



Toward a Borderless, Decolonized, Socially Just, and Inclusive Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

ABSTRACT

In the context of global curriculum transformation and from a global South perspective, this article explores the imposed and self-created borders that continue to “discipline” us into reproducing scholarly processes, practices, and traditions that privilege dominant forms of knowledge making and knowing in teaching and learning. Drawing on Africa as a case study to explore a framework for thinking outside borders, the author invites the reader to embrace a global social imagination that disrupts and transcends the epistemic, social, and cultural borders designed to produce knowledge that is ahistorical and decontextualized. Using a social mapping of how we thrive on neatly delineated borders that detach the known from the knower by marginalizing or delegitimizing knowledges of the Other, this article, which draws on an earlier version presented as a keynote at the 16th annual conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, presents a theory of change geared toward borderless, decolonized, socially just, and inclusive pedagogy and scholarship.

KEYWORDS

epistemic disobedience, delinking, border thinking, decolonized, socially just

When I was invited to do the keynote address at the 16th annual conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), I was gobsmacked. Why me? Why now? What was the catch?

The conference organizers, Michele DiPietro and Hillary Steiner, explained that I had been considered because of my work in the South African critical tradition of decolonization, which linked well with the conference’s theme, “SoTL without Borders: Engaged Practices for Social Change.” They proposed that I offer a critical and different perspective in relation to national and cultural borders in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by speaking about the need to make borders more permeable to promote social justice.

I accepted the invitation graciously but with both trepidation and excitement. In my lived experience, the metaphor of the border is more literal than it is figurative. I have experienced borders as a powerful device that closes off and at the same time closes in. Theorizing the border as a catalyst for reducing marginality and liminality thus posed a challenge for me, not only because I was delivering this keynote in a context where the issue of “walling” people in or out was a vexed topic nationally, but because I had to overcome my own internal and external borders in order to do this work. I first had to deal with the border between feeling honored at being invited to share my insights and perspectives as an academic activist and knowing, given my positionality and work in the area of decoloniality in South

Africa, that similar invitations to speakers from the global South by the North, are met with suspicion by my peers.

Notwithstanding, I decided to take a leap of faith. I was new to the ISSOTL audience and they to me, so I needed to challenge myself to experience how someone “like me” would be received. Also, it meant that I could explore globality (South and North) across discursive differences to enact my own agenda to disrupt and push the borders—or so I thought.

My experience at and of the ISSOTL conference and the reception of my keynote address on October 9, 2019, was one of the most engaging and meaningful professional experiences I have had in awhile. The generosity of and interaction with the ISSOTL delegates presented a huge lesson for me: I had to disrupt my own false borders and assumptions about academics, knowledge, and practices in general.

I acknowledged also that Atlanta, as the host city, offered us the possibility of thinking beyond geographical and ideological borders because it, too, carries the memory of transcending artificial borders that define who people are, where they come from, and where they are going. The history of civic engagement in Atlanta is testament to the border crossing that happened in this time-space capsule through its iconic markers of civil action, such as the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Center for Civil and Human Rights, Jimmy Carter’s Presidential Library and Museum, Gay Pride, and the AIDS Quilt. The spirit and ethos of Atlanta provided an ideal backdrop for engaging in meaningful discussions about the role of SoTL without borders in an envisaged, reimagined, borderless higher education in a borderless world. Atlanta provided an exemplar of the connection between SoTL as both an academic and epistemic project and a socially engaged project—one that encompasses international, national, cultural, institutional, disciplinary, and methodological challenges and opportunities.

More poignantly, I realized that the cycle of scholarly teaching and learning is ongoing and that none of us can claim to have ever “arrived.” We need to constantly challenge ourselves to unlearn, relearn, and reframe assumptions and practices—to relate to people in real time and not through tropes constructed about them. If we have half a chance of mitigating global challenges such as achieving social justice, addressing climate change, and enacting sustainable development, we need to find each other and work on the solutions together and urgently. This was the “key note” that I, as an invited keynote speaker, took away from ISSOTL 2019.

In this spirit of finding each other, I share the content of my keynote address, both as a prompt and provocateur. In retrospect, I see this work as auto-ethnographic (which has its roots in anthropological studies; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) in the sense that I theorized the content by drawing on my assumptions, presuppositions, and personal meanings based on my past experiences in my context. I advance a critical, self-reflexive disposition to the problem of borders by looking at the subjectivities and the society from which it emerges. What is important to me is to offer a meta-analysis of the Self, to get to the inner feelings and interpretations not usually considered by “outsiders” (Atay, 2018).

I explore this by embracing a contextually and critically reflexive decolonial approach (Chawla & Atay, 2018), one that emphasizes the criticality of the Self, bending back on itself, to make strange that which has become normalized and neutralized. In decolonial scholarship, this is related to confronting the alienation and invisibility of subjectivities that have been continuously silenced in sociocultural settings. It is about the storyteller making way for and representing the story of Others in ways that are inclusive and just. It is about thinking outside of borders.

I draw on the word *story* in two ways: as a noun, as in a telling or narration of events, and as a verb, “to story,” to assert the agency and determination needed in storying a story. In this way, I assert the importance of silenced and marginalized voices to tell their own stories without being edited, narrated, and curated by those outside the storyteller’s frame. Once the story has been told, it becomes a living artifact for other stories and counter-stories to be told in response. In adopting this approach, I choose to decolonize the linear and clinical academic practices that have come to dominate scholarship and the knowledge project. I choose instead to open up spaces for alternative, circular, performative, and generative stories (Atay, 2018) to be told and for different voices to be heard to avoid reducing the agency of people who are not able or allowed to speak, which in turn constructs them as the Other (Spivak, 1988, 1994).

