

Disrupting Whiteness as Higher Education: Towards a Systemic Decoloniality

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Abstract

This creative conceptual paper expands traditionalised academic approaches through integrated narratives, plays, lyrics, and poetry as decolonial method. Based in first person narratives, informal interviews, artistic expression, and music-integration, the author clarifies tensions in decolonial strategy, including moving beyond racial representation to acknowledge and respond to racialised poverty, racism built into the fabric of higher education, and an overarching denial of racial disparities. The paper begins with a discussion of the student-created and produced play, *The Fall*, which brings the #RhodesMustFall movement onto the stage. Integrating student discussions and reactions to the play, the paper echoes themes from *The Fall*, suggesting that strategies which interrupt coloniality, while necessary, are insufficient to transform from formal education's capitalistic and exploitative foundation. In centring USA and South African writers, the paper highlights that the purpose of education remains a White supremacist vision and that to move from such anti-Black infrastructures, transformation must align directly with ongoing, student-led decolonial approaches. The paper then parallels higher education protests to the context of the 2010 World Cup's artistic exploitation of South Africa, warning of the power of appropriation, especially on a global stage. The paper concludes with the affirmation that creative, artistic, and Black-centric voices must be fostered and integrated into decolonial strategies to transform the global Whiteness of higher education.

Keywords: decoloniality; Whiteness; higher education; student protests; #RhodesMustFall

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The university is built on blood and nourished by injustice. (Kozol 1975, 197)

Introduction

Most of the USA students in the “study-abroad” group were exhausted to the point of collapse. Having spent their first week in Philippi, a township outside of Cape Town, South Africa, they were struggling with their beginner isiXhosa, reconciling the accumulated shock and rage at the inhumane conditions reflected by township life. Though they had studied and watched documentaries on apartheid conditions and contemporary poverty in South Africa, no amount of preparation could inoculate them to the lack of resources within Black townships, particularly when compared to the vast luxuries of Western society available in Cape Town’s central business district, just a 20-minute drive away. Despite being emotionally overwhelmed, they were eager to see tonight’s play, in part because the outing was a welcome respite from the continual racial tension of White haves and Black have-nots. But perhaps more importantly, several students expressed excitement in seeing Black South African artists conceptualise recent #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall student protests.

The visiting students, all living in the USA, identified as Black, White, Asian, and Latinx, with many multiracial combinations therein, reflecting a variance in racial identities rarely seen in one place in South Africa. While students were staying in Cape Town, the many Black people they saw (aside from those who were part of the “study abroad” group) were domestic workers, guards, and other low-wage workers, returning to townships at the end of each day. And in Philippi, they interacted with the 99% Black isiXhosa-speaking residents, educators, and organisers. After settling into their seats, the Baxter Theatre soon filled with Black, Coloured, White, Asian, and Indian audience members, with again numerous multiracial combinations therein. The USA students later reflected on how that was the first and only racially integrated space they saw in three weeks, recognising the potential for art communities to break the apartheid-era holdover of interpersonal and societal segregation.

The play itself was a product of disruption, with students in the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) theatre department writing and producing it as an outcome of their final projects for their bachelor’s degrees. Written by Conrad et al. (2017), while still students, the play is about their perspectives during on-campus protests to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the British colonial administrator of southern Africa in the late 1800s. Rhodes left a global legacy of violent imperialism as an early architect of southern African apartheid (Maylam 1980; Rotberg and Shore 1988). Yet, he is particularly known because he also helped create higher education as a process of institutionalising White supremacy (Rohr 1999; Schaeper and Schaeper 2010). Much has been written about Rhodes and his infusing of racism, sexism, and Western conceptions of oppression into the fabric of society, and in particular, knowledge systems of higher education (Beinart 2022; Newsinger 2016). He was also one of the founders of South Africa’s extremely lucrative and violently exploitative diamond trade, exploiting Black labourers as the early fabric of South African society (Becker 2017;

Newbury 2016). His strategic White supremacy, as integrated into governance and higher education infrastructures, was later recognised by none other than Hitler (Maylam 2005).

