



# GENERAL ASSEMBLY ASSEMBLÉE GÉNÉRALE ASSEMBLEIA GERAL جمعية عمومية

#CODESRIA14

**Creating African Futures in an Era of Global Transformations:**

**Challenges and Prospects**

**Créer l'Afrique de demain dans un contexte de transformations mondialisées :**

**enjeux et perspectives**

**Criar Futuros Africanos numa Era de Transformações Globais:**

**Desafios e Perspetivas**

**بعث أفريقيا الغد في سياق التحولات المعولمة :**

**رهانات و آفاق**

**Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in South Africa? Researching  
Epistemic Disobedience in the Postcolonial Humanities**

**Shannon Kelly Reeler**



**CODESRIA**

**08 - 12 June / Juin 2015**

**Dakar, Senegal**





## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the very preliminary findings of an interdisciplinary research project presently being conducted within three higher education institutions in South Africa – the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, and the University of Fort Hare – which is examining Humanities courses that include content and methods that deliberately aim to interrupt the traditional knowledge hierarchies present in South African universities. Such content was defined as that which consciously aimed to engage with African epistemologies, be it through teaching postcolonial theory; deconstructing dominant canons or worldviews; using African examples, texts and contexts; correspondent examples or theories from other parts of the so-called third world; or a pedagogy that used African languages as learning resources. The impetus behind this project was that, at these three English-medium universities, a particular epistemic hierarchy exists, such that Nyamnjoh (2011:133) characterized the South African postcolonial university as a “European greenhouse under African skies.” Within such an epistemic framework, African knowledge and resources are under-valued. This research paper provides a qualitative analysis of spaces within South African universities where such knowledge and resources *are* valued. In the paper I seek to use two in-depth case studies of semester courses from the University of Cape Town to evaluate the successes and limitations of such attempts at curriculum transformation within a historically white, ‘elitist’ university. The paper therefore presents an examination of current hierarchies in the production of knowledge, and of the spaces being held open or created anew by African academics and students within these hierarchies. I argue that while such spaces do exist, within the Humanities at least they are usually being held open by ‘activist’ individuals or ‘undisciplined’ disciplines rather than by the institution as a whole. ‘Transformation’ thus has a long way to go. The paper therefore provides a snapshot of the potentials for change in Southern African higher education today, and of the ways in which theories of Africa, for Africa, and about Africa, are being generated and taught.

## ***Introduction: Breaking the Greenhouse Glass***

I work in an institution that has been characterized as a “European greenhouse under African skies” by the head of the department that awarded me my doctorate in anthropology (Nyamnjoh, 2012a:33). This is a sentiment with which the reflexive academic cannot find fault. From its institutional geography – ivy covered buildings, a main campus divided geographically into the Sciences and the Humanities/Arts- to the promotion criteria of academic staff which firstly emphasises publishing prestige, secondly considers teaching load, and lastly includes either the taking on of administrative duties *or* ‘social responsiveness’, the University of Cape Town is organized to maintain status and prestige based on a Euro-American model. The University is



also a space of whiteness: arriving as an undergraduate from Harare, Zimbabwe, many years ago, my first thought on walking around on the campus was that I, a white African myself, had never before seen so many white people, young and old, in one place.

Today, more than a decade later, I am an academic in that same university. I work in the Humanities faculty, in an unusual institutional position in that I work for an ‘Education Development Unit’ whose particular remit is to attempt ‘transformation’ of the student body by assisting or ‘developing’ students who come from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds<sup>1</sup>. As can be seen from the preponderance of scare quotes, although I think the actual work done in my Unit is very valuable, I have trouble with the (institutionally generated) vocabulary that goes along with it. So do most of my colleagues: as academics on the front-line of a system that sees many of our ‘previously disadvantaged’ students failing and being academically excluded, we have attempted to implement pedagogical and curricula changes that might do something to shift this. We knew we could not be alone in this: what else, we wondered, was happening around the country, on a practical level, rather than at the level of rhetoric, to fundamentally alter the Humanities in South African universities?

This paper thus reports on some very preliminary findings of an interdisciplinary research project we are presently conducting with colleagues based at three higher education institutions in South Africa – the University of Cape Town; Rhodes University, and the University of Fort Hare – which is examining Humanities courses that include content and methods in their pedagogy and curriculum that deliberately aim to interrupt the usual hierarchy of knowledge. Such content was defined as that which consciously aimed to engage with African epistemologies, be it through teaching postcolonial theory; deconstructing dominant canons or worldviews; using African examples, texts and contexts; correspondent examples or theories from other parts of the so-called third world; or a pedagogy that used African languages as learning resources. Given that African knowledge and resources are usually under-valued in South African universities, what happens where such resources are valued? This research paper provides a qualitative analysis of such spaces. I draw on two in-depth case studies of undergraduate Humanities courses at the University of Cape Town to evaluate the successes and limitations of such attempts at curriculum transformation within a historically white, ‘elitist’ university.

The paper is interdisciplinary in nature: whilst I am an anthropologist, I also include educational theory and perspectives from the sociology of knowledge for my analysis. The paper thus begins with placing the particular institution I am examining here within the historical contextualization of South African higher education, before moving on to examine some of the theories of education and knowledge that help us to understand the ways in which knowledge is formulated and valued in the postcolonial Humanities. I move from here to a critique of the South African Humanities, drawing on decolonial thinking to do so, before discussing the data collection

---

<sup>1</sup> An unpacking of the terms commonly used within ‘transformation’ discourse in South Africa is beyond the scope of this paper: for an excellent discussion, see Reddy (2008)

methods used. From here, I move to an examination of the two case studies – one from Anthropology and one from Education Development – in order to argue that whilst transformative spaces and practices are being generated by individual departments and academics within the university, the university space itself is a conservative one. Further, the intended ‘audience’ of such transformative content and methods – who the students are or who the students are perceived to be by academics – matters enormously to how such attempts at transformation are enacted.