How Africa is perceived and constructed as Other is encapsulated in a video posted by Jimmy Kimmel Live (2018) in which everyday Americans were asked to identify countries on a world map: Africa is seen as a country and not a continent. This perception continues to hinder the progress of black people to self-actualize and realize their worth and value as autonomous and relational beings. Notwithstanding, and as an example of a country in the throes of actualizing itself, South Africa has experienced major transitions in the last 25 years; the most potent being the recent calls for decolonization and transformation by the #MUSTFALL student movements of 2015–2017 (Wa Bofelo, 2017). Students challenged us to confront our positionality, privilege, intersectionality, guilt, trauma, and assimilation into coloniality as academics. Recently, South Africa has been struggling specifically with issues of gender-based violence and xenophobia that have affected the nation as a whole and universities specifically because young university students are being maimed, raped, and killed; so-called foreign nationals have also become targets of hate crimes (du Plessis, 2017; Phakeng, 2019). These social challenges remind us that the academic project is deeply entwined with the social reality despite self-imposed borders between the two. To collapse the borders, universities need to acknowledge their ethical obligation as epistemic agents and producers of knowledge for society and communities to enable the conditions for social change that serve the public good. We owe it to those who came before us, those who are here now, and those still to come.

South Africa is nonetheless an important place and space in time. Having come through apartheid relatively calmly, then outlived the rainbowism¹ (Slade, 2015) of the 2000s and now as a fledgling democracy, South Africa, which might be thought of as transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, is a place where difficult conversations are now taking place about what it really means to be free, equal, and just. We have, indeed, been on a very long walk to freedom—we were on it before Mandela and with Mandela, and, in many ways, we are still walking. We might have arrived in some ways, but we are also still in transition, striving to find a better space and place of belonging and inclusion for all.

It is from here that I enunciate my commitment to the performative task of navigating through borders of being alienated, marginalized, and silenced to explore a space and place of understanding and release from the subjugation of black people and women, in particular. Such a stance enables us to not just be awake but to be “woke²” (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017) to untruths, false realities, mimicry, and other devices and mechanisms that are alive and well in academia. This is one of the reasons for my embracing a decolonial disposition in my thought and action as an academic staff developer and activist in the Centre for Higher Education Development, where my work is with and for academics to strengthen their voice, disposition, and sense of self as university teachers and researchers in South

Africa. Being a decolonial academic activist now, at a time and place in higher education where old borders no longer seem to serve the epistemic and social justice needs of students and staff, is a significant and courageous exercise of agency.

South Africa, being of Africa, draws on the rich African philosophy of *ubuntu* (Ramose, 2019), which means “I am because you are.” The question of identity (I) and belonging (we) is poignant to all but central, I believe, to what it means to be African, to *ubuntu*, where the personal and the social are intertwined, making the border between the *I* and the *we* a porous, dotted line that connects and affirms both the I and the we.

WHO AM I?

Identity is complex. *My* identity is complicated. The colonial *dent* on our sense of individual and collective *identity* is deep as we move between iterations of *I* and *my*. To claim something as *mine* is to assert an agency that belongs to *me*; not a description, anecdote, or narrative imposed on and projected onto me. Who I am and where I am located at the university has been shaped by forces beyond me. As experienced by many other black bodies, my entry into the academe was not a seamless segue way into a world that was an extension of my primary world. To enter meant to “cross different borders—cultural, linguistic, methodological, theoretical” (Atay, 2018, p. 21)—borders that became the imprint of an/*my* academic identity relegated to the margins and operating in the periphery. It is from this place that I speak, work, think, feel, and live.

The story that I tell from this place reflects *my* identity and the way it has been constructed by structural and cultural influences. My story, like that of many others, highlights the ontological dissonance of being displaced, uprooted, and never quite belonging in the land I was born in, grew up in, and have known as home. It is a domicile that has made me feel, for a long time, like a foreigner in my own country because of who I am and what my name, my body, and my reality represent here. Herein lies the first border.

The border of the self

My name is Kasturi Behari-Leak. Kasturi is a Hindu name that means *musk*, the fragrance found in the musk deer (Prashanth, n.d.). I have never been able to embrace my name and its meaning fully because I do not like the smell of musk. The musk deer apparently spends its time chasing this wonderful scent, looking here and there for the fragrance of the divine, a fragrance that is actually inside its own body. One who is blessed with the name Kasturi, I am told, should not try to find happiness and satisfaction externally or be disillusioned by the world outside, as I have done all my life, looking here and there for my special scent, for my center and sense of identity and belonging. It is only in recent years that I have started to dive inside and connect deeply with the inner Kasturi, which is the fragrance of my own self-knowledge and being and everything else about me that makes me who I am.

A discourse analysis of my name would generate certain assumptions, depending on your vantage point as insider or outsider. You would probably arrive at certain judgments about me long before any interaction with me, confirming or refuting stereotypes of what I might be based on what I represent.

Kasturi would tell you that my name is gender-specific, but it would probably not confirm that I am a cisgendered womxn³ and a feminist. It would assume links with Indian traditions and culture, and it would even make a link with my religion, Hinduism. It would link with a set of Indian languages

specifically, Tamil and Hindi, as my name, which originates in Sanskrit, is used in both languages. What it will not tell you is that I grew up on the borders of two cultures: Indian/Hindu and European/Dutch. While I grew up with many languages around me, I was not taught in my mother tongue at school. Instead, I spent my time, aspiring to be “English,” which meant being “proper,” with just the right accent that earned much praise from teachers and family alike, as I spoke very well apparently, “for an Indian.” My name would not reveal that I am fluent in Afrikaans, which we had to study until grade 12, even though we did not use it as a lingua franca. Such was the successful colonization project by the Dutch and the British in South Africa, as many of us sacrificed our own cultural heritage to assimilate and adopt an impostor language, literature, culture, and the arts. An impostor Identity.