Framing Rhodes's stature as a relic of the overthrown apartheid and colonial regime, UCT students leveraged this racist legacy as a systemic target. A Black-led, multiracial coalition organised and led the removal of his statue (Mangu 2017). The protest erupted across social media, with the hashtag #RhodesMustFall leading the way; soon after #FeesMustFall reflected organisers' centring a class-based call to make higher education free across South Africa. Even as the movement fractured against identity and class battles, the underlying message was of access to a decolonial higher education for historically excluded Black communities (Mangu 2017). #RhodesMustFall protests spread across South Africa and into British universities (most particularly, Oxford, from whence Rhodes and his racism came), and soon Oxford was forced to engage with protestors (Chaudhuri 2016; see also Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo 2018). After sustained protests had gained global attention, UCT quietly removed the statue. Eventually, the university renamed the building behind where the statue once sat, replacing "Jameson Hall" (named after a similarly racist and sexist colonial administrator who corroborated with Rhodes) with "Sarah Baartman," honouring the woman enslaved and paraded around late 18th Century England as a White curiosity (Lever 2019).

That renaming had not yet happened in 2017, when the USA students watched *The Fall's* vibrant capturing of the nuances of social protest, student organising, and the tensions between advocating for representational politics, access to higher education through eliminating fees, abolishing outdated, colonial admissions requirements, and decolonising the university more broadly (Mangu 2017). The play told of foundational discussions that surrounded the #RhodesMustFall movement from a range of perspectives based on personal experiences as well as archival research (Conrad et al. 2017). The writers clarified that "The movement ballooned into wider discussion on Blackness, feminism, institutionalised racism, sexuality, transgender and gender non-binary erasure" (Conrad et al. 2017, 14). Capturing these tensions with conflicting emotions throughout the play, the actors provided a multilingual, multicultural, multi-gendered representation that struggled with how to collectively move against coloniality. *The Fall* shows how coalescing around the removal of the statue was the easy part. The difficulty of navigating the tensions of identity politics, representation, and transformation served as the lingering aftertaste.

The university had also not engaged in decoloniality at the level the actors now were, and the audience could not escape this critique. The play was successful beyond expectation, raising essential arguments in movement building, privileging excluded perspectives, including students of colour, non-binary, gender, sexuality, religion, and language identities in ways that challenged continued intersectional oppression within decolonial movements. The play also argued for access to elite institutions of higher

education that provide tangible class-based privileges as foundational to any decolonial movement. Additionally, the play elevated the tensions of leading across social differences, lived experiences, opinions, and strategies (Conrad et al. 2017, 14).

After the play, a group of non-binary and gender-queer Black graduate students talked about the struggle they were having with what to do now. Their discussion was as tense as the play, with passions rising towards a confrontative end: either focus on representation or transformation. They all agreed that access seemed the easy part, like the removal of the statue, it was simply a matter of admitting and not charging students tuition and fees. Higher education, their argument went, should not cost those who are socially oppressed by Whiteness and White settlers in South Africa. Their discussion ended just as the play did, abruptly, without a clear pathway forward, and perhaps most importantly, without clear agreement on what decoloniality even means. The USA students were similarly frustrated, embodied by one who argued, “we all agree that White supremacy and English only and all the colonial stuff is terrible, but we can’t agree on what to prioritise or who should be protesting versus building.” This lingering challenge is ultimately at the heart of decolonial movement building, and it is precisely this challenge that higher education must take on.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to help reframe global decolonial approaches through a narrative engagement with authors, activists, and artists. Using descriptive storytelling as method (Chilisa 2020; Smith 2021), this paper engages in a comparative South Africa-USA analysis to illustrate global challenges to decolonising higher education. In what comes next, I clarify a foundational argument of interrupting coloniality. I then link the USA to South African school structures, reminding of the need to recognise formal education as structurally linked to a global Whitening purpose. In identifying and interrupting causes of racialised traumas, I echo the need for higher education that centres healing while fostering culturally rooted voices. I conclude with music and arts as foundations for collective survival, offering lifelines of relevance to higher education systems far removed from everyday survival strategies of most Black communities.

Interrupting Coloniality

In the confusion of how to build movements that sustain across complex, contradictory institutions, students—and youth more broadly—often resort to interrupting, disrupting, protesting, and demanding change (Barker 2008; Heath 1972). These efforts, however, are often reactions to Western-framed ways of being; interrupting through various protests reflects a response to ongoing efforts, essentially maintaining the integrity of the institution itself (Rojas 2007). Student movements have historically aimed to improve higher education, and while many have limited their arguments to access into colonial institutions, others have linked their efforts to larger global movements (Gill and DeFronzo 2009; Heath 1972). However, these efforts often reinforce the status of universities, holding into place the infrastructures of wealth and privilege (Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019). Reorganising infrastructures, shifting to online instruction, increasing enrolments, and creating new committees to explore decoloniality, all still

uphold the fundamental belief in higher education as a societal equaliser, while not fundamentally transforming the exploitative nature of capitalism. Indeed, as Gobodo-Madikizela (2014, 59) argues about post-apartheid higher education strategy: “The South African government has decided that the best way [to transform from apartheid] is ‘to build a Black middle class’—as if a Black middle class will behave any differently from Whites during apartheid rule.”

