A METAPHORICAL APPROACH TO HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT AS A LIMINAL AND CREATIVE FREE SPACE AMID SUPERCOMPLEX AND PARADOXICAL DUAL DEMANDS

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ABSTRACT

Amid the 'continual pandemonium' (Barnett in Smith 2000, n.p.) of supercomplex competing imperatives, the burning question about the social relevance and impact of universities has become a significant postmillennial concern in higher education. This article explores some of the associated challenges and dynamics and considers 'higher education engagement' (broadly defined to mean any interaction between a university and any of its identified communities, both internal and external) as a liminal space for approachability, collaboration and creation, both within and beyond the traditional structures of higher education institutionalisation and disciplinary and methodological silo's. The article uses three metaphors of space and placement for integrated paradoxical 'both-and' thinking in order to conceptualise and articulate the potential of engagement as a liminal creative free space in higher education today. The metaphors are the shifting fulcrum, the agora and heterotopic anxiety. All three resonate with the ideas of paradoxical simultaneous situatedness (localisation) and mobility (globalisation) amid supercomplexity and boundary-challenging liminality, as inherent qualities of the contemporary academic engagement project and the postmillennial higher education landscape with its associated dual demands of globalisation and localisation.

Key concepts: higher education, engagement, supercomplexity, heterotopias, the academic *agora*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education is caught between an ideological rock and a rhetorical hard place as it attempts to balance various competing millennial imperatives to address what is now discursively marked as 'higher education engagement': the local and global; theoretical and practical; innovative and custodial; leadership and consultation; academic and vocational; teaching and research. Ronald Barnett (1998) describes this as *supercomplexity*, signified by a postmodern spirit of 'uncertainty, unpredictability, challengeability, contestability', 'boundarilessness', 'a multiplication of frames of understanding and of self-identity' and 'a

world open to infinite interpretation' (Smith 2000, n.p.). This often manifests in paradoxical experiences: a sense of contradiction where two or more things are true at the same time, but are seemingly unable to co-exist. This makes universities of today liminal boundary-shifting spaces for both traditional inward-focused academic teaching and research as well as more outward focused civic and societal engagement: 'vibrant places, though living in constant turmoil amid radical uncertainty' (Smith 2000, n.p.). Amid the 'continual pandemonium' (Barnett in Smith 2000, n.p.) of competing higher education imperatives, the burning question about the social relevance and impact of higher education institutions has become a significant postmillennial concern in higher education politics, practice and management, even signalling, as Magaiza (2014, 62) argues, a 'paradigm shift in terms of university-community relations' and a change in perspective to the creation in higher education of knowledge as part of the process of enablement of communities and stakeholder groups (Erasmus and Albertyn 2014).

A precarious and often seemingly conflictual dual demand relationship exists in higher education today between two main driving forces related to social relevance, namely, on the one hand, that universities and other tertiary education institutions should be commercially and globally competitive while also, on the other hand, they should be actively involved in and responsive to the unique and specific local spaces in which they are situated (socially, culturally, politically, geographically, economically and ideologically). Globalisation, the first of these dual demands of social relevance in higher education, is represented by the familiar metaphor of 'the global village', while the second, localisation, can be detected in the call for bi-directional and mutually beneficial relationships to exist between 'town and gown'. This directly challenges the traditional view of universities as 'ivory towers', detached from the realities of the societies amid which they operate.

The former, globalisation, is especially evident in university research agendas, for example, the controversial global ranking of universities, the demand for impact factor-driven high profile publication output and the intensive competition for research funding and resources. The latter, localisation, can often be detected in the changing teaching agendas of universities, for example, the increasing demand for open access and online education, the adaptation of teaching methodologies to accommodate localised indigenous knowledge systems and practices, and the challenges around language as both a potential barrier and enabler of education.

