Critical conscious leadership for decolonisation: a Black consciousness perspective of authentically transforming leadership

Sadi Seyama-Mokhaneli

Department of Education Leadership and Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

Purpose – This paper draws on African anti-colonial thought and Black consciousness to propose critical conscious leadership (CCL) as a decolonising leadership approach appropriate for pursuing emancipation, social justice and innovation in a new African university.

Design/methodology/approach – I utilised the method of critical discourse analysis to study Ihron Rensburg's language as he reflected on his leadership at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). The study engaged with Rensburg's writings and texts on his account of leading the merger and transformation of UJ. The primary text draws from his book *"Serving Higher Purposes" (2020)*.

Findings – Through the construction of CCL, the paper proposes alternative tenets for leading transformation towards a new African university. CCL grounds a decolonised and pluriversal new African university's character premised on a consciously revitalised alternative thinking that will carry the communitarian spirit of Africa in knowledge production, dissemination and consumption in humanising all and serving the greater good. And it operates within the dialectical tensions of the social and economic purpose of higher education (HE), African and global relevance, African and Western paradigms, excellent performance and attainment of social justice.

Originality/value – The proposed CCL offers an alternative leadership approach that responds to the call to "Dethrone the Empire" by centring Blackness in HE leadership, which is crucial for authentic transformation and decolonisation.

Keywords Anti-colonial thought, Black consciousness, Critical conscious leadership, Transformation, Transformational leadership, Whiteness

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

White males have historically been portrayed as the embodiment of great leadership (Nkomo, 2011; Liu and Baker, 2016). It is their stories of effective leadership that have dominated theory and practice. The "Great Man" is alive and well in the Global South, shaping the what, how and why of the organisational leadership of private and public organisations, including higher education institutions (HEIs), which ought to foster public intellectualism in their accountability towards the public or citizenry. Despite the call for the transformation of higher education (HE) in South Africa after the end of apartheid, leaders have been largely complicit in the reproduction of colonial oppression and reification of Western supremacy as enabled by unconscious whiteness-ridden leadership thinking and practice. April (2021) and Sihela (2022) affirm the enduring violence of racism in Southern African organisations against black people,

reproducing their historical socioeconomic marginalisation, inferiorisation, exploitation and implicit denial of access to senior positions. Similarly, in HEIs, black academics and students still struggle against anti-blackness biases, Western-centred workplace practices, colonial curriculum and teaching and learning practices that undermine their equitable progression (Badat, 2020; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2019; Mbembe, 2016).

Therefore, historical colonial power is still wielded through leadership power. The "decolonial turn" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 262) is yet to be fully palpable to ground organisational leadership's conscientisation, acknowledgement and decolonial activist praxis to disrupt colonial and epistemic power that constructs the notions of race and racism in organisations, which hinders black people's economic, social and political human flourishing. The commitments to the repudiation of universalised superiority of whiteness and embracement of the world's pluriversalised ontologies and epistemologies are elusive (De Sousa Santos *et al.*, 2022). The paper concurs with management and organisation studies (MOS) scholars that contemporary organisations and universities are still racist, particularly the business schools (Dar *et al.*, 2021), which are popular and fêted as breeding grounds for current and future HE leaders.

In this context, this paper draws on African anti-colonial theories and Black consciousness to problematise HE leadership's transformational approach and proposes critical conscious leadership (CCL). CCL is a reflexive approach that enables a shift of paradigms, renewed thinking and practices that disconnect organisations' leadership from the remnants of coloniality. To argue for the relevance of CCL, the paper problematises universities' leadership that draws on popular contemporary Eurocentric-Western leadership theories and practices. One of the new dispensation mandates was transformation, which meant redressing the oppression of Black people and serving their political, racial, economic, epistemic and social justice. However, the Western conceptualisation of transformation took hold rather than the intended decolonisation at the fundamental level of universities as organisations and knowledge producers (Mbembe, 2016). Endorsed as objective and colourblind but grounded on the archetypal great white man (Liu and Baker, 2016), transformational leadership gained hold as a popular leadership theory to radically redress the South African education system's inequalities and injustices.

However, the assumptions underpinning TLT reveal its questionable philosophical foundations and expose its strong bias towards the Euro-Western leadership paradigm, which centralises whiteness in leadership epistemology (Ladkin and Patrick, 2022). Whiteness, in this understanding, is a claim of the superiority of the white race as centred on Euro-Western identities, knowledges, cultures and values, inferiorising and marginalising all African, Black, indigenous and other people of colour (BIPOC) and black representations (Dar *et al.*, 2021). Grounded on whiteness, TLT's assumptions are misplaced. They cannot capacitate leaders for authentic transformation and the creation of a new African university, thus necessitating a Blackness lens in rethinking and reconceptualising leadership. This proposed CCL responds to the call to "Dethrone the Emperor" (Nkomo, 2021). Blackness in rethinking leadership encapsulates an African anti-colonial affirmation of the African and black people's identities, knowledges and cultures. This affirmation "symbolises beauty, purity, happiness, anger and resistance; a subversion of racist Euro-constructions of Blackness as deviancy, criminality, and dis-normal" (Dei, 2017, p. 3). To carve a place for Blackness to underpin the construction of leadership, the paper draws on African anti-colonial thought and Steve Biko's Black consciousness philosophy to conceptualise CCL for the authentic transformation of HE. These analytical lenses highlight the broader colonial blind spots in leadership undermining decolonising efforts.