This “interrupting-only by focusing on access” approach reinforces higher education’s role in class-based ascendance. While this view of higher education as fulfilling the national role of developing a firm middle class is echoed across the globe (and reframed from the neo-liberal higher education agenda; see Crow and Dabars 2015; Sternberg 2016), the results are less grandiose. Elite universities still largely limit access to those with economic earning power. Class barriers remain, and include poverty, access to unequal school systems, standardised tests that measure class-based Whiteness, and additional tuition and school systems that maintain wealth earned through colonial and apartheid means (Au 2020; Lorbeer 2020). The results are similar across the planet, with Black people disproportionality limited from accessing well-funded universities (Fischer et al. 1996; Lui et al. 2006). This has devastatingly predictable effects: “...even youth who have completed secondary schooling do not necessarily perform well in terms of finding employment” (Mlatsheni 2012, 36). Thus, higher education retains its sorting purpose, supporting those who already have access as an investment into continued support for a capitalistic exploitative agenda (Gutmann 1987).

When students advocate for access to these elite systems without simultaneous transformation, their argument echoes educational reformers across the globe. An access-only argument essentially advocates for Freire’s (1973) long-dismissed banking system, wherein students—particularly poor and Black—are encouraged to participate in a higher education system for the sole purpose of accessing the local and preferably global marketplace, and hence, to “create employment” (Mlatsheni 2012, 36). An access argument hides the existence of divergent Black and Indigenous thought, silencing arguments that challenge the purpose of higher education as an economic-first engine (paperson 2017). This alignment ultimately maintains protests as reactions to systems designed to limit access, while simultaneously funnelling all knowledges and languages to privilege Rhodes’s White supremacist, Western-centric vision (Lulat 2005). Many are aware of the colonial tensions of this compromise but recognise that access provides a chance at wealth, and for those in poverty, the promise of even minimal wealth requires taking the opportunity to attend university (Knaus 2018).

As students lead temporary cycles of anti-racist and decolonial protests, higher education’s generational alignment against systemic change mirrors a centuries-long list of examples of movements that did not dislodge oppressive structures. Bell (1998, 158) refers to these cycles as “symbols of redemption,” wherein “after much effort, a door is opened, but after a brief period of hope, Blacks again find themselves trapped in the darkness of a new and more subtle set of subordinating social shadows” (Bell 1998,

159). While universities in South Africa and Britain waited out the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, the Movement for Black Lives in the USA gave rise to #BlackLivesMatter, which in turn led to Black Student Unions issuing lists of demands to universities in 2015 (Taylor 2016). These locally focused, globally aligned movements share an underlying commitment to Black liberation and collective care (Khan-Cullors and bandele 2017), echoing those that came before them (Heath 1972). Yet ultimately, the methods have remained reactions to Western institutions, rather than the creation of alternate structures (Spring 2018). Such visible protest movements are not yet dislodging what paperson argues is needed: the reorganisation of “institutional machinery ...” where movements subvert the “machinery against the master code of its makers” (paperson 2017, 55).

Within-systems transformation, in short, continues the edifice of the university, sustaining colonial purposes while holding Whiteness intact. Ndlovu-Gatsheni summarises this argument: “The bottom line [in Afrocentricity] is how to transcend Eurocentrism embedded in conventional thinking and pedagogy” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 60). Transformation, then, must interrupt structural barriers that frame and justify intersectional oppression and simultaneously rebuild towards African and Indigenous knowledge systems (Gumbo 2016). Spaces of interruption, therefore, must be made strategic, about representation, access, *and* the transformation of White supremacist-based ideologies, structures—and ultimately, epistemologies that guide global education (Battiste 2013; Knaus 2018; Love 2019).

