartheid government were intended to create two separate educational systems. This pedagogic ideology was affirmed by the Eiselen Commission (1949–1951). Its express purpose was to convince the authorities of the day to take control of the education system of black people. Christie and Collins (1982: 59) state that the commission 'considered that black education should be an integral part of a carefully planned policy of segregated socio-economic development of black people'. The report which emerged from this commission served as the foundational policy which enabled the emergence of Bantu Education. Ironically, sections of the white populace believed that even this racially contextualised instruction of black people was a threat to their socioeconomic supremacy. As Christie and Collins (1982: 64) reflect:

It ... seem[ed] that whites had little confidence in the ability of schools to reproduce black labour in the form they desired; it is possible that they themselves, believing in the ideology of mobility through education, feared that schooling would operate in the same way for blacks, and thus impede the continuous provision of the lowest level of workers.

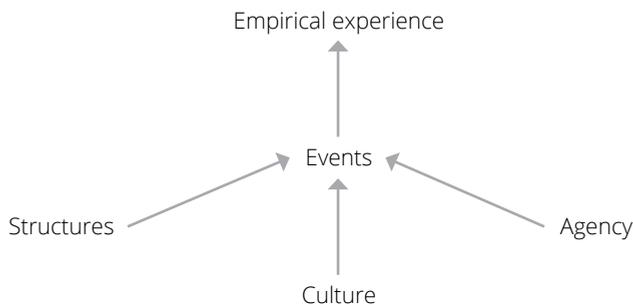
When a tertiary-level curriculum, culture and identity are juxtaposed as active elements in students' learning experiences, it is necessary to employ frameworks which are able to account for each of these social powers. Social realism, as an ontological framework, is able to illustrate this interplay between social structures, human culture and agency.

## **Applying a social realist ontology towards developing Afrocentric curricula**

Considering the harmful effects of Eurocentric curricula on the self-esteem and socioeconomic aspirations of black people during the apartheid era, it is necessary today to develop a methodology for implementing Afrocentric curricula in South African universities; curricula which deliberately enable discursive spaces to include the struggles, hopes and dreams of African people. Afrocentric curricula, which place Africa and African perspectives and experiential knowledge at the centre of global considerations, should aim to uncover problems that are peculiar to our local contexts and, perhaps more critically, address conditions which continue to harm the masses. This includes poverty. However, to implement an Afrocentric pedagogic methodology, it is essential for such strategising to unfold within a conceptual framework which is capable of highlighting the various elements which constitute curricula. Social ontologies, in the view of this analysis, are useful blueprints for the conceptual mapping of curricula. Guarino (1995: 628) defines an ontology as

'the study of the organisation and nature of the world independently of ... our knowledge of it'. Searle (2006: 12) adds that social ontologies are 'mode[s] of existence of social objects'. Deriving from these definitions, social ontologies aid researchers in identifying the various parts of the social phenomena they examine and how these elements may generate human experiences. A curriculum constitutes such a social phenomenon. As such, it possesses a structure with various parts or components. To analyse the nature or composition of curricula, I use a social ontology developed by Archer (1995), according to whom all human experiences emerge from social events. This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Social realist ontology



Source: Archer (1995: 193, 194)

In Archer's (1995) social realist ontology, effective analysis of human experiences requires identifying their origins. Her ontology holds that human experiences emerge from the interplay and combined powers of social structures, culture and agency. Through the activities of human agency, structural and cultural systems generate varying experiences (Archer 1995). In the context of this analysis, examples of experiences are those which derive from teaching and learning, the curriculum and institutional cultures. Afrocentrism, as a philosophical paradigm, may also be experienced in teaching and learning events and students' experiences of them. From within a social realist ontological framework, the actions and cultures of agents may generate curricula which are Afrocentric. To develop understandings of the presence or absence of Afrocentric curricula, a social realist ontology is applicable for conceptualising the emergence or constraining of experiences related to Afrocentric curricula in South Africa. Two key principles associated with processes of enablement and constraint are morphostasis and morphogenesis (Archer 1995). When morphostasis occurs, previous traditions, practices or ideologies are maintained; there is no change. During morphostasis, agents behave and manipulate structural and cultural systems in such a way that Afrocentric curricula are unable to emerge. However, when morphogenesis occurs, the interplay between structures, culture and agency creates propitious conditions for an Afrocentric curriculum to emerge and radically redefine the ways in which we conceptualise the university in our context. During morphogenesis, and in accordance with the position being advanced in this analysis, structural and cultural systems align in a manner which produces Afrocentric experiences, curricula and culture in institutions (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Morphostasis and morphogenesis of Afrocentric learning experiences

