
Chronotopes of the Angloscene

What cultural, historical, and other representational materials are available for synthesizing a future African subject of China-Africa educational encounters?¹ Postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon once noted that the postcolonial subject's nightmares have a time and a place—a *socius* of the colonial encounter that haunts and recontextualizes the future of the colonized eternally within that shape-shifting nightmare (Fanon [1952] 2008, 84–85). This chapter—exploring the cosmopolitan aspirations of African students in Beijing—recasts Fanon's observation and explores how dreams of efficacious personhood, like nightmares of compromised subjectivity, imbricate the same spatiotemporal tension between aspirational horizons and their compromised conditions of mediation. At issue are the semiotic infrastructures that constitute affordances and “props” for the emergence and recruitment of both aspirational and available figures of personhood under conditions of twenty-first-century transnationalism.

Personhood—as analytical proposition—has become diffuse, stratified, and provincialized in many contemporary anthropologies of the Anthropocene (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015; Latour 2005). Much of this literature inadvertently presumes dualisms between human vis-à-vis nonhuman, actant vis-à-vis network, and individual agency vis-à-vis social structure. Though much of this literature has often been understood as doing precisely the opposite, the contradictions of presupposing the object of negation—in this case the dualisms at issue—nonetheless protracts the discursive life of a given semantic tension. This is perhaps largely due to the ways in which elements that make up personhood's semiotic infrastructure—like language, media, and conditions of mobility—have been treated as discreet semantic problems requiring an endless divergence of methods as well as the compartmentalization of political engagements. As such, several disciplinary accounts of twentieth- and twenty-first-century social life—particularly those involving mobile subjects like migrants, global citizens, or refugees—often show little overlap between communicative practices, media landscapes, and

conditions of mobility as integrated phenomena that impact contrapuntally, rather than unitarily, on their subjects' reception and legibility of being.²

This book is by no means solving that problem, but represents an attempt to situate personhood as neither an individuated social unit nor an overarching social, or even human, concept. Aligning with pragmatist and critical theoretical genealogies in contemporary anthropologies of personhood (Carr 2011; Comaroff 1999; Munn 1986), I understand personhood as the event, eventual, and eventuating horizon of reflexive social and intersubjective life. In this understanding, personhood entails time and place—historical and futurist; individual and collective; intimate and public; aspirational and traumatic. To demonstrate personhood's contingency on spatiotemporal contextualization necessitates an exploration of personhood as emergent and emerging—yet always relied upon as prior or above—within both durable social institutions as well as fleeting social interactions. Pursuing this imperative, I explore the contingency between personhood and space-time by reconciling three ethnographic dimensions of interaction—media propinquity, language, and conditions of mobility. What I term the Angloscene emerges at the confluence of these ethnographic dimensions, in face-to-face social interactions that must simultaneously presume upon available space-times of personhood, even while personhood is being remade through these interactions.

GETTING OFF THE OCCIDENTAL SCHOOL BUS

"What is that?" asked Eniola Eco, my classmate and a Nigerian international relations student at Da Hua University in Beijing. We were looking across a crowded intersection, having just come out of class for an off-campus lunch at a cut noodle (*dao xiao mian*) shop right around the corner. I followed Eniola's gaze to the other side of the road, but seeing nothing of particular interest, I replied, "What's up?"

"The bus," he answered. "Where have you ever seen one of those?" I understood at that moment that he was pointing toward an American-style yellow school bus, which did seem out of place in Beijing. I suggested that we walk across the road and take a look. As we did so, an enormous "ABCD English School" sign—emblazoned on the side of the bus—came into view. "That's ridiculous," he exclaimed, gesticulating with his open hands at the rainbow-colored papyrus font subtitled the photo of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed child spread across the side of the vehicle. "I used to work for those guys. They told me they were going bankrupt and let me go without paying me two months' salary. I guess I know where the money went."

Eniola's example is far from unique and reflects how many African students in Beijing face the somewhat paradoxical situation of being subjects of an alternative educational globalization—Sino-South rather than Euro-American—yet have to depend on the signs of English cultural capital to supplement university scholarships that often fall short of their financial expectations as newly "cosmopolitanized" international students.³

A number of western-based scholars have demonstrated how China is rapidly adopting an escalating horizon of expectation, aspiration, and desire.⁴ The forms that this adoption might take have been vividly described in ethnographies of conspicuous consumption, the commodification of desire, the curbing of urban migrancy, and the branding of lifestyle, respectively. However, the English subtitles that accompany the reformulation of Chinese postsocialist modernity through many of these adoptions are less emphasized. Such adoptions include everything from the appropriations of English language as an auxiliary lingua franca for Chinese engagements with virtually all outsiders to English's textual rhetoric in a wide array of artistic and protest mediums. No doubt, China scholars will—and in some cases do—hold the opinion that the presence of signs of English and Englishness in China are superficial trappings with little ideological content—provincial even—in the context of a simultaneously “rising” and “deeply ancient” Sinosphere.⁵

Such a view betrays an unfortunate recruitment of Sino-exceptionalism that has become a feature of western China studies as well as several anthropologies of China that contextualize themselves within its intellectual tradition (an orientation formerly understood as Sinology). This Sino-exceptionalism can further be observed in a discursive double movement between Sino-exceptionalism and what Chinese anthropologist Mingming Wang (2014) has criticized as “Sinified” and “internal” Orientalisms in the context of the anthropology of China:

Western anthropologists who study China have “Sinified” Orientalism. In the anthropology of China, the concept of “internal Orientalism” has become popular. Anthropologists who focus on studying the interrelationship between ethnic groups and the Han in China have begun investigating how popular discourses shape—e.g., feminize—the image of ethnic groups with romantic technologies of domination. They have taken important notes of certain “social facts” of representation, and argued for the critique of “internal othering.” This kind of research is surely not trivial, but it does have certain obvious shortcomings. It, for instance, fails to acknowledge that Chinese “internal Orientalism” has always been derived from the conflation of the internal and external. (16)

Here, Sino-exceptionalism—as the dialectical shadow of Wang's broader discussion of Occidentalism—presupposes a bounded, inscrutable space-time within which an ideological Chineseness will easily and unproblematically encompass outside or foreign semiotic formations that enter it. The efficacy of Sino-exceptionalism within the matrix of western Sinology and area studies more generally depends on the selective canonization and recruitment of Chinese scholarship that perpetuates this exceptionalism. Such ethnographic materials then, as Wang suggests, adopt—while masquerading as evidence for—the western Orientalist gaze by both projecting it onto and confirming it within the Chinese academic context. Among many other problems, this discursive double movement depends on a “dilution” model of cultural/semiotic interaction, as well as the maintenance of a world consisting of hermetically sealed, exceptional space-times, that remain inscrutable until rendered translatable

within the “universal” archive of Sinology and area studies—something that cannot happen without the consent and ratification of “local” scholars seeking recognition in the elite journals of the academic Anglosphere.