Recognising Whiteness as Schooling

Within the USA, Jonathan Kozol, a critical scholar of racism in schools, has much to offer contemporary decolonial struggles. Kozol has echoed the many researchers, educators, and advocates before him who decried intentional school inequalities in resources, funding, teacher training, and support (Provenzo 2002; Woodson 1933/1990). Despite legal mandates to desegregate and fund schools equally, Kozol (1991) has repeatedly argued that schools which enrol White students continue to be funded at dramatically higher rates than those that enrol Black students. Kozol challenges the function of schools, ultimately arguing that disparate school funding is a surface level issue, reflecting global structures that prepare children of colour to participate in low-wage economies (Kozol 1991; Kozol 1995). His deeper critique remains that the intentional approach to teaching, curricula, and schooling infrastructures continues to be based on colonising children to discount their lived experience, echoing Woodson (1933/1990) and Du Bois (1903/1989) before him (Kozol 2000).

Kozol (1975, 35; original italics) argues that “In psychological terms there *are* no victims in the worldview of the USA public schools.” He further clarifies how schools silence even token recognition of systemic oppression: “To believe in victims is to believe, as well, in victimisers. It is to be forced to come into the presence of the whole idea that there must be *oppressors* in the world for there to be *oppressed*” (Kozol 1975,

35; original italics). Rather than teach about systemic oppression, schools intentionally hide the existence of power imbalances that are created, sustained, and justified by school systems. “The ruling principle is: No Connections” (Kozol 1975, 40). Thus, the intentional design of schools (curriculum, pedagogy, classrooms) is to colonise, and to silence recognition of this intentional design. Just like the removal of Rhodes’s statue and access to elite universities represent important individual interruptions, Kozol (1975) recognises that while disparities must be addressed, the underlying goal must be to radically transform schooling from its colonial purpose of fostering acquiescence and an inability to make connections between one’s personal circumstances, capitalism, and Western knowledge systems (hooks 1994).

Kozol captures this denial of reality in his description of heroin use in his 1970s neighbourhood, clarifying that knowledge “... does not come out of a book, but from a real world seven minutes from my door” (Kozol 1975, 139). However, schooling intends to silence this local recognition, rewarding students who model these disconnects with higher grades and increased access to capitalistic marketplaces (Knaus 2011). Kohn (1999) has echoed this silencing argument, suggesting that the standards used to measure learning result in less motivated children, eager to please and be rewarded, but not to think critically and engage in learning for the purpose of improving their world. Deresiewicz (2015) similarly documents how, even at the most elite spaces of higher education (Yale, in his example), students are taught and rewarded for following directions. Official school knowledge, then, is designed to sort society into categories linked to capitalism, denying structural racism while punishing those most impacted by that racism (Apple 1993; Au 2015).

Kozol captures the details of school reward systems that foster acquiescence, arguing ultimately that the intended result is students and citizens removed from thinking about oppression:

It is with the same precision, coldness and efficiency of motion that all men and women of a certain economic class and intellectual position, once prepared for self-protection in the U.S. public schools, learn to divide the words they speak from the real lives they lead, and to divorce the ideals they espouse from the behaviours which they foster, demonstrate, and learn to live by. (Kozol 1975, 169)

Schools thus enforce Whiteness thinking, isolated from context, committed to a false notion of individuality that hides the interconnected nature of the world. The intended result, certainly amongst those who do well academically, is to pacify graduates, supporting the adoption of passive language so common to newspapers, academic texts, and mainstream Western writing (Freire 1973; Macedo and Bartolomé 1999). “The level of speech which is accepted, offered, and purveyed within the public schools,” Kozol (1975, 133) argues, “is the level appropriate to that person who has no reason to be angry.”

But anger is a rational reaction to systemic anti-Black oppression (Jordan 2002; hooks 1995). Western schools foster and reward a passive denial of the existence of oppression, hiding dissent, silencing anger, and fostering intellectual disconnect. Henkeman links this disconnect between how we experience our lives to what we know to be true: “What we do not know, and are ordinarily not taught, is that most, if not all perpetrators of violence have themselves been victims of invisible *and/or* visible violence” (Henkeman 2018, 26). Being victims, however, contradicts what and how the official curriculum—taught in most school systems across the globe—represents, which Ladson-Billings (1999) refers to as a White supremacist master script. Indeed, Kozol further argues that “We teach children to adjust to evil carried out in their own name. We teach children to look on at misery without rage” (Kozol 1975, 155). Rather than encourage thoughtful responses to the lies schools teach, and the intellectual and spiritual violence schools perpetuate, regurgitation of the official national narrative becomes an individual survival mechanism. This is the foundation of Whiteness at schools, and one which decolonial movements have thus far been unable to dislodge.

