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Cosmopolitanism, international development and the university brand, a critique

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Abstract: Coming from the Greek *cosmos*, meaning the world, and *polis*, meaning city or citizen; to be marked *cosmopolitan* is to be marked as a worldly citizen. This paper examines representations of ‘international development’ in university marketing and argues ‘development’ images and text brand the university as cosmopolitan. However, contrary to seeing the *cosmopolitan* as a progressive political concept in a time of globalisation, I draw on postcolonial scholarship to contend the governance of cosmopolitan identities is an expression of power, which as Jazeel (2019, p.155) states, “cannot help but bear some of the hallmarks of the lingering effect of colonial and imperial geography.” The paper expands critical work on branding UK universities as global and superior (Sidhu, 2006), with the promise of endowing lucrative ‘capitals’ on prospective students (Lomer et al, 2018), by adding a critique of *cosmopolitanism* in the university brand, a hitherto underexplored concept.

Jazeel, T. (2019) *Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge

Lomer, S., V. Papatsiba and R. Naidoo (2018) ‘Constructing a national higher education brand for the UK: positional competition and promised capitals’, *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1):134-153

Sidhu, R. (2006) *Universities and Globalization: To Market, To Market*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

Paper: The university brand is a unique competitive identity that captures the values a university wishes to project externally, for example ‘excellence’ or ‘prestige’ or ‘being global’. Closely related to other university marketing strategies, branding (a verb) concerns building associations between the brand (a university) and consumers of the brand, including prospective students, staff and research funders (Lomer et al 2018; Farber and Holm, 2005). In a globally competitive higher education (HE) landscape, a ‘successful’ brand identity defines a university’s offering in relation to other institutions (Chapleo, 2010). The extent to which a brand identity is aspirational or emerges from the institution’s actual performance is subject to debate (Temple, 2006). Most usefully, we can regard the university

brand as ideological and a means to convey purpose (Naidoo et al, 2014).

To Farber and Holm (2005, p.117), writing of a political context where higher education can be decried as elitist and removed from popular concerns, the purpose of university marketing is to project the university as “admirable” and a worthy public good. Despite internal tensions in formulating an appropriate brand for the university, they say, “the public image must elide the internal strife and contradictions and convey instead a grand harmony of diverse ends” (*Ibid*, p. 119). This means in communicating to external audiences, virtuous slogans such as “Meeting the challenges of our world” (they study a number of these), do not just speak to the merits of a particular university or to potential students, but is a response to a desire for the university to be seen as a public good that serves us all. Farber and Holm’s (2005) contribution allows us to regard the university brand at two complementary levels: the first concerns a competitive university image that serves to attract prospective students, staff and funders from other universities; and the second is more collaborative and concerns the HE sector as public paragon, an admirable, worthy and virtuous endeavour.

Drawing from a wider study on course marketing and international development (Patel, 2019), in this paper I demonstrate how international development mobilises these two levels of the university brand through analysis of the material representations of ‘international development’ in text and images on webpages and course brochures at two UK universities. I go on to problematize such representations for engendering cosmopolitan desire among mainly international students, and for projecting cosmopolitan virtue through the international development activities of the university.

To be marked cosmopolitan is to be defined as a worldly citizen. In higher education scholarship, cosmopolitanism is often interpreted through an internationalisation agenda typified by global citizenship education and international student mobility (Carunna, 2014), the purpose of which is to generate compassionate global agents (Martin and Griffiths, 2012). The geographies of cosmopolitanism in this literature is marked by northern and southern difference and flows. Students from the global south flow to the north (Maringe and Carter, 2007), and northern education programmes fund southern study and exploration (Patel, 2015), for example. Where cosmopolitan is critiqued it can be “banal” and focus on its unrealised promise in education (see Matthews and Sidhu, 2005). Yet, the concept itself reflects an intrinsic epistemic and moral position inseparable from colonial and imperial structures of power, of which UK universities with internationalisation agenda are one manifestation.

Walter Mignolo’s (2010) persuasive account of the reinvigoration of the concept of cosmopolitanism to the 21st century, suggests its Kantian origins in driving a project of European global expansion have not been undone and rethought. Highly individualised discourses of ‘rights’ and a liberal concept of citizenship underpin civilising missions from the north outwards into the world. The project of international development has long been subject to damning critique along these lines (e.g. Escobar, 1985). Of relevance to debates in higher education, is Andreotti’s (2011) critique of the geo-politics of knowledge production, racialized epistemologies, and the privilege accorded to Euro-American ways of knowing the world coded in global citizenship education. Yet, its critics offer redemption for cosmopolitan values. Mendieta (2009, p.241) offers a dialogical cosmopolitanism that is “a version of cosmopolitanism that is grounded, enlightened, and reflexive”. Mignolo (2010, p.124) offers a “de-

colonial cosmopolitanism” that privileges ideas and knowledge from the margins. Some abandon the term all together finding it too problematic to overcome and favour instead progressive alternatives like Gayatri Spivak’s *planetarity*, a call to imagine ourselves and reach out to one another as temporary subjects of the planet (Jazeel, 2019, Spivak, 2015). These points of redemption can serve as signals of ‘good’ cosmopolitanism.

I present here two brief case study illustrations (to be discussed in the presentation) of how representations of international development in university marketing produce a cosmopolitan brand for the university. The first case concerns the marketing of an international development postgraduate course at University A. Drawing on an analysis of 12 documents, we found representations of development built cognitive associations for students to the values of development as a normative pursuit, geographically grounded in the south, and predicated on helping others who are not like ‘us’. In imagery, this was done through mimicking familiar tropes of development, specifically highly racialized tropes of desperate or lacking black and brown bodies, and barren or chaotic landscapes that appear unfamiliar to the viewer. Of particular interest is the marketing logic. One marketing professional interviewed for the study remarked, “You want them [students] to be able to see themselves here, studying at the university, and you do that by representing them in the images.” Yet, there were no images of students in the course marketing, only of development scenes, encouraging students to imagine themselves only in relation to ‘othered’ development subjects.

The second case concerns university-level marketing and the use of ‘development’ or development studies as a way to signify a university’s international or global outreach and outlook, and their public purpose. At University B, for example, ‘International Development’ was listed as part of the institution’s strategic mission, alongside widening participation and access initiatives. The ‘doing’ of development work by the university is presented without critique or reflection, and is framed within an overarching discourse of ‘impact’. In both cases, representations of international development mobilise a sense of cosmopolitanism that serve the university brand, sadly, without any sign of ‘good’ cosmopolitanism.