My name would perhaps tell you about my nationality, but it would not clarify that I live in the diaspora, in South Africa, and not the motherland India. In fact, it would not tell you that throughout my life, when asked where I am from and from which part of India my family came, that my answer was always “I am not from India, I am from here, I am South African,” as were the five generations of Indian indentured laborers who came to this land to work on the sugar cane fields. Notwithstanding, I still hear the subtext and innuendos: You do not belong. You are not from here. You are from the outside.

It would not tell you that I am very much on the inside—a person of color and mother to two beautiful children who are engaging with their own identity and what it means to be mixed race in South Africa; that my white husband is working with his privilege and blind spots. We are seen as “exotic” by white friends and colleagues and often associations are made with Indian food, dress, curry, and spices—as if our identities, bound by ethnicity, are worthy of being reduced and essentialized in these ways.

It would not tell you that my “ethnicity” is tied to the liberation struggles against apartheid and that I identify as black—*Biko black*, a term that refers to blackness not merely as the pigmentation of one’s skin but as a political resistance against domination and oppression (Biko, 1978). *Black* is also an intersectional term that acknowledges the struggles of the Black feminist movement and queer struggles against heteronormative and patriarchal orders of society that relegate “feminized bodies” to the margins. My activist identity was born and nurtured in the 1980s as a young university student at Durban-Westville, where I became involved in academic and civic struggles against apartheid. I engaged with and learned from strong student leader partnerships about what it means to be part of a liberation movement against a colonial and apartheid regime.

If you were in my context, *Kasturi* would perhaps tell you that my name represents a minority culture, and thus, as a person of color, that I am part of a minority race. As such, during apartheid, my name would locate me in a specific geographical area designed by apartheid to keep Indians separated from whites, coloreds, and blacks. I grew up in Merebank in Durban, a tiny suburb caught between a rock and a hard place—the oil refineries on the one side and the airport on the other. In apartheid spatial planning, Merebank (an Indian township) was situated next to Wentworth (a colored township) and close to Lamontville (a black township). As separate geographical spaces, it succeeded in its goal for apartheid, as we successfully learned how to both live apart and hate (*heid*) the Other.

Such is the story of my name and some of the borders and intersections of similarity and difference that it generates. Through its spelling and sound, it generates reactions and responses that privilege me and marginalize me in particular ways.

I invite you to reflect on what your name means and what it means to you. What image does it invoke? What are the different intersections and borders that your name generates? Then attend to a

critical question: How does your name privilege or marginalize you? How do you mediate this when interacting with students and colleagues? How does this manifest in your scholarship?

I have come to understand that naming is an important mechanism, often used to include or exclude, to enculturate people from the periphery to the center, and to assimilate them into the colonial project. In the satirical Comedy Central video *Substitute Teacher* by Key and Peele (2012), we see how Mr. Garvey, the black substitute teacher, mispronounces white students' names and insists that they "pronounce it correctly" to avoid being "insubordinate and churlish." As the teacher calls out each name and pronounces each one incorrectly, we feel the unease and discomfort associated with certain names and the hegemony of naming and framing, which constructs some people as the norm. Naming as a colonial act of subjugation is a powerful subtext to this tradition.

Many students in South Africa have existed as subtexts to the colonial project. Students are renamed by their English-speaking teachers because their African names are too difficult to pronounce or spell. For example, a student named Busisiwe was renamed Octavia based on where she sat in the room—in the eighth (octave) row of desks from the front of the class. In this violent act of renaming, Octavia replaced Busisiwe, creating ontological confusion between the persona she, Busisiwe, was forced to be but one she could never really embrace as an African child. Between the borders of being Octavia and Busisiwe, in the liminality of shadows of the Self, the persona non grata emerges as the Other. In African culture, people are personae grata, recognized and acknowledged fully through their names. Naming is an important act of reverence because people's names, like places, carry a footprint, history, and memory of roots and origins and an energy and vibration of families and culture and traditions. The experience of being named and being known in my context is also connected to issues of race, class, gender, culture, and other structural systems. Linking this to our classrooms, we need to reflect on the prejudices and implicit biases evoked in us when we engage with our students (and, likewise, our colleagues) and their names, their histories, and their positionality, and question whether we mediate these borders with a sense of social justice. My name does not reveal the hardship and challenge of many like me who grew up betwixt and between borders of difference and borders of the familiar—but borders nonetheless, that were neither here nor there, with us sometimes on the inside looking out, and at other times, on the outside looking in, in a liminal space of never quite being sure, never quite belonging in any space or in any sense.

It is perhaps for these reasons that I see myself now as an activist, using my intellectual and embodied resources to raise awareness and to challenge the ways in which power in academia controls knowledge and keeps us separate. My aim is to transform academic spaces into places that are inclusive and affirming for all, especially the marginalized and alienated who have been beneficiaries of oppressive academic practices. I have conceptualized and facilitated my work with academics through an experiential and embodied process that allows Us and Them to see in bidirectional ways. But my goal is also that we take everyone along, especially those open and honest and willing to work with the historicity and structural inequalities that manifest in our practices and discourses in higher education. As it should be, this is a joint, relational, and collective project to begin to address the social and epistemic justice needs of all.

Moving from the borders that are generated by names, I invite you to explore with me the limitations and possibilities of a variety of other borders. A border is a strong clear image or a dividing line, a line drawn in the sand between this and that, good and bad. Borders are geographical boundaries of political or legal jurisdictions to control areas and to define places that are safe and unsafe, to

distinguish Us from Them. But one cannot talk about a border without invoking the moral and ethical question: What is the border keeping in and what is it keeping out? And why? If it is keeping something in, what is the threat or danger from which it is protecting and securing that thing? I am not speaking just in material terms. What or who is being kept out, and why? Is there an ethical justification for this exclusion?