The proposed CCL emerges from interrogating the leadership of Professor Ihron Rensburg, the former and first Vice Chancellor of the newly merged University of Johannesburg (UJ). His leadership serves as an exemplary case of authentically transforming leadership. To build a case for the proposed CCL, the paper first addresses the risks related to drawing on the self-reflection and reflexivity of a single "unpopular" university leader, while other popular leaders

are also renowned for laying the foundations for the decolonised leadership of universities. Second, acknowledging that "it will always be a lie to accept white values as necessarily the best" (Biko, 2004, p. 56), the paper illuminates the problematic HE transformation trajectory as a leadership approach mishap. Third, it draws on African anti-colonial thought and Black consciousness to ground CCL and illuminate its underpinning tenets. In doing this, it positions the argument within an African ethic that rejects the dominance of whiteness. In the next section, the paper articulates a conceptualisation of CCL as findings through a thematic presentation and discussion of its tenets, offering what it would mean to lead through CCL. It then provides concluding thoughts that consolidate the paper's problematisations, arguments and the bearing of CCL's tents on the new African university.

South African HEIs flawed transformational leadership: the case for the decolonial "leader"

For the last three decades, SA HEIs have been pursuing the transformation of HE to redress "the inherited higher education system . . . designed, in the main, to reproduce, through teaching and research, white and male privilege and black and female subordination in all spheres of society" (Badat, 2004, p. 3). However, this project continues to struggle to establish its legitimacy in the continuing colonial and apartheid legacy. The 2015–2016 student protests against the ubiquitous colonial and apartheid symbols and practices (#RhodesMustFall) and high tuition fees (#FeesMustFall) in HEIs exposed a deficient transformation agenda that is half-heartedly considering students' financial deficiencies, "decolonising" curricula, pedagogy and educational spaces. Indeed, universities faced contextual transformation challenges and the polarising neoliberal ideology, which has inserted market-driven efficiency and effectiveness demands. The dominance of neoliberalism has fostered competition and individualism in universities (Seyama, 2017). Mbembe (2016) contends that neoliberal potencies limit the decolonisation project as they continue to reproduce coloniality in the "post-colonial" era, reifying colonial capitalistic ideals that dehumanise the previously colonised, pilfering mineral resources, destroying the environment and increasing global inequalities. Thus, the crucial moral considerations underpinning HE's mandate and values are marginalised. And the fundamental project of achieving social, economic and epistemic justice is decentred and relegated.

While the paper contributes to offering emancipatory potentials through the anti-colonial and decolonial leadership praxis for disrupting colonial power as called for by MOS scholars, it is confronted with several risks, particularly with an explicit and direct engagement of critical leadership perspectives. First, the idea of conceptualising CCL emerged from my critical observations and reflections of Professor Ihron Rensburg's leadership – the former Vice-chancellor of the University of Johannesburg (UJ), who served from January 2006 to December 2017. As an academic at UJ since its inception as a merger, I witnessed the creation of UJ from three historically diverse HEIs into a transforming African university, carrying hopes of a better future. However, with my orientation towards critical leadership studies, I have been vigilant about not reifying individual leaders' heroism in leadership. Nonetheless, there is no denying that, in a challenging historical and political context of transformation, Rensburg spearheaded UJ's transition by drawing on an alternative paradigm. Moreover, the heroisation of the leadership of Professor Ihron Rensburg may appear to ignore other former Vice Chancellors who courageously tackled the SA HE transformation challenges grounded in colonial and apartheid histories.

Further, he is not an iconic global leader of a multinational business like many of those who have become household names (for example, Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos). However, the University of Johannesburg was a newborn and not a multinational organisation whose leaders would inherently be under their global panopticon. Rensburg had the novel leadership task of envisioning a new university in a society undergoing radical social change

on all levels. As Nkomo (2011) noted, the literature on leading change generally assumes that the primary challenge is responding to the competitive environment. Second, the hegemonic normalised anti-blackness that undergirds the suspicion or distrust of the capability and, consequently, the legitimacy of African leaders (Nkomo, 2011) has implications for the trustworthiness of the ontological and epistemological articulation of their anti-colonial and decolonising leadership experiences.

Third, an acknowledgement that "finding alternatives between colonised representations and counter-representations is not an easy project" (Nkomo, 2011, p. 365) in a world that is largely unconscious of the persistent global coloniality in modern society, undermining the global South's (especially Africa's) ability to cut the umbilical cord of colonialism. However, the reflexive case of Rensburg's leadership of a newly merged comprehensive university from 2006–2017 (University of Johannesburg) provided a unique context of transformation challenges where one of the merged institutions (Randse-Afrikaans University) was the brainchild of the apartheid government, which meant he faced direct resistance from some of the white supporters of apartheid. Of significance is the tangible transformative progress of UJ due to the foundations he laid for the next Vice-chancellor. The continuing success of UJ started with Rensburg's visionary, strategic, collective and collaborative digging and laying the bricks for UJ's future success [Professor Marwala, next Vice-chancellor, UJ Annual Report (2019)].

Problematic higher education's transformation trajectory
The current unequal and divisive context of SA HE demands a deeper analysis of students' and academics' realities. Of significance is how we confront the difficult questions about HE leadership. As Badat (2020) aptly argues, HE has yet to equitably serve students from poor backgrounds and ensure equitable, inclusive future social and economic opportunities. The goals for transformation were set out in White Paper 3, "to promote equity of access and fair chances for success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities (WP3:1.14)" (DoE, 1997). CHE (2016) notes that HE has indeed focused on this goal – in addition to widening access, there is "more attention paid to teaching and learning, to curriculum and student support; the implementation of a governing framework for its educational offerings; the allocation of financial aid to many more students than twenty years ago; and having nationally coordinated projects and grants to address some of the identified areas for improvement" (CHE, 2016, p. ix).

