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Embodying an Anti-Racist Architecture

The University Of Sheffield.

Sheffield School of Architecture

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Cover Illustration Alem Derege

My initial interest in the politics around Afro hair came from watching comedian Chris Rock's 2009 documentary 'Good Hair'. Rock's inspiration for the film came from his young daughter enquiring "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?", highlighting how insecurities around physical appearance begin from a young age and are influenced by society's often polarised, eurocentric view of beauty. The concept of "good hair" is one rooted in slavery as those with looser, softer hair (and fairer complexions) were seen as being more white adjacent and thus given indoor tasks. For many of us who live in the west we manipulate our hair in order to appease others, sometimes through the use of relaxers, wigs/weaves or even just slicking back our hair with thick creams and gels as to not 'offend' anyone or to garner attention. This is particularly noticeable in educational environments and in the workplace. Watching Rock's documentary prompted me to examine my own relationship with my hair, which I wore exclusively straightened until the age of 15. Even now, as I am nearing my mid-twenties, I continue to struggle with how to "manage" my hair and feel confident wearing it out in its naturally curly state. That being said, in the last decade or so there appears to have been a shift, with an increasing number of Black women foregoing weaves and relaxers in favour of wearing their hair in an Afro state or opting for protective styles, like box braids and twists. These hairstyles are not new, however, they have been around for centuries and are often indicative of particular tribal/ ethnic groups, for example Fulani braids originating from the Fula people of Western Africa.

To me, there is a unique and beautiful quality to the way that Black men and women may style their hair – particular styles like, for example, cornrows aren't always constrained to 'cornrows'. There are actually a wide array of complex patterns and designs which people incorporate and they have a beautiful architectural quality to them. Slaves did in fact use braiding patterns as intricate floorplans to indicate escape routes and

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convey messages to each other. For example, in Colombia and other South American countries people used cornrow designs to gain freedom from plantations.

In my design, also inspired by visuals from Sonya Clark's 'The Hair Craft Project', the male figure on the left-hand side is wearing cornrows, similar to the aforementioned styles, which compile into a mound at the crown of his head – attached to this is a tree-like afro puff. I wanted to create a sense of ambiguity by linking these hairstyles not only to architecture but also nature. The blonde colour choice of the braids was intentional, with it creating contrast from the dark routes and emphasising the intricacy of the braids, as well as showcasing the versatility of protective styles as they enable us to "switch up" our look through the use of coloured extensions instead of chemical dyes which could compromise the health of our natural hair. The figure on the right-hand side has a single braid at the front of her face with locs on the base of her head and zig-zag partitions along her scalp. The orange thread wrapping around the conical structures are reminiscent of African threading – a technique which originates from Sub-Saharan Africa and is used a heatless method for stretching hair. The conical structures mimic vernacular hut typologies, like the Hamer conical huts found in Southern Ethiopia. Overall, this artwork is intended to celebrate and reclaim Afro hair and traditional styling methods in the midsts of threats such as demonisation and appropriation.

Alem Derege is a 24-year-old Sheffield School of Architecture alumnus who completed her BA Architecture degree in 2019. During her time at SSoA Alem became involved with the Black Females in Architecture (BFA) network and was recognised in RIBA's 2018 Black History Month campaign. She was also the recipient of SsoA's annual MSMR travel award scholarship in 2019 which sponsored her trip to the city of Asmara located in Eritrea, East Africa. Since graduating Alem spent time working as a Part I Architecture Assistant at MSMR architects and freelance illustrating. She is currently completing an MA in Migration and Diaspora studies at SOAS, University of London.