Borders are always entangled in historical traditions of exclusion, marginalization, and silencing. Important for SoTL are the epistemological exclusions and marginalization that have become huge blind spots for higher education researchers and writers today. We are being challenged to come of age by being awake to injustices—injustices not just in our lecture halls and in teaching and learning spaces but in civic society, too. We are waking up to our complicity in reproducing the status quo and the need to disrupt the dichotomies between Us and Them; we and they; Self and Other. It is in this nexus between the Self and the Other that I locate the site of epistemic and ontological borders, to which I now turn.

EPISTEMIC BORDERS

Epistemic borders demarcate the distinctions between the epistemes that are kept in, protected, or sanctified and those that are kept out of the mainstream, whence they become marginalized epistemologies.

Epistemologies of the South refer to those knowledge systems not privileged by the history of the modern colonial capitalist and patriarchal world system that has privileged the culture, knowledge, and epistemology produced by the West (Spivak, 1988, 1994; Mignolo, 2007). Whether you are inside or outside a border, it involves thinking from a particular perspective in the world. Feminist scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Collins, and bell hooks remind us that when we speak from a particular location or place, we cannot “escape the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical and racial hierarchies fashioned by the modern world system” (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 114, citing Grosfoguel 2007, at p. 213) because the modern world is implicated and constitutive of colonial and material expansion. So we are all implicated in a sense. While the contemporary might be quite seductive, Vázquez (2011) reminds us that the contemporary, even the modern, often implies a negation of multiple pasts and histories and an erasure of many other worlds of meaning.

Epistemic borders can thus have unfairness attached to how knowledge is communicated, how it is understood, and how it denies parity and equilibrium to some people in the conversation of humankind. In my opinion, epistemic borders thrive on epistemic hierarchies. When epistemes are canonized to privilege certain worldviews, such as Western knowledge, it sets up a hierarchy of “superior” and “inferior” knowledge, which in turn creates a hierarchy of “superior” and “inferior” people around the world. From epistemic borders and epistemic hierarchies emerge disciplinary borders.

DISCIPLINARY BORDERS

Operating from what Castro-Gómez (2007) calls a universalizing zero-point hubris, disciplines construct a corpus “about” the Other. As it moved from North to South, knowledge became disciplined into this or that by either excising information or embellishing it; this disciplined knowers and producers in different fields in particular ways (Garuba, 2017). Disciplines are a mechanism for categorizing and classifying the world. Categorization is the foundation of Eurocentric scholarship and works in ways that include and exclude. Similarly, colonialism and colonization categorized people into zones of being human and not being human. According to Fanon (1991), those in the zone of being human experience

a life mitigated by race, whereas those related to the zone of nonbeing experience a life aggravated by race and prejudice.

LINGUISTIC BORDERS

Disciplinary borders, in turn, work through linguistic borders. Dominant languages were able to thrive, develop, and grow in lexical and semantic density because of their use in epistemic projects while languages of the Other were used for producing folklore or culture but not for rigorous knowledge or theory (Mignolo, 2007). Most of global research is addressed to an audience mainly in English-speaking countries, which establishes the linguistic borders that keep speakers of other languages out. Knowledge needs language to ensure that the power set up in the hierarchy is maintained. But language is more than an epistemic device; it is a purveyor of culture and memory. African author and sociolinguist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) believes that when you erase a people's language, you erase their memory. This erasure of memory and language ensures that the assimilation process into colonial culture is guaranteed because people without memories are unconnected to their own histories and culture and are somewhat disabled from asserting their epistemic power.

Epistemic power

Those who have epistemic power are able to blur the lines so that certain epistemologies appear innocent, natural, and normal. Grosfoguel (2011) asserts that at the point where different hierarchies of knowledge intersect, "heterarchies" (n.p.) are formed, which highlights how the intersecting nature of linguistic, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, and racial hierarchies of domination and exploitation reveal the nature of epistemic power.

Even though there is nothing natural or innocent about knowledge or disciplines (Foucault, 1972), epistemic power determines whose knowledge is legitimated and valued in the world by making such knowledge appear natural and seamless. When a set of "naïve" knowledges is "located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (Foucault, 1980, p. 82), that knowledge becomes "disqualified" as "insufficiently elaborated" (p. 82) and then becomes "subjugated" (p. 83). The process of rendering knowledges subjugated, silent, and unable to speak is what postcolonialist scholar Gayatri Spivak calls "epistemic violence" (1994, p. 83). In her seminal work, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak (1988; 1994) unpacks epistemic violence as a means of inflicting harm against subjects through discourse and in the practice of Othering.

Epistemic violence

This violence is perpetuated when the North remains the reference point for the world in economic, political, and cultural terms. De Sousa Santos (2007) refers to this as "abyssal thinking"—a process through which certain types of knowledge produced in peripheral countries are actually made invisible and devalued. Extending this to SoTL, we need to question whether and how dominant forms of SoTL perpetuate and reproduce "abyssal" borders with particular cultural features which end up Othering teaching and learning processes in peripheral countries and their contexts, setting up the border between the North as expert and the South as novice. This epistemology of difference masks a critical ontological difference between North and South and East and West in how "human" is conceived and constituted.

ONTOLOGICAL BORDERS

Ontological borders are created when some people occupy the center while Others become the out group and are dehumanized. Edward Said (1978) asserts that when societies of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East are seen by the West as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and, at times, dangerous, this can be understood as Orientalism. To understand this better, consider the recent movie *Aladdin* (Lin, Eirich, & Ritchie, 2019), where very little human density is attached to the protagonists. As Harris (2019) points out, whereas the earlier *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992) featured a mainly white voice cast, with uneasy stereotypes depicted in a lyric about cutting off ears and the city of Agrabah described as “barbaric,” the more recent *Aladdin* stars Will Smith as the black genie who appears to be cool, hip, and progressive, but the city is still presented as “chaotic.” Through such “Orientalist” representations, images continue to marginalize and discriminate against the people who actually live there now.