The 2015–2016 SA HEIs' student protests brought home the harsh reality of coloniality even when HEIs had reasonably progressed with transformation. They laid bare the hostility of their lived experiences of financial struggles, threats of academic exclusion, deficient neocolonial curricula, alienating culture and neocolonial spaces (Badat, 2020). Rensburg (2020a) observes that the protests exposed how "... institutional prestige and ranking seemed to matter far more than institutional responsiveness and transformation in step with the country's post-apartheid trajectory" (p. 249). In the post-colonial era, marginalised people's voices remain oppressed and their wishes and wants are yet to be attained (Waghid, 2021). At historically white universities (HWU), black academics experience unimaginable racism, discrimination, harassment and patronisation (Khoza-Shangase, 2019). Whiteness in universities enforces cultural assimilation, demanding black academics to wear white masks and self-alienate. Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam (2019) observe that failure to play the white game rendered black academics the natives of nowhere, with dire consequences for their career progression.

Despite the pledges and policy developments post-2015–2016, universities have not made adequate inroads in securing epistemic justice and inspiring the intellectual tradition of exploring and expanding decolonising alternatives (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). Deep, tangible

change is elusive. Even though significant shifts have been made in reversing historical racial inequalities with increased access for black students and academics, women in academia and senior positions (Essop, 2020), the 21st century's neoliberal leadership approaches and the attendant performative cultures are undermining the authentic pursuit of decolonising HE spaces, curricula, pedagogies and epistemologies. Consequently, continuing with the dehumanisation of black people (Waghid, 2021). To clear a new path towards alternative thinking and practice of HE leadership, dominant mainstream leadership theories such as transformational leadership theory (TLT) ought to be discarded as they enact whiteness (Ladkin and Patrick, 2022).

Historically, such thinking is captured in the Great Man theory constructed on the heroic white man, displaying intelligence, discipline, charisma and moral prudence (Mouton, 2019). Bass (1985), as one of the influential researchers of TLT, presented a highly seductive image of a transformational leader "... as someone who raised their awareness about issues of consequence, shifted them to higher-level needs, influenced them to transcend their self-interests for the good of the group or organisation and to work harder than they originally had expected they would" (p. 29). This portrayal of transformational leaders assumes followers' subjugation, reminiscent of colonial racist ideologies that perceived black African people as childlike, needing civilisation to attain the status of a rational man to become fully human. Such subjected positioning of followers also enables manipulative charismatic tendencies of transformational leaders that are subtly repressive. Unless the implicitness of solipsism in leadership is recognised and confronted, constructions of moral leadership would be drawn on white wants and demands (Liu and Baker, 2016), which would inform transformation trajectories and suppress Blackness's ideals, interests, values and needs. African anti-colonial thought and Black consciousness provide useful tools to construct alternative leadership thinking and practices.

Theoretical framing

The paper draws from African anti-colonial thought and Black consciousness, which offer a new direction for reconceiving leadership thinking and practices to diverge from the prevailing dominance of whiteness in MOS epistemologies. The escalating Black racism in the 21st century calls for a re-reading of radical anti-colonialists and a retheorisation of organisational colonial subversions. MOS is yet to make material inroads in decentring Eurocentric epistemologies; consequently, epistemological coloniality is ubiquitous and the Othered knowledges remain on the periphery (Banerjee, 2021). Knowledge production is not objective but a political endeavour entangled with identity and paradigmatic and epistemological positionality (Banerjee, 2021). And unless scholars deliberately foreground African anti-colonial thinkers, the ignored and discredited Ubuntu epistemology as the African ethic of humanism would continue to be subordinate to Eurocentric epistemology – with ramifications of racism and dehumanisation of the Othered in organisations (Nyathi, 2009). Anti-colonial thinkers' activism has been pivotal in rewriting the full humanity of Africans (Kamola, 2019; Nyathi, 2009), and in the contemporary post-colonial era, we can draw on it to set in motion social and political action (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001).

Anti-colonial thought mandates emancipatory strife and epistemological interrogation (Sihela, 2022). It pursues anti-colonialism by critically questioning the dominant power structures in the constructions of values, identities, beliefs, cultures, concepts, knowledge generation and legitimation (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001). Central to anti-colonial thought is reaffirming the Othered people as agents of their identities, knowledges and experiences and reinterpreting African peoples, customs and ideologies to counter Eurocentric coloniality in the post-colonial era (Kamola, 2019). Fanon's (1967) contributions to African anti-colonial thought were centred on offering a critical analysis of colonisation, particularly its physical

and psychological violence on people and, worst of all, the colonisation of their minds. He was troubled by how colonisers captured the colonised people's imagination that they saw themselves as "The Wretched of the Earth" through the colonisers' eyes.

They eventually despised themselves so much that they rejected themselves and resorted to creating false identities that embedded subordinate subjectivities (Fanon, 1967). Anti-colonial thought offers critical insights into how the coloniser captured the colonised's minds by destroying their histories, erasing any semblance of positivity and valuable memories about their cultures (Fanon, 1967). The annihilation was the colonisers' attempt to reduce Africans to a people of no roots, no foundations and a reconciliation (making peace with) to a lifelong precarious place of existence. In realising that your "beingness" has proffered you with nothing but despise and a life of misery, how could the colonised not abhor their very Blackness? With emptied minds, a perfect reception vessel was created in which Euro-imperialist cultures, languages and pseudo-identities could be deposited.