Cover Illustration Alem Derege

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Questioning Hegemony Within White Academia

Asma Mehan, Carolina Lima, Faith Ng'eno and Krzysztof Nawratek

Introduction

We have been working together in various configurations in the past, but we were yet to meet as a group prior to writing this text. Krzysztof was our main link in his awareness of each individual's interest in the decolonial discourse which inspired this discussion. This conversation is the outcome of three discussions we had (online). We recorded them, made a transcript and then wrote the text. English isn't the first language for any of us, but it is "almost" the first language for Faith. However, we all use English to communicate between members of this group. We tried to write the text, correcting our grammar while attempting to keep idiosyncratic characters of the way each of us use the language and also reflecting on the significant 'role that language plays in perpetuating western hegemony' (Faith, below).

The questions organising our discussion have been formulated post factum, during the process of editing the (pretty chaotic) "raw" text. Let's say that they are asked by X, our shared, bigger than each individual consciousness.

X: What did you think when you saw 'Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call for Action'?

Asma: The direct reference to #BLM [Black Lives Matter] strikes me in this call for action by the students of Sheffield School of Architecture at Sheffield University. In the wake of demonstrations against racial injustices this summer in a short blog, Port City Heritage: Contested Pasts,

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Inclusive Futures?, research colleagues at Delft and Rotterdam and I discussed how our own research practices relate to systemic inequalities within different cities in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.[1] Co-authored with colleagues in South Holland, we concluded that we need to better understand how these contested and complex pasts, legacies of diversity and segregation, and colonial pasts impact port cities today. Beside the shift in the academic sector, these #BLM campaigns and protests also affect governance decisions. I think it is critical, timely and relevant to bring forward the issues of decolonisation of knowledge, racial discrimination and gender equality issues in academia and beyond across the different contexts.

Carolina: I don't know how a discussion can actually go to the material plane and do something when it comes from, for example, three passing white people (Me, Asma and Krzysztof). I say passing white due to the fact I'm actually a Latin-American woman, but in Brazil I am seen as white… Here in Brazil, this kind of conversation is something that is happening between academic people only. I think it is really important for academia to discuss race, discuss colonisation and to discuss gender. So my question is whether discussing this really changes anything? We need to change the way people get access to knowledge and how through centuries we have conceived the university in a western way.

Faith: I agree with what Asma and Carolina have highlighted with regards to issues of race and gender. The University of Sheffield prides itself with the idea of diversity, and that includes the School of Architecture. However, despite the diversity of students this diversity appears to have hardly influenced or is reflected in the teaching curriculum and pedagogy. There is a tendency to take students almost as "empty vessels" to be filled with knowledge. I think there should be a more conscious attempt to identify what these students bring to the department from their diverse backgrounds. Thus, the school should continuously evolve as it interacts with more students and staff from different backgrounds and experiences. It should create a space where different voices are not only heard but influence the lens through which learning and teaching is understood. The 'Call for Action' begins to address these issues embedded within the learning and teaching environment.

Krzysztof: The Sheffield School of Architecture is not an extremely diverse place. The staff are predominantly white (with very few exceptions) and British. Our student body is more diverse but, again, we are not the most diverse school in the country. Therefore, I believe the issue of representation is important. However, representation is not enough. One may be a woman and reproduce patriarchal relationships, one could be Black and speak the "white speech". To me the 'Call for Action' addresses these two issues – representation and reproduction of existing academic (white, Anglo-Saxon) hierarchies. Faith has a point – by not treating

1 Asma Mehan, Hilde Sennema & Saskia Tideman, Port City Heritage: Contested Pasts, Inclusive Futures? 2020 https://www.portcityfutures.nl/news/port-city-heritage-contested-pasts-inclusive-futures [accessed 19 January 2022].

students as “empty vessels” we can start challenging these hierarchies. I also think that what Carolina said is interesting, when she describes the three of us as white. I think the discussion about race as a construct will happen later. When we see whiteness as an intensity of privilege then I am white, of course, but I am “more white” in Brazil and definitely “less white” in the UK.

X: Why is it important to discuss hegemony, space and knowledge construction?