In embracing China as a space of historical as well as contemporary contiguity and dynamic interaction with the Global South, what follows opposes Sino-exceptionalism and aligns with Wang’s critique of the construction of China as a bounded territory and disciplinary exception. Wang suggests that this boundedness and exceptionalism is complicit in perpetuating rigid Occidental/Oriental divides that become impassable to accounts of historical and cultural interaction that fall outside of Eurocentric east-west binarisms: of which China-Africa encounters represent but one example. Thinking China in terms of its non-western others, however, requires taking seriously the mutual dependency on shared (or overlapping) discourses and broader contexts that might seem to undermine the very proposition of a genuinely postcolonial, non-western, condition of personhood promised by a Sino-South encounter.

TRANSLATING BEYOND POLITICAL MONOLINGUALISM

In the previous vignette, Eniola—like many other African educational migrants in Beijing—is compelled to teach English (in many cases illegally) in order to support a newly acquired, self-reportedly “cosmopolitan” lifestyle in China. This is a pattern for many African students studying in the Chinese capital. Thus, both the exploitation he described earlier as well as the political economy of language at play is far from unique among the increasing numbers of African students in Beijing and other major academic centers. In the first instance, teaching English to supplement studying Chinese in China has become a paradoxical feature of Sino-South educational globalization. In the second, having the capacity to speak English is often the only form of social currency that black African students in China have, as it becomes the means to both attain income—teaching in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) market—as well as build friendships with cosmopolitan Chinese teachers, students, and other foreigners. Here, English is prevalent even in Chinese university settings, where increasing numbers of classes are being taught to African students who have been a more common presence on Chinese campuses since the first ministerial conference of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 (Bodomo 2012; King 2013). Even Francophone and Lusophone interviewees claimed that their English improved far more dramatically than their Chinese after becoming university students in Beijing. According to another informant—a French-speaking Malagasy economics major named Rousseau Bakoly—committing to English more than Chinese reaps benefits because “knowing English and some Chinese offers more opportunities for friendship than being really good at Chinese.” According to him, having good English and some Chinese had the benefit of improving one’s romantic

prospects, as “many foreign girls only speak English [other than their native tongue], and many Chinese girls want to practice their English.”

Beyond the common-sense assertion of Anglo-American soft power hegemony, we must ask: How does English persist as a currency mediating Sino-South encounters where the imbricated signs of English language-ness, cosmopolitanism, and whiteness become the favored forms of social capital among actors who have been historical others to the Anglosphere’s racio-linguistic worlds? In exploring this question, we must reconsider literatures that have underlined the limits and pragmatics of postcolonial translation (Spivak 1993; Bhabha 1994, 1995; Bassnett and Trivedi 1999) particularly when the so-called neutrality of English becomes compromised by the ideological vectors of whiteness and cosmopolitan desire. In this genealogy of postcolonial theory, translation can be understood as an analogical shorthand for getting at the interested and unequal contingencies of postsocialist and postcolonial encounters that imbricate a double temporal consciousness. Because of the unequal situatedness of postcolonial subjects in relation to the historical and material afterlife of colonialism, translation—in this metaphorical sense—is not only a capacity that arises out of having to inhabit double-, or indeed multiple kinds of, consciousness. It arises from the constant burden of both postcolonial and still-colonized subjects to have to reconcile temporalities of history, language, and subjectivity to their still colonial audience.

Monolingualism, as a feature of the imagined audience of translation, (as in Benedict Anderson’s [1983] literary public) places the burden of a disjunctive, lived counterpoint on the multilingual, usually colonized, translator. Ironically, however, it turns out to be the monolingual voyeur who then judges the translator’s work, work that becomes simultaneously exploited and negated to present the smooth surfaces of a politically monolingual world. This is a point that has been compellingly raised by Daniel Vukovich in his *Illiberal China* (2019). Hence, the metaphor of translation does not fetishize language once we understand that the use of language is already at issue in making the very arguments for translation—the reflexivity that is immanent to translation is the reflexivity that is immanent in language itself. No forms of representation or reception—especially those reflexively about representation and reception (like this sentence)—can unfold without mediation. The point that any abstract formulation depends on fetishistic, sensorially perceivable materializations—like sign-able, audible, or entextualized language—to talk about abstractions or fetishes, was already explicit in Karl Marx’s (1972) own insistence on immanent critique. Instead, the metaphor of translation—in postcolonial theory—draws attention not only to the double burden of translating and translational personhood on the part of the colonized, but also the double burden of time travel—or living in a counterpoint between unequal social histories—that remains a feature of the persistent historical precarity of postcolonial subjectivity.

To think that postcolonial concerns are absent in the context of contemporary Afro-Chinese interactions would be both intellectually naïve and historically

ignorant. At the same time, to take China as a simplistic proxy for a historical trend set in motion by Euro-American colonialism would also be to reduce colonialism to a game of leveraging power and extracting resources, without asking what conditions of value and imagined subjectivity drive these historical-material and discursive processes: be they explicit power grabs or the more insidious effects of endless accumulation. As English-teaching fuels African students' attempts at attaining cosmopolitan dreams in China, Chinese development bank personnel and government officials overseeing Global South investments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are increasingly recruited out of the law and business schools of Oxbridge and the Ivy Leagues. Just as archetypes of cosmopolitan personhood are less hospitable to black bodies as a result of decades of American soft power, Beijing's attempts to place Chinese soft power on an equal footing frequently fail due to English and Mandarin Chinese occupying radically different international positions of influence. China, unlike its Anglosphere counterparts, must often work through English translation when engaging other non-western interlocutors. In light of this situation, and in relation to what will follow, the perspective that languages and the conditions of possibility for any translation are populated by the people who maintain them will become evident to the reader if it is not so already. Yet most of us seldom have this immediate intuition due to the fact that language, history, conditions of mass-mediation, as well as our available forms of personhood are always experienced as prior to or above us (Inoue 2006; Agha 2007a; Carr 2011).

To analytically demonstrate the contingencies of personhood and space-time in the contemporary dialectics of postcolonial translation, it is imperative to give an account of the ways in which certain kinds of marginal subjects—non-white, second-language English speakers—are unequally burdened by having to undertake multiple and transtemporal participant roles. The designers of the *China Exploratorium* must not only motivate China's relevance in the world, but must do so for a default English-literate audience. The pragmatic effects of historically plural subjectivity and its unequally distributed burden should not be undermined by positing the "facticity" of linear historical experience: as in a historical chain-of-being argument where China can unproblematically supplant Euro-American colonialism while conveniently eliding its own prior emplacement as civilizationally inferior to "the modern west."⁶ This is especially the case in situations where different sets of interlocutors become stratified in relation to mediums of participation and their imbricated, transnational framing: for instance, Chinese and African subjects mediating their mutual encounters through English, and in relation to divergent and unequal space-times of racialized historical colonialism as well as the fantastic utopic imaginary of unmarked cosmopolitan futurity.