Survival through Fostering Voice

Underlying struggles to transform from higher education coloniality must be a recognition of the causes, and impacts, of intentional harm caused by the conditions of schooling. Jordan (2002, 232) argues that beyond what we do in schools, successful movements “will have to eliminate the passive voice from our democracy.” Henkeman (2018) presents reflective narratives of trauma, wherein participants in her healing-centric research process strengthen their personal voice. In addition to modelling action-oriented research that shifts from the Western orientation of documenting and naming (Smith 2021), Henkeman compiles the power of voice into a volume that challenges the denialism of Western education. Indeed, Henkeman is clear that “Breaking silence is an act of self-determination” (Henkeman 2018, 12), and thus, her research process creates space, encouragement, and love for participants to craft healing narratives of traumatic memory. These narratives come in the form of stories, prose, poetry, and other creative expressions. Henkeman’s applied critical research strategies, named invisible and visible traumas, offer resistance strategies against societally and educationally enforced silences. “... We tell our stories,” Henkeman (2018, 12) argues, “to contribute to truth-telling from the standpoint of decedents of colonised, oppressed and enslaved people.”

While journals and mainstream academic outlets continue to privilege traditionalised colonial research, Indigenous research processes have existed for thousands of years (Patel 2016; Smith 2021). The domination of knowledge production extends well beyond research-sanctioned activities, and an important consequence of this almost total denial of indigeneity is what Thiong’o (1986) calls the “colonisation of the mind.” Henkeman argues that “To live under these conditions, and to be subjected to overt or subtle dehumanisation on a daily basis, is psychological violence” (Henkeman 2018, 27). Fundamental to the recognition of education as coloniality is the notion of voice, where we, the people, express who and how we are, in multiple languages and forums from which we choose to speak, with force, vibrancy, and emotion (Knaus 2011).

Mbele's poetic reminder clarifies, in ways dismissed by Western academia, how English-centrism continues to enact linguistic violence:

We will be told that
 we are second language speakers
 English is the first in command
 As if our mother's tongue were a deficit. (Mbele 2018, 44)

Mbele leverages a challenge, particularly in South Africa's context of 11 official languages, to recognise the harms and transform the structures of Western-dominated languages, particularly in higher education. No mother's tongue is a deficit, unless there is a structured privileging of White, English-speaking mothers; and who gets to decide which mothers' tongues are of more worth? Who gets to determine that someone being raised in a colonial context (which is to say, in the world), should be forced to speak English, within the specific intonations of historic colonial England? Higher education continues to answer these questions with structured silences.

Walker's "Appeal" (1830/1965), initially written in 1829, and re-printed several times before Walker's murder in 1830, is but one of thousands of concrete examples where Black scholars set a path in motion, laying footstones for others without knowing whether they would be followed or extended. Walker most assuredly recognised the threat that his public condemnations of colonisation and slavery meant to his survival, yet he spoke, published and demanded freedom from USA oppression. Walker (1830/1965) represents the continued building of resistance to oppression as a strategy for current and future survival. This resistance, through naming the contours of coloniality and of laying footstones for the next steps of future generations, is essential for transformational survival. Indeed, Walker's "Appeal" is paralleled by what is often referred to as the "Black Tax" in South Africa, where those who gain even minimal access to the Black middle class carry generations of others with them (Mhlongo 2019). Applying the metaphor to higher education, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 53) argues: "... African academics and intellectuals must engage in the production of knowledge that addresses the current African problems created by colonial modernity." While African identities are as substantively different from each other as any other human groupings, localised, Indigenous, and Black-centric knowledge production—that addresses contemporary problems created and institutionalised by historic and current coloniality—is the foundation of societal transformation.

