experiments embodying 'otherwise' in South African university education

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'if anything is to be protected, it is that vulnerability which allows us to be otherwise'
Bayo Akomolafe

abstract

there may come a time when the echoes of a single story no longer dominate education pedagogies and structures: when many knowledge systems co-exist across vast, living ecosystems of learning. that time is now; they exist within all of us.

this offering takes us on an immersive learning journey where we travel into a prototype. it charts the story of an attempt to disrupt oppressive structures by re-worlding how we relate to learning and to each other. a fourth-year module at (what is currently known as) the university of cape town (uct), became a live lab for exploring embodied practices, decolonial futures and knowledge co-creation to reimagine education.

these pages are written in ways that invite us to experience some of the 'otherwise' practices that were used to unravel curricula, reclaim spaces, redefine power dynamics and co-learn. we grapple with accountability, compassion, discomfort, and the entanglements of victimhood and complicity. we live into possibilities for being and doing 'otherwise' to seed more just, joy-full learning landscapes.

key words

reimagining education, knowledge co-creation, embodied practice, decolonial futures

*wrestling the conditionings of my whitewashed
learning lineage
for a multiplicity of otherwises
is a lifetime occupation*

*nothing of this work is uniquely mine.
many knowledge-sharers speak through these words
Black text on white pages
tapestry work – shades of colours – in betweens
the knowings of Peoples and more-than-
human worlds
through space and time
et al: named yet unnamed*

*welcome Ancestors welcome Forecestors welcome
Children's playfulness
welcome incoherence, creativity. welcome dreaming
and re-membering
let us journey together…*

knowledge is used to oppress

higher education spaces globally reflect and reproduce existing power relations of racial, gender, class and other intersecting inequalities (Naidoo, 2004). colonial homogeneity is embedded within the academy's social fabric of what and how we learn and make sense of the world, and humanity's place within it. a critical challenge for scholars is that our minds are rendered 'captive of the very thought-structures that created the present crisis' (Moore, 2015, p.70).

in South Africa we have inherited an unequal settler-colonial post-apartheid education system (Gqola, 2018). education policies after 1994 emphasised access, equity, and participation for all. while demographics have improved somewhat (Essop, 2020), our universities continue to uphold eurocentric knowledge systems framed by gendered and racial biases that suppress other forms of knowledge-making (Mzangwa, 2019; Knowles *et al*., 2023). neoliberal cuts to government funding have also driven up fees, affecting poorer Black and Brown students and historically Black universities the most (Menon and Motala, 2021). indebtedness and marginality, cognitive and intellectual occupation, and anti-Black, anti-Women, anti-Poor institutional cultures remain pervasive (Hlatshwayo, 2024).

the Student protests beginning in 2015 and the #FeesMustFall movement that continues today, resist these forms of violence, calling for decolonisation as a radical transformation tool (Le Grange *et al*., 2020).

the university of cape town, where our research took place, is a historically white university, established to create a skills pipeline for the mining industry. it was built on Khoi-San land appropriated by the imperialist cecil john rhodes.[3] uct Student co-researchers[4] described it thus:

> 'The buildings scream colonialism and oppression, when will something be done that truly shows that there is an investment into changing ideologies because to some, they are just walls, to some these are prisons.' (uct Student, 2022)

> 'fees and academic standards have strategically been placed to prohibit access to university institutions... colonial ideologies are reproduced in universities when structures are systematically put in place to keep certain race groups out of academic spaces.' (uct Student, 2022)

> 'who are the philosophers and theorists that we are exposed to as students? what agenda are we being fed to digest within the academic arena? these are questions i ask myself as a student… speak back to my identity as a South African Indian Woman.' (uct Student, 2022)

> 'so many assignments are labelled as independent but the moment you come up with your own concept … it is sort of seen as wrong.' (uct Student, 2022)

> 'there is a little voice inside telling me to write this reflection in isiXhosa. because a lot of meaning is lost here than to how it would have sounded in my Home Language. the more i study the more i realise i'm swimming in western discourses that have no regard for my culture whatsoever.' (uct Student, 2022)