Drawing on the Disney archive again, and moving from Orientalism to “Africantism,” a term I coin to shine the torch on Disney’s representation of blackness or Otherness as a case of epistemic injustice, Disney has increased its depiction of diversity in recent years. The 2019 remake of *The Lion King* (Favreau, Silver, & Gilchrist, 2019) with its diverse black cast is exemplary. Similarly, the Disney-owned Marvel movie *Black Panther* (Feige & Coogler, 2018) is another example, “important for its depiction of the black diaspora” (Harris, 2019). But according to some critics, Wakanda, the fictional African world, might be set in Africa, but the terms of its representation were crafted in Hollywood to present a glorious utopian Africa, with themes of royalty—“the Africa of pyramids and Kente cloth inlaid with gold” (Akinro & Segun-Lean, 2019). Akinro and Segun-Lean (2019) suggest that the reason Blackness in the diaspora identifies with these stories is that “they derive power from a particularly Afrocentric essentialism, which uses pre-colonial Africa as an oppositional tactic to the western narrative of blackness, as primitive and unaccomplished.” Discussing Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s *Spirit* video (2019), Akinro and Segun-Lean suggest that “the exotic dress and dance, the vast deserts and mountainous landscape, and other such features in Beyoncé’s work present an Africa primed for a tourist’s escapade” (2019). But that raises a critical question. Does our consumption of African-American culture and representations such as these reveal our desire to see blackness reflected to us without the handicap of Africa?

AFRICANTALISM

The Africantism exemplified in these films echoes the danger of similar possible blind spots in our work as academics and SoTL scholars—that is, the danger of not seeing our students in our classrooms as human beings in their full ontological density, not as exotic incarnations of their stereotyped selves. But let me cast the Disney net further afield, beyond Africa.

There have been many remakes of Disney originals to make them more progressive and politically correct. As Harris (2019) observes about recent Disney releases, *Frozen* (Del Vecho, Buck, & Lee 2013), though still primarily about princesses, “prioritizes sisterhood over romance”; in *Moana* (Shurer, Clements, & Musker 2016), which features a Pacific Islander heroine, and *Coco* (Anderson & Unkrich, 2017), which has a Mexican hero and Hispanic voice actors, the progressive changes are evident. In *The Princess and the Frog* (Del Vecho, Clements, & Musker, 2009), the heroine and later princess, Tiana, is Disney’s first African-American protagonist. While these attempts stretch the range somewhat, Disney’s representation of brownness or blackness in these movies has been critiqued

because the dominant narrative remains untouched and functions as a romantic tourist brochure, even though its principal characters have been racially tweaked. This is evident in the different settings and the obvious absence of racial, gender, and class tensions, while the dominant narratives depict the tensions between royalty and ordinary, the natural and supernatural, etc. etc. In *The Princess and the Frog*, this is in sharp focus in the way New Orleans is depicted without any reference to it as a place where many African-Americans were displaced and in the racial implications of the use of voodoo in the film.

Even Barbie™ has been given a professional makeover by Mattel. As Zaretsky (2019) explains, framed now as a judge, the new Barbie™ judge dolls (“four different skin tones with four different hairstyles”) supposedly “inspire girls to imagine everything they can become—like protecting the rights of others and ruling on legal cases!” (Zaretsky, 2019, quoting Mattel).

Harris (2019) points to the danger involved in the world viewing blackness as less sophisticated and subhuman and therefore less important than others. As she notes, cutting and pasting diversity onto a work that is already firmly embedded in the collective consciousness of impressionable children is not easily achieved. Fanon (1991) reminds us that biased suppositions in the collective unconscious ensure that there is always identification with the victor or the white hero while the black child internalizes this racist dualism, depreciating his own race in favor of what he perceives as the white ideal (pp. 146-148). As Ortega (2017) reminds us, we also cannot continue without engaging more fully with gender and sexuality from a decolonial perspective. This has important implications for SoTL and how we represent race, class, and gender in our writing.

In the South African/African context, the above examples illustrate what happens when borders designed to produce knowledge as ahistorical and decontextualized diminish and minimize people through misrepresentation and epistemic injustice. These borders shift “the geography of reason” (Gordon, 2019) away from Africa in its full glory to a trope that produces stereotypical ties that bind Africa to this or that image. Out of these binaries and dualisms, knowledge is produced to reflect and represent the epistemic self at the center and the epistemic other on the margin. This has definite implications for SoTL in the South, when imposed and self-created borders continue to “discipline” us into uncritically reproducing scholarly processes, practices, and traditions that privilege dominant forms of knowledge making in teaching and learning at the expense of a social imagination that disrupts the neatly delineated borders in how we write about teaching and learning.

POLITICS OF THE FLESH

To disrupt the process of unconsciously producing the epistemic and ontological other we need to understand how specific mechanisms such as Othering, marginalizing, silencing, erasing, and rendering invisible work. Maart (2019) speaks of the natural ways in which unconscious prejudice against black women’s complexion, hairstyle, and texture are played out in the “politics of the flesh.” Black ontologies are misrecognized daily in advertising campaigns and in the media. In an advertisement for H&M™ depicting a black boy in the “coolest” monkey sweater and a white boy as “survival expert,” we see how neocolonial thinking is projected and becomes an Othering mechanism. The politics of the flesh plays out in a politics of hair. The Oscar-winning actor Lupita Nyong’o, born in Mexico to Kenyan parents and who grew up in Kenya, was disappointed when Grazia UK edited out and smoothed her hair on the cover of its latest edition to “fit a more Eurocentric notion of what beautiful hair looks like” (Ruddick, 2017, quoting Nyong’o’s Twitter post). In South Africa, this is playing out at our schools: 25

years after the abolishment of apartheid, they are a site of racial tension. Learners at San Souci Girls' High who feel they are still being marginalized and discriminated against on the basis of their hair say it is a violation of their human rights as outlined in the South Africa Constitution (Pather, 2017). The "My Natural Hair" campaign petitioned the South Africa minister of education for the establishment of a national hair policy that would protect learners by giving them the right to wear natural or ethnic hairstyles in schools without experiencing prejudice.