<b>Morphostasis</b>	<b>Morphogenesis</b>
Constrained Afrocentric experiences	Enabled Afrocentric experiences
Absence of Afrocentric curricula or methodology	Presence of Afrocentric curricula or methodology
Afrocentric paradigm constrained by structures, culture and agency	Afrocentric paradigm enabled by structures, culture and agency

Source: Inspired by Archer (1995: 165)

Theories of morphostasis and morphogenesis are relevant to the South African context in respect of attempts to implement more Africanised university curricula. They assist researchers to analyse various configurations of social structures, culture and agency, as well as how, in the forms of policy and methods of assessment, they generate experiences that may be described as African or Afrocentric. Morphostasis is the opposite process of morphogenesis. Theoretically, this ontological construct enables identification of the configurations of culture, structure and agency which stunt an Africanised curriculum. In morphogenic and morphostatic discoveries, it is critical to scrutinise the nature of the *interplay* between structure, culture and agency. Archer (1995: 8) expresses the intricate connectivity between agency and societal structures as follows: ‘Neither the structuring of society nor the social interaction responsible for it can be discussed in isolation of one another.’ The implications of this theory for implementing Afrocentric methodologies and curricula are that without renewed interactions between key actors in the South African tertiary scene, we will remain in a Eurocentric state of morphostasis. Without incorporating the cultural and socioeconomic worlds of all students into our curricula and methods, morphostasis persists. As Adelia Carstens argues in reference to the decolonial project in South Africa, ‘solutions often ... [lie] in the very discussion we have with each other’ (in Eybers 2018). Failure to evolve our methodologies may lead to a repetition of the history of violence and rebellion amongst South African students. A social realist ontology, when applied to history, reveals how configurations of structure, culture and agency which produce morphostasis, or the persistence of imbalanced power relations, will explode in tangible ways. Table 1 illustrates how the 1976 Soweto uprising may be analysed via a social realist ontology by identifying real generative mechanisms.

As with the ontological mapping of the Soweto uprising, the #RhodesMustFall protests at UCT, including the now infamous poo-throwing incident, enable us to interrogate how the theory of morphogenesis can be applied to understanding the emergence of an event and experiences (Table 2). During 1976, students experienced the imposition of Afrikaans as a morphostatic constraint on their cultural development. Likewise, years later at UCT, student activists continued a similar cultural endeavour; however, this time the protest was more than just the rejection of Afrikaans. Instead, students rallied against the oppression and celebration of coloniality, with some seeing the statue of Cecil Rhodes as the continued instantiation of colonial domination and oppression.

**Table 1.** Critical realist ontology

Domain	Associated variables
<i>Empirical</i>	Protests, resistance and state violence
<i>Actual</i>	Soweto uprising and student rebellion
<i>Real (generative mechanisms)</i>	
Agents:	Students, police and state agents
Culture:	Students, youth, educational, Afrikaans, apartheid
Social structures:	The state, schools, police force, student formations, class, race

**Table 2.** Social realist ontology

Domain	Associated variables
<i>Empirical</i>	#RhodesMustFall symbolic victory
<i>Actual</i>	Removal of Rhodes statue
<i>Real (generative mechanisms)</i>	
Agents:	Chumani Maxwele, vice chancellor and deputy vice chancellor, SRC president, South African police members
Culture:	Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, postcolonialism
Social structures:	SRC, Heritage Western Cape, #RhodesMustFall movement, National Heritage Resources Act

## Manifesting structure, culture and agency in Afrocentric curricula

Given that Eurocentric curricula negated the political hopes, languages and socioeconomic aspirations of large segments of African people, it is necessary to reconfigure existing pedagogic methodologies in a manner which embraces African cultures and knowledge systems. Arguing for an inclusive model of instruction, Donohue and Bornman (2014) point out that South Africa's diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups place the country in a prime position to develop curricula which draw on the rich identities of all inhabitants. In their view, inclusive curricula enable teachers in their attempts to accommodate students with diverse needs and learning styles. An Afrocentric curriculum, if applied strategically, will be able to incorporate the diversity which South Africa's students represent and embody in our teaching and learning spaces.