### **The English Medium University**

As with much else in apartheid South Africa, higher education was allocated by race group. The university that I am examining in this paper, the University of Cape Town, has been described during its apartheid manifestation as “enjoy(ing) an excellent reputation with few exogenous pressures to change. The fact that it was an elite, predominantly white male institution that had reproduced itself historically went largely unquestioned. Its culture was liberal- humanist and collegial, underpinned by strong disciplinary cultural and structural systems.” (Luckett, 2012:342). The university was one of a number of white, English speaking higher education institutions in South Africa that were considerably less comfortable with the norms of the apartheid system than were their white Afrikaans medium alternatives. Nonetheless, the English medium universities worked within an institutional culture that was not deeply welcoming to alternative (for example, ‘black’ or ‘ African’) ways of being and doing. This is not to say that the university did not have voices outspoken against the apartheid system; rather, in line with its liberal-humanist ethos, a vocal minority spoke out during the 1960s and 1970s, gaining most traction and vehemence in the turbulent 1980s. Institutional culture as a whole, however, was somewhat conservative and firmly in support of a particular set of academic mores and norms that originate in the British higher education model. To be against apartheid, in other words, was not necessarily to be for epistemological transformation. Nonetheless, senior leadership pushed the boundaries of apartheid law by admitting small numbers of black students; when, in the late 1960s, the Department of Social Anthropology attempted to appoint a black senior *lecturer*, however, it was prevented from doing so by the administration. This incident, known locally as the ‘Archie Mafeje affair’ after the black academic whose appointment was turned down, has become part of the ‘struggle’ lore of the institution – a tale that speaks both to activism (on the part of one department) and conservatism (on the part of the wider institution). The University has subsequently issued a formal apology for the incident in the 1960s and for not making efforts subsequently to restore relations between the then Professor Mafeje and the university (UCT, 2008). The Mafeje Affair provides a fitting anecdote through which to imagine UCT in the late apartheid era: a space willing to admit black students on the grounds that they worked within its discourse, but not willing to appoint black academics who might begin to alter the terms of that discourse. By some critiques heard at university seminars on these matters, it is not an unreasonable anecdote with which to imagine UCT as it operates today. Such critique is,



however, politicized: an examination of the practices of the university, as I provide in this paper, shows some of the truths and some of the limitations that lie behind such a position.

Nonetheless, UCT today is still popularly considered to be amongst one of the most conservative nationally, despite its attempts to 'transform'. This is partly a matter of perception: as an elite, research intensive university, it carries a particular reputation of exclusivity that does not find favour in today's national politics of transformation. Thus, even though it has in fact one of the oldest programs of academic development in the country, a legacy of the institution admitting black students (albeit in very small numbers) from the 1920s and then into apartheid, it is still perceived as a white university. It is only partly a matter of perception, however: in many ways, the institution *is* still a white one, and one which institutionally positions black learners as somehow deficient, as is attested by the very name of the institutional bodies provided to do the work of transformation at the level of the student body: *academic development* units. UCT is not alone in this: as Smit notes, "The dominant thinking in higher education [in South Africa] attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as *lacking* some of the academic *and cultural* resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society. This constitutes a deficit thinking model: it focuses on inadequacies of students and aims to 'fix' this problem" (Smit, 2012:369; emphasis mine) rather than recognizing the multiple structured inequalities at work that hinder students success.

The discourse of deficiency stems in part from the difficulties first generation students experience in entering the university environment; it also stems from the high rates of failure experienced by such students once they are in the university system. The most recent set of statistics released by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) on enrolments and success rates in universities in South Africa are a telling indictment of the lack of meaningful post-apartheid transformation in the South African higher education system. Enrolment by 'race' (categorised using apartheid's population groups, with the aim to redress) shows white participation in higher education to be disproportionately large, with black, coloured and Indian enrolment lagging behind (CHE 2012, p. 4). Furthermore, beyond the issue of participation rates, the chances of success of students once they enter the higher education system can also be disaggregated by the same race categories to show a familiar pattern: the percentage of black students who graduate is much lower than the percentage of white students who graduate. Similarly, the percentage of black students who drop out is three times the percentage of white students who drop out (CHE, 2012, p.50). In such an instance, it seems possible that something institutional is hindering students from success. The statistics of success within higher education as a whole across South Africa are fairly damning: only 27% of students graduate in 'regulation time' of three years; and about a third of the students admitted each year to institutions will not graduate at all. Within the Humanities at UCT the numbers are only slightly better: 36% of students graduate after 3 years, and 64% after four years (UCT, 2011). As is the case across the country, however, the students who are least likely to graduate are those who are systematically disadvantaged both by

socioeconomic background and by the cultural capital of the institution itself (Bourdieu, 1986) : first generation black learners.