Asma: How can we decolonise the set of references for the production of knowledge in the western academic context? Considering the dominant western hegemony in different fields, especially in the humanities and social sciences, how can we make sure that both researchers and the research outcomes are decolonised? I think we are still at the beginning of a long journey. We still try to analyse and identify the existing challenges in the western research, researchers, and western University research methodology training. Like Faith, studying and working in the western academic context as the scholar who was born and raised in Tehran gave me a powerful analytical basis to compare and analyse the two academic systems in the West and East. During my PhD, I realised that there are very few references available from the well-known and established academics that I used to know and work with in Iran. I guess this gap in the academic references produced in the East and West is even deeper in the fields of social sciences, humanities and philosophy.

Carolina: It is very important to comprehend that power and hierarchy are present in all relations, so it is crucial to empower other voices beyond middle-class white male from western academia. We need to have a new set of references. When we discuss and publish this it needs to reach professors, deans and decision makers. This discussion, without involving them, is almost as innocuous as a discussion that doesn’t encompass everyday social reality. Coming from my experience in Brazil, for example, I don’t have a large set of Brazilian, female or non-white references. So, as you all are saying, this is something important. I also haven’t had a single Black professor in university. When I talk to some friends, who are Black, they say that something that pushed them back from staying in college is related to the references, they don’t see Black references, and they start to think that they don’t belong in the universities. Some Brazilians that I know who are in Europe now say they see some opportunities, but Europeans don’t want them, but they accept due to the Brazilian references. Just because we don’t have these opportunities back home, it doesn’t mean that is recognition or decolonising. Like Asma said before, it is going to be a long journey due to the number of challenges we face.

Faith: I think the questions raised by Asma are extremely important in shaping this discussion. Allow me to take an example from my PhD

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research. When we talk about sustainability, who are we sustaining? This is particularly important to ask when certain concepts are embraced without proper interrogation that often continue to perpetuate this western hegemony. For instance, if buildings in Nairobi, Kenya are certified using LEED standards or BREEAM standards, both of which originate from a significantly different context, it is hardly the people from Nairobi who are benefiting or being sustained. For starters, Kenya does not have a significant portion of the technology and products required to meet the sustainability threshold outlined in these certification tools and therefore, these products have to be imported. Hence, not only are we importing western knowledge, we are importing a large number of materials required for the building to count as "green". In addition, we are paying the same "custodians" of this knowledge to assess our buildings and give us their stamp of approval. Now, once we have done all this, the question begs, who is being sustained?

From a broader perspective, take Mobius for instance, Kenya's car manufacturer, I would argue that all government officials should be issued with the Mobius as their official car and not the "fancy" western models they currently use. This sets a precedent that would arguably not only denote a vote of confidence on Kenyan products but grow the manufacturing industry, Kenya's economy and reduce reliance on the West. There have been some good attempts however in this direction. For instance the East African Community (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi) issued a proposal to ban the importation of second hand clothing to East Africa from the West by 2016 in an attempt to grow the local textile industry. However, soon after the proposal, the EAC faced several threatening petitions from the West forcing the EAC to bow to pressure from these lobbyists. What I'm trying to highlight is the systemic nature of that problem in an attempt to explore how to begin tackling it. Arguably, academia has the most significant role in tackling this problem. How, however, is still a matter of discussion.

Krzysztof: To me the discussion about power is essential here. We need to be very clear about it. As a lecturer and non-British I can easily imagine that in my work I focus on decolonial thinking and practices to strengthen my academic position. My research is on religions as intellectual traditions challenging western (post)enlightenment thinking. Obviously, working in Brazil and before that in Malaysia I can try to represent researchers from these countries and try to speak on their behalf in the western academia. This is the risk and the challenge. This is why I believe we must discuss and deconstruct hierarchies of power we are part of. We need to acknowledge that colleagues who are conducting research and collecting data are better suited than we are to analyse and conceptualise these data. The genuine international collaborations will help to reshuffle the existing academic hierarchies.