CHRONOTOPE AND ANGLOSCENE

It is this articulated relationship between English and its associated signs of race, cosmopolitanism, and mobility that I wish to term the Angloscene. In unpacking the dimensions of the Angloscene, I find Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the chronotope to be useful. In his essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*, he emphasized language's capacity to evoke space-time via the reading subject's ability to embody different times and places from those that they inhabited at the moment of reading. For Bakhtin, a genre of language (or mutually intelligible sign system) could act as an intimate teleportation device that allows the reader to access remote fictional or historical worlds. In defining chronotopes, he was attempting to articulate the immersive or teleportational propensity of language-based worlds, existing as entextualized space-times within novels and other text artifacts. Importantly for Bakhtin, the embodied intimacy of the chronotope was also of a publicly shareable and accessible kind, given the fact that chronotopes were intelligible to the very publics they addressed, while being formed and maintained by these self-same publics. This publicly shareable and socially maintained dimension of chronotopic affinities and affordances is often overlooked in literary studies that deploy the chronotope merely as a means of foregrounding the novel and other entextualizable forms of art as social and political artifacts. However, we can go much further. Bakhtin's more neglected concept, heteroglossia, enables an enriched understanding of how chronotopes emerge in institutionalized social settings—like the publishing houses, circles of literary criticism, national broadcasters, and state-regulated curriculums of his day. I encountered two such settings during my own fieldwork: the Hanban headquarters as well as the Central Party School, both of which are in Beijing.

In the case of the Hanban, I was able to visit on my own thanks to the generous introduction and facilitation through a Chinese professor and friend—as well as a former Hanban official—who arranged for me to meet and interview another Hanban official, Hong, who was in charge of curriculum development for Confucius Institute materials. I met Hong Laoshi (Teacher Hong) at the Hanban headquarters in Beijing, accompanied by a Chinese graduate student intern who was meant to facilitate my passage through the massive building. Upon arrival, I was taken directly to Hong Laoshi's office and tea was brought in. It was established that I was a South African graduate student without ties to the United States. Having undertaken this disambiguation ritual a few times, I indicated that my concerns were Afro-China oriented, but coming from an Afro-centric perspective. She emphasized that the Hanban and its CIs prioritized Sino-African and inter-Asian cultural and educational exchange. We talked about whether language education could ever be undertaken without ideological and cultural exchange and agreed that this was impossible. I then asked why she thought that some people

believed this—thinking of an example in my home country where the head of a China studies department rumored to be in an adversarial relationship with its Confucius Institute was adamant that there was no conflict given that their department worked on political and economic matters, and the CI worked on linguistic and cultural matters. Responding to the question, Hong Laoshi stated carefully: “I think that would be an incorrect perception.” Our meeting concluded once Hong Laoshi had asked me how CIs were received in South Africa, to which I answered honestly: “Quite differently from the US.”

I then was taken to a different area where I was shown an archive of materials that CIs were distributing to their centers around the world. There was a collection of language textbooks translated into over a dozen different languages, placed on shelves under a large banner in English and Chinese which read: “Culture / *wenhua*.” I was then led to another exhibit space, the China Exploratorium, which has been somewhat succinctly described by Jennifer Hubbert in the following way: “The first stop on the Chinese Bridge program’s tour of Beijing was a trip to Hanban headquarters. . . . In the ‘Exploratorium’ section, an instructional space that resembled US children’s museums by offering opportunities for hands-on manipulation of artifacts and computerized lessons on history, students could don Beijing opera costumes, manipulate beads on a massive abacus, make paper and print a book, and view ink-brush paintings, all either common symbols of traditional Chinese culture or recognized examples of historically advanced technological accomplishments” (2019, 85).

As Hubbert suggests, the space was a multisensory exhibit featuring objects, textures, images, and imaginaries of various regions in China. Up until that point, I had not traveled much in China, nor did I have a reference point for the scale of CI activities in different places. Though China is undoubtedly vast and diverse, and CI transnational activities could hardly be accounted for in a single exhibit, both the “culture” room and the Exploratorium are expected to function like chronotopes within which material culture and language can be synthesized under the rubric of a singular state project. In this way, the Hanban shares many similarities with the selective archive of a multinational university, the Goethe Institute curriculum, or the South Korean national museum.

The chronotopic functioning of such institutions is contingent upon their maintenance through language and participation in the institution on the part of a vast number of stakeholders. Hong Laoshi and I are not equal participants in the maintenance of the Hanban participation framework, but the salience of the institution very much depends on our chronotopic calibration through this interaction and many more like it. The feature of language that enables this calibration, Bakhtin reminds us, is heteroglossia, which can be understood as the feature of communication that permits mutual intelligibility: the element of unoriginality and familiarity that underpins every seemingly “new” or “novel” message. The fact that language is already shared, and that all expressive potentials are immanent in it, mean that the poet relies on the unoriginality of language to make their

original permutations intelligible. What makes a poetic contribution original then is a combination of unoriginality and the unfolding and nonpermanent universe within which chronotopes cycle through unfolding into flesh and evaporating into oblivion. It is institutionalized intersubjective labor that enables the heteroglossic maintenance of always historical chronotopes against the erasures of “becoming.”⁷

This relationship between heteroglossia and chronotopic formation was potentially foregrounded in a different context, the Central Party School (CPS). The CPS is the premier educational center for elite cadres of the Communist Party of China and serves as a significant intellectual archive and training ground for members of its Central Committee. The CPS, in collaboration with the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (CCTB), oversee canonical interpretations of Marxist and Hegelian thought, as well as their ideological calibration with Xi Jinping thought, Dengism, and Maoist reform. As a member of an interdisciplinary and international delegation of mostly American and Chinese social science PhD candidates from US universities, I found myself fortunate enough to enter the CPS campus and meet with some of the faculty and translators from both institutions. Having been screened in advance of the visit, we relinquished our phones, passports, and recording devices before entering a minimally furnished but beautiful seminar room: lacquered wooden surfaces, porcelain cups with old propaganda slogans, and two prominently placed sets of calligraphy on the walls of the seminar room. The professor casually remarked that these were the penmanship of Deng Xiaoping and Mao Zedong. Fragrant Longjing tea was served and we settled in for a long discourse that sutured Hegelian and Xi Jinping thought, reconciling continuous revolutions all the way down to the present—“we are on track with our party’s socialist vision” and “[despite many challenges] things are [and have been] getting better.” Such seamless suturing and reconciliation is profoundly dependent on the interdiscursive recruitment of the chronotopic potentials of the props in the room and the dramatic staging of the visit. This chronotopic interplay of co-texts permit transhistorical materializations in the present that further presume upon a familiar contextualizing language: modes of speaking and co-textual signification that articulate (in the sense of “gluing”) aesthetic and linguistic registers of socialist internationalism for the right kind of receptive listener. Notably, it is not the objects of language that evoke transhistorical or transgeographical breaching of space-time, but rather their embodiments and resonances with already familiar incorporations.