The deficiency discourse is inadequate as a means of explaining these statistics. I would argue that such failures should also be read as a deficiency on the part of higher education institutions, in that they have not succeeded in adapting their teaching and learning to the cultural resources that such students *do* bring. In other words, many spaces within the university do not recognize the knowledge and cultural capital that first generation students bring with them to the university as valid forms of knowledge and as valid forms of cultural capital. Fricker (2007) refers to such unequal participation in the legitimated system of shared meanings that constitutes culture as instances of “hermeneutical injustice”. In instances of hermeneutical injustice, the power imbalance is such that certain person’s positions, and the knowledge they bring from those positions, suffers from a deficit of credibility: experiences that are outside of what has been marked as the norm are unable to be adequately heard and acknowledged. In South African higher education, this is a hermeneutical injustice with its roots in a colonial past, where African knowledge systems and ways of being were systematically disregarded and perceived negatively. Unsurprisingly, given this notion of students as somehow both academically and culturally deficient, UCT as an institution is also often experienced as alienating by black students despite the fact that it now has over 50% black enrollment (Kapp and Bangeni, 2009) The shift in numbers does not reflect a shift in legitimate access by the unspoken terms of the institution. Kapp and Bangeni (2009:588) thus note of English-speaking South African universities that “many of the dominant institutional academic and cultural practices are still ‘white’, English, middle class and male (even Oxbridge) in character.” The effects of this on the learner can be seen in the words of a student interviewed by Kapp and Bangeni (2009:587): “(usually) I only participate when I am forced...but sometimes I feel that I belong to a certain topic...and I then participate in that.” Why do black students so seldom feel that they do belong to the topics covered in universities, or that the topics belong to them? Perspectives from the sociology of knowledge can allow for an examination of the ways in which knowledge is formulated and valued in the postcolonial Humanities, and the ways in which it is still deeply entangled in what Quijano (1999) would term “the colonial matrix.” It is to this that I now turn.

### **Constructing the Knower in the Humanities and Social Sciences**

What is the work that (post)colonial epistemologies do in the university? Nyamnjoh (2012a) argues that in the social sciences, colonial epistemology has privileged an ahistorical mode of thinking about Africa, which “sacrifices pluriversity for university and imposes a one best way of attaining a singular and universal truth.” (Nyamnjoh, 2012a:131). Such a singular model effectively positions students who come to the university with other ways of knowing as outside of the discourse; and thus as ‘other’. In other words, one of the founding tenets of the privileged discourse that is at work in the social sciences is that there is only one way of knowing rather than multiple; or only one ‘true’ (‘scientific’) knowledge form. In such an instance, it is

unsurprising that hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007) occur. Under the guise of modernity (as discussed further below), such an epistemology has “promis(ed) ‘development’ for individuals and groups who repent from ‘retrogressive’ attitudes, cultures, traditions and practices.” (Nyamnjoh, 2012a:131) Nyamnjoh (2012a:132) writes of colonialism that “It repressed where it should have fostered, tamed instead of inspired and enervated rather than strengthened.” Can the same be said of disciplinary practices in the Humanities in South Africa today? An examination of how the Humanities are structured is a useful means of approaching this question.

The sociological theorist of education, Basil Bernstein (1999), provides a useful lens for examining the ways in which knowledge is structured in higher education. Bernstein argues that knowledge is organized differently in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the Humanities. The natural sciences consist of what he terms a hierarchical knowledge structure. This is one in which knowledge is cumulative and the relationship between an object and knowledge about that object dominates. The Humanities, on the other hand, are categorized by Bernstein as a horizontal knowledge structure: one in which knowledge is segmented rather than cumulative, and the capacities and dispositions of the knower are central to the way a hierarchy of knowledge is created. In other words, the relationship between the knower (the subject) and knowledge is more important than in the natural sciences— the Humanities are thus intrinsically social. The social sciences lie somewhere between these two ends of the continuum – they are both social (subject-knowledge relationships) and science (object-knowledge relationships). Boughey (2013) states that, “Progress in the sciences is dependent on the development of highly structured conceptual knowledge...In the Humanities the situation is somewhat different. It is not the progression in knowledge building that is so important but rather the development of a disciplinary ‘gaze’ – a particular way of looking at and exploring issues and problems.” (Boughey, 2013, no page numbers available). Why are higher education institutions less likely to be able to successfully inculcate such gazes in first generation learners than in learners who enter the university with the cultural capital of ‘insiders’? It must surely say something about the ways in which identity is entangled in the learning process by which such gazes are developed.

How, then, might this organization of knowledge affect the ways in which students encounter the university and make their way within it? Karl Maton (2010) has extended Bernstein’s argument beyond the field of knowledge in order to consider the ways in which the disciplines also create *knowers*. In his Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), Maton argues that fields of knowledge are composed of social as well as epistemic relations. While the epistemic relation concerns what can be known, and how it can come to be known or developed, the social relation is that between such knowledge, and the person making the knowledge claim. In other words, Maton’s social relation reflects *who* it is that can legitimately know, rather than just the ways things come to be known. LCT proposes that disciplines can be analysed in terms of the relative strength or weakness of the epistemic and social relations. While in the natural sciences the social position of the scientist is (supposedly) irrelevant to the possibility of scientific insight, in the Humanities

the ideal knower is always constructed socially. We aim to inculcate our students into the discipline, such that they ‘become’ anthropologists or philosophers – rather than they become people with knowledge of anthropology or philosophy. The Humanities then are concerned with identity as well as knowledge. In this context, the issue of what history lies behind the ‘ideal knower’ that we attempt to inculcate becomes central. If our ideal disciplinary knowers spring from a Eurocentric tradition, then the process of inculcation into disciplines could be understood as a colonizing one.

The implications of this for a postcolonial (in the temporal sense) university are manifold – if the Human and Social Sciences value subjectivity over cumulative (and supposedly universal) knowledge, then entering the university with the ‘wrong sort’ of cultural capital will have large effects on a student’s ability both to feel at home and to do well within the field. It is a small step from here to the fact that the English speaking higher education institutions in South Africa, and the disciplines within them, have emerged from a European epistemology and knowledge structure. To what extent, then, are the ideal knowers, as constructed by the pedagogic discourse within each of our disciplines, a result of the colonial endeavor? What colonial subject-positions and historicities are invoked in the lifeworlds (Habermas, 1987) we attempt to engender in our students in the Humanities in South Africa? Nyamnjoh (2012a) argues that university knowledge is driven by a modernist, colonial discourse: “An epistemology that claims the status of a solution, where there is little room for introspection or self-scrutiny.” (Nyamnjoh, 2012a: 131). Attempts to shift the curriculum, then, need to do more than deal with the ‘deficiencies’ of the knower: rather, they need to unearth the power dynamics at play in the curriculum itself, and in the pedagogy that recontextualises knowledge for learners, and begin to consciously shift these if transformation is to take place.