These struggles link with similar incidents abroad—for example in the case of Marian Scott, third grader in Michigan, who, according to school policy, was denied a class picture because her hair extensions were not natural tones; her parents claimed that she had to stand in a hallway while her classmates posed for pictures (Abrahamson, 2019).

The politics of the flesh also plays out in a politics of the skin. The global market for skin-lightening products is worth \$10 billion. The most toxic skin-lightening ingredients are mixed with automotive battery acid and bleaching agents, with serious and irreversible health consequences. Lightening one's skin is akin to a pathology of psychological fractures instilled by deep and entrenched colonial wounds—wounds that ensure that Self and Other are kept separate and remain different light and dark hues and skin tone.

The additional damaging effects of skin as a marker of difference manifest in brand campaigns such as that of the soap company Pears™, which reproduced a narrative that cast Africa as dark and its people as dirty, to which they offered a solution—Pears soap—which they claimed would "cleanse, lighten and civilise" in one handy bar. This form of subliminal racism is also evident in Dove™ advertisements for body wash, skin care, and hair care with lotion advertised for "normal to dark skin." Dove was also accused of being tone deaf when it asked, "If your skin were a wash label, what would it say?" The model in the advertisement, Lola Ogunyemi—Nigerian, born in London, and raised in Atlanta—grew up very aware of society's opinion that dark-skinned people, especially women, would look better if their skin were lighter (Ogunyemi, 2017). In this advertisement, the models wear nude T-shirts and turn into one another. Ogunyemi spoke out against the racist advertising by asserting herself as "strong" and "beautiful," someone who "will not be erased" (2017).

ARCHIVES OF REPRESENTATION

I now consider a different archive of representations produced by the colonial machinery that focuses on Africa as a site of development, difference, or Othering and explore the ontological borders that these archives generate. Archives that position Africa and Africans and others all over the world, especially in the global South, in particular ways require critical engagement because they are living and growing all the time. Africa has historically been represented by the West as the "dark continent," deprived of the light of Western education, industry, and progress or as a place of chaos and savagery; it is also either a jungle or desert, with childlike people or witch doctors; art is described as primitive and childish; and rhythm, dance, and music are recurrent motifs in African representations. Stereotypical images of Africa became the body of knowledge and source of knowledge about the continent for those living abroad. The problem, of course, is when the outside thinks that is all Africa can do or is good for.

According to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), representations are dependent on the viewer's position and positionality relative to the observed. But who gets to observe and represent is a question of power. Representations such as these contribute to a single story of Africa. But why do audiences in the West accept this single story so uncritically, and what is the inherent danger for us when

they do this? In the following examples, I draw on a humanities course at my university, “Representations of Africa,” convened by Harry Garuba, through which students interrogate how Africa is represented and ways that makes Africa invisible (Garuba & Behari-Leak, personal communication, July 24, 2018). I look at three pervasive and dominant archives in the South Africa and African context.

On safari

The first archive is the Safari archive. The safari has been curated by the media, tourism, literature, and Hollywood to reproduce stock images of the African safari as romanticized sunsets, animals (the “big five”), or fantastical journeys through the savannah (Hays, 2012). This archive constructs the narrative of wildness or wilderness of Africa through which visitors can approach the wild and untamed—whether animal or human—through the safety of a safari.

Indigenous people are depicted as living harmoniously in nature, ready for tourists’ easy consumption, while simultaneously the identities of those members of a wealthy leisure class on safari, armed with cars, cameras, and cash—emblems of power—solidifying white power and privilege and reifying a particular version of black African “primitivity,” are civilized.

Game lodge

Closely linked to the safari archive is the archive of the game lodge. The game lodge is built on the notion of Afro-romanticism, an ideology to define and represent Africa and African people as exceptional, based on essentialized characteristics. The game lodge exoticizes Africa, but like the safari and park archives, it remains the grand narrative of white power and privilege. It offers the pleasure of risk without danger or risk, with the guarantee of safety. In contrast, the reality for many people in South Africa is daily risk, and danger is guaranteed, as the living conditions of many South Africans, including the ones working at the game reserves, are dire. Despite the huge economic gap between working- and high class, the emergence of a black middle class in South Africa that provides new patrons of game lodges also leads to what in a 1999 essay Njabulo Ndebele (2007, n.p.) calls “ontologically disturbing” because the black game lodge worker is not sure how he or she should respond to the black leisure colonialist, who is caught up in the structure of “white things.” The difference (or paradoxical similarity) between the black middle class at game lodges and blacks in general from the African diaspora, according to Akinro and Segun-Lean (2019), is that “Blackness achieves a certain cultural and political” superiority over local blackness “when it has left Africa, when it is in contact with its Euro-American counterpart.”

Township tours

The third representation is the archive of the township tour. Townships are urban residential areas set aside for nonwhite people during South Africa’s policy of apartheid (1948–1994). Usually located in the outskirts of a city center, they often lack basic facilities like electricity and running water. Although the policy of apartheid is no longer in place, most South Africans continue to live in townships today. A whole culture has developed in the townships, with an influence on music, dancing, dress, and speech. This has led to the township becoming a commodity to sell to hungry tourists who want to understand the South African freedom struggle and black urban culture. But from an epistemic justice point of view, what knowledge do township tours actually generate? Would this be the same if tourists visited gated communities and went on a white township tour into suburbia? Would it have the same

effect? What benefit do these often “awkward” tours provide to either the tourist or the inhabitants of these townships? Is the township tour justified if it is at the expense of the dignity of people, even if township dwellers have convinced themselves that such events are entrepreneurial and bring in capital?