Turning against themselves, the colonised were reduced to "Black men in White masks" (Fanon, 1986). Fanon fervently brought to attention the impact of the colonised's internalised inferiority complex, which led them to accept their sub-human positioning – thus offering "little" resistance to the colonisers' dehumanisation. However, Fanon held the conviction that colonisation was not totalising. As a radical humanist, the struggle for anti-colonialism was a battle for full humanity for all, where all people equally acknowledge and affirm each other's meaningful existence (Fanon, 1986) – the rejection of their being calls for war, worthy of laying lives down. Therefore, in that "non-Being" of existence, there was something left in the colonised to decolonise themselves. Fanon carries additional currency for the transformative project in the post-colonial post-apartheid context that is driven through whiteness-laden leadership, that is, "his Utopian aspiration to define a new humanism . . . . to create a new man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth" (Fanon, 1967, p. 253). Therefore, in this paper, anti-colonial thought offers the lens through which Rensburg's leadership is interrogated in its attempt to disrupt dehumanising and marginalising whiteness in HE leadership.

Theoretical framing: Steve Biko – Black consciousness

There is paucity in drawing on Steve Biko's Black consciousness (BC) to rethink leadership in times when Blackness is increasingly marginalised. The post-colonial African university is struggling to authentically transform and find its bearing in the national and global space of humane teaching and learning in the context of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and pandemics. Therefore, appealing to BC is timely in guiding a critical interrogation of leadership thinking in contemporary African universities. Influenced by Fanon's thinking, Steve Biko, the founder and leader of the BC movement, is regarded as the father of BC (Dolamo, 2017). He gave expression to Black people's experiences of apartheid in South Africa, offering dimensions of colonisation when Western imperialists had withdrawn from many African countries. Biko embraces "Black consciousness as an attitude of mind – a way of life" (Biko, 2004, p. 101), a necessity for Black people to shed themselves of colonisation and apartheid. He inspired solidarity, illustrating how the collective power of Black people was necessary for exercising freedom and helping themselves through community projects (Kgatla, 2018). Amid the critique that BC is racist itself, it offered a deep understanding of the imperative of safe spaces for Black people to purge themselves from the poison of apartheid and colonialism (Dolamo, 2017). Biko also extended BC's ideals to whites to help themselves recognise their colonisation.

Drawing on African anti-colonial thought, Biko (2004) understood that the emancipation of Black people ought to start with the mind because the colonisers' most powerful strategy

was the conquest of the colonised's minds. Therefore, the most significant battle has always been the decolonisation of the mind – to return Black people to their "first love" – self-love. Biko envisioned the decolonisation of the mind as the ultimate strategy "to help Black people reach self-empowerment and self-emancipation from external and internal enslavement and the control of their colonisers" (Kgatla, 2018, p. 146). Appreciative of the influence of self-governance on a colonised mind in giving the coloniser power and control at a distance, Biko appealed to Black people to reclaim their freedom and power. He contended, "Black man, you are on your own" (2004, p. 213); colonisation and apartheid were too valuable to the colonisers to be given up. With BC, Biko (2004) conscientised Black people to work in solidarity to solve their problems.

Against the negation and denigration of Africa, Black people and Blackness, BC offers a way of coming into being for Black people. It advocates for Black people to discard the fragility with which their identities were constructed and re-embrace the African personality – attitude, spirituality and culture. In this way, they could renew their spirit, restore their souls and reignite the life they are meant to live. Such a quest encompassed a return to the human-centredness of African values – "kindness, faith in themselves, mercy, hatred of evil, integrity and self-confidence" (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). Biko (2004) understood that with all the violence and hatred meted out against Black people, the black hole that colonisers had so intentionally and persistently dug in emptying Africa and all its representations (people, cultures, languages and traditions) was never fully emptied. Standing as one and with those who sympathised with Black people's plight could "filleth" the hole with the truth. The truth is about the worth of African values that underpin its culture.

Biko (2004) abhorred how Black people were reduced to amateurs in explicating their culture, while whites positioned as experts on black culture facilitated the miseducation and misrepresentation of African cultures and accorded supremacy to Euro-culture. Colonisation forced Africans to assimilate white culture embedded in education, religion, language (Wa Thiong'o, 1986), government, organisations and professional environments. For Africans to fit in these, they had to alienate themselves from themselves, wear the cloak of whiteness and become "Black skins in White masks" (Fanon, 1967). Consequently, Black people have carried multiple identities and lived with multiple cultures – not as a choice but as a force, hence the burden of always remembering your place in white spaces – self-discipline to discard "barbaric" behaviours in schools or workplaces. From this perspective, we cannot talk about integration or multiculturism. Biko (2004, p. 46) observes that,

> We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence, in all we do, we always place Man first. Hence, all our actions are usually joint community-oriented rather than individualistic, which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach. We always refrain from using people as stepping stones.

Drawing on African culture, BC articulates a concern with objectifying people as instruments of capitalism, cultivating individualism and competition. These are the maladies of neoliberalism in contemporary universities, separating people from real humanity, thus undermining their ability to flourish together and achieve the greater good. In the evolving landscape of neoliberal universities, where power dynamics often perpetuate colonial structures, the perspectives of African anti-colonial thought and Black consciousness emerge as vital leadership frameworks. These lenses serve to unveil and challenge colonial power structures, directing attention towards authentic transformations aimed at restoring the full humanity of marginalised communities.