This article explores some of the supercomplex challenges and dynamics associated with this postmillennial dual demand and considers 'higher education engagement' (broadly defined for the purpose of this article to mean any interaction between a university and any of its

identified communities, both internal and external), within the 'quadruple helix' of university-industry-government-civil service (Johnson and Cooper 2014, 97) as a liminal space for approachability, collaboration and creation, both within and beyond the traditional structures of higher education institutionalisation and disciplinary and methodological silo's. It uses three metaphors of space and placement for integrated paradoxical 'both-and' thinking in order to conceptualise and articulate the potential of engagement as a liminal creative free space in higher education today. These metaphors, borrowed from science, history, psychology and philosophy, are the shifting fulcrum, the *agora* and heterotopic anxiety. All three resonate with the ideas of paradoxical simultaneous situatedness (localisation) and mobility (globalisation) amid supercomplexity and boundary-challenging liminality, as inherent qualities of the contemporary academic engagement project and the postmillennial higher education landscape with its associated dual demands of globalisation and localisation.

This article aims to contribute to the current debates around transformational discourses and praxis in higher education, globally as well as in South Africa specifically, thereby also contributing to increasing impactful and responsive relations between sections and silos within higher education, but also between universities and their diverse and dynamic communities and stakeholder partners. The article specifically contributes to these debates by addressing the transformation of higher education and the civic responsibilities of universities through the lens of *engagement* as the third core function of higher education, along with teaching and research. The implication is that thoughtful vigilance and well-considered institutional responsibility will be encouraged in higher education through the conceptualising of higher education engagement as a liminal and creative space and that utilising metaphorical devices as aids to transformational thinking about higher education will contribute to creatively opening up alternative discourses and mind sets for thinking about higher education today.

ENGAGEMENT AS A FUNCTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE CONVERGENCE OF PARADOXICAL DUAL DEMANDS

Engagement, often also referred to as *community engagement,* has since the late 1980s been viewed as a distinct and clearly identifiable set of actions and goals for higher education institutions (alongside traditional teaching and research imperatives), often with both global and local implied expectations. As a result, engagement has become part of a variety of often seemingly contradictory agendas and the rhetoric of various societal role players, both within higher education institutions and among broader stakeholder groups, such as governmental, industrial and business sectors as well as non-governmental role players like non-profit

organisations, private funding agencies, research networks and civic organisations.

Two significant driving forces in the historical development of engagement discourses and practices in higher education are, firstly, the American influence based on their land grant and volunteerism models (promoted by, for example the Kellogg, Ford and Carnegie foundations and the Peace Corps) and, secondly, the European influence of Michael Gibbons (Head of the Association of Commonwealth Universities in the 1980s) who introduced to higher education engagement a rhetoric decidedly technology-slanted with neo-liberal ideas/ideals and lexical markers such as 'globalisation' and 'knowledge production' (Gibbons 1998; 2006). It is also Gibbons who introduced the phrase 'engagement as a core value' in higher education, resulting in the dilemma that Johan Muller (2009, 6, following Subotzky 2006) describes as the paradox of higher education's 'admiration for the global theory pyrotechnics' and its 'loss of a sense of 'community''. Edward Webster and Sarah Mosoetsa (2001, 18) call the later the 'mythical collegial past' of higher education.

Consequently, after the 1980s, many universities began to 'define their institutional missions explicitly in the terms of linking academic programmes with community service' (CHET 1998, 21). Thus, engagement in higher education is often still traditionally associated with ideals and ideologies relating to philanthropic community service or outreach. However, these are increasingly viewed as potentially problematic because of the associated implications of a one-way flow of charitable action, such as elitism, pedanticism, exploitation, paternalism and reactionism, thus paradoxically maintaining or even enforcing unequal power dynamics that in the longer term often do more to benefit the 'giver' than the 'receiver'.