### Learning from African American perspectives on Afrocentricity

African Americans experienced their political freedom from statutory segregation roughly 30 years before most African nations achieved independence from colonial states. As such, they are a few generations ahead of South Africa in developing Afrocentric educational structures and curricula. Indeed, as Giddings (2001: 462) notes,

Two distinct historical developments among African American people inform what can be called a movement for Afrocentric content infusion. The first is the late 1960s

mass call by parents and community leaders for more control over their schools. The second development is the popularisation of the Afrocentric idea and the embracing of African culture by African Americans.

In articulating the challenges faced in developing Afrocentric curricula, Giddings (2001) addresses the view that curricula are naturally deracialised. He states that 'although we like to think of education as race-neutral and politically neutral, education is a part of racism' (Giddings 2001: 468). This claim is premised on the fact that we teach from positions that are informed by the political conditions in which we are located. Thus, in the context of the black South African experience less than 30 years into the post-apartheid dispensation, it is necessary to consider the learning styles of African students, as embedded in and emergent from their home and community cultures. Within the American context, which I perceive as being analogous to sectors of South Africa's student populace, there exists among learners an 'atomistic-objective [mode of learning which] is identified as the style that reinforces the cultural traditions of European American learners' (Giddings 2001: 475). This mode of learning entails processes in which learners '[break] down an experience into its parts or atoms, separating oneself from the experience [while preferring] regularity, environmental control, and objectivity by placing little value on the meaning of an event' (Giddings 2001: 475). This type of learning is perceived as emerging from the cultural and social organisation and values of the west. However, and as Giddings (2001) further argues, this mode of learning does not always correlate with the forms of social organisation and cultural systems from which students of African descent emerge.

According to Willis (1989), users of a synthetic-personal mode of learning combine a variety of experiences to access the *essence* of knowledge in the classroom. Such students appreciate and lean towards experimentation, improvisation, and meaningful interaction with others and learning contexts (Willis 1989). Unlike the atomistic style of learning, this mode of learning involves interaction, negotiation and developing shared meanings through interactive learning (Botha, Van der Westhuizen & De Swardt 2005). While it is acknowledged that not all African-descended students display tendencies associated with the synthetic-personal mode, just as all western-descended students cannot be categorised in the atomistic sphere, there are values and principles in the synthetic-personal mode which resemble those found in African modes of organisation. For example, synthetic-personal modes of learning mirror principles of communalism on the African continent. Wafula (2003) claims that communalism was the pervasive philosophy underpinning the organisation of most precolonial African societies, which placed the community at the centre of their organisational structures. The individual was seen as relying on the community for his or her existence, while the community, in turn, relied on the individuals that constituted it (Ayttey 2006). Wafula (2003: viii) claims that communalism 'was a deliberately desired social structure which was established and zealously sustained by a people's will and desire to survive under the most certain and tried conditions'. He also asserts that communalism has persisted, starting from the emergence of human beings in Africa, through the colonial era, though it was attacked, and it remains with us today in various forms in Africa and throughout the diaspora. So embedded are the principles and values associated with communalism that it has even aided in the organisation of family units. Wafula (2003: 35, emphasis added) states that

[The] extended family structure ... was the foundation of traditional African communalism. The structure extended a *web of relatedness* among different extended families ensuring a fibre of relatedness among all the families of the ethnic group. This union was extended to the living, dead, fauna and flora.