> 'Students are sold the idea that they can exist in an environment where their mental health will be prioritised and free thinking is encouraged.' (uct Student, 2022)

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3 www.sahistory.org.za/place/university-cape-town accessed 14 July 2023.
4 i include uct Student co-researchers' perspectives within this 'framing' section as legitimate knowledge-makers (Hlatshwayo 2024), alongside the published academics above. you will read more on our research methodology in the section below called 'stories of our research journey

institutional efforts to decolonise South African universities have often resulted in 'decolonial washing' (Le Grange *et al*., 2020) with the continuation of business as usual. whether adapting curricula, pedagogy or research methodologies – or reimagining an entire overhaul of the economics, epistemologies, governance, spaces and culture of university education – this work remains in its infancy (Morreira *et al*, 2020).

bodies as instruments of 'otherwise'

many scholar-activist learning lineages have been disrupting colonial knowledge co-option. the reflections and practices of Black posthumanist Feminists such as Peers (2024) and Martin (2024) among others offer fertile soil in which to situate, generate and experiment with decolonised learning possibilities for now and Generations to come.

critical pedagogy, founded upon Freire and Baol's work of Liberation theology, engages decolonial practices of thinking from the geographies and biographies of knowledge, and thinking with Social Movements, to dismantle colonial-patriarchal domination in education (Funez-Flores *et al*., 2022). weaving more radical Social Justice and anarchist pedagogies (Moyo, L. 2023; Rouhani 2012) – including embodying practice and experimentation – into the work of re-imagining education may offer further scope for undoing sources of power and oppression – particularly over Black, Brown and Femme bodies. it might also help avoid our complicity in a mind-supremacy hierarchy, which we may inadvertently reproduce by thinking from and thinking with. 'otherwise ways of being and knowing' (Martin, 2024, p.46) needs to reside in our whole bodies, not exclusively in our minds, and in the spaces within and between us. because our cells carry collective traumas, memories and dreams across and between time-space-matter (Menakem, 2017; Barad, 2018). being otherwise is re-membering and re-imagining with our whole-Body selves:

imagining and being 'other'...is an inherently political process. by deconstructing commodified social relationships and subjectivities and opening up to the possibility of being, thinking and living 'otherwise' as students and lecturers we practically negate the hierarchical power relationships through which contemporary university education is produced. (Motta, 2012, p.81)

could we use the classroom as an activist space (Rouhani, 2012) to 'see from below' to speak 'about, to and beyond' Student knowledge-making experiences (Knowles *et al*., 2023)?

seeds of our 'research' journey

this was not a linear experience. imagine these questions in conversation, and the experiences interwoven across space and time.

what if we could get funding to do transgressive research that re-imagines learning? i secured a grant through a uk-funded international fellowship programme, which i experienced as steeped in colonial, patriarchal practices—mirroring patterns of oppression, complicity and longing for otherwise within the international academic system, that we observed within our South Africa-based research.

what if we used a university module as a decolonial knowledge co-creation experiment? we secured approval to adapt and facilitate (rather than teach) an existing fourth-year undergraduate module for creative arts Students called 'professional practice'. keeping the existing course code and title to bypass the 'new module' sign-off processes, we re-framed a new course for Students to explore and embody the interconnected possibilities for their creative practice throughout their lives. fifty Students, mostly Black, mostly Women, and including Gender Diverse Students, participated. through six weekly sessions (five two-hour sessions, one 8-hour weekend session) – and enlisting many formal and informal university spaces – the process involved co-creating expressions of past, present, and future, culminating in a day-long immersive experience that navigated professional and personal challenges across 30 years into the future. our knowledge-creation practices included ritual, playfulness, storytelling, time travel, embodiment meditation, theatre, dialogue, mapping, illustration and reflection.