What I call the Angloscene extends this principle of trans-spatiotemporal incorporation, recognizing that chronotopes depend on, while also being depended on, as sites for the production and maintenance of personhood. As such, chronotopes can never be political vacuums. The capacity to produce and depend on them can favor some, while compromising others. This prompts us to understand the Angloscene as itself a meta- or macro-chronotope: a broader or encompassing ideological space-time that constrains the indexicalities (context-defining propensities) of chronotopes emerging within or in relation to it. In this sense, the Angloscene can be understood as recruiting chronotopic capacities, including

the desires of subjects, in the service of generating nexuses of alienation and dependency that entail, and are entailed by, the ideological interplay of English, cosmopolitan mobility, and white space-time. The Angloscene is thus a material and ideological affordance for generating certain conditions of personhood, while itself depending on persons for its maintenance.

In understanding the Angloscene through the lens of the chronotope, I hope to suggest the ways in which “English-language-ness” and “cosmopolitan desire”—as contrapuntally converging space-times (simultaneously distinct and mutually convergent)—come to pragmatically entail an ideological landscape that forms the context in relation to which Chinese and African students must generate or discover their affordances for mutual personhood.

To be sure, my use of Angloscene *does* gesture phonetically toward the popular iterations of “-cene” that have come to problematize historicity and contemporaneity within a recent species-oriented paradigmatic shift in Euro-American anthropology. However, I favor “-scene” as a suffix that immanently understands interactions and mediation as constitutive of personhood. The difference between -cene and -scene is one of spatialized, bounded time that is more or less indifferent to people and personhood; versus a more dynamic interplay between the reflexive capacities of personhood and the mutual contingencies of space-time. For there is no personhood without space-time and no space-time without reflexive personhood. In sociologist Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of interaction, for instance, we may understand scenes as recruiting personhood and personhood as depending on scenes (1959). Similarly, for Frantz Fanon—a trans-Atlantic contemporary of Goffman’s—postcolonial personhood and the space-time of colonial trauma are mutually constitutive within the colonial *socius* (Fanon [1952] 2008, 84–85). What is at stake for myself and these thinkers is not a vulgar human-centrism. In the work of Goffman and Fanon, as well as generations of Durkheimian interlocutors from Marcel Mauss (1985) to Jean and John Comaroff (1999), it emerges fairly emphatically that personhood is not reducible to categories like human and posthuman. Of course, this insight has been a mainstream common sense in legal and juridical settings where institutions like corporations have been afforded the status of persons. Situating this move in an older sociological language, I suggest that a scenic view of personhood suspends the concept of the human as a settled formation; and instead posits that nature and posthumanity are unthinkable propositions without the reflexive capacities that can be identified within the interstices of personhood and space-time. The scenic view I am proposing is one where personhood is simultaneously unsettled as a stable semantic formation, while recognizing personhood’s pragmatic efficacy as a project that semantic, ethical, phenomenological, and materialist endeavors as social commitments depend upon. Among African students in China, for instance, the ideal African person that must emerge out of Chinese education is not entirely known. This semantic gap, however, does not paralyze African subjects in their attempts

to make personhood in a new context—even if it requires them to pragmatically repurpose or reuse a combination of older and available props to make new persons while citing older scenes. Deconstruction and translational nihilism are not options for subjects who must motivate a pragmatic, intelligible personhood even if it comes at the cost of significant historical and contemporary compromises.

Rather, Anglocentric icons of value and their cosmopolitan co-texts appear to be both the signs through which to achieve some degree of financial and social mobility, as well as the conditions constraining African cultural capital in a Chinese social landscape. The way in which these signs and co-texts of Englishness hang together as evocative of a broadly cosmopolitan personhood are suggestive of a space-time populated by interacting types of persons where these very signs and co-texts have meaning, value, and efficacy. In Afro-Chinese Beijing, the Angloscene emerges as a chronotope of intersubjective personhood that sustains the meanings, values, efficacies of English signs and their co-texts. Here, the Angloscene is not a synonym for English lingua franca as just another form of cultural capital. Rather, it contests the understanding of English as a bounded, arbitrary manifestation of shifting historical power relations indifferent to the ideological particularities of language and its contexts—where the Angloscene is the condition of possibility for English to be understood as more than *langue* and *parole* (Saussure 2011). As a nexus between ideology, personhood, and language, the Angloscene affords English a materiality, spatiotemporality, and social domain, allowing English to not only transcend its taxonomy as a language among languages, but also its range as the disinterested communicative interface among non-western others. It is through the broader domain of the Angloscene that English is able to entail its space-time and particular affordances of subjectivity. In all these senses, the Angloscene emerges as a less benign iteration of what anthropologist Nancy Munn might have once termed an intersubjective space-time (1986). Similarly, however, space-time and personhood are mutually contingent conditions for the valuation and enactment of cultural capital in the case of the Angloscene.

NO ENGLISH, NO WORRIES

In the context of Afro-Chinese encounters in Beijing, the Angloscene's spatiotemporal and intersubjective propensities are particularly pronounced. In addition to allowing Rousseau, Eniola, and many like them to overcome social isolation and access short-term economic opportunities in China, many African students suggested that mastery of English enabled academic access, allowing my informants to take "better courses" from "international scholars" at their Beijing universities. Many complained, however, that the Chinese language classes offered at their universities—at many top-tier institutions in Beijing—were inadequate because of large student numbers and a lack of conversation practice in class (often

numbering over thirty students). After sitting in on a few classes with Rousseau, and watching a somewhat harassed-looking female Chinese teacher trying to motivate over seventy African and other foreign students to repeat phrases from a conversation book, I came to understand his apprehension. His teacher, Liu Laoshi, shared apprehensions of her own. She too felt that the mass-education she was providing for the foreign students was ineffective. In an interview, she stated that the “classroom environment [provided] no opportunity for feedback . . . you can’t surpass the affective threshold.” In using the terms “feedback” and “affective threshold,” Liu Laoshi demonstrated a background in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This is unsurprising since many Chinese teachers who specialize in Chinese Foreign Language (CFL) education also teach English as a Foreign Language, as EFL has been the primary model for CFL training. English grammar and other language terms also make up the default reflexive register for teaching Chinese language points to foreign students of Chinese, which means that every student learning Chinese and every teacher teaching it must work through English as a default pedagogical language. Liu Laoshi would later take a teaching position at a private language education company teaching Chinese to smaller groups of mostly white expat students in the east of Beijing, describing her move as having “been promoted.” In retrospect, there was certainly a stark contrast between her new four-person conversation classes, and the lecture hall of her former university job—the intimate, well-equipped “first-world” classroom at the top of a corporate building versus the cold, dusty “third-world dungeon” where she was getting a chorus of students to yell out a cacophony of Chinese tones augmented by the concrete and plastic surfaces of the overcrowded, neon-lit space. As I came to discover, however, it was not only the Chinese classes at Rousseau’s and Eniola’s universities that presented obstacles to a first-world educational imaginary.