Survival Is a Complicated Dance

Numerous popular examples can inform the complications of higher education transformation. In the build-up to South Africa hosting the first ever World Cup on African soil in 2010, for example, capitalistic forces coalesced to ensure the experience was as lucrative as possible for corporate sponsors. To highlight South Africa's emergence from apartheid, a global icon was selected as the musical face of the World Cup. Shakira Isabel Mebarak Ripoll, born and raised in Colombia, with additional

Catalan, Italian and Lebanese ancestry, was thus chosen to welcome the world to South Africa. Then one of the world's most popular musicians, Shakira embodied multiraciality and multiculturalism, often singing in multiple languages, even recently belly dancing during the Super Bowl halftime show in 2020. Back in 2010, *Waka Waka* (Hill and Shakira 2010) was released on video in the months leading up to the World Cup, exploding in popularity on YouTube (as of this writing, *Waka Waka* was one of the most watched videos ever on YouTube, with more than 3 billion views). The video was bolstered by cameos from football superstars Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi (themselves of Portuguese and Argentinean ancestry). While the song was attributed to Shakira, the original was written by The Golden Sounds, a Cameroonian band. The Golden Sounds sang in Douala, French, patois, and pidgin English and performed with a stage narrative that directly challenged collaboration with European colonisers (Howden 2010). It is not clear if The Golden Sounds, who have since changed their name to Zangaléwa, received royalties, but the song's anti-colonial message was clearly silenced in Shakira's version.

In a globally integrated world, appropriation is tricky, even when done with good intentions and to an engaging affect. The revised song is catchy, multilingual, flatters the original writers, and features one of the world's most popular singers. *Waka Waka* has become one of Shakira's bestselling songs, earning her far more than the African-based song writers who might have been readily available to perform at the first World Cup held on African soil. But Shakira added star power, and as the world watched her dance around in the video, critical questions about why Shakira was singing about Africa began to be asked (Baldauf 2010). In Shakira's performance of *Waka Waka* during the Super Bowl, a decade after the World Cup, she left out the lyric, "This time for Africa," stirring up critiques once again; this was also during Black history month, adding to the insult (Author unknown, 2020c, *The Herald*). Back in 2010, World Cup promoters surely knew they needed more than a White-appearing popular singer to welcome the world to South Africa, and they secured Freshlyground as the backing band to Shakira (Baldauf 2010). Serving as a backdrop did not appease all South Africans, of course, but Freshlyground reflected a multiracial South Africa in a much deeper way.

Shakira's *Waka Waka* is a great song, easy to dance to and with positive messaging, including: "If you get down, get up" and "You paved the way, believe it" (Freshlyground 2010). The contradictions, in 2010 and now, are simply that the World Cup was not for Africa, despite all the promises to introduce the world to a newly democratic South Africa. Its stadiums sit unfilled today, a beautiful image of the failures of capitalism, as streets widened to help ease the heavy flow of traffic during the World Cup now sit largely unused, paralleling empty dedicated bus lanes. A decade later, these infrastructure improvements stand in stark contrast to the townships where most workers came from to erect the stadiums. Many of these townships still do not have running water or adequate housing, even though they are just 15–20 kilometres from these stadiums. Within the backdrop of capitalistic exploitation that is the World Cup, *Waka Waka* silenced a band that could have led the way towards a more inclusive,

conscious, African-centric welcome. This experience perfectly reflects how interruptions often fail to inform decolonial movements, often through the ignoring or downplaying of Indigenous and Black-led voices.

As a model of moving from disruptive critique (of Shakira’s appropriation and higher education’s coloniality) to building upon indigeneity, Freshlyground offer, well, fresh ground from which to build from. A locally renowned South African band, Freshlyground was led by Zolani Mahola, and included members from South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, reflecting a multiracial range of racial, ethnic, and national identities. In live performances, Freshlyground sings many of its songs in isiXhosa, so an integrated Spanish and English version of *Waka Waka* matched their style. At that point, they had produced six albums and were known for lively concerts, including a penchant for throwing free surprise shows. Regardless of the global economics and performativity of Shakira’s voice proclaiming, “This time for Africa,” welcoming the world to South Africa fit well with Freshlyground.