### **A Place for Decolonial Thinking in re-Imagining the Humanities**

Decolonial thinking, as seen in the work of Latin American theorists such as Mignolo (2012) and Quijano (1999) and as used in Southern Africa by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), is predicated on the idea that while colonialism delineates a temporal period of oppression which has come and gone, coloniality – the underlying hierarchising logic which places peoples and knowledges into a classificatory framework such that the European is valorised – is still very much with us. Decolonial thinkers argue that modernity is predicated upon coloniality, and that one product of modernity has been the creation and maintenance of the kind of knowledge which is considered legitimate. Quijano thus argues that a “colonial matrix of power” (in Mignolo, 2012:ix) consisting of interrelated forms of control such as patriarchy, racism, knowledge, authority, and the economy, underlies Western civilisation. Whilst colonialism may have been and gone, the colonial matrix of power is still very much seen, lived and felt in the present day.

Mignolo draws upon the colonial matrix to argue that “Such a system of knowledge (the “western code”) serves not all humanity but a small portion of it that benefits from the belief that in terms of epistemology there is only one game in town.” (Mignolo, 2011: xii). Coloniality



is thus also a system of management and domination that affects the ways in which people are able to be in the world, based upon the social categories to which they have been allocated by birth, geography or other circumstance. Institutions are needed in order to legitimize the sorts of classifications that emerge during the entanglements of modernity and coloniality; and the university has played a role in classification of persons and in the creation of what is considered to be valid versus invalid ways of knowing and kinds of knowledge. Modernity, according to Mignolo, provides a rhetoric of salvation, whether seen through the salvation provided by Christianity, by the civilising mission or by, in its latest permutation, discourses of 'development'. Development discourse creates "the myth that there are global needs but only one (diverse) centre where knowledge is produced to solve the problems of everybody." (ibid, xvii). In contrast to this, decolonial thinking argues for polycentrism, and places itself as one theory amongst others. Decolonial thinking further aims to engage in "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2012:9) in order to envision social life, knowledge and institutions differently.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:180) has applied the decolonial lens to higher education institutions in Africa in order to argue that there is a need for creative cultural transformations within Southern African universities. By this, he does not mean transformation within the neo-liberal meanings of the term that have developed in post-apartheid South Africa, but rather "a package of transformations in teaching, research, epistemology, curriculum, pedagogy and institutional culture, aimed at reanchoring higher education within Africa and the liberation trajectories of the African people." (ibid, 179). In other words, for Ndlovu-Gatsheni this is a deeply politicized project. Whilst I at times am troubled by Ndlovu Gatsheni's implicit assumptions that there is some innate African identity, it is easy to agree with the side of his argument that calls for a recognition of the coloniality at work in universities. He argues that a true transformation of the university will need to find creative ways to blend Euro-American and African epistemologies, whilst recognizing the need to "decolonize" (ibid, 180) the curriculum, the pedagogies, and the institutional cultures as they now exist.

Decolonial thinking thus seems to me to be useful lens through which to examine the university context of postapartheid South Africa. My interest, and the interest of my colleagues at the Humanities EDU at UCT and in various disciplinary positions at the University of Fort Hare and Rhodes University, lies in exploring the spaces in which this can already be seen to be happening in order to assess whether such transformations are meaningful or whether they are simply a shift at the level of content. Can decolonial thinking be seen to be happening, and if so, in what sorts of spaces and for what sorts of audiences?

## **Research Methods**

The methods used for gathering data were largely anthropological and aimed at eliciting qualitative findings. The reasoning behind this is that attempts to unearth shifts at the level of epistemology need to do more than collate quantitative information. While surveys on the numbers of courses being taught with ‘Africa’, ‘postcolonial’ or even ‘decolonial’ in the title can tell us something, they cannot tell us about academics’ interpretations of those terms, or the ways in which they are taught. Similarly, while the success rates of students engaged in courses which aim to interrupt the usual hierarchies of knowledge are of course important (and, in the case of the cross-university research project of which this paper is a part, are being collated and analysed) this also does not allow for an intimate access to the ways in which altering pedagogies and/or curriculum content might influence the experiences had by students and teachers. It is this level of analysis in which I am interested here. To that end, the paper relies primarily upon participant observation, interviews, and an analysis of course outlines and student responses in order to provide a snapshot of the ways in which Africa is being taught and represented in an elite research intensive university.

This is not, then, an objective or representative analysis: the case studies discussed here are a selection of a much broader suite of courses being examined in the larger project, and are too few to be representative of what is happening across the Humanities as a whole. They do, however, tell us something interesting about the qualitative shifts that can occur when individual academics or departments try to do things differently. The courses being examined across the project as a whole were selected on the basis that the way in which they were described by academics working on them or by students who had previously taken them seemed reflective of a different sort of engagement with the usual substance of the Humanities and Social sciences, and worthy, therefore, of a closer look. The large sample was thus chosen, in other words, on the basis of word of mouth amongst the university community that these courses were somehow ‘different.’ The two cases I discuss here were selected for the examples they provide. The first case study comes from the Department of Social Anthropology, a third year course that interrogates the ways in which ethnography represents persons, and requires students to engage in a project of representation of their own. The second is drawn from educational development – a course which was developed for first year students and aims to provide a broad introduction to key concepts in the social sciences. Each example speaks to something different about the teaching *of Africa in South Africa*.