Over three years of ethnographic research as a student, mentor, and colleague among African students and Chinese educational personnel, I came to understand that “better courses” by “international scholars”—at institutions like Dahu University—presented their own contradictions. At this elite university, I sat in on an international relations class (offered in English). The class consisted of around thirty students, the majority of whom were Chinese, with around a third of the class being made up of foreigners—most coming from South Korea and African countries. Eniola was attending this class and attempted to ask the instructor a number of questions about the professor’s PowerPoint presentation. After two questions, the instructor—a Chinese male in his late forties—gave Eniola a nonplussed look. He then responded by indulgently replaying the PowerPoint slides that might somehow prompt revelation, much to the exasperated sighs of the rest of the class. After this happened a second time, however, the professor promised to send Eniola and the rest of the class the lecture notes. Eniola stopped asking questions at this point, but approached the professor at the end of the lecture, worried about whether he understood the class, much of which appeared to be

explained in Chinese as a supplement to the reading of the English presentation. The teacher, who appeared to be in a hurry, tried to put Eniola at ease by saying in both English and Chinese, “Don’t worry, *meiguanxi*,” before heading back to his office. In many instances like this, Chinese professors who are not comfortable with English are put in a position where they have to augment their credentials as international scholars to maintain academic positions that are extremely precarious—driven not only by a demand for international education, which they must supply, but also by the unthinkability of an international education without English . . . even when virtually no English is being conveyed or understood. To be sure, many instructors are able to conduct research and read in English, but are uncomfortable fielding questions and verbally engaging students that speak a variety of different “Englishes” with accents and registers that are difficult to contextualize. I noted that this was a problem even for Chinese lecturers who had attained academic English fluency in British and American settings, where anything that deviated from an acquired standard became unintelligible.

Nonetheless, in these interactions, students, teachers, and professors come to rely on English as lending legitimacy to the “international” education that their universities offer, as well as their future cosmopolitan aspirations. Here, the delicate work of promoting an international education rests not only on the mobilization of English as a unit of commensuration, but also on the signs of cosmopolitan aspiration that accrue around English in Sino-African encounters like this. This necessitates an interplay between explicit processes of entextualization and contextualization, where the contextualization of English—what is done with it—simultaneously supersedes and supercharges its entextualization—what is said with it (M. Silverstein 2014). For Mikhail Bakhtin, this simultaneity rests on a curious semiotic phenomenon: the meanings that accrue around signs—always understood to be intersubjective and dialogical—appear to simultaneously recruit and constitute past meanings, “taking on flesh” that appears to be both emergent in the here-and-now, and familiar in the sense of drawing on a shared past. Bakhtin’s formalist theory of language further posits that because of this propensity, textual objects, like novels, are just one kind of linguistic artifact that in themselves form a very small part of a semiotic landscape that is contingent on the reception and production practices of a public totality of language speakers. Language, for Bakhtin, becomes a political site of social production and revolution because of its imbricated semiotic co-texts and contexts—or co(n)texts (1981).

Our contemporary moment explicates these political and public contingencies of language: where the simultaneous co-texts of social- or mass-media contiguity and their associated live-stream of discourse and commentary come to both intertwine and amplify public intimacies of social movements like migration, mobility, and expulsion. The co-textual and the contextual portability of the language that connects conditions of mobility and mass-mediation to histories and futures populated by aspirational and traumatized persons, in this way, is very much at issue

in understanding global contradictions between public knowledge about alienating forms of social movement, on the one hand, and concrete political action based on that knowledge, on the other.

In this vein, English's relationship to its co(n)texts imbricates ideological forces that appear to both liberate and constrain Chinese and African interlocutors in their contemporary encounters. The co(n)texts of English, in this case, may include cosmopolitanism, international education, as well as imagined white bodies that constitute English's ideal inhabitants. These signs, I suggest, hang together in such a way that their ideological relationships both constitute and are constituted in the interactional here-and-now of Sino-African encounters. But what makes such signs "hang together" in this way? Bakhtin suggests that the condition of possibility for such constitutive and constituting relations between signs to emerge—understood as a socially ubiquitous phenomenon—is an intersubjective capacity to construct and depend on semiotic nexuses of spatiotemporal relations in our meaningful engagements with the material universe. In other words, constitutive and constituting meanings of signs are contingent on a simultaneous semiotic construction of space-time—a kind of ideological gravity for signs to have reinforcing meanings to subjects that depend on them. Through this interplay between signs and their associated personhoods, written and spoken forms of English, as well as nonverbal communicative acts (such as flipping through PowerPoint slides), can be mobilized in a given context to evoke an "international standard" as opposed to the, at times farcical, attempt at mass education purely in Chinese. This is a fraught endeavor that many aspirational cosmopolitan Chinese and African actors remain committed to, regardless of constant failure. Rousseau, Eniola, and their teachers—for better or worse—are in this endeavor together. They are precariously dependent on and are constrained by their commitment to the Angloscene. How does one then understand the seeming contradiction of coming to depend on English and its signs of social currency as a supplement to Chinese soft power in the form of scholarships and aid that initially bring African students to China?

HORIZONS OF ANGLO-AMERICAN MALWARE

The apparent durability of the Angloscene and its associated, necessarily racialized, "cosmopolitanism" explicates a number of the contradictions inherent in recent criticisms of Chinese soft power as they emanate from academic and media contexts in the western Anglosphere (Sahlins 2015). Among African students attending elite Chinese universities, third-world cosmopolitanism—indexing a collective historical "third-world solidarity" struggle—is meant to encompass a broader encounter and aspiration toward an alternative, non-Anglo-global common of the kind that a number of African anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers have called for (Fanon [1952] 2008, 1963; Baldwin 1963; Biko 1978; Mbembe

2001). At present, the escalating educational migrancy from Africa to China is unprecedented not because of the encounter of African students with the Chinese education system. This has a far older history (Hevi 1963; Snow 1989). Rather, the escalation appears to have generated an unease—arising predominantly in the west—about a perceived counterpoint between China’s augmented prominence in global and soft power economies and a rapidly emerging, Chinese-educated African elite public. Disassociating themselves—often dismissively—from their “trader” counterparts in southern China, I have observed how many African students in Beijing attempt to perform or translate their position as members of a China-based, globally oriented Pan-African elite public sphere.