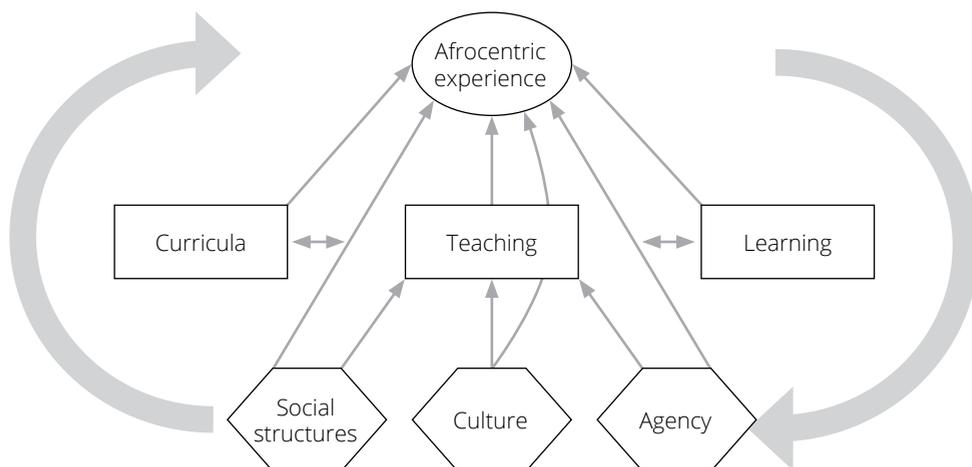
While principles of communalism, like the synthetic-personal style of learning, embody the values of interaction, community and relatedness, the atomistic-objective style of learning borrows from capitalism's emphasis on the individual (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton 2007). Given the dichotomy between African and western modes of learning and organisation, an Afrocentric curriculum has a specific purpose in the South African context. It aims to enable the incorporation of indigenous African principles and knowledge as valid, necessary and relevant in contemporary learning experiences undergone by African students. While embracing certain features of the atomistic-objective model, including individual writing, reading and planning, an Afrocentric curriculum must also apply principles associated with the synthetic-personal style of learning. By so doing, disciplinary practitioners ensure they draw on the cultural systems from which a significant proportion of South African students emerge. An Afrocentric curriculum drawing on principles of communalism must therefore aim to make explicit to learners the interrelatedness between their disciplinary fields of study, their communities, families and self-identities. Such a curriculum must also aim to achieve the objective of strengthening the self-esteem of African students by inculcating in them an awareness of their dependence on the social and physical worlds, which in turn depend on African sociality as individuals and communities.

## Concluding remarks

The period between the Soweto uprising of 1976 and the #RhodesMustFall protests indicates that while South African institutions of higher learning have made strides towards contributing to social justice in our fledgling democracy, more development is required to create a tertiary environment which is epistemically diverse. Failure to develop more inclusive, Africanised and Afrocentric curricula will result in morphostasis or the perpetuation of curricula experiences which lead to student protests (Archer 1995). In the framework of a social realist ontology, the agency, cultures and social modes of organisation emerging from Africa are excluded in the theoretical underpinnings of many mainstream pedagogic practices. Afrocentric curricula should therefore enable the incorporation of the value systems and principles of social organisation which underpin communalism – the philosophical foundation of much of precolonial Africa.

An Afrocentric ontology is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows how it is possible to incorporate African cultures, principles of social organisation and the agency of African people into contemporary curricula. The illustrated domains are rich in diversity, and future studies in Africa's multitude of local contexts should reveal the powers of each. Such studies should, for example, highlight the extent to which students and lecturers perceive their ability to exert their agency in a manner which enables implementing Afrocentric curricula. While an Afrocentric approach – including principles such as communalism – to curricula design may not be a solution to all experiences of alienation or marginalisation encountered by students in our tertiary institutions,

**Figure 3.** A social realist Afrocentric ontology



Source: Author

there is much to be gained from such an approach in South Africa. Given that Afrocentrism aims to embed the cultures, aspirations and identities of students' families and communities in the curriculum, including those of students from outside South Africa's borders, it guards against xenophobia and draws on the values of social justice. Often, the cultural sphere of students' identities is revealed in the personal narratives they share (Carstens & Alston 2014). When disciplinary practitioners incorporate the agency, histories and hopes of Africans into curricula, they apply the principles of social justice: 'equality, equity, and justice' (Rambiritch 2018: 48). On the contrary, maintaining Eurocentric curricula is not only socially unjust, but prolongs morphostasis and the inequality of learning experiences amongst our students. The manifestations of these inequalities, both on and off campus, are undesirable. They lead to alienation and intellectual rebellion on campus, while indirectly producing future professionals who are divorced from African knowledge systems and modes of organisation. This is an untenable path for the African continent. The core purpose of Afrocentric curricula in South Africa and on the continent, therefore, is to aid in the greater endeavour of creating a more equitable and socially just society by drawing on those values and principles which enabled social organisation in precolonial Africa. Re-examining the relevance of Africa's communal history via a social realist ontology is an effective reference point for future Afrocentric discussions.

## About the author

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Oscar Eybers was born in Cape Town, South Africa. At the age of 9, in 1981, he moved with his family to the United States due to his father's self-imposed exile. At the age of 21, Eybers returned on his own to South Africa to contribute to the reconstruction of the nation. He has taught in

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