My own position as anthropologist who lectures in ‘education development’ is also clearly relevant: I am trained in one of the disciplines discussed here, practicing in another, and am deliberately teaching on both of the courses as a means of gaining an insider view of whether or not practices of meaningful transformation can be seen to be happening, or whether ‘transformation’ exists at the level of rhetoric only. Such a positioning is deliberate: as Falk Moore (1994) has argued, one of the strengths of participant observation lies in the fact that it allows access to unsolicited events: unlike interviews, where the researcher guides the conversation, an examination of life-as-practice allows for the emergence of “spontaneous local

information.” (Falk Moore, 1994:365). Such a methodology is also in keeping with Diawara’s (2000; cited in Connell, 2007) assertion that social scientists in Africa need to engage with what is occurring in practice rather than working within the strictures of accepted theory. I thus argue that participant observation allowed for access to the ways in which, in these courses at least, academics are attempting to recontextualise knowledge for students in a way that provides hope for meaningful transformation of the Humanities. In what follows, I consider each case study in turn. In order to make a meaningful comparisons between the case studies, in each case I firstly examine the disciplinary context; followed by an analysis of the kind of theory being taught to students (the content); before moving on to a consideration of the way in which it is taught and assessed (the course’s pedagogy).

### **Case Study 1: Creating Knowers in Anthropology**

#### *a) The disciplinary context*

Social anthropology is, at heart, a culturally relativist discipline – although the extent to which relativism is espoused within the discipline has waxed and waned with changes in theory, it is still one of the core concepts that is taught to undergraduate students, and it is still expected that any ethnographic work will attempt to understand its unit of study – be it one of place, one of people, or one of discourse – from within rather than through an ethnocentric lens. As such, it prides itself on being a discipline which does not privilege one way of being in the world over another in its ethnographic/research based work. But social anthropology, as we well know within the social sciences, also has roots deeply entangled in colonialism, such that it has been referred to as ‘the handmaiden of colonialism,’ a discipline that allowed for the creation of the sorts of classificatory systems that Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers see as indicative of “the darker side of modernity”(Mignolo, 2012). There is thus a tension at work within the discipline that has been well-theorised – on the one hand, it seeks to understand the other, whilst on the other hand, by positioning others as other is opens itself up to the dangers of alterity in the ways in which people are represented. (Keesing, 1990). The writing culture debates of the 1980s (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford, 1988) brought home to anthropologists the difficulties and dangers of representation, and an awareness that good liberal intentions might not be enough and that the roots of the discipline needed interrogating and overturning. It has thus become one of the more reflexive disciplines in its theorizing: as a genre, anthropologists today usually place themselves in their work, and recognize the subjectivities involved in representation in the name of science or, indeed, ‘social’ science. The sorts of things that are being represented are also shifting: within South African English speaking anthropologists, for example, there is a growing recognition that the discipline’s focus on power imbalances has resulted in an over-study of the marginalised at the expense of the powerful, such that knowledge is still being generated about the less powerful while the elites remain unexamined (Nyamnjoh, 2012b; Morreira, 2012).

#### *b) Course Content and Pedagogy*

It is in this disciplinary context that the third year course *Anthropology through Ethnography* is situated. According to the course outline given to students, the course aims to “Critically engage

with the challenge of ethnography as a theoretical approach and scientific research method in social anthropology; examine the relationship between ethnographic theory and practice in social anthropology and provide hands-on introduction to ethnographic fieldwork.” The course aims, therefore, do not highlight Africa or theorizing about Africa at all: nonetheless, the content taught serves to critique ethnographic production about Africa, and examine the ways in which contemporary African and Euro-American theorists are doing so today. I would thus argue that at the level of content the course seeks to destabilize dominant ideologies.

On the one hand, this occurs through a disciplinarily endorsed means: the implicit assumptions of relativism that lie at the heart of the discipline almost require a destabilization of the normal. On the other hand, however, we can see a further means by which the usual hierarchies of knowledge are interrupted when we closely examine the course material. Some of this set material is standard within the canon, such as the work of Edward Said on orientalism (1978) which confronts students with the politics of representation, and the work of James Clifford and George Marcus on writing culture (1985; 1988) which places anthropology as a discipline firmly into this picture. Other work set for the students to read, however, is less mainstream and more relevant to the localities inhabited by the students themselves. For example, the class reads and debates Francis Nyamnjoh’s (2012a) *Potted plants in Greenhouses: the resistance of colonial education in Africa* which critiques the very university structures within which students are learning. It also draws upon Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which provides a hard critique of the ways in which social science is implicated in the colonizing project.

One of the assignments set to the class provides a good example of the ways in which the usual hierarchies of knowledge have the potential to be interrupted by both the content and the pedagogy employed by the course convener. The assignment requires students to review an ethnographic work in terms of the politics of representation and in light of the sorts of evidence it provides for the claims it makes. Students can choose from a list of 89 ethnographies or representations of culture – of these, 61 are related to Africa. Furthermore, the forms of representation are not limited to ‘traditional’ anthropological texts: rather, it includes African novels such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and P’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* on the grounds that whilst the discipline or science of anthropology may have been closed to African narrators and writers for a long time, it was never possible to silence African commentators. The course convener thus argues that novels are able to provide as much depth of representation as are so-called scientific accounts. This is a big move within the discipline, which upends the power relations of who may speak with authority about African culture – and one that could be characterized as “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo, 2012:9) on the part of the course convener. The list also includes theoretical work that destabilizes the way Africa is thought and theorized, such as Paul Zeleza’s (1997) *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*. In a nod to the history of the social anthropology department at UCT, the work of Archie Mafeje (1998) is also included in the list of potential works to review. On the level of theory and content, then, the course is

deliberately disruptive of monocentrist thinking, and seeks to promulgate alternative ways of being in the world. This particular example also shows, however, a partial pedagogical move away from a Euro-American measure of knowledge, in that while the terms of assessment remain traditional – a book review structured in the style expected by the academy – that which is being assessed requires the students to think outside of the dominant categories.