Fusing South African Indigenous and Western string instruments, including a violinist, percussions, electric guitar, bass, and flute, Freshlyground embodies a pop-centric ethic that intentionally crosses boundaries. Zolani, an outspoken singer who often sports a shaved head, proclaims Xhosa roots through traditional instruments, lyrics, and clothing. In *Mowbray Kaap*, for example, Zolani sings of unity, almost entirely in isiXhosa. The sometimes-goofy song affirms that no matter which part of Africa people are coming from, all are welcome, welcoming in Senegal, Libya, Congo, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Nigeria, Mali, Rwanda, Uganda, Botswana, Malawi, and Zanzibar, before identifying South African locations, including Mowbray, a suburb of Cape Town. She sings:

Selifikile ixesha lokusenza isigqibo sokuphila
Ub’ ubiziwe yiafrika, the same song we all sing. (Freshlyground 2004)

The time has come to make a decision to live
If you’ve been called by Africa, the same song we all sing. (Author unknown 2020a,
English translation by LyricsFreak)

Indeed, Freshlyground welcomes the continent to South Africa in *Mowbray Kaap*. In one of their biggest hits, *Doo Be Doo*, Freshlyground centres a message of positivity, with an upbeat tempo, and Zolani’s smooth voice capturing a dreamlike reality of societal love:

Did you hear the news on the radio today?
People have agreed to give their love away
I can’t wait to be there in line!
Politicians have agreed to honour and obey
They’ll come down and listen to what the people say
I can’t wait to be there in line, no no! (Freshlyground 2004)

In *Pot Belly*, Freshlyground provides another dreamlike vision, this time of interracial love, a still radical notion in South Africa's post-apartheid societal segregation. The video of the song tells the story of two very different neighbours as they begin to fall for each other, presented as a White man and Zolani, a Black woman. Sending a message about interracial love in a society that still barely tolerates racial integration was not enough, however, and the video is also about learning to embrace who you are and the people you love. The chorus further challenges the sexism of Western body image preferences, arguing that love is more important than airbrushed images of women:

Even though I have
 Fat thighs
 Flabby arms
 A pot belly still gives good loving. (Freshlyground 2007)

Freshlyground has a wide range of songs with life-affirming messages that resonate with fans, who are often excited to be in some of the few musically integrated spaces their music and venues create. Another song captures the ongoing contradictions of South Africa. In *Zithande*, Freshlyground again sings in isiXhosa, telling the story of hardworking domestic working women who “siyakorobha” (clean the floors) while taking care of children. The backdrop is that while working, these women witnessed the fall of apartheid only to still suffer racism from their White women bosses and sexism from their boyfriends who “don’t care about us—they bring us AIDS” (Freshlyground 2004). With *Zithande*, Zolani sings into existence the reality that sustains the oppression of Black women who navigate racism and sexism regardless of the political system. Deeper, Black women “siyanimema” (saw this coming), offering a reminder that decolonial strategies must address the range of identities that *The Fall* wrestled with centring, and particularly Black women. Freshlyground’s catalogue builds toward a decolonial South Africa through music, multilingual lyrics, and recognition of oppressive realities. Their footstones continue traditions before them, linking the past to the present, urging transformation forward through lifelines of hope with dance, conscious lyrics, and renewed imaginations of what could be. Freshlyground offers a musical metaphor for the role of higher education in transforming society, aligning with Jordan’s (2002, 62). solidarity: “I’m with Emma Goldman [an anarchist activist and writer who centred an early feminist and class-based analysis], if you can’t dance, it’s not my kind of revolution.”

Conclusion

This paper begins with a USA-based “study abroad” programme to South Africa’s Black townships, highlights a multiracial student-written and directed play about the decolonial student movement, and provides context to contemporary protest and movement strategies. The flow engaged a narrative structure to recognise the need for creativity, music, arts, and voice to transform from traditionalised academic writing, researching, and structuring. The paper extends a reminder that decolonial strategies

must move more deeply than reactions to oppression, and instead focus on the larger, intentionally stubborn, roots of inequalities.

Higher education remains structured in ways that relegate the recognition of voice and the power of song to the disciplinary boundaries of the arts (theatre, dance, music, videos, poetry). These disciplinary structures eliminate the power of song and voice from everyday learning, but also from the experience of being human, requiring what Kozol (1975) frames as the purpose of schooling: the intellectual and emotional separation from our humanity, layered with an ethic of anti-Blackness. The way in which the arts are structurally silenced (or limited to protected spaces) is precisely what makes interruptions difficult to sustain, because examples of voice become academically irrelevant. In this way, student protests become overly simplified into struggles for access, rather than larger decolonial movements. The infrastructures of higher education thus remain intact, above reproach, and fundamentally solidified. For transformation agendas to coalesce, a fundamental shifting of priorities—to recognise and address the structural conditions of poverty and racism while also transforming the way higher education conceptualises research, teaching, and service—is needed. Ultimately, if higher education cannot do both at the same time, decoloniality will remain an unattainable goal.

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