Research methodology

The study utilised the critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology to study Rensburg's language (as construction and use of his discourse) to analyse the transforming HE context and explicate his leadership journey. My aim with this paper is not to produce an exhaustive and complete analysis and interpretation of Rensburg's leadership of the merged UJ but to engage it as far as it epitomised an anti-colonial paradigm and a new African humanism, affirming all university stakeholders and nurturing "... exceptional conditions for our students and staff to flourish ..." (Rensburg, 2020a, p. 5). With a focus on leadership as socially constructed and continuously emerging through contextually grounded relations between leaders, followers, and purpose (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), CDA offers an amenable approach (Ladkin and Patrick, 2022). It provides alternative insights into the power and politics of organisational leadership, countering colonial power and its related ideologies. Hence, it enables the conceptualisation of CCL. CDA positions the researcher to:

... systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power and to explore how the opacity of the relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132).

The data was collected from Rensburg's writings (published articles and book) and his account of leading the merger and transformation of UJ. The primary data for the textual analysis draws from his book, *"Serving Higher Purposes" (2020)*.

Through Fairclough's (1995) 3D framework, the analysis focused on the following questions:

(1) How does Rensburg's textual strategy reflect his commitment to transformation?

(2) How are his ideology and the act of countering dominant colonial ideology reflected in his selection of social, economic and political themes he engaged in his writings?

(3) How did he craft his power and understanding of its dividends and strategic use at the macro (government, business and global partners) and micro (UJ community and its immediate stakeholders) levels as a subversion of historical colonial power?

The analysis of Rensburg's discursive space revealed how he made sense of the influence of his upbringing, education and politics, his self-identity, his sense of life purpose and the crux of what matters in his personal and professional life. CDA's articulation of being Vice-chancellor revealed his navigation within an authentic context of social change, demonstrating the interconnected use of text/language as constitutive of racial, cultural, sociopolitical and economic dimensions while simultaneously constituting UJ's transformative discourse.

Findings and discussion

Through Rensburg's leadership, UJ became a post-apartheid, democratic-era university. This new African university challenged historical, traditional views and stereotypes, intentionally shaping unorthodox positionality to ground a new vision, mission and organisational goals. In his words, Rensburg (2020a) admits that at the end of his term in 2017, he "left behind ... extraordinary people, passion, ambition, drive, courage, and hope ..." (p. 8). Indeed, UJ achieved beyond expectations as a new university – in the 12th year, it had climbed the ladder as one of the world's top 400 universities, claiming the fourth position in South Africa and fifth in Africa (UJ, 2017). In 2020, it ranked third in South Africa, fourth in Africa (UJ, 2020) and second in 2022. Moreover, UJ has, over the years, been globally recognised and "has consistently climbed the CWUR World University Rankings by 323 places over the last six years to its current 2023 global ranking of 628" (UJ, 2022).

The findings capture a critical interpretation of Rensburg's leadership thinking and practice, offering an alternative leadership epistemology that fundamentally draws from a complex African context to further the transformation mandate. They embody the revisioning of effective university leadership to encapsulate cautiousness towards neoliberal ideology and a commitment to pursuing social, epistemic and economic justice while becoming global players in the innovative space. Reading Rensburg's leadership reveals much of the African anti-colonial and Black consciousness and future-fit principles for an equitably humane and flourishing world. Therefore, it is also vital to contribute to MOS' call to undo colonial power in organisations through anti-colonial and decolonial tools.

Leading a merger was a profound responsibility, and it offered an opportune moment for HE leaders, together with all the stakeholders, to radically transform South African society. Recognising the life-changing possibilities, Rensburg (2020a) held the conviction that "when the public and the common good is foremost and top-of-mind, organisations take care of themselves, their stakeholders, future generations, and the planet" (p. 37). Rensburg's leadership paradigm offers a bounded moral duty for humanity to triumph amidst the hegemony of the economic ideals of education. He argues that "... the university does not operate for direct commercial gain, nor in the interests of a political ideology or party. Its function is the pursuit of truth in the interests of society, thus searching and finding new paths – with some knowledge production loops taking much longer than others – that advance the highest ideals of humanity" (Rensburg, 2017a, p. 33).

The characterisation of CCL explicates what it would mean to lead organisations from an African anti-colonial and Black consciousness ethic standpoint. CCL could serve as a lens through which organisational leaders could "... self-reflect constantly and critically on the questions: Am I leading? Why? Who and how am I leading? What kind of leader am I becoming? Where is my leading taking the organisation?" (Rensburg, 2020a, p. 37). Through the CDA of Rensburg's texts and the coding of this data, CCL is conceptualised as a leadership grounded in Black consciousness and anti-colonial thought. It is thus committed to countering hegemonic whiteness' superiority notions and affirming Blackness in its symbolism of the world's fully human and worthy African and Black peoples. It encapsulates a pursuit of the public and greater good with a cautiousness towards neoliberal ideology and a commitment to achieving social, epistemic and economic justice within the pluriversal national and global innovative spaces for equitable human flourishing beyond the 21st century. The following CCL tenets emerged: operationalise the decolonised psyche, foster a new humanism for a thriving communitarian culture, craft critical performativity to insert meaningful positive performatives, nurture pluriversality and cultivate political, humane and innovative academics' and students' agency.