In practice, however, engagement in higher education contexts is often much broader than this and is a varied and diffuse concept. But there is a general lack of cohesion within the higher education sector in general, and in other sectors that often form the influential stakeholder groups of universities, about what engagement can or should entail in the higher education arena. Martin Hall (2010) emphasises the inherent 'messiness' (in Muller 2009, 2) and lack of definition associated with higher education's engagement with its communities while Muller (2009, 2) argues that it is inherently contextual, 'susceptible to rhetorical fashion' and 'historically adaptive' in character. Lorilee Sandmann (2008, 91) speaks of the 'definitional anarchy' of engagement scholarship and Patricio Langa (2011, 8) refers to the 'field of struggle' that revolves around 'scholastic capital'. All of these descriptions resonate with the characteristics of Barnett's concept of supercomplexity. All agree, as does Gibbons, that engagement cannot and should not be seen as distinct from teaching and research, but that these three categories are necessarily always already integrated in a continually contested higher

education space. These have now globally come to be acknowledged as the three equal and integrated core functions of higher education: teaching, research and engagement.

In its broadest form, higher education 'engagement' can therefore include any or a combination of the following, often several at the same time or in subsequent phases of a specific teaching or research project: service learning, work-integrated learning, clinical practice, graduate placement, community outreach, volunteerism, commissioned contract work, patenting and technology transfer, short learning programmes, curriculum-based teaching, basic and applied research, consultation and professional services, public debate, scholarship development and policy development. Around the turn of the millennium Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff (1995; 1996; 2000) and Terry Shinn (2002) introduced to higher education the idea of a triple helix of engagement (university-industry-government), reflective of the significance of the impact of state and industry on higher education realities. More recently, Bernadette Johnson and David Cooper (2014, 97) argue for the extension of this late twentieth century idea into a new quadruple helix of engagement (namely, university-industry-government-civil service), thereby recognising the more fully comprehensive dynamic of the complex realities of higher education engagement and its stakeholders.

However, the one cross-cutting characteristic of contemporary engagement rhetoric is the principle of reciprocity and bi-directionality (as opposed to merely one-directional outreach and service agendas). Consequently, linguistic markers such as partnership, collaboration, mutuality, collectivity, cooperation, stakeholders and the two-way flow of information have become part of the lexicon of higher education engagement and is increasingly favoured above, for example, lexical markers such as beneficiaries or recipients (Sandmann 2008, 94; Spanier 1997; Byrne 1998; Leviton 1999; Ray 1999; Simpson 2000; Boyer 1990; 1996; Roper and Hirth 2005). This also resonates with the dialogical and agonistic approaches that have emerged from the contemporaneous pedagogical theories of, for example, Paolo Freire (1970) and others (such as Bartholomé 1994; Ladson-Billings 1995; Salazar 2013) in terms of humanising and liberatory pedagogy, pedagogies of potential (Magaiza 2014, 62), critical and public pedagogy (Giroux 1997; 2007; 2011) and social justice agendas.

The potential products of successful and effective postmillennial higher education engagement are a variety of relevant and socially responsive practice, theory and scholarship development opportunities, which can include the development of effective solutions to practical problems, the conveying and advancement of knowledge across generations and contributing to social responsibility, accountability and social justice agendas at global and local levels.

THE SUPERCOMPLEXITY AND LIMINALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT

Higher education engagement (or, maybe more accurately, *E*ngagement with a capital E-) as a specific institutionally-driven goal or objective can thus be seen as, what Burton Clark (1998, 139, from Webster and Mosoetsa 2001, 18) calls, 'a halfway house to the outside world', becoming 'the organised location within a university for the entry and absorption of whole new modes of thinking'. Engagement therefore is an intersectional, intersectoral and interstical space of increasing and ever-expanding supercomplexity and liminality; a paradoxical space, within yet beyond the limitations and boundaries of institutionalised, methodological and disciplinary structures and conventions; both outside and inside the bounded organisation. It is potentially a conceptually creative space where the much-criticised, and often debilitating, silo mentalities and practices of traditional ivory tower institutionalised higher education can be challenged and transcended in innovative ways that remain academically sound, rigorous and accountable, yet allow for a spirit of practical approachability, mutuality and collaboration, which is often more restricted in the conventions of the higher education arenas of teaching and research. Engagement in higher education is therefore (at least for the time being), metaphorically viewed, a paradoxical no-man's land where everyone is welcome and where the contestation and articulation of the postmillennial dual demands of higher education, namely globalisation and localisation, can potentially be creatively and innovatively conceptualised, scripted and enacted within yet also beyond the conventions and traditions of teaching and research. Engagement thus provides a boundary-spanning liminal space within higher education for 'the new multiplying forms of knowledge [... like] those of communicative understanding, practical wisdom, action learning, critical self-knowledge, all of which suggest new roles within supercomplexity, and in particular that of making supercomplexity itself multiply further' (Smith 2000, n.p.). Sandmann (2008, 97), likewise, sees engaged scholarship as both adhering to the qualitative standards of traditional scholarship, such as 'clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective communication, and reflective critique', but also transcending traditional scholarship in being 'applied, problem-centred, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, hybrid, demand-driven, entrepreneurial [and] network-embedded'. As Anthony Smith (2000, n.p.) explains,

> supercomplexity means that we confront a surfeit of data of which the academic is both consumer and provider. It is impossible to keep abreast of any field, but we are condemned to do so in the absence of any tools of self-understanding. ... Commonality of language, tradition or ideology recede as our criteria of truth alter in order to accommodate the many new canons of

performativity. The frames of knowledge prevalent in the academy are no longer judged by their power to describe the world but through their use value ....

This supercomplexity consequently also reflects a Foucauldian sense of heterotopic anxiety (being in two or more conceptual, cognitive, psychological or experiential spaces at the same time) and calls for paradoxical thinking (functionally holding two or more seemingly opposing ideas at the same time). This entails acknowledging and honouring, and as Paul Trowler (2004, 4) and Barnett (2000a, 1) say, even revelling in, the multiplicity of heterogeneous already existing, potentially emergent and constantly reconfiguring narratives, while attempting to functionally manage systems and organisations, which admittedly require some form of categorical homogeneity, normativisation and standardisation. Thus, everybody involved in or with higher education today live in constantly shifting multiple realities, paradoxical states in which often extremely opposing paradigms must be continuously negotiated and reconciled. For Barnett (2000c, 257) this means that our world is one 'in which the very frameworks by which we orient ourselves to the world are themselves contested' and there is 'a fragility in the way that we understand the world, in the way in which we understand ourselves and in the ways in which we feel secure about acting in the world'. Without being equated to one another, *fragility* here stands in direct relation to *vulnerability*: the former signifying delicacy or the potential to be easily broken and the latter signifying a state of being open to injury. Both consistently contain the subtext of transformation and change, be it constructive, benign or malignant.

As Barnett (2000b, 1) correctly surmises of the neo-liberal globalised higher education landscape, 'the knowledge function of the university is being undermined' in three ways, substantive, ideological and procedural, and is increasingly being replaced by 'an information function'. The common argument is that, as a result of this, knowledge in the university context becomes 'performative in character and loses its power to enlighten' (Barnett 2000b, 1). Damian Ruth (2001, 45) indeed also warns against situations where 'learning to use the technology is mistaken for learning the subject'. Smith (2000, n.p.) accurately describes this contemporary postmodern postmillennial higher education environment as follows:

> The university is no longer 'its own end'. It has been thoroughly boxed in by the state with intrusive evaluative procedures. The new disciplines of a procrustean managerialism have curtailed the freedoms that were once among the defining characteristics of academic life. The arrival of a market has reduced the autonomy that was once deemed to be its essence, and in a pursuit of 'kudos', exacerbated by research assessment exercises, textual production is favoured irrespective of whether there is an audience for the product. In a production-dominated knowledge economy, academic texts are increasingly reduced to the status of data. Being more managed, academics are now more subject to external and internal scrutiny. Teaching has become commodified and subject to constant evaluation, and what was once a private and interpersonal

activity has become public.