what if we collaborated on a 'research-creation' journey that resisted extractive hierarchies? following ethical clearance, facilitators and Students engaged as collaborators, blurring the separation of research 'subjects' and 'objects'. using performative approaches to generate knowledge, we used embodied art-making practices as 'material enactments' to co-activate the 'as-yet-unthought' (Martin 2024, p.36). we enlisted the

research-creation process to 'teach us what a body can do as we go about doing it' Manning (2022, p.173). we harvested our learnings through creative assignments, including individual forest journaling reflections (voice notes); group theatre sketches (video clips); pairs dialogues (video clips); class-based group work and discussions (radio broadcasts; storyboards; visual mappings; written notes); tasks and discussions during immersion (photos, footage, written notes); individual written reflection (essays). facilitators also participated in some assignments.

we embedded iterative, embodied sense-making processes into the course design and facilitator debriefs, as well as practices of personal reflection long after course completion. quotes shared in this article are mostly from Students' individual written reflections.

what if we could affect wider learning landscapes with our 'otherwise' practices? we continue to creatively embody otherwise in form and content when sharing these learnings – whether at the podium or on the page.

let's look at what the Students had to say about their experiences of the experiment. this poem is a collage of quotes from Students' individual written reflections.

room for error is room to grow

'we were dealing with real life problems in a
real-life setup
critical thinking and practicality
this course grew me
out of my comfort zone
i trusted my peers, lecturers
and more importantly, myself

i was made to feel comfortable
to show raw expression,
given a platform to express,
to be active in the learning process
challenge the forms and structures
set in place for me to learn
i was not even aware of how much they held back
any kind of free thinking.

opening my mind
space to think beyond
room to vocalise thoughts

space to ask questions
trying things i haven't done
staying in not knowing
but allowing yourself to dream
what could possibly be

performance and creativity can be found
in everything and anything we do
it is possible to integrate my passions
there are more doors that open up in the future

some of the tasks i found frustrating
assignments that support
the oppressive and limiting methods of the system

i was not in the best head space
the take home exercises helped me
in getting my mental health in the right path
creative learning and thinking is therapeutic in
some sense

the immersion made me realise how powerful it is to
collaborate
sometimes it is better to take the risk and fail
as a group
as opposed to always working alone
there is room for error thus there is room to grow

growing up as a Person Of Colour in South Africa
i found it hard to remain hopeful
my ideas are just as valid
it made me feel useful and smart and capable
allowed me to see my value
fostered each idea
as if we are truly capable of change
which i discovered we are
i felt a part of something bigger

the simple act of imagination can spark some of the
greatest ideas
that is why i feel courageous
i found it so beautifully challenging
this course has opened my heart
to what education is supposed to feel like.'

alongside the profound inner and outer learning that we experienced, this experiment created a \crack\ (Akomolafe, 2024) in which Students dreamed wide while also reflecting on their often painful university experiences. as Peers (2024, p.135) discusses with Barad (2018) 'the past and history is not left behind but rather its materiality is felt in our bodies… it bleeds through "now"'. the Students' reflections on this bleeding of the past into their experiences of

the academy's present have been composting within my body for months, and two words are emerging. accountability and compassion. because the single story – including racism, erasure and violence – sits within us all.

i am victim, accomplice and 'otherwise'-maker

this collective learning journey is revealing to me how i can simultaneously hold within my body experiences of being a victim of the system (from a gendered and geographical perspective), an accomplice in reproducing oppressions of the colonial knowledge system (as an educator and researcher, reinforced by the skin i am in, my degrees and mother tongue), and an otherwise-maker who is attempting to show up in decolonial, transformative ways. as course convenors and researchers, our team regularly experienced having to make messy compromises between these victim/accomplice/otherwise-maker identities as we navigated academia – whether through acts of 'data extraction' from Student assignments, navigating our own or others' bodily exclusion or career-limiting risks in conference spaces, or exposing our own/ other peoples' bodies to unpredictable, uninvited re-memberings.

becoming more aware of my complicity in maintaining the commodified and colonised university, i noticed various influences. external pressures and risks, personal and professional circumstances, and how my body and intersecting identities are positioned and privileged within academia and society. i experienced the layers – or stories – that mirrored each other at each level of the system. at the personal level, i was questioning my role and place in the colonial academy; in the classroom, our co-created stories were trying to make sense of uct's learning landscapes and our creative possibilities; and as a scholar i lived the 'stories' of the inter-university fellowship program. as i searched these layers for compassion and accountability, i encountered rage at the lack of accountability within institutional hierarchies:

surrendering towards ecosystems of otherwise

i tried to throw it in the laps of leadership:
Students' experiences of violence
as a microcosm of my experiences of violence as a research fellow participant
as a microcosm of the academic systems of violence
as a microcosm of our global violent mess.