X: What kind of set of references characterise your education background?

Asma: Like Carolina, Faith and Krzysztof, I did my Bachelor and masters studies in my home country, Iran (Tehran mostly: the city where I was born). Even in Iran, the academic environment was mostly dominated by the western schools of thoughts, methodologies and set of references. There were a few local references available which were mostly inspired by the western world in an unorganised manner and dis-integrated with the local context. In 2013, I moved to Italy to start my doctoral studies in Architecture, History, and Project programme. While diving into the rich Italian and Western European academic culture, I realised that there are a few voices available directly from countries like Iran. Even the most established scholars in Iranian Studies are the ones that graduated and worked in the western academic institutions.

Faith: As an educator in Kenya, often when we ask students to select case studies or case precedents to inform their designs, very few, if at all, would select references within the African context. They would rather "bigger" more notable buildings done by FLW [Frank Lloyd Wright], or [Santiago] Calatrava or William McDough and others whose works more often than not are significantly divorced from our context. That is something that was also apparent during my PhD research, I found that despite a lot of "accepted" sustainability concepts being present within the Kenyan vernacular design or even more broadly, their way of life, very little is documented or even discussed within the sustainable design discourse. For instance, interrogating the "Kenyan" traditional hut or housing done within the Kenyan coastal cities where evidently there is a real consideration for climate and thus the buildings are context appropriate and arguably sustainable.

Carolina: My education so far has all been done in Brazil. I feel the lack of local references. It is not that they do not exist, but the professors and the indicated and commented readings in the academy are not local. When they're local, we're talking about white men with a western background. So we do not have a large number of references that are not from the western world. However, some professors during the MA course presented some Latin or Asian references, especially when discussing development or culture. Still, we continue to study mostly Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Lefebvre and others. To get to know more about the knowledge produced here in Brazil and about the culture in my country, I am trying to personally reach them. I have also noticed just like Faith said that studies and projects are often about "bigger" references, often outside Brazil or Latin America.

Krzysztof: I have been educated in Poland. Mostly in communist Poland. My education had references to the west, but there were also broad sets of

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references to Russian thinkers. I read Mikhail Bakhtin before he became fashionable in Anglo-Saxon academia.

X: How important is language in the construction or deconstruction of different hierarchies?

Asma: All four of us in this discussion have a different mother tongue. I do believe that language is a very powerful tool to represent different academic voices across the world. I used to work and study in Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Germany and Switzerland. What I like about the European academic context is the diversity and availability of different languages, cultures and voices even in the peer-review and publication processes. Although, it is important to note that by publishing the multilingual academic products even in Europe, you can get credits but at the end of the day, what is the most important criteria is producing high-impact factor academic publications mostly in English. I guess this is an ever-lasting challenge for non-English speaker academics as well.

Faith: I agree with Asma, I think the concept of language and the power of language is interesting. The English language has been made the "authority" when discussing academic writing. So much so that if we want to quote a book written in Swahili for example, or in any other language then it has to be translated into English. Only then will it become a notable reference. Therefore, I think the role that language plays in perpetuating this western hegemony is significant. This is not just within academic circles, the person who cleans my car for example will accord me more respect if I speak English. This highlights the systemic nature of the problem which goes beyond the hegemony that was created consciously to a more unconscious complex phenomenon.

It is also imperative to consider language and how language influences voices, as well as who is talking and about what. Because this leads to the idea of whose voice is being highlighted by whom and whose voice is being suppressed. Hence with regards to anti-racist architecture or the decolonial discourse, it's important to consider who is talking about it, who should be talking about it, who is not talking about it and why are they not talking about it. This would begin to highlight the power embedded within the different voices and the politics of knowledge construction.