Barnett (2000c, 263), however, argues that, in fact, the university in this context also paradoxically and simultaneously acquires a new three-fold knowledge and epistemological function, namely to compound this supercomplexity, to contribute to making sense of the resulting knowledge mayhem and to live purposefully amid supercomplexity, uncertainty and the continual pandemonium of postmillennial higher education. This, then, is by its very definition a liminal boundary-shifting space, open to the potential that E/engagement offers higher education institutions and its global and local stakeholders.

CHALLENGES AND THE NEED FOR VIGILANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT

Muller (2009, 2–3) identifies three major challenges that emerged through the historical evolution of engagement rhetoric and practice in higher education and which higher education institutions must now contend with in relation to their engagement agendas. First of these is the potential for well-meaning and apparently benevolent, but possibly malignant, intrusiveness in communities and stakeholder groups (for example, the potential for pedanticism, paternalism, arrogance and exploitation). Secondly, there are the inherent practical and ethical limits of the potential of student-based engagement (since students are by definition novices rather than experts). Thirdly, there is the increasing scepticism about engagement as a branding and marketing ploy (from external as well as internal organisational constituencies).

A danger for engagement in higher education is that it can potentially succumb to the pressures of corporatisation and consumerism, on the one hand, and superficial humanitarian philanthropy, on the other, thereby possibly becoming a mere vehicle for corporate branding and surface ventures 'into the community'; for example, when it is presented as merely a showcase vehicle for what is often called corporate social responsibility or for media profile creation, rather than being an integrated, sustainable and strategically embedded values-based practice. Chouliaraki (2012, 1) calls this the 'theatricality of humanitarianism': humanitarianism as spectacle and as inauthentic aspirational discourse rather than dialogical, impactful and relational social change. For this reason higher education institutions must remain eternally vigilant (as in the sense of Foucauldian scepticism and pessimistic activism, which I refer to below), constantly being self-reflective and interrogating of their own and others' engagement agendas and practices – both those based in ideologies and discourses of social justice, citizenship, altruistic and empathetic volunteerism, philanthropy, corporate social responsibility, internationalisation, commercialisation and what is now often called 'third

stream' income generation (as opposed to funds more traditionally generated from tuition fees and donors or funders, including the state).

I would add to these a fourth challenge, and Muller (2009, 7) alludes to this, namely the increasing awareness of the myth of equal transactional spaces. There is often an inherent and unavoidable imbalance of power in Gibbons' ideal that 'all partners [in engagement] bring something that can be exchanged or negotiated' (Muller 2009, 7; following Gibbons 2006), which speaks of an exchange- or bartering-mentality, reminiscent of both colonial/imperialist and neo-liberal economic bottom-line profit-driven concerns.

A further challenge for higher education engagement is the still elevated status (also the acknowledgement, recognition and reward) associated with traditional research-and-publication paradigms in comparison to perceptions of 'lower-level' engagement activities. This remains a large impediment to the developing of engagement as scholarship and the resultant articulation with teaching practices, knowledge transfer and research domains. As a result, higher education engagement projects and activities are often fragmented ad hoc events (Van Schalkwyk 2014, 2), either spilling over from the personal agendas and sympathies of individual academics or staff members, or are attempts at branding a specific academic product, rather than being academically-driven scholarly projects. As Perry (2003, 4) points out, '[engagement] has yet to become an equal part of faculty practice, with an institutional reward system that recognises it as a meaningful academic enterprise, and a culture of engagement that makes it a significant part of individual faculty practice'.

A related challenge is the difficulties associated with determining the extent and impact of higher education engagement activities (Van Schalkwyk 2014, 1; Kruss, Visser, Aphane and Haupt 2012). Traditional teaching and, especially, research paradigms rely on the production and rewarding of discernible and explicit 'outputs', be it statistical data, student pass rates, graduate numbers, funding grants, published articles or the impact factors of academic journals. Engagement, conversely, does not comply with or adhere to these measurables, as it is often situated in the implicit, and often unspoken, liminal and shifting spaces of experiences, relationships and change, thus inside but also beyond (both-and) traditional higher education's conventions of teaching and research.