In the day to day teaching of the course, however, the pedagogy follows a pattern usual to the University's Humanities courses. Lectures are delivered three times a week, the students attend smaller tutorials once a week, and course marks are reliant upon completing an essay, a book review, and a group research project; followed at the end of the semester by an examination which requires they write a number of short essays. To some extent this conservatism can be seen to be due to the constraints of the institution – all of the courses we are examining at UCT in the broader project from which these examples are drawn have to teach their students how to write essays, and are obliged to conduct an examination at the end. I would argue that it also reflects, however, an emphasis within anthropology as a discipline on a deep reflexivity and theorizing with regard to research-based work, but a lack of reflexivity in terms of teaching and pedagogy. In other words, in terms of teaching methods and expected style of writing, the discipline is still fairly conservative. While anthropology has been deeply critical and reflexive of its theoretical underpinnings, we have not been critical of our teaching practice. In our teaching methods and assessment practices, anthropology privileges the Eurocentric model. This is not to say that the discipline is alone in this, and nor is it to deny the work that is being done by activist individuals at universities across the world to shift it. Rather, it is to argue that there is little *disciplinary* emphasis on the ways in which teaching practices, as well as practices of representation, are also embedded in the colonial matrix of power. The second case study provides an example of an attempt to acknowledge and shift this, as well as the institutional constraints that work against it.

## **Case Study 2: Creating Knowers in Education Development (ED)**

### *a) The Disciplinary Context*

Strictly speaking, education development, sometimes termed academic development, cannot really be termed a discipline as much as it is an approach. Although education development is defined slightly differently in different global contexts (Clegg, 2009), at its core, education development is concerned with a range of pedagogical and research approaches aimed at analyzing and improving teaching and learning in universities. Shay (2012) has argued that it does not yet have a strong enough knowledge base to be termed a field, but that it is a space of emergence. In the South African context, educational development emerged specifically as a means of addressing the power imbalances at play when black students entered white, English speaking universities during apartheid. Since then, educational development has undergone some shifts and changes (see Luckett, 2012) but has always retained an almost activist position with regard to access to universities for students emerging from positions of structured disadvantage. Educational development theorists such as Morrow (2009) and Muller (2012) have highlighted



that simply giving such students physical access to universities is inadequate and even unethical, as they often are admitted to the institution only to fail. Rather, as Muller argues, there needs to be a concerted effort to provide students with epistemic access to the disciplines and to the ‘hidden curriculum’ – the unstated rules of academic discourse.

Institutionally, then, education development is in an interesting position in that it operates across disciplinary boundaries – or, to put it another way, it is ‘undisciplined’. In my view, the interstitial space occupied by educational development, and the fact that it has not yet solidified into a well-defined field, opens up spaces for “border thinking” and “epistemic disobedience.” (Mignolo, 2012:9). People working within the field in South Africa come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds – sociological, educational, anthropological, linguistic, scientific – and bring a range of approaches to the table. This, in combination with its emphasis on quality teaching, and its activist stance with regard to broadening epistemic access, has meant that educational development has been very innovative with regard to the acknowledgement of the multiple ways of being in the world that students bring to the university. Education development has thus been instrumental in re-imagining forms of teaching practice, pedagogy and curriculum development in the post-Apartheid context with an aim to transforming higher education. However, we have not been very critical of the dominant colonial epistemology that lies behind our theorizing. Educational ‘development’ is largely driven by an uncritically modernist discourse, that sees access to higher education as a mark of ‘progress’ – as is apparent in the emphasis on development in its moniker. However, there is a small body of practitioners within South Africa who are beginning to critique the disciplinary underpinnings whilst still celebrating its strengths. This, then, is the disciplinary context from which my second case study emerges.

#### *b) Course content and pedagogy*

The course analysed here is one that I myself designed, in consultation with my colleagues, and on which I am course convener and lecturer. It is a first year foundation course for students who are taking their undergraduate degree in the social sciences as part of an extended four year program, rather than the usual three. The course, compulsory for extended degree students in the social sciences, aims to make explicit some of the implicit rules of the social science disciplines. In this, along with much of ED, it already practicing a kind of epistemic disobedience, in that rather than implicitly cultivating gazes, it seeks to make the ways in which those gazes are constructed explicit to those students who are most disadvantaged by the hidden curriculum. This is done through an explicit unpacking of the assumptions about what constitute valid knowledge that are carried by various disciplines within the social sciences, and the ways in which emphases are different across the disciplines.

The course further interrupts the usual hierarchies of knowledge in terms of the content through which it seeks to achieve the above aims. Rather than introduce students to the Euro-American canon of social science theorists and concepts, I decided to ask my students to read Steven Biko’s (1978) *I Write What I like*, a collection of Biko’s writings that forms a political treatise on black identity under apartheid to argue that apartheid inflicted multiple damages upon the black

population such that they could not recognize the worth of their own ways of being in the world but instead emulated whiteness. The course begins with students learning about the ways in which social science has theorized identity and socialization, before moving into two weeks of discussion on Biko as a social theorist who approaches identity from an African perspective. From there, in order to make the disciplinary gazes explicit, we move week by week through the ways in which various disciplines have picked up on Biko's ideas and used them, working our way through historical studies, political studies, sociology and psychology and the ways in which they have embraced and critiqued Biko. This approach enables us to encounter social science from an African perspective, drawing on content the students find relevant and exciting, whilst simultaneously giving students the critical thinking skills they need to move into, and critique, the disciplines as they currently exist at UCT.