In this light, however, it must be understood that the particular kind of Pan-Africanism one encounters in China arises in the context of vast numbers of African students not only attending classes together but also rooming together in university dorms, often finding themselves in African university communities numbering in the thousands on some campuses. As a result of being segregated from Chinese and often other western students (a common placement policy on Chinese campuses), African students form intercampus networks facilitated by the close proximity between universities in Beijing. This process is further amplified through convenient Chinese social media networking interfaces like WeChat (Weixin), which I will briefly discuss later. As such, a climate of expansive—even at times volatile—Afrocentrism, -culturalism, or -nationalism frequently subsumes any interest in Chinese language and educational immersion. Although many students seeking an immersive experience do exist, they often find that the endeavor is a lonely one, requiring a commitment to compartmentalizing their social and solitary identities. In expressing this social dimension, many informants feel intense pressure to exude an English-inflected cosmopolitanism to their Chinese and non-Anglophone African peers, while using Chinese or other African languages among themselves to internally put down or generate complex plays of one-upmanship. Linguistic hierarchies enter into a polyphonic relationship with other semiotic vectors, like media genres, political and entertainment icons, nationalism, gender hierarchy, personal histories, and various forms of racism. What regulates, arbitrates, or renders these vectors as translatable is an inter-relationship between discourses of race, language, and mobility. The Angloscene emerges immanently—even while it appears to exist prior to, above, or without—at the nexus of this inter-relationship: as a space-time of commensuration where a diffuse notion of aspirational mobility becomes the end goal of not only African, but also Chinese educational labor in China. From this standpoint, Chinese and African student life as well as outlook—especially in contexts like Beijing—become impossible to disentangle in moments of interaction where multiple horizons of “cosmopolitanism” appear to converge at once.

While aligning with practice-based (Bourdieu [1986] 2011) and performative (Butler 1999) theories of personhood, the Angloscene strongly emphasizes that

the maintenance and historical recruitment of personhood cannot unfold without spatiotemporal contingencies and the pliability of semiotic infrastructures. Such maintenance and recruitment certainly depends on the discursively limited availability of signs—in the case of performativity—and on the limiting contingency of hegemonic forms of cultural capital—in the case of practice. However, I want to get away from the idea that signs and forms of capital in themselves *cause* people and chronotopes. This is not what Bourdieu (1977) or Butler (1999) have argued. The imaginary provocation of signs-cause-people as a counter to an equally imaginary orthodoxy of people-cause-signs is an unfortunate unidirectional folk intuition that goes against reflexive formulations of these thinkers. This is an unfortunate symptom of an emerging intellectual subculture, within which much contemporary academic writing depends on professionally elegant but intellectually truncated expression. Writing against a unidirectional relationship between signs and personhood, I put it to the reader that: on the one hand, signs and forms of cultural capital can only be efficacious within accommodating affordances of space-time and horizons of personhood, while on the other, these very spatiotemporal accommodations and horizons of personhood cannot be dialectically mediated without the signs and forms of cultural capital they also afford. For instance, African imaginaries of Chineseness, and Chinese imaginaries of African-ness are difficult to conceptualize outside of imported imaginaries of orientalism and primitivism that must be recruited from outside the Sino-African encounter so as to be reconstituted within it. And yet, the fact of a Sino-African encounter—and the need for intelligible horizons personhood to populate its past, present, and future—is inescapable.

An important example of this compromised contingency emerges in David Borenstein's recent short documentary on foreigner-renting in China, which appeared in the *New York Times*.⁸ It reflected how, in order to add value to property prices in the increasingly prevalent context of ghost cities, Chinese real estate moguls have begun recruiting foreign bodies, which through their copresence are meant to make a property or building seem "more desirable." What is telling in the documentary—and was also confirmed by a Zimbabwean informant who was once hired as a drummer by one of these companies—is how black bodies, while still suggestive of foreignness, nonetheless signify a "less expensive" foreignness than their white counterparts. Here, signs of whiteness and Englishness are fundamentally intertwined, given the now well-documented example of African students pursuing English teaching jobs, where many are overlooked in favor of whiter applicants regardless of their lack of English-speaking ability. These are often white foreigners, who are not English first-language speakers, but come from countries like Russia, Spain, and Germany. Thus, from the perspective of many African learners, Chinese cosmopolitanism's horizon of expectation emerges increasingly in English subtitles with white characteristics. Of course, this

observation doesn't detract from, and is certainly experienced in counterpoint with, the daily reality of student life in Beijing.

As African students arrive in the Chinese metropole, to an environment that requires a facility with Chinese that vastly transcends their one or two years of textbook training in their home countries, the only legible categories are the occasional "English" signs of value that protrude like stepping stones on a seemingly fathomless sea of (initially) illegible characters, interactions, and objects. However precarious their footholds might be, they appear like an oasis compared to the often brutal negotiation of infrastructure, bureaucracy, and social media—all predominantly in Chinese, with (in most cases) very little preparation before coming to China. It quickly becomes apparent that these luminous signs of the Angloscene are connected to a vast education industry in China. One thinks here of institutions like New Oriental (Xindongfang) and increasingly prevalent lookalikes, indexing a privileged world of English-language abilities and American universities as the aspirational end-goal of Chinese educational labor. This domain of consumption is evidenced by the relentless emergence of all manner of arcades (online and on every block) that foreground the images of entrepreneurs and celebrities like Yao Ming—in his role as the exemplary subject of English learning—and Kai-Fu Lee, one of a number of figures who have increasingly come to embody American educational aspiration. These individuals, once rendered into archetypes of aspiration through a multifaceted media assemblage, come to merge with popular representations of Steve Jobs and George Clooney, for example, as the iconic distillations of a situated horizon of expectation and personhood. But, how do such associations emerge, and how do African students engage them in China?

Perhaps a clue arises in the ways that emanations of the Angloscene come to predominate in any meaningful interaction between Chinese and African cosmopolitans—where such interactions must be regulated and made legible in English, in relation to the ideological ontology the Anglosphere encompasses. Rather than through the mere centrality of spoken English in Chinese-African student encounters, or the artifacts of cultural capital that index the Anglosphere's particular flavor of "Europe," the Angloscene is a space-time that orders and gives ideological gravity to such tokens within its orbit of typification. This ordering and typification can be demonstrated through the ways in which African students engage, or perhaps participate in, the maintenance of the Angloscene through their linguistically and technologically mediated practices of spatiotemporal evocation. Paradoxically, the appropriations of chronotopes of the Angloscene—cosmopolitan performances, ways of speaking, and strategic recruitments of an international (white) gaze through combining signs of English and unmarked cosmopolitanism—appear to generate obstacles to African students' self-making labor, while simultaneously becoming prostheses that must be depended upon to, as some informants phrased it: "translate China" or at least make themselves legible within it.