When the Duke and Duchess of Sussex visited Cape Town in September 2019, what representation of Africa would they have seen and how would it compare to what their parents would have seen on visits through the years? While an archive may be largely about the past, it is often reread in light of the present. When Meghan Markle, who self-identifies as a woman of color, said to a group of black women in Cape Town, “I am here . . . as your sister” (Murphy, 2019), what exactly did she mean? Is the sisterhood alluded to a euphemism for Ms. Markle’s link to her African roots? Or does it mean that she would, despite her whistle-stop nature of her tour of the township and city, see the historical and colonial project where urban spatial planning and architecture was designed to keep the rich, white, and well resourced at the center of the city while everyone else was forcibly removed to townships?

And what would Ms. Markle say if she saw how the apartheid spatial planning makes its way into South African classrooms and its spatial planning as we witnessed in the example a year or two ago, when black and white primary school pupils were segregated on the basis of race and language and made to sit in different “group areas” in the classroom? What about the visible and invisible borders and structures in our higher education classrooms and lecture halls all over the world? Look at the spatiality of our lecture spaces and observe how the coloniality of space defines roles for the students as passive and compliant. Do our pedagogical practices mediate these schisms when we teach? How do we represent these interactions in our research and writing? These are some of the provocations that need to guide our understanding of academic borders and what they keep in and what they leave out.

CURATORIAL ACTIVISM

As agents of curatorial activism, we as academics have choices and options in how we manage our classrooms and our research. But such curation requires an urgency and agency that disrupts the traditional and normal in favor of what is socially just. We need to stay alert by questioning who curates the archive and who decides which form is more important and why. If we link this to the SoTL, the question of who gets to curate, classify, and canonize the teaching and learning project and whether this curation privileges the powerful North is a question we cannot ignore because it poses a challenge for developing research and knowledge on teaching and learning in the South for the South and all over the world. This agency also raises the following urgent questions: Which discourses and stereotypes are we still reproducing and confirming in SoTL? Which archives are we debunking? More importantly, how does our research contribute to an epistemology of viewing, as in the safari and game lodge archive, and who gets to gaze at whom? Where do we draw the line between tourism and voyeurism in SoTL? How complicit are we in producing archives that position the marginalized and silenced in particularly weak ways?

Active curation requires that we become conscious of normalized perspectives in the work we do by disrupting the assumptions and biases we carry. Easier said than done, right? How exactly do we do this, you ask? Well, one approach advocated by decolonial scholars is through epistemic disobedience. Another is delinking.

Epistemic disobedience

Epistemic disobedience as a discourse is not to be mistaken for the denotation of *disobedience*, which means a failure or refusal to obey rules or someone in authority. What Mignolo (2011) means by epistemic disobedience is a disobedience that changes the questions and frames with which we look at knowledge, its rules, who it serves, and who benefits from such knowledge or understanding. It involves moving the locus from the “enunciated” to “enunciation” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 490).

Epistemic disobedience is linked to the archive of border thinking, which is thinking from the outside, using alternative knowledge traditions and alternative languages of expression that introduce “other cosmologies into the hegemonic discourse” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 456). Border thinking as a decolonial concept was first used by Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which offers a space to think anew. But, as Anzaldúa cautions, exterior spaces are not pure or absolute so one cannot completely step outside and have a perspective fully from the exterior.

Thus, “[b]order thinking is the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside” (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006, p. 206). From these interior/exterior spaces, a borderland emerges as a vague and undetermined place in a constant state of transition, generating border epistemologies that disrupt the old and create the new. This has important implications for knowledge production and our scholarship of teaching and learning.

According to many decolonial scholars, the way to heal is through conscious and considered gestures and changes to the Self that result in first awakening oneself to one’s own attitude and beliefs that have been shaped by colonization and then to encourage others to do so as well (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019).

Delinking

This break from coloniality and colonization, aptly termed “delinking” (Mignolo, 2007), refers to a process of unlearning the associated dispositions, orientations, values, and actions instilled by the colonial regime. When Mignolo (2007) proposes that we delink from uncritical traditional knowledge-making practices in our institutions, I understand delinking to mean reassessing the training of new and epistemically obedient members and the control of what knowledge making is allowed while not throwing out everything that is Northern and Western. Some groups have successfully delinked from the old and provide exemplars of critical border thinking, which I explore further below.

In the Zapatista struggle in Mexico and based on the old Indigenous communities and the new urban marginal communities, reciprocity and solidarity have been recentered as the main forms of social interaction. This is being reasserted as a new border epistemology to reclaim old cultural ways of knowing with new political realities.

In the New Zealand context, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) redefines the border from the locus of Indigenous practice and cosmology of the Maori. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith subsumes Western anthropological tools into Maori to advance anthropology research that affirms local people’s knowledge and sense of being, asserting that local people know what is good or bad for them, better than any outside researcher.

But delinking also involves unearthing the positionality and power dynamic between researcher and researched and how researcher and researched are differently positioned along positionality markers of race, class, and gender (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012). In the South African context, there was huge controversy surrounding an article published in 2019 (now retracted) by academics at the

University of Stellenbosch, “Age- and Education-Related Effects on Cognitive Functioning in Colored South African Women” (Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht, & Terblanche, 2019). The article has been widely criticized not only for its colonial and racist use of the term *intelligence* but also for the harmful stereotypes and colonial representations of colored women by the researchers and the positioning of the researched as part of the colored community.

For most decolonial scholars, the understanding of decoloniality is predicated on first understanding colonization and coloniality. *Coloniality* is defined as the residual structural and cultural presence of colonization, such as the mental, emotional, and agential dispositions and states of being that remain long after colonizers have left (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Colonization left in its wake the mental, emotional, and even psychological wounds sustained when people are minimized, negated, and overpowered. These attitudes were embedded in remnants of colonial artifacts and other cultural signifiers, such as statues, paintings, buildings, and names (Grosfoguel, 2011).