i held up my fist, a mirror to leaders on the ladder:
stop complicity! be reflexive!
silence.
my judgement a violence
to meet the violence.
my compromises, ignorances, complicity,
ours
stamped across this landscape.
my failures lonely, vulnerable, exposed.

but then i started bleeding
and something in me shifted.
my body moves in monthly cycles
not sound bites
or round-the-clock fist fights.

it was a relief to slow down
to let go, be in flow
to trust where it carries us
to be curious in the failure
figuring out new steps to the dance.

and my question became
how do we make transformation
our own, and the academy's,
utterly irresistible, compassionate and inevitable?

tending to the 'otherwise' within us to show up
seeds are awake deep in our bodies
ecosystem of otherwise, rise.

i am realising how the otherwise-maker in me can be a home for accountability: towards myself, other humans and the more than human world, towards oppressive academic systems and towards reworlding.

i am noticing connections, people – especially in the global South – showing up to be and do and practice re-imagining what education could be. most intermittently, all with vulnerability. prototypes and scholar-activist networks from the \cracks\ within institutions; pluriversities, ecoversities, multiversities emerging outside of formal systems. with explicit

agendas for social, economic, epistemic justice, many operate as integrated ecosystems of learning for, and within communities. some of these networks are daring to explore beyond reform: 'beyond what is currently imaginable and viable within existing institutions of higher education' (Stein *et al*, 2021, p.15).

whether transformation is taking place within or outside formal systems, we've seen from students' own learning experiences that the 'otherwise' practices of individuals matter. adapting practices such as the ones shared below from our findings may help educators, researchers, students and leadership – to nurture the 'otherwise' within ourselves as we navigate our relationships with academic systems.

'otherwise' practices emerging from our work

acknowledging injustice and practising healing: recognising historical, political, and economic contexts of learning spaces and disciplines. opening and closing sessions with care practices that honour the land, ourselves, our ancestors, and the more-than-human world.

showing up with intention: moving beyond traditional lectures and attendance registers. encouraging active, voluntary engagement and presence in knowledge co-creation and valuing all wisdoms in the room.

shifting curricula towards process: focusing on emergent, collective learning rather than set content. designing curricula to be open-form, emphasising curiosity, provide for learning about oneself alongside eternal-focused learning; guided by collectively-developed aims focused on what students want to learn; actively choosing resources and knowledges that contribute to decolonising our minds.

reclaiming and webbing spaces: using diverse learning environments, including indoor, outdoor, and technology-facilitated spaces, other faculties' spaces, across and beyond the university. inviting cross-disciplinary cross-pollination and engaging practitioners, creatives and traditional knowledge-keepers across an ecosystem of learning.

rebalancing power: saying 'i/we/they don't know'. acknowledging, addressing, continuously re-assessing dynamics of power related to race, class, gender, academic rank, language, disability, LGBTQI+ in learning spaces. using facilitation and co-facilitation with students, other educators, practitioners, activists, and traditional knowledge keepers, to dismantle notions of 'experts and novices'. co-creating assessments with students, encouraging multi-lingual discussions and assignments in mother-tongue.

embodied knowledge-making: seeking ways to learn, express and co-create knowledge with our entire bodies. acknowledging that embodiment is not neutral. recognising the raced, classed, gendered nature of knowledge-making and knowledge-silencing.

using assignments and assessments as instruments of learning and self-awareness: inviting students and facilitators to carry out voluntary, non-assessed assignments as learning tools combined with discussions about them in class. if assessed assignments are currently a non-negotiable university requirement, co-determining assessment criteria and weighting of marks between the student, peers and lecturers.