JUSTIN BIEBER'S UNDERPANTS

"I don't get it!" exclaimed Lerato Thulo, a South African accountancy major at Beijing's Daji University. We were having a coffee together at the Sculpting In Time chain in Haidian's EC mall. It's the kind of space that a variety of migrants in Beijing flock to, where their buying power can supplant the "problematic worlds" their accents and appearances might otherwise index. She was following a WeChat feed on her phone where someone had posted an article that condemned China's human rights record in light of a recent execution of a South African expatriate found guilty of drug trafficking. The group chat, which I also had access to, was the Azanian Students in China (ASIC) WeChat group. As we both read the discussion thread, we realized, all of a sudden, that a censor had deleted the student's post after a few minutes. This sparked a debate about censorship among the students, some seeing this as a "violation of free speech," while others regarded it as "an appropriate measure" that "perhaps should be implemented in South Africa." Interestingly, this last comment was referencing a discussion a few days prior about the problematic role the media in South Africa played with regard to African and race politics in general. As we read the comments and laughed at some of the more animated flourishes, Lerato continued, "Why do [the Chinese] have to take shit from America anyway? They make everything, but they have some white guy wearing CK underpants meant for Chinese customers." She was referring here to Justin Bieber's partially nude image in one of Calvin Klein's 2014 advertising campaigns, which we had made fun of earlier for taking up almost forty square meters of a shop window in the mall.

Here, the interaction between two South Africans engaging the media contexts of familiar debates in our home country combined with the familiar, all-commensurating texture of the transglobal mall and its universally cosmopolitan coffee shop evokes another space-time that momentarily displaces that of Beijing. Through our communication-in-context, otherwise "neutral" signs become reconstituted through their recruitment in the interaction. The dulcet tones of "Blue in Green" from Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* album, the familiar flavors of coffee and cheesecake, the mutual legibility of the tones of our respective South African accents, even the image of Justin Bieber all coalesce to allow us, for a moment, to forget the ten grammar points and forty new characters we had to learn for the following day's quiz, or possibly the inevitable hassle of yet another visa renewal at the Entry and Exit Bureau the following week. No tokens of the Angloscene have an essential character that allows them to be *translated* as such. They come to work in this way through an interaction, and through their received and reconstituted arrangements during the unfolding of intersocial space-time. It is this process of contextualization that allows the experience of a concatenation of total sensory worlds all to be relied upon to temporarily anesthetize—through sensory distraction—the experience of Beijing. The

associations together—generating an intersocial chronotope between Lerato and myself—affording the Sculpting In Time cafe a synesthetic time machine–like propensity. Through occasional meetings in such spaces, and the recombination of many of these indexicalities, otherwise mundane coffee shops can be transformed into space-times of recuperation for many beleaguered international or aspirationally cosmopolitan subjects seeking recourse from various hostilities or discomforts experienced in classrooms, offices, and even factories. In many cases, they become anesthetically dependable infrastructure.

But what manner of dependency does this distraction and anesthesia engender exactly? The intelligibility of the signs in question and their personal associations, accumulated through our respective spatiotemporal trajectories up until that moment, relies precisely upon their ubiquity—their postcolonial heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981). Our very register of mutual interaction is a default first language—the ever-present commonality among postcolonial multilinguals without mother tongues. This spatiotemporal displacement and reconstruction, as a form of anesthesia, makes explicit the Angloscene’s entailed compromise. In reducing intensity, it potentially paralyzes awareness. It is here, where the Angloscene emerges, where the nexus of our respective, potentially very different receptions of “common” yet plural spatiotemporal experiences down to the present converge to evoke our partially shared chronotopes of the Angloscene. It is a pluralistic index of our contrapuntal colonial and postcolonial alignments emergent in our interaction and shared experience. For this reason, the mall and all the potentially chronotopic props it contains can never be a nonspace to an African student in Beijing, even if it is a space of temporary forgetting (Augé 1995). However, emerging from this anesthetic dimension of the Angloscene, as I will now show, can be somewhat jarring.

As we were leaving the mall, Lerato and I saw more than twenty young Chinese men and women wearing suits and carrying brochures for Wall Street English, an English education company with branches throughout the world. The brochures were offering GRE and TOEFL preparation in addition to regular English classes. Lerato looked at one of the leaflets being distributed and addressed a young female sales representative in relatively fluent Chinese: “Yīnwèi wǒ shuō Yīngwén fēicháng liúli, suǒyǐ nǐ juédé wǒ néng qù Měiguó ma?”—“Do you think that, just because I can speak English, I will be able to go to the US [to study]?” This was followed by a rhetorical interrogative: “Huh?” Whether, due to her pronunciation, additional phonemes, somewhat accusatory approach, or possibly even a mixture of confusion and embarrassment on the part of her interlocutor, the Chinese sales representative stared at the South African awkwardly and didn’t say anything. At that point Lerato, looking somewhat incensed since reading the pamphlet, turned to me and dismissively stated: “See, even if you speak Chinese to them, they don’t want to understand.” The exchange was concluded with an exasperated click of the tongue on the part of Lerato—“*Xh!*” (kl^h)—accompanied by a “waving-off” gesture.⁹

In a subsequent interview, it emerged that Lerato's frustration stemmed—on the one hand—from what she saw as a misguided commitment to western education on the part of her Chinese interlocutors: “English isn't enough to get you into Oxford, otherwise, why am I here?” On the other, it stemmed from what she perceived as being negated as a “low-quality [black] foreigner” when, from her perspective, she had already mastered a skill—in this case, English—which “[all Chinese] see as a golden ticket,” but which hasn't helped her at all. For Lerato, and many other African students in China, it is quite obvious that, while they are embracing the possibility of an alternative Sino-African globalization, their Chinese peers seem to be moving in a different direction by chasing the branded emblems of Harvard, Yale, or Stanford emblazoned on every institution that promises a shortcut to global educational excellence. In leaving an Anglocentric world, particularly in the case of Anglophone African students, they come to encounter one that embraces not only the language, but also the cultural capital of a world within which blackness and African-ness continue to be liabilities (Mbembe 2001; Bodomo 2020). It is here where the commitment to a shared alignment with the Angloscene paradoxically fails to ease discomfort, yet continues to render paralysis.

ENGLISH AS A LIFE RAFT

Toward the latter part of my fieldwork, I received a message that would suggest the existential limits of the Angloscene. Via an anonymous China-Africa student network, I received the following email from a contact traveling around eastern China:

I thought I would share a little news with you. Currently, I am writing to you from Hangzhou, where I have just arrived by speed train following a “crisis call” from another African student there. He is a gay Senegalese who is unable to go home to renew his visa because he [fears imprisonment] on the basis of his sexuality. The Chinese LGBTQ community has arranged short-term solutions for him but can do very little following recent amendments to Chinese immigration law. Because of these sudden changes in policy, it is virtually impossible for Africans from any country to renew their visas without going back to their home countries. They are forbidden from renewing anywhere else. As a result, he faces Chinese prison if he overstays his visa, and because of his citizenship, he can go to very few other places in the world for longer than two weeks. He is now awaiting a French consular official's evaluation of his case to see if he qualifies for refugee status in France . . . we will know his fate in a few days.