Acts of delinking allow previously silenced voices to be heard by “highlighting” the importance of “plurality, multiplicity, and difference” (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p. 109) and to signal a willingness to embrace the perspectives of those who are marginalized. In South Africa, there have been many interventions emanating from the 2015 student protests that involve delinking from “westernology.” At the University of Cape Town, for example, the Curriculum Change Working Group was established to facilitate engagements across the campus on the meaning of curriculum change and decolonization in the 2016-2017 period during campus shutdowns. Intense work at three epistemic sites with lecturers and students generated data that was analyzed using three metaphors from decolonial scholarship: knowledge, being, and power. Based on this, we have produced a framework for curriculum change using a decolonial approach (Curriculum Change Working Group, 2018), one of the spinoffs being the launch of a new course, “Understanding Decoloniality” (Cape Higher Education Consortium, 2019).

Beyond the abyss

This new course involves understanding how the black body, through hypervisibility of hair, skin, and being, has been violated through a “politics of the flesh” (Maart, 2019) that favors straight, light, and bright. The aim of the course is to bring historically silenced voices into the spotlight, to foreground their value, plurality, multiplicity, and difference (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) in an African context. It also strives to explore the ontology of *ubuntu*, not as a reified and romanticized concept but as a relational concept that connects the parts to the whole (Ramose, 2019). Decoloniality for me has come to mean a deep spiritual process and a collective movement evoking a different “geography of reason” (Gordon, 2019), beyond “abyssal thinking” (de Sousa Santos, 2007) toward recentering and remembering (Thiong’o, 1986) what it means for me to be African and what Africa means to me.

CONCLUSION: DELINKING AND RELINKING ACROSS BORDERS OF DIFFERENCE

I propose that we as postsecondary educators look at our scholarship as representations that we consciously discipline, curate, archive, and canonize, and revisit what these curations signify in terms of privileging certain epistemological positions above others and what the collateral damage is for people and places represented in particular ways. Knowing what we now know, how might we look at disciplines and the curriculum in more critical ways and address the issue of epistemic (in)justice

tangibly and with impact? In other words, can we be epistemically disobedient to the norms, categories, and representations in our teaching and learning scholarship that marginalize, silence, and erase the Other? I think we would agree that we must not reproduce a decontextualized conception of teaching and learning through our scholarship or advance the premise that teaching is an individual standardized task (Fanghanel, 2009; Malcolm & Zukas, 2001). We need to consider the complexity and richness of teaching and learning in specific contexts and what it means to learn and teach in peripheral, marginal regions.

I have engaged specific archives and discourses to raise awareness about how people are constructed through representations of assumptions, prejudice, and bias and how these affect the construction of the full person, whether teacher or student, academic or novice. Representations conjure an image, concept, or idea to which we assign value (Hall, 1997). Representations have social and political consequences for the way people are treated, spoken to, and engaged with, especially if a country, continent, or region—for example, Africa—is represented as different from the norm. Perhaps a deeper issue for us transnationally is whether representation should matter in higher education, and especially in the field of SoTL. Does ontological dissonance matter when it creates borders that lead to negation rather than affirmation of the Self? What are the consequences of (mis)representation on the individual and collective psyche when people are forced to ask essential questions: What kind of a person am I really? Am I a person at all? What is our responsibility in this regard?

I call on all of us to reflect on our own agency in dismantling borders to create possibilities for social and epistemic justice posing this challenge: If the place from where we articulated our worldviews were borderless, would this enable an epistemic and ontological justice for those who have been historically marginalized and Othered? Can we embrace a theory of change geared toward a borderless, decolonized, socially just, and inclusive pedagogy and scholarship?

Remembering and recentering

Finally, from an African geopolitical space, we need to heed Ngugi wa Thiongo's (1986) use of the word *remembering*, where he is calling for a restorative act of putting the broken parts together again. A re-remembering vision in economic, political, cultural, and psychological terms is needed to make us whole again—in terms of how we are represented, constructed, and positioned. We remember Achebe (1958), who asserts that remembering who we are requires an agenda that rejects being told what we are. We remember Biko's (1978) and Fanon's (1991) vision for the formation of a reflexive reality to enable the epistemic conditions of possibility for all those who have legitimate knowledge to share. We remember that Black lives matter and that an African philosophy needs to be respected not just for its relational and communal principles but because it rests on an understanding of a relational ontology—of *ubuntu*, which, you will recall, means *I am because you are*.

And, finally, we remember Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream (Classical Media, 2015) that we know ourselves and from where we speak and that we claim our legitimate right to be here. My dear friend Chng Huang Hoon reminded me of King's words from 1963: "an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King, 2000, p. 65). So we need also to be active and take action against injustices. Perhaps we need to embrace an epistemic activism and responsibility in our scholarship of teaching and learning so that in years to come, we, too, can say that we had a dream and that on our watch and in our lifetime, we did realize the goals of social justice and belonging for all, beyond all borders.

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Kasturi Behari-Leak is Interim Director of Academic Staff and Professional Development in the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town (RSA), President of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa, and President-elect of the International Consortium of Educational Development. She also leads a national academic staff development collaborative project focused on new academics, and serves on an advisory committee of the World Universities Network.

NOTES

1. The term *rainbowism* refers to the disregarding, romanticizing, and idealism of post-apartheid racial relations and issues in South Africa in the name of the “rainbow nation,” where all races supposedly coexist in harmony (Slade, 2017).
2. The term *woke* refers to a consciousness that is aware of systemic political, social, and economic injustices, especially racism, befalling marginalized groups in society (Ashlee, Zamora, & Karikari, 2017).
3. The term *womxn* is an intersectional term used in place of *women* to empower and stress that *womxn* are not merely extensions of men but independent beings who can live without the help or control of a man as the word *women* suggests (Knotty Vibes, 2018).

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