Carolina: Something that I noticed in this process (in academia and knowledge production) is that it's not only getting associated with a certain institution (usually western institutions), but also writing in a different language is something that gives you a lot of credit in Brazil. Language is power and this happens not only in Brazil. People automatically assume that you are smarter or that your knowledge is more legitimate if you are an English speaker. Despite the uncertainty, after brief research it is possible to notice that 5% or less of the Brazilian population speaks

English. Speaking and writing in English symbolizes an association with the West and even with the colonisers. Although there is a discussion about strengthening South-South cooperation, even in this environment English is not expendable. To enter a masters or doctorate programme, you must prove proficiency in English. Meanwhile, territorially Brazilian languages, which are more than 100, are not even taught in schools. In this way, it keeps western hegemony, like Faith pointed out, and not valuing the knowledge produced here, since it is not even written in Portuguese.

Faith: I think what Carol mentioned is interesting, if only 5% of Brazilian population speaks English and academia largely produces knowledge in English, then who is this knowledge being directed at? It appears it's not quite the Brazilian people. Plus, I'm afraid this is similar in many other countries whose first language is not English.

X: What, if at all was/is the influence of colonisation on the dichotomy of privileged and non-privileged?

Asma: Every time I am filling a form/questionnaire for the academic positions in the UK, USA, Australia, or Canada, I have a moment of self-reflection about my ethnical and racial identity. Who am I? Which category can I define myself in? Am I white? Am I Middle Eastern white? Do I belong to another white category? Am I Asian white? Am I Indo-European, Caucasian, ...? We can label ourselves in thousands of identities. The question here is which ones we want to be.

We (Carolina, Faith, Krzysztof and I) had a long discussion on this issue. As a white female Iranian academic, I struggle to find my place between puzzles of racial and ethnical identities. How much does the place we were born/the ethnicity that we have affect our life? The word "Middle Eastern" itself can be interpreted as political in different contexts. The word "Iranian" (sometimes misspelled as Iraq) has a heavy impact on the audience due to the current situation of the country and the media coverage. Even if I call myself "Persian", it reflects another load of identity related to the glorious past of the Persian Empire.

Living as an immigrant in different countries also makes me think more critically about the questions of colonisation, race, gender, and privilege. It is interesting to add that these double or even triple identities can be a powerful personal representation as well, in the western societies. At the same time, while you have your roots in another place, you need to represent a mixed, liminal, merged and brand new identity in the host societies to be able to enhance your personal identity and integration with the new communities.

Carolina: Even when we appropriate the knowledge produced in the Global North (or in the West) it is necessary to understand that space, society

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and time are organised and arranged in different ways in the North and the Global South. When carrying out research using dialectical historical materialism, it is essential to understand that Marx was talking about work among white men, despite the different classes, for example. Silvia Federici made an important update in this regard, bringing the aspect of gender to the discussion within what Marx proposed. Colonisation here was founded in race. It was the criteria to define the labour and the class. Consequently, they (Blacks and "natives") ended up having less access, not only to money and upper classes, but to possibilities and privileges present in Brazilian society until today. White or white-passing people get more access in Brazil. When I go to a western place, I get to be seen as Latin, but here in Brazil I'm seen as white and have lots of privileges because of that and I need to be critical in my research and in my practice to change it pragmatically.

Faith: What Asma and Carolina have pointed out is very critical in that at the core of colonisation was the imposition of western power and authority over indegenous cultures and knowledge forms, thus one can argue dividing the world into privileged and non-privileged. As part of my PhD research, I explored the relationship between colonisation, modernity and globalisation in relation to the hegemony embedded in knowledge construction. I explored how imperialist colonial history legitimised and delegitimised certain knowledge forms establishing privileged epistemologies. It is also apparent that many of the universities in the Global South largely remain as colonial products that continue to perpetuate Eurocentric theories. Therefore, the West continue to benefit from their superior/privileged position entrenched in colonisation. For the rest, for a long time, the more one can position themselves in association with the West, as Asma highlighted, the more privileged they tend to become. However, a shift contrary to this trend is slowly becoming apparent.