Soon after receiving this, I was introduced to Damien, the subject of this exchange, and we secretly met a few months later near the West Lake in Hangzhou. After a long discussion where he described the ways in which China and a Chinese education were the conditions of possibility for the exploration of his sexuality, and following an elaboration on some of the details in the correspondence, he finally told me what he was doing in Hangzhou. “You have to understand,” he explained

in a heavy Francophone accent, “English saved my life.” Teaching English illegally, it turned out, had kept him afloat for almost a year, but the period for renewing his Chinese visa had arrived and, at the time of writing, a new set of visa laws for Africans were instituted barring those in mainland China from renewing their visas anywhere other than in their home countries. For Damien to return home would mean arrest upon arrival because of the fact that his parents, who were government officials, had already reported him to the authorities there. English teaching had indeed saved his life, but only temporarily. The space-time of the Angloscene he was clinging to was a lifeboat with a hole in it, and it was sinking fast. When, after a few months, the date arrived for his French refugee visa interview, I contacted him to ask how things had gone. He did not qualify for refugee status and was distraught. Soon afterward he was unreachable and up until now I have still heard nothing from him. Whatever the outcome, his commitment to the Angloscene—having “saved his life” by fleetingly keeping him temporarily afloat—ultimately compromised him.

STEVE BIKO IN BEIJING

From the broader perspective of China’s educational investments, Lerato’s paradox and Damien’s dilemma seem to mirror a number of recent debates on Chinese soft power. On the one hand, Sino-African dialogue continues to escalate on political, economic, and educational fronts, evidenced by current FOCAC and BRICS initiatives, and accompanied by a considerable escalation in Chinese-sponsored educational endeavors in both Africa and China (Alden 2007; Brautigam 2009; Bodomo 2012; Li et al. 2012; Chan et al. 2013; King 2013). On the other, all of these initiatives—despite being overwhelmingly China-driven—continue to be made legible and evaluated within an interconnected landscape of predominantly English-language-based media, aesthetic, political, ethical, and economic discourse and its associated signs of cultural capital.¹⁰ Despite a sustained Anglo/western hegemony in social, political, and educational settings worldwide, there has been much nervous hand-wringing over Chinese influence in the media and disciplinary theaters of the Anglosphere, at times followed by “corrective actions,” notably in the US academy (Sahlins 2013; Crovitz 2014) and more recently in Sweden (Zhang 2015). What these controversies clearly demonstrated was the limited media landscapes, associated languages, and aesthetic values within which debates over “global” educational initiatives are able to unfold. These politically monolingual media and rhetorical theaters of evaluation—unfolding predominantly within the media Anglosphere, where “lessons were taught [to Beijing]” and “academic freedoms protected [from China’s inveigling influence]”—emerge as a clear explication of the ways in which not only English but its associated sensory and media worlds at times foreclose rather than merely “frame” the context of educational and political interaction (Crovitz 2014; Zhang 2015).

For these reasons, media representations of the Chinese educational-political matrix have been less than transparent and far from even-handed, precisely due to the ways in which “China,” as an oppositional term to “the west,” becomes monolithically fetishized in the western media lens (Vukovich 2019). However, in the case of Lerato and others, it is increasingly apparent for those standing outside of western media Orientalisms, that the perceived dualism between the alterities of yellow peril-ism and the commensurations of unmarked cosmopolitanism globalism are ultimately contextualized via the same English subtitles. Many African students in China have already realized that the superficial rhetoric of this dualism in the Anglo media sphere that elides the less easily demarcated friction between a western media-based horizon of value that, on the one hand, presupposes an iconic equivalence between all participants in a “neutral” value system, while on the other, entails the very asymmetrical alterities this presupposition continues to generate. This is especially true for those encountering the cruel optimism of trying to cultivate an alternative. In defining cruel optimism, critical theorist Lauren Berlant has noted:

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (2011, 1)

Berlant’s framing resonates profoundly for African students like Lerato and Damien, where the expectation that the west is appearing less capable of setting the terms of everyone’s representation in the wake of an increasingly legible theater of interactions (between China and Africa, for instance), gives way to a frustration at a persistent hegemony of a western sphere of aspiration. This further engenders perhaps an emergent sense that the implied pluralization of this asymmetry—through an imminent multilingualism—is not so much “arriving too slowly” as not really arriving at all. However, many of their Chinese counterparts—cramming for TOEFLs and GREs—are following the same initial intuition as Damien. Here, recourse to the Angloscene represents something more akin to a life raft than a stepping stone, or at least something to help one survive a swim to shore (which itself is yet to emerge on the horizon). If it is manifestations of power we are after, it is surely in this situated rather than arbitrary theater of post-colonial translation—the absent presence of Anglo-whiteness in Chinese projections of soft power—where it might be excavated with perhaps fewer overtones of yellow peril. For African students in Beijing, what appears to be at stake is an intelligibility that transcends marginality by any available means. This has many parallels with activist and thinker Steve Biko’s call for the appropriation of Black Consciousness as a conduit for achieving a “full expression of self” (1978).

As an education activist and icon of anti-imperialist struggle, Biko's legacy—through its citation in and beyond contemporary student struggles back on the continent—animates endeavors of many Africans studying in China. This is clear in the ways he is often quoted in student social media groups to index solidarity or even misalignment with student struggles that are not far from the everyday consciousness of many, particularly Southern African, students living in Beijing. Rather than being a flat-footed racial essentialist, and quickly written-off as such by many superficial readings of his work in western academe, it is worth noting that Biko never made any claims about the intrinsic differences between white or black races in promoting an educational decolonization. Instead, he encouraged young Africans to appropriate the alien, racialized categories of difference within which colonized subjects found themselves to be emplaced. His utopic vision of a nonracial nation-state following revolution is consistent with an argument that underlined the situated and discourse-driven nature of the very categories of race and racism. For Biko, racism—like the Angloscene—emerged out of intersubjectively translated signs of difference and sameness (or alterity and iconicity), where sameness and difference were far from arbitrary possibilities. Racism thus requires a space-time to perpetuate its stratifying force where the chronotopic capacities of signs were exploited within a racist ideology to continually reinforce the meanings of blackness in relation to whiteness, and not in relation to the “arbitrary” signifier of race. For this reason, Biko encouraged young Africans—constrained by conditions of apartheid and its colonial precursors—to appropriate, rather than provincialize racialized signs that were doing racist work. His was a move that assumed the immanent categories of a hegemonic context (blackness and whiteness as opposed to “race”) and sought to overturn them from within, or at least reveal the internal contradictions of their appropriation. This is a strategy that itself emerged from the limited possibilities of expression with which previously colonized subjects had to make do. For African students in Beijing, their cosmopolitan dreams must unfold in the absence of previous success stories of Africans who “made it” in China or through Chinese education. At the same time, their Chinese interlocutors are themselves in pursuit of a horizon of aspiration located in an elusive, but certainly English-speaking, metropole. For Chinese and African subjects imbricated in this economy of desire, such contradictions indicate the limits of cosmopolitan commensuration in provincializing the perpetual present of a still far from decolonized world. The chronotopic propensities of the Angloscene disrupt projects of decolonization in precisely the ways Fanon once suggested, where without an idea of what “having-been-translated” might look like, a “being-in-translation” must unfold within the limited confines of other worlds, in others' words.