Quantitative data collection about higher education engagement is beginning to be addressed, though it still remains problematic, while the qualitative aspect of impact measurement is a great challenge. Even quantitatively there are limitations to measuring impact, such as disciplinary situatedness, project duration and the attendant comparative and methodological challenges (Van Schalkwyk 2014, 17). One can quite easily measure how many

engagement projects are active in a specific geographical area, how many people attended a community workshop or how many health screenings and tests were conducted in a specific area as part of a specific outreach project, and so on. The qualitative impact, however, and the longitudinal effect are much more complex, time-consuming and challenging to measure (and often to maintain, as a result of shifting student, staff and community populations, short term funding cycles and changing institutional and stakeholder priorities) and this is problematic in a reward and incentive driven performance culture such as postmillennial higher education has become.

METAPHORS FOR SUPERCOMPLEX POSTMILLENNIAL HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT: THE *AGORA,* A SHIFTING FULCRUM AND HETEROTOPIC ANXIETY

David Perry, Director of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Great Cities Institute, an often-cited case study in successful higher education engagement management practice, says: 'change the language of engagement from service and outreach at the margins or periphery of the university (compared to the core mission of teaching and research located at the disciplinary centre of the university structure) to one of partnership and interdisciplinarity and impact' (2003, 5). This implies addressing the role and responsibilities of a university at a discursive (including systems, practices and language) level rather than merely being, as Perry's quote above suggests if taken out of the larger context, being a matter of semantics or 'a language-game'. Metaphors, being constitutive, symbolic and representative, therefore are useful discursive tools for the conceptualisation of alternative ways of being and for the pre-emptive imagining of potentialities.

This article now draws on three familiar concepts of placement and space as metaphors, aiming to contribute to the conceptual and discursive revisioning of higher education, generally, and higher education engagement, specifically, today and for the future. What the three metaphors have in common, and where they intersect in their usefulness for conceptualizing higher education engagement, is their implicit simultaneous relationship to both the concepts of supercomplexity and liminality, as described in the preceding part of this article. All three metaphors also engender the paradox of simultaneous mobility and situatedness that is generally inherent to the academic project but also specifically resonates with the postmillennial higher education dual demands of globalisation and localisation.

The first metaphor of placement and space is the shifting fulcrum, which is a (often unpredictably changing) balancing point between forces. The metaphorical vision here is of a

continually shifting point of balance that organically articulates with, and adapts to, its vibrant and dynamic supercomplex environmental weight. The second is the *agora* (which was at the heart of an ancient Greek city state), a historic multi-purposed space for spirituality, trade, critical scholarship, polemical discussion, intrigue, republican collegiality, stewardship, networking and activism. The third is the concept of heterotopias, and heterotopic anxiety, borrowed from Michel Foucault: the experience, arguably a form of cognitive dissonance, of being in two or more cognitive, conceptual, psychological or experiential places or spaces at the same time. All three metaphors represent complex, potentially creative or otherwise, liminal spaces of relationality, contestation and construction. Foucault (1984, 1) describes this concept of heterotopic existence as follows

> We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.

As Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2002, 113) note, 'such a heterotopic world of an infinity of different and conflicting spaces can produce a crisis of identity ... [and] heterotopic anxiety'. Foucault calls these 'ideological conflicts' (1984, 1), imbricated in the relationships between space(s) and time(s).