Feedback from students' shows that they find this approach useful and, perhaps more importantly, very different to other courses in the ways that it enables power dynamics to be played out. On the first day we discussed Biko a student approached me after class and said, "I want to thank you for these classes and the material. But you must be prepared for people to speak very loudly in your class. This is Biko, they will think they know more than you!" When I suggested that perhaps, as black South Africans, they may well know more about this particular form of identity politics than I did as a white Zimbabwean/South African social scientist, she laughed delightedly, saying, "I didn't know the university could open up such spaces for us as students!" Other comments on the evaluation of the course suggested that beginning with Biko rather than the conventional Euro-American social science canon allowed for students to relate to the content in ways that otherwise would not be possible. It also validated their presence within the university as it was clear from the emphasis within the course that African thinkers were accorded importance within the institution. Pedagogically, it was also considered useful by students as it provided insight into the disciplines in a culturally relevant and accessible way – one student commented, for example,

"Biko brings up many social issues that we have in South Africa and we can use Black Consciousness as a way of understanding many of the social sciences. I found it useful that we have incorporated Black Consciousness and used it as a base to understand social science concepts. We can also relate to BC."

Another said that it had enabled an understanding of apartheid as a social system that constructed race in a particular way, rather than race being a biological fact, as she had previously believed. Yet another commented that, "I have found that I have to learn to question things and not just agree upon anything that comes my way." Merely by shifting the emphasis in content from prioritizing the social science canon first, and using African authors to illustrate that canon; to positioning African theorists as central and then drawing the social science concepts out of that, has had a radical effect on the ways in which students, black or white, encounter the university.

A second pedagogical innovation in the course is the celebration of students' African language

resources. This has been done through the development of a multilingual glossary – a list of terms which students are encouraged to debate in whatever language they wish, and then to generate definitions for themselves, again in whatever language they wish. This small shift – allowing African languages in the classroom, and allowing students to generate their own definitions in their language of choice – led one student to comment that “ it is a relief to be able to speak in our mother tongue in the university”, while another said that it was very useful to recognize that these are concepts that African languages also use, but just express differently. Another commented that translating the concepts meant that she was now able to see the ways in which they applied in different contexts from her own life, and to see that they were relevant to her as a person. As the conversation in class led to a graded assignment, a third expressed happiness at being able to garner some of her course marks from a language other than English. This small concession to African languages had a very positive result, suggesting that a truly transformative UCT should be open to the inclusion of multiple languages in its teaching curriculum *and* that doing so does not even require much in the way of resources.

The final example of the possibilities for epistemic disobedience that I wish to draw out from this case study refers to the institution and the ways in which it encodes a particular form of personhood. Part of the institutional structure of the university requires that students are granted a ‘Duly Performed’ (DP) status in order to be able to write exams: in other words, proof that they have handed in all necessary assignments and attended all necessary lectures or tutorials. When I first began working in educational development it was immediately clear that the numbers of students each semester who were at risk of losing their DP were much higher than when I had taught in anthropology. When I investigated why this might be, a clear pattern emerged: those students who were in danger of losing their DP were conscientious up to a point, and then suddenly disappeared from the institution for a while. When I followed up with the students, I discovered why they had disappeared: the cultural calls upon their time were very different to those upon the (largely white and privileged) students I had taught in anthropology. Students in my foundation course encountered an institutional barrier in the form of Duly Performed requirements when they were obliged to return home for long periods in order to fulfill familial obligations such as attend funerals, or care for sick family members. Their resultant absence in the middle of the university term had the long term effect of ensuring students were unable to complete their assignments as they fell behind and could not catch up. The Euro-American logic of the institution would consider the students choice to return home to be an illogical one, which showed that students were not serious about their studies, but to the students it was not an illogical choice. Rather, if we consider that Southern African students do not leave their culture at the door when they enter the institution, and that such students are enmeshed in familial relationships such that their personhood is relational rather than individual, then the students’ choices become clear. If, as is the case across Southern Africa, to be a person is to be part of social relationships and to fulfill the requirements of those relationships (Nyamnjoh, 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001), then the choice to return home to do so is an obvious one. In my own course I have thus found ways, using forward planning and the flexibilities offered by new

technologies, to work around this institutional barrier. Here, then, is a concrete example of the extent of the shifts needed within the so-called post-colonial university if it is truly to recognize the cultural backgrounds of its students in order to ‘transform’. To not acknowledge the different forms of personhood at work, and the different social responsibilities these generate, is to perpetuate a hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007).

These two case studies thus illustrate some of the possibilities that are being opened up within an English medium, research intensive university. Furthermore, the ‘activist’ academics encountered here are not alone – the work we are currently doing as a team across the country shows multiple spaces where the usual hierarchies of knowledge are being interrupted from within.

## **Conclusion**

The notion that the post-apartheid Humanities and Social Sciences is still driven by a monocentric, modernist, colonial discourse (Nyamnjoh, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) raises hard questions for academics. We do not necessarily see the gazes we seek to develop in our students as colonising ones (indeed, in Bernstein’s (1999) terms the gaze is by definition implicit), and do not necessarily see ourselves as implicated in the colonial matrix even as our theories and our research works to deconstruct the social and political world around us. Yet we clearly are implicated, and universities are clearly part of that power saturated world. However, I have shown in this paper that this is not to say that there is not the possibility of what Mignolo (2012:9) terms “border thinking” from academics based within institutions of the South that are embedded within the colonial matrix of power. Such thinking, based in the premise that it is possible to think beyond the terms of coloniality, particularly if one dwells in the borders and practices epistemic disobedience, opens up the possibilities for a shift in the epistemological hierarchies at work in universities. As Bernstein (1999) argues, academics are in the position of recontextualising knowledge for students: as such, the presence of border thinkers within the institution could have impacts upon student experiences and the institution as a whole. As academics, we are in an influential position. It thus seemed pertinent to examine the ways in which Africa was being taught, thought about, and produced in the Humanities curricula at UCT, in order to explore spaces where African knowledge is being valued, and to examine the possibilities and limitations to this within the institutional space. In keeping with the polycentric nature of decolonial thinking I have taken the position in this paper that it is not useful to take an *Afrocentric* stance with regard to the curriculum – one that seeks to valorize so-called African knowledge at the expense of others. Rather, we need to examine the ways, in practice, in which knowledge is currently being produced, in order to examine hierarchies of knowers and seek ways of recovering the value of African discourses. As Neville Alexander has argued with regard to the English language in the South African academy, this means seeking to find ways to ‘reduce to equality’ (Alexander, cited in Bhanot, 1994:38) the colonizing way of knowing and producing knowledge, such that other ways of knowing and producing knowledge are equally