Krzysztof: My position is slightly awkward. I am Eastern European, hence, I am white (we still discuss whiteness as a privilege) but not as white as my British colleagues. I am also "less white" than academics from the western Europe or the USA. But on the other hand, in Brazil I am "more white" than Carol, because I am European. We can say that Poland wasn't a colonised country, nor was it a coloniser. However, there is ongoing discussion about "decolonising Eastern Europe". Having been occupied by other forces (Poland was erased from the map for 123 years, and re-emerged as a sovereign country in 1917), we have never been a "centre of the world". On the other hand, Poland has been presumed as being a colonial power. Some of our national literature (for example by Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz) is conspicuously racist. Hence, for many Polish people colonialism is an ambivalent term – if it would allow us to claim "special" position as victims, we may be happy to say we have been colonised. However, we also fantasise about the "Great

Poland" which could colonise others. This is exactly how we try to present our white privilege as overrated (I do it myself in this text, questioning my whiteness) in order to take a better position in the global hierarchy of nations.

X: From your experience, how did/does hierarchy influence education models?

Asma: I trained in the mostly conservative schools of architecture in Iran (Tehran and Isfahan) mostly based on what they taught for years inspired by the European cultures of teaching and education; historically French-inspired pedagogical approaches in the field of architecture and urbanism and then inspired by the German schools of thoughts such as the Bauhaus. The most recent academic educational system is inspired by the Northern American and the Western European approaches and systems of education.

Faith: My undergraduate training in Kenya was somewhat similar to Asma's, largely still conservative [and] entrenched, in my case, [in] the old British pedagogical approach to the learning and teaching of Architecture. There was very little interaction with the community and the organisation within the school remained largely hierarchical. Unfortunately, this was also the case in the UK where I undertook my masters degree. This model limits the potential for rich knowledge production.

Krzysztof: When I first came to Brazil and saw how the architecture school in UFMG [Federal University of Minas Gerais] operates, it's mind blowing. Architecture schools are firmly engaged with the local communities, they work with people outside academia and they do their best to redistribute the knowledge and privilege they have. It is impressive. Also, how the research is conducted, by combined teams – in a pretty horizontal way – from professors, PhD students, MA students and even Year 1 UG students. I do not believe we would be able to work like that in the UK, because the structure of the curriculum is too rigid. To do this, the whole British university structure would need to change. For architecture school, it also means that RIBA/ARB would need to approve these changes. I am not saying it is impossible, but it would be difficult and would take a lot of time.

Carolina: What Krzysztof says about Brazil is something very good and that I am proud of... These horizontal possibilities we have in our teaching and learning. When I was an undergraduate, I worked with PhD candidates on a research project coordinated by an Associate Professor. However, classes are formally organized by the semester of entrance to the university, just like in elementary and high school. But there are experiences that differ from this educational model, which I understand as a form of resistance to what is imposed. In Belo Horizonte, in primary

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school, there is an example of a school that does not work in school years but in learning cycles. Students are arranged in learning rooms, in which students share spaces. In the halls there are teachers, and they offer individual guidance and clarification. There is also a Brazilian university that also conducts "multilevel" classes. However, it is important to emphasize that such occurrences are an exception, considering that most of the processes that occur are fixed in the western academic production mode. Such possibilities are insurgencies from academics dedicated to the subversion of this hegemonic mode of production. These examples occur in "loopholes" and are not accessible to the popular classes.

X: What influence, if at all, has capitalism had on academia?

Asma: Krzysztof put forward the importance of economic issues in academia. I agree that it is critical to talk about the question of economics in academia. How do we distribute the money in academia? How are the acquired grants, funds, scholarships, and fellowships distributed between researchers, professors, assistants, scholars, fellows, and students during the various stages of their academic life? I think the current format of money distributions in academia is partly hierarchical, non-horizontal with a top-down approach which needs to be modified. The current regime of grant and money distribution claims to be merit-based and competitive. But the question here is who defines these merits and required criteria? Are the assessments unified, context-based, and selective? Are there any ways to make sure that all the acquired qualifications from the local knowledge are measured with non-western tools and methods? From whom do we get credit in academia? I think providing detailed responses to the critical above-mentioned issues can open new ways of imagining the future of academia.