Using these multi-disciplinary metaphorical signposts (borrowed from science, history, psychology and philosophy) as guidelines, I propose that higher education engagement is, like the ancient *agora*, at the supercomplex heart of postmillennial higher education systems and practices, a liminal no-man's land where everybody is welcome. It also represents a continually shifting balancing point between diverging discourses and demands and, because of its liminality, functions as a potentially creative free space in which contemporary higher education's heterotopic anxieties can be enacted and negotiated (relating back to the metaphor of the *agora* as both a theatre of human engagement and a marketplace for goods and ideas). The strategic positioning of, and emphasis on, higher education community/stakeholder engagement as a core function of higher education directly steps into the paradoxical gaps to bridge the divide between local social responsibility and societal responsiveness, on the one hand, and commercialisation and global competitiveness, on the other. It enables the institutional discursive enactment of place-bound identity, while remaining accessible to global forces of many kinds. As a result it can be interpreted as an attempt to walk the necessarily paradoxical path in-between the parallel train tracks of globalisation's two trends, what Marginson (2002, 413) describes as, on the one hand, 'a trend to converge, homogeneity' (creating like-minded communities and clusters of similarity) and, on the other hand, 'a trend

to diversity via more extensive and complex encounters with cultural "others"' (creating experiences and knowledges that potentially take us beyond ourselves).

What is called 'engagement' in higher education thus finds itself at the shifting fulcrum of a supercomplex balancing act between the neo-liberal capitalist demand for higher education institutions to be 'self-supporting global corporations' (Marginson 2002, 419) and the (often non-profitable) demand for immediate social relevance and impact. This is particularly visible in institutions where engagement rhetoric is (whether just ostensibly or in actuality) integrated, open-ended and broadly defined, to incorporate both income-generating ventures through partnerships with government, business, industry and civil society (including, for example, profit-based commercialisation and patenting, contract research, consultancy, short learning training programmes and work-integrated learning or graduate placement) as well as the more traditional understanding of 'community outreach' (such as is implied in philanthropically-minded non-profit volunteerism and traditional community service).

The often-used, arguably even redundant, metaphor of the Greek *agora* as a communal meeting place for civic action, active discussion and debate in higher education inevitably also implies acknowledgement that it was historically also simultaneously a marketplace and space for trade and negotiation of capital, resources, goods and ideas. For example, Mary Huber and Pat Hutchings speak of the 'social commons' of teaching (2006); Torgny Roxå and Katarina Mårtenson (2014) discuss the organisational microcultures of the 'higher education commons' and the concept of a research commons as a communal space for academic praxis is also familiar in higher education. Michael Gibbons (2006), in particular, also uses the metaphor of the *agora* of higher education, but specifically in relation to engagement as the third core function of higher education, which supports my metaphorical reading of the same here.

At the 2001 Conference on Human Capital for Socio-Economic Development on The Role of Higher Education, Damian Ruth emphasised higher education's role of social stewardship for future generations and said that 'democracy requires contestation as is maintained by scepticism not trust' and 'we must contest the discourse that invokes the notion of human capital and reduces society to an economy ... consumerism is about forgetting not learning and remembering – we need students to critique rather than consume' (University of Fort Hare and CHET 2001, 14). This vigilance resonates with Foucault's understanding of the need for scepticism in the form of 'pessimistic activism' (Foucault 1984 in Grimshaw 1993, 123). He describes it as follows:

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism (Foucault 1984 in Grimshaw 1993, 123).

The *agora* of higher education engagement is potentially a space of stewardship and activism where the dynamic network of sometimes seemingly contradictory discourses around accountability, social justice, social responsibility, social responsiveness, the public good, collaboration with stakeholders and academic scholarship generation are visibly and vividly enacted, while vigilantly remembering that higher education has also become, and is continuing to be, a space of (often conspicuous) consumption, as the growing emphases on higher education commercialisation, competitiveness, income generation, market-orientation and internationalisation often show. The challenge for higher education institutions is not to choose (either-or) between these two ideological and discursive forces, which are inextricably linked in a push-pull relationship, but to vigilantly and continuously manage the dynamic relationship between the two at the shifting fulcrum point where they converge. This is the relatively free space of higher education engagement (compared to the more traditionally circumscribed spaces of teaching and research) where personal, societal and institutional meaning-making take place on a continuous, adaptable and self-replicating basis. It is also a supercomplex existential experience (both personal, social and institutional) of heterotopic cognitive dissonance, of having to 'be in more than one conceptual place at the same time'.