practicing care and mutual support: just caring. recognising the mental health impacts of academia, supporting diverse learning needs, and implementing flexible deadlines (a 'life happens' grace period after submissions) to accommodate life's demands. committing to education's potential role in restorative healing. recognising that everyone (students and educators) has different needs in their learning journeys and decision-making compromises; creating space for people to name these needs in order to try and make provision for them.

being accountable and reflexive: building reflexive capabilities through regular, incremental practices that hold the academy accountable at personal and institutional levels in terms of intellectual/ epistemic, affective, relational, historical, political, economic and ecological accountability (Stein *et al*., 2021). recognising, naming and addressing the complexities of victim/ accomplice/ otherwise-maker identities playing out within us and others across academic systems.

growing solidarity and accessible cross-pollination: only publishing in open-access journals. sharing our experiences, reflections and practices

in creative, playful ways that model 'otherwise' to inspire others. exploring where else within the university's systems, structures, research, spaces we could embody 'otherwise' practices. finding allies across the university – in other students, educators, leadership, employees, organisers – to bring strength to each other and spread otherwise practices.

this is no blueprint or 'checklist' for gesturing towards otherwise. recognising our specific contexts, and adapting, embodying and drawing inspiration from each other's practices, we continue to experiment together in our co-learning journeys.

where we could not go…

while our work profoundly impacted individuals—students, facilitators, and the wider Africa and Central Asia research fellowship cohort—it barely touched the systemic changes needed within academic institutions. The project-based nature of my external research funding meant the course was not repeated, and the rise of precarious short-term teaching contracts that prioritise publication over teaching (Hlatshwayo, 2024) pose challenges for developing sustained, collaborative knowledge-making spaces. we may have missed opportunities to influence uct's broader culture of social violence by focusing too much on classroom epistemic and pedagogic changes. whether these engagements had an influence on university policies and practices is unclear. whether our limited engagements with university decision-makers had any effects on institutional policies is not known.

at the inter-university level, attempts to address colonial framings in the fellowship program, to suggest design improvements for knowledge-sharing workshops, and offers of reflexive feedback, were met with a mixture of defensiveness, silence, helplessness, overwhelm and patriarchal exclusion.

these challenges suggest that educators, researchers, and students may need to resource ourselves with additional capabilities and seek skilled allies to become more effective and compassionate strategic influencers at the institutional level.

unconclusions: modelling the magic

this journey explored how embodying 'otherwise' as a political practice in the academy can help grow our relationship with accountability and with regenerative ways of learning. it traced some of the complex roles and identities that educator-researchers play in formal university education learning spaces as victim, accomplice, and 'otherwise'-maker. through these pages we experienced experiments with using the classroom as an activist space.

perhaps we are realising how building individual and institutional reflexivity requires us to be in our bodies, with our pasts and presents. perhaps we are noticing how building the capabilities to re-imagine requires us to nourish collective creativity, whole-body emergence, curiosity, an abundance of ways and possibilities. we may find relief in realising how our identities and practices, when we show up as otherwise-makers, can be sources of accountability and inspiration in cultivating 'ecosystems of otherwise' across more just and joyful learning landscapes.

as this offering comes to an end, it is also a beginning; as is the way with stories. it is an opening towards many possible versions of our learning landscapes.

risking to be otherwise in the ways we learn tends to our deepest responsibilities towards humanity, and the more-than-human-world. if the academy is to play a transformative role in worlding more just futures, it will require a groundswell of people from within who are willing to challenge the power – within ourselves and across the hierarchies – that limits possibilities. daring to show up to live the questions, we will begin to embody what else is possible. this is how we begin to model the magic of how humanity can re-member and learn to thrive.

the ideas and dreams of people who came before us created the way our human world has become organised today. let us tend to our waking dreams. in so doing, we can hold ourselves accountable as ancestors, by dreaming and embodying into being how the world will be organised for the forecestors to come.

author bio

bridget steffen: is a scholar and practitioner, experimenting at the intersections of racial equity, inclusive co-learning and transformative justice, to re-imagine and co-create more just and joyful learning landscapes. i would love to hear from you! my preferred pronouns are she/her.

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