Operationalise decolonised psyche
The tenet of operationalising a decolonised psyche overarches other tenets in grounding alternative thinking about organisational leadership. Premised on actioning a courageous leadership from a decolonised psyche, Rensburg's leadership guided the creation of a new African university while cognisant "that universities can and are expected to advance the boundaries, and deepen the quality of freedom, democracy, equality, human dignity, human solidarity and social justice" (Rensburg, 2017a, p. 17). In the post-colonial era, where white men as managers and leaders are still revered as the legitimate, responsible, effective guardians of organisational visions and missions of achieving the greater good (Liu and Baker, 2016), Rensburg's leadership has been exemplary, drawing from an African ontology and epistemology and it is expanding organisational leadership epistemology outside of whiteness. Rensburg demonstrated a decolonised psyche through his critique of the HEI's transformation features.

... the conception and implementation of transformation have failed at a general system level. To disrupt, delink or precipitate an epistemic break from the status quo ante, and as a result, actually mimicked Bourdieu's ideas of academic capital and Gramsci's (1971) conceptualisation of cultural reproduction, hegemony and counter-hegemony (2020a, p. 89).

Thus, Rensburg understood colonial power structures and envisioned authentic transformation and its complex dynamics. Therefore, colonialism and apartheid should be sufficiently present in leaders' memories in African educational contexts, not to be ignored or forgotten. Central to enacting the proposed CCL is leading courageously from a decolonised psyche. In this sense, leadership offers an anti-colonial positionality to think, analyse, evaluate, critique and act upon organisations' transformational or diversity and inclusion policies' strategic goals, plans, implementation and review. Freire (1972) argues that radically transformed modes of thinking should become radically transformative and humane. Such a radical shift is conscious of the insidious racially dominant structural and systemic socioeconomic power that oppresses black and non-white people, placing them lower on the socioeconomic ladder. From this perspective, CCL privileges individual and collective critical consciousness that enables deep insights into the racial, political, social and cultural context in which transformation must be realised (Freire, 1972). Consequently, operationalising a decolonised psyche embraces a praxis of leadership activism, aiming to normalise the affirmation of Blackness – a commitment to interrupting whiteness in organisations. Rensburg (2020a) exemplified this tenet by reclaiming autonomy within the confines of legislative frameworks and policies and engaging the progressive activist agency to dislocate historically dominant structures and systems.

A decolonised psyche deviates from traditional patriarchal conceptions of power as the possession of an individual leader to serve their interests. As Rensburg (2020a) posits, "this power and authority are only available for the empathic and deliberate advancement of the vision, mission, and goals of the organisation, and the pursuit of the public and common good" (p. 38). Moreover, it entails using power to actively reveal deficient, oppressive paradigms and practices and removing obstacles to attaining future-oriented visions that foster humanising innovations for complex global problems. Such conscious engagement of power foregrounds a humble spirit that understands the suffering of others and is open to hearing, listening to the lived experiences and current realities and being fully cognisant of the negative impact of the internalised black inferiority and white superiority stereotypes.

Foster a new humanism for a thriving communitarian culture

In a contemporary global context of pervasive dehumanisation of Black people and all Othered peoples, a CCL recognises the advancement of a new humanism that rests within African humanism, which aligns with Fanon's new humanism crucial for decolonised public and private organisations. Rensburg (2017a, p. 22) believes in "the fundamental purpose of the Socratic university of advancing the highest ideals of humanity in and through critical dialogue with society ...". And "for research universities to effuse true greatness, they must elevate, and be seen and known to elevate, all of humanity, including the poor and the marginalised inside and outside their nation-states, regions and continents" (Rensburg, 2017a, p. 18). Integral to such leadership is the organisational vision, which recognises the importance of affirming all in their differences and creating conditions for them to buy into the organisation's vision individually and collectively. Also, it creates conditions for them to share and utilise their knowledge, expertise and wisdom and continue to advance in serving the organisation better.

Drawing on Rensburg's (2017a) position that "the assertion that states determine academic access is complete nonsense" (p. 23), I contend that with the seeming contradictory social and economic demands and complex political and economic national and global

challenges, Vice-chancellors carry the power (legitimate, network, expertise, referent, et cetera.). And have room to exercise it to pursue authentic transformation: progressive visions for human and economic flourishing for all. These form the basis for constructing their decolonial power and exercising it with integrity to serve the greater good. As follows, vice-chancellors should reestablish institutional autonomy and academic freedom geared towards pursuing a new humanism. Such humanism is inclusive, communal and autonomous humanism for all people, constructed collectively by the former colonised and colonisers in seeking new ways of regarding each other outside the colonised, exclusive Eurocentric values of humanism (Biko, 2004).

Colonialism and apartheid disconnected people through their racial humanisation and dehumanisation of people; consequently, the world has not been able to pull together all its resources – human and material, for collective flourishing. For a better future, the world needs solidarity – the Ubuntu ethic of communitarianism to explore collective wisdom and agency in confronting complex contemporary challenges. Similarly, this ethic is crucial within a microsetting of individualising and competitive neoliberal organisations and university contexts, which are reproducing coloniality and repression of black people. Centred on relationality as the essence of our real and complete selves, communalism demands that "one becomes a real self "because we are" or a complete person "through another person", which roughly means insofar as one prizes communal or harmonious relationships with others" (Metz, 2018, p. 39). In communion with each other, people uncover their unique gifts and worth (Metz, 2018) in pursuing collective aspirations while bolstering the essence of each other humanity. By fostering this principle, CCL instills humane relations in organisations and creates conditions for what Escobar (2021) sees as radical interdependence, which could serve to transition into new civilisations as "everything unfolds within meshworks of interrelations" (p. 7).