Langa (2011, 1), following Bourdieu, calls this powerful dynamic 'scientific capital', a term which he prefers over the term engagement, which to him mostly equals 'academic networking'. The ideal result of this power-based enactment of scientific capital as engagement would be a 'self-referenced institution' (Marginson 2002, 416) in what Langa (2011, 2) calls 'a field of struggle': in critical and creative conversation with itself, various disciplinary academic conventions, its environment, the state, civic drivers and the global forces that influence and transcend higher education. The ideal result of this would be an organisation with constituents that are practically, critically, democratically and sceptically engaged in all three of the critical higher education activities that Trowler, following Barnett (2000a, 1), identifies as epistemological, practical and ontological: knowing, acting/doing and being; or understanding, self-identity and action (Trowler 2004, 3; Barnett 2000c, 257–259). Higher education engagement spaces are therefore by implication arguably always already agonistic, discursive, dialogical and heterotopic places 'where the proliferation of frameworks by which we might understand the world' (Barnett 2000c, 257) are constantly shifting and negotiated.

CONCLUSION

Higher education engagement can serve as a productive liminal space of dynamic reinvention and reconstitution of identity and purpose – for individuals, communities, as well as institutions

– and as a site of resistance to potentially myopic or destructive hegemonies and the enactment of counter-hegemonic discourse and action. Simultaneously, vigilance is needed to ensure that new myopias and hegemonies are not created. Smith (2000, n.p.) says that 'a university living in the realm of supercomplexity is one in incessant turmoil, one in which all the basic assumptions of one's self-identity as researcher, scholar and teacher are kept perpetually in the air. But this, if properly understood and applied, is where the university can work its way into a kind of rebirth'. As Barnett (2000a, 1) also points out,

> the university has lost its way. The world needs the university more than ever but for new reasons. If we are to clarify its new role in the world, we need to find a new vocabulary and a new sense of purpose. ... The university has to live by the uncertainty principle: it has to generate uncertainty, to help us live with uncertainty, and even to revel in uncertainty.

John Caputo (1993, 252) constructs the central question of contemporary experience as follows: 'who are we now, at this particular moment of our historical continuum [?] Who are we high-tech, late capitalist, mobile, post-Enlightenment ... postmodernists? And how can we be otherwise?'. This is also the question that higher education is confronted with today on many fronts and (community/stakeholder) E/engagement is one vehicle through which universities and societies negotiate their way on the transformative rebirthing journey, carving out spaces for what Caputo (1993, 257) calls 'the murmurings of a capacity to be otherwise'.

I argue that engagement, as the third and most recently officially circumscribed function of higher education (with teaching and research as the other two), is potentially one of the few remaining organically free spaces in universities. It creates and enables interstices, liminal and interactional spaces – pockets of thoughtful and thought-provoking relationality, networking and networked interaction – in which the supercomplex reality of the postmillennial human experience can be reflected, debated and enacted in ways that transcend the staid and even artificial divisions of more conventional academe. As a fluid and creative space for personal, social and institutional stewardship, accountability, vigilance, scepticism, pessimistic activism, self-reflection, collective meaning-making and identity formation, higher education engagement plots the evolving politics of individuals and institutions situated in their various environmental circles of influence, both locally and globally.

It is in the spirit of this continuous self-reflective vigilance that this article conceptualises higher education engagement as a paradoxical liminal boundary-challenging space, a metaphorically creative free space of conceptual and practice-based approachability, adaptability and mobility, amid the dual demands of globalisation and localisation. As such, higher education engagement may (at least for the time being) arguably even be the last remaining organically free space in the evolving academic context, dominated by the highly

regulated arenas of traditional teaching and research, and may potentially lead the way to the future freeing of these two other core functions of higher education.

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