valued. I have shown in this paper some of the ways in which this is happening in South African English speaking universities – but such efforts are often driven by individual activist academics, or by ‘undisciplined’ approaches such as that of education development, rather than by the institution itself. As long as such academics are able to continue such interventions, however, there is the possibility for a decolonial Humanities in the future.

## **Bibliography**

Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart* London: Heinemann

Bernstein, B. 1999. ‘Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An Essay.’ *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 20(2), pp. 157-173

Bhanot, R. 1994. ‘Rakesh Bhanot interviews Neville Alexander.’ *Language Issues* 6 pp 36-39

Biko, S. 1978. *I Write What I Like*. Johannesburg: Heinemann

Boughey, Chrissie. 2013. ‘Real Barrier is Academic Inertia’ Mail and Guardian 4 October 2013



- Bourdieu, P. 1986 'The forms of capital.' In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood, 241-258.
- Clegg, S. 2009. 'Histories and institutional change: understanding academic development strategies in the global 'North' and 'South'. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 19(1), pp. 53-65
- Clifford, J and Marcus, G. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Comaroff, John and Comaroff, Jean. 2001. 'On Personhood: An Anthropological Perspective from Africa.' *Social Identities* 7(2) pp267-283
- Connell, R. 2007. *Southern Theory. The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Council for Higher Education (CHE) 2012. 'Vital Statistics' Public Higher Education. Pretoria: CHE
- Falk Moore, Sally. 1994. 'The Ethnography of the Present and the Analysis of Process' in Borofsky, R. (ed) *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*. New York: McGraw Hill
- Fricker, M. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Habermas, J. 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol 2* Beacon Press
- Kapp, R and Bangeni, B. 2009. 'Positioning (in) the discipline: undergraduate students' negotiations of disciplinary discourses' *Teaching in Higher Education* 14:6 pp587-596
- Keesing, R. 1990. 'Theories of Culture Revisited.' *Canberra Anthropology* 13(2), pp. 46-60
- Luckett, Kathy. 2012 'Working with 'necessary contradictions': a social realist meta-analysis of an academic development programme review' *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31:3, 339-352
- Mafeje, A. 1998. 'Anthropology and Independent Africans: suicide or the End of an Era?' *African Sociological Review*, Vol (2)1, pp 1-43
- Maton, K. (2010) 'Progress and canons in the arts and humanities: Knowers and Gazes' in Maton, K. & Moore, R. (eds) *Social Realism, Knowledge and the Sociology of Education: Coalitions of the mind*. London, Continuum, 154-178.

Mignolo 2012. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*

Morreira, S. 2012. ' Anthropological Futures: Thoughts on Social Research and the Ethics of Engagement.' *Anthropology Southern Africa* 35( 3&4), pp. 100-105

Morrow W. E. 2009. *Bounds of democracy: Epistemological access in higher education*, HSRC Press Cape Town.

Muller, J. 2012 Every picture tells a story: Epistemological access and knowledge. Keynote presentation to the *Knowledge & Curriculum in Higher Education Symposium* UCT, 7 & 8 November 2012

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. 2013. *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity*. Berghahn Books: New York and Oxford

Nyamnjoh, F. 2004 'Reconciling 'the rhetoric of rights' with competing notions of personhood and agency in Botswana.' Chapter 1 in Englund, H and Nyamnjoh, F.(eds) *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*. London: Zed Books

Nyamnjoh, F. 2012a. 'Potted Plants in Greenhouses: A Critical Reflection on The Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa.' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47(2), pp. 129-154

Nyamnjoh, F. 2012b. 'Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa.' *Africa Spectrum* 47(2-3), pp. 63 -92

P'Bitek, O. 1989. *Song of Lawino*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers

Quijano, A. 1999. 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality'. In Goran Therborn, ed. *Globalizations and Modernities*. Stockholm: FRN.

Reddy, T. 2008. ' Transformation' in Shepherd, N and Robins, S. (eds) *New South African Keywords*. Johannesburg: Jacana

Said, E. 1978 *Orientalism* New York: Pantheon

Shay, S. 2012. ' Educational Development as a Field: are we there yet?' *Higher Education Research and Development* 31(3), pp. 311-323

Smit, Renee. 2012. 'Toward a Clearer Understanding of Student Disadvantage in Higher Education: Problematising Deficit Thinking' *Higher Education Research and Development* 31(3), 369-380

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books

University of Cape Town (UCT). 2008. ‘ UCT statement and apology regarding Professor A.B. Mafeje.’ Available online at [https://www.uct.ac.za/usr/news/2008/downloads/Mafeje\\_apology.pdf](https://www.uct.ac.za/usr/news/2008/downloads/Mafeje_apology.pdf)

University of Cape Town (UCT) 2011 Teaching and Learning Report. Cape Town: UCT

Zezeza, P. 1997 *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*. Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)