Carolina: Research in Brazil is extremely under financed but is also a great business. Currently, there are (private) universities closing all around Brazil. Fortunately, we don't need to pay for our education if we join public universities. The programme I am part of is at a public university. However, masters and doctoral students are often subject to a regime of exclusive dedication, in which they cannot work formally in exchange for a research grant that varies between R$1500 and R$2200 from the main agency of promotion and not everyone is entitled to grants. Their distribution in graduate programs is linked to their productivity (which is often measured by the level of journals and books published, in a ranking that values internationalization at the expense of local knowledge) and distributed among the best students' performance, on the same measurement bases. This form of distribution ends up implying a reinforcement of western hegemony.

Krzysztof: British academia is a business. It brings in a lot of money and it is rooted in the colonial past – because of the language and its

prestige in the world. Without international students the British model of university will not work. But the British architecture industry goes beyond just students paying for an education here. This is what Faith has been investigating in her work – by teaching international students a set of normatives, standards and regulations, British architecture schools are reproducing conceptual infrastructure allowing British architecture and construction companies to operate globally. We need to talk about money when we discuss de-colonialism.

Faith: I would argue that academia across the world has become a business, it is just that western countries have done it much better than others. Taking universities for example, billions of dollars are invested in order to attain/retain certain [university] rankings that create/maintain hierarchy. These rankings continue to privilege western universities over the rest of the world. This hierarchy is reflected in other facets of academia just like Asma mentioned grants, publishers, scholarships, allocation of teaching positions, all of which have an economic element embedded in their decision making process. I think it is safe to say the western countries have successfully monopolised and commercialised knowledge systems making it difficult for countries like Kenya to make any meaningful contribution and as Krzsystof said, allowing British (western) architecture and construction companies to flourish globally. Thus the issue of economics with reference to decolonising academia is one that cannot be ignored.

X: How has your association with western academia influenced your positionality?

Asma: Working closely with Krzysztof from the Sheffield School of Architecture (especially) and other colleagues associated with western academia gave me a critical and analytical tool to be able to assess the important questions and dilemmas such as the issue of decolonisation. The trans-national voice that I did not have in the confined zone of my country of birth was awakened. While being critical about the unheard voices, I am really thankful to have the chance to work with many inspiring western academic scholars. I believe together, we will be able to move forward the equal, just and inclusive future in academia and other contexts.

Carolina: Even with all that, I'm really thankful that being associated with the western academia by working with Krzysztof, for example, or being able to speak and write in English, is something really important. Not only due to the association but with the access to a culture and the tools as Asma said. This association and accesses give you a lot of credit that is probably better than money, like to open doors and accesses.

Faith: Well, I think my association with the West has allowed me to be who I "need" to be depending on whom I'm dealing with. For instance,

within the academic circles in Kenya, the fact that I am a University of Sheffield alumni gives me a bigger voice. So even my students and colleagues tend to respect me more. Certainly, studying at the University of Sheffield provided the opportunity to meet a range of people from diverse backgrounds and experiences significantly increasing my knowledge base. Outside of Kenya (or Africa) however, my identity as a Black female Kenyan architect, coupled with my Sheffield education, gives me a bigger voice especially with reference to the decolonial discourse. Perhaps because for a long time voices like mine were suppressed. Therefore, for me the challenge is how to take advantage of my positionality to make a difference.