Craft critical performativity to insert meaningful positive performatives
Higher education leaders in Africa face the challenge of changing society, redressing historical and current injustices, enabling humane and innovative academic agencies and producing future-fit graduates and knowledge with shrinking financial resources. In finding viable ways to achieve these mandates, universities have been seduced by the problematic neoliberal ideals of efficiency and effectiveness (Badat, 2004). This background necessitates the consideration of critical performativity as a crucial enactment of CCL. Therefore, it is incumbent upon HE leaders to deeply understand the negative influence of neoliberalism on education and society. Rensburg (2020a, p. 5) demonstrated this insight, noting:

Alert not to implement the worst excesses of new managerialism in higher education; we were undertaking, sensitively, the twin tasks of bedding down the new university and building a base from which it could become South Africa's new generation post-apartheid democracy university – ambitious, dynamic, achieving, challenging and transforming.

He was also mindful of the neoliberal trajectory, as it ... "raises uncomfortable questions about the utilitarian Modern Ages where all that is required of the university is the rapid graduation of highly skilled persons and where universities are judged against their contribution to the economy" (Rensburg, 2017b, p. 29).

For CCL, crafting critical performativity involves engaging with practice critically to affirm anti-neoliberal practices and shaping the ethics and normative orientations of these through a clear and meaningful transformative discourse. It is about operating within the dialectical tensions of the social and economic purposes of HE, African and global relevance, African and Western paradigms, excellent performance and attainment of social justice (Seyama, 2018). As Alvesson and Spicer contend (2012), "This calls for combining and

switching between performative positions (which largely accept present conditions and constraints) and critical positions (which question existing conditions, emphasise independent thinking, and aim for less constraining social relations)" (p. 369). Critical performativity encapsulates flexibility within the normative contemporary HE's contradictory dimensions of corporate orientation vs public orientation, research vs teaching, performance assessment and policing vs performance development and management, utilitarianism vs egalitarianism, power vs resistance, control vs collegiality and national vs global responsiveness (Seyama, 2018). Rensburg's (2020a) leadership guided a critical performative focus ". . . on advancing substantive and progressive student and staff diversity and inclusion: investing in sustained student academic success; building a base for advancing teaching and research resilience, and social impact; and, carefully, yet ambiguously building our new image and brand" (p. 5).

Enacting critical performativity, UJ distanced itself from elitism by increasing the enrolment of students from poor backgrounds, with most presenting with learning gaps (Rensburg, 2020a). UJ invested in teaching, enabling a holistic, integrated approach to students' needs, providing extensive student academic support and development programmes and raising funds for vulnerable students. This assisted in providing food, tablets and laptops (UJ, 2017). Thus, for CCL, the goal of widening access should take a holistic lens in laying the foundations for students' excellence and sustainability – guiding a contextually relevant response with a critical sensibility to discourses and demands of meritocracy in the absence of the attainment of equity for all. From CCL's perspective, the university's excellence rests on its transformation – deracialisation of students and staff – decolonisation, shared purpose, inclusion and humane and innovative future fitness should be the barometers for excellence (Rensburg, 2020b).

Considering the shortcomings of neoliberal individualism and competition and attaining critical performativity as an alternative, Rensburg (2020a) argued for the need for a "collective entrepreneurial action" (p. 38) of all stakeholders – academics, managers and administrators led by virtuous executive leadership, aiming to achieve the collective goals underpinned by a compelling, values and pride; and accountability and consequence management . . ." (p. 38). As Rensburg (2020a) observes, organisations depend on individuals to perform even with clear visions, strategic goals and plans. Thus, performance management should detract from a panoptic, controlling and subjectifying culture. It should encapsulate performance development and primarily consider individuals' context – level, support and autonomy for academics to align purposefully with organisational strategic goals.

Cultivate pluriversality

Pluriversality is vital to the project of dismantling Eurocentric dominance and its flawed civilisation project in all aspects of life. It rejects dualism that characterises Eurocentric ontology and advocates for dialectical realities as constructed by multiple varied worlds (various ontologies, epistemologies, beings, ethics and cultures) – yet holding the promise of worlding together and in communion for a better future (Escobar, 2021). Pluriversality positions difference as inherent and necessary and ought to be enabled to exist in its dynamism without strangling it through frameworks that enforce simplistic, homogenous pseudo-reality. An essential consideration for CCL is that the authentic African university must affirm that Africa is ontologically and epistemologically rich; dependence on Eurocentricism only robs the world of the unique inspiration for solving its complex problems (Rabaka, 2009). For the new African university to be a globalised African university, it should inspire the recovery and restoration of African history and epistemologies for the future benefit of Africa (Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda, 2019). Thus, epistemic resistance to whiteness dominance and epistemic justice is imperative to transition

into pluriversality. Rensburg (2017b) acknowledges that "the university is the organisational context where the complex and detailed, yet contradictory, process of knowledge production and dissemination occurs. For, correctly, the university is the custodian of, and the public speaker on, humanity's intellectual, moral and scientific enterprise" (p. 45).