Also, I think what's more interesting with regards to what Krzysztof referred to as the "hybridity of my identity", is perhaps how it has evolved and continues to evolve. A couple of years back, within the academic circles, I would prefer to be less associated with JKUAT or Kenya, and more with the University of Sheffield or the United Kingdom. However, increasingly with discussions like Black Lives Matter or decolonial methodologies, there has been a shift, voices like mine are highlighted and recognised more and therefore, my identity as Kenyan has begun to "overpower" my identity as a Sheffield alumni.

Krzysztof: Even when I was working on my PhD in Poland, I received a lot of help from western academia, namely from Professor Kimmo Lapintie from Helsinki and Professor Julia Robinson from Minnesota. My Polish supervisor did not really understand what I intended to do and these two western academics kindly offered me some help. I would not be who I am without them. I believe the western and especially Anglo-Saxon academia still have a lot to offer to the world with regards to the quality of research and the ability to critically self-reflect on its own privileges. But it is possible mostly because of their economic power and prestige. Western academia is powerful, hence, it can do (almost) whatever it likes to do. Sometimes, it can be good for the world. However, I do not have doubts that non-western universities, if they have enough economic power and academic freedom (and it is already happening!) could be as good as British or American universities. Working closely with colleagues from Brazil or Malaysia, I do feel the centre of academic importance is now fragmented. Western universities, through their networks of influences, are still channeling the knowledge produced globally. Our role is to "hack" the system and make the real producers of the knowledge visible and strong within the global system of academic exchange.

Biographies

Asma Mehan is the principal investigator (PI) currently affiliated with the University of Porto (Portugal). She is the co-author of Kuala

Lumpur: Community, Infrastructure and Urban Inclusivity (co-authored by Marek Kozlowski and Krzysztof Nawratek, Routledge, 2020) and author of Urbanism in Tehran: From Sacred to Radical (Routledge, forthcoming 2022). Asma received awards, grants, and fellowships from the Municipality of Amsterdam, the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS-KNAW), Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), AESOP, EAHN (European Architectural History Network), Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), ZK/U Center for Art and Urbanistics Berlin and Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain (SAHGB).

Carolina Lima is a Geographer, MA in Geography by Federal University of Minas Gerais. Researcher at Cultural Diversity Observatory in Brazil, member of editorial coordination of the Boletim do Observatório da Diversidade Cultural, researcher at Metropolises Observatory and member of the project Spatial practices of members of Pentecostal Churches in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, from Postsecular Architecture Research Network. Her main research interests are in public space perception and praxis. Currently working on Profane space does not exist. Candomblé and Pentecostalism in a Brazilian City (co-authored by Daniel Freitas, Krzysztof Nawratek and Bernardo Pataro, Routledge, forthcoming 2022).

Ng'eno Faith is a practicing architect and educator from Nairobi - Kenya, who recently completed her PhD study at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom and also became a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). Her research interest is in understanding the implications of contextual dynamics – socio-economic, cultural and environmental – on the articulation of architectural design concepts particularly with regards to the development of sustainable built environments. She is passionate about understanding the needs of a society and working with them to develop appropriate spatial solutions. In Nairobi, she runs her own architectural design practice as well as being a lecturer at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT). She has also been involved in teaching at different capacities at both the University of Sheffield and the University of Manchester.

Krzysztof Nawratek is a Senior Lecturer in Humanities and Architecture at the University of Sheffield, UK and a Visiting Professor at Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Brazil. He is an author of City as a Political Idea (UPP, 2011), Holes in the Whole. Introduction to urban revolutions (Zero Books, 2012), Radical Inclusivity. Architecture and Urbanism (dpr-Barcelona, ed. 2015), Urban Re-Industrialisation (Punctum Books, ed. 2017), Total Urban Mobilisation. Ernst Junger and Postcapitalist City (Palgrave, 2018) and Kuala Lumpur. Community, Infrastructure and Urban Inclusivity (co-authored by Marek Kozlowski, and Asma Mehan, Routledge, 2020). He is currently working on Profane space does not exist. Candomblé and Pentecostalism in a Brazilian City

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