Against falsified African wisdom, it is important to take heed of Biko's perspective on African and Western mental attitudes towards life problems. He observes, "Whereas the Westerner is geared to use a problem-solving approach following very trenchant analyses, our approach is that of situation-experiencing" (Biko, 2004, p. 48). Thus, contradictions are considered within the reality of contexts, and dialectics are considered in sense-making. However, Western thinking finds a place for sense-making in harmony, homogeneity of thinking, knowledge and practice – problems need solutions, and solutions are premised on rationality and scientific knowledge. There is little consideration of the different paradigms – ways of thinking that breed different ways of knowing and doing and acknowledge the permanence of paradoxes and tensions. Biko (2004) noted this rationalistic and scientific knowledge flaw as the ignorance of nature's inherent mysteries and intelligence that directs the flow of giving at the appropriate time and self-generating in preparation for the next cycle of giving. Recognition of this African wisdom is vital in illuminating most of the contemporary environmental challenges. Therefore, decolonial thinking is paramount for regrounding African universities' knowledge production on African knowledge systems and, importantly, restoring Africa to a worthy partner in a pluriversal world.

Cultivate political, humane and innovative academics and students' agency

Western ontologies and epistemologies dominate African universities' knowledge production, dissemination and consumption. Knowing no other than Western-oriented education, most academics in Africa have carried the legacy of colonialism into the 21st century, imbuing future generations with deficient ways of thinking, knowing and doing that have the world in crisis – socially, politically, economically, environmentally and spiritually. African universities will realise epistemological decolonisation once the liberation of academia is attained, which has not been a priority of neoliberal universities. In advancing a new African university that grounds students with critical skills to navigate the world's paradoxes and tensions courageously and creatively while interdependently communing with all, enacting CCL would involve nurturing a political, humane and innovative students' and academics' agency. Rensburg (2020a) conceded the centrality of students' political activism in compelling universities to realise transformation shortcomings, noting that "all were moved to actively engage in rupturing the post-apartheid university's implicit comfortable relationship with the out-of-tune and out-of-place colonial university models and its associated knowledge, governance, traditions, and culture" (p. 248).

CCL drives universities that are beacons of deliberative and participatory democracy (Davids and Waghid, 2020), and they ought to enable student and academic activism. History is a witness to their role in confronting and opposing oppressive regimes. Students' voices should become powerful to resist oppressive governance, reproducing marginalisation and inequalities for a politically and economically free society. Decolonising students' minds should be the premise of universities transforming society. Moreover, the decolonisation of minds involves students' contribution towards creating inclusive humanism, where all participate equally (Waghid, 2021, p. 2). With a political consciousness and a humane ethic, students and academics will engage in innovations and creations that serve human sustainability.

The CCL tenets, as elucidated, illuminate the possibilities of the new African university's leadership in dislocating whiteness and patriarchy and delegitimising heroic authoritarian leadership practices. While Rensburg's leadership offered an alternative and meaningful approach, it was not without limitations or problematisation. Facing the paradox of leading

transformation to redress deeply ingrained historical, socioeconomic and racial inequalities in a neoliberal era, UJ began a performative culture journey. This raised concerns about its subjugating performance management system, which risked academics' performances in the "glass cages", fostering self-policing and eventually alienation from the self (Seyama, 2018). As Banerjee (2021) contends, performatives based on whiteness risk constructing identities to align with organisational performance culture and Sihela (2022) contends it produces "managing to colonise". Furthermore, such a system creates academic capitalists, ignoring the racist foundation of capitalism intent on reducing and placing inferior blacks lowest on the ladder of "human" capital and the superior whites on the upper level to grab the fruits of wealth easily (Mill, 1977 cited in Dar *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

Drawing on African anti-colonial thinking and Black consciousness' critical insights to examine Rensburg's leadership texts, this paper proposes CCL as an alternative approach underpinning Blackness in HE leadership, which is crucial for authentic transformation and decolonisation. In doing that, it also sought to illuminate how TLT normalises whiteness. The aim was to demonstrate how Rensburg, as the former UJ Vice-chancellor, exemplified a meaningfully effective leadership, which offered an alternative leadership paradigm and epistemology, thus inspiring the conceptualisation of CCL. CCL cultivates leading with the head, heart and spirit and directs a humane and innovative leadership praxis, encapsulating emancipatory and developmental philosophies, ethics, ideals and norms that serve the transformational mandate of repairing, healing and rebuilding. It calls upon HE leaders to mobilise an authentic collective commitment and efficacy to change society, develop active and critical graduates and produce meaningful knowledge for creating future paths towards making the world a just and thriving place.

Taking up CCL, leaders ought to engage in the reflexivity of their subjectivities and assumptions and ask the difficult question – "What are they directed to serve?" The CCL praxis draws on a decolonised psyche, embedding an ethical, political, social and economic subjectivity. It acknowledges the colonial historical violence that shaped Blackness as a political discourse, embodying a dehumanisation of black people. CCL offers a pursuit of HE transformation within a new humanism, affirming the equitable value of all human beings and underpinning the subversion of neoliberal ideals that undermine social justice. It also inserts positive performatives within the dialectics of the seeming contradictions and tensions of serving the public and economic good and national and global responsiveness. This paper illuminates the possibilities of retracing African thought for a new African university that could rewrite African legacies and redefine excellence as a meaningful endeavour of alternative thinking in innovation and creativity. Furthermore, it offers the world new knowledge for tenable and sustainable answers to difficult questions in a global context that is inhumane, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

While Rensburg's leadership largely epitomised the CCL tenets, the challenges of transformation and decolonisation persisted. At a micro-level – units and departments – dominantly discriminatory subcultures continue to oppress and marginalise people. Amidst the broader institutional transformative values, enclaves persist with hostile authoritarian micromanagement tactics. Pursuing transformative accountability is vital for all institutional stakeholders to live up to their values.

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Corresponding author
Sadi Seyama-Mokhaneli can be contacted at: sseyama@uj.ac.za