Steps Towards Decolonial Higher Education in Southern Africa? Epistemic Disobedience in the Humanities

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Abstract
In South African universities, a particular epistemic hierarchy exists within which African knowledge and resources are under-valued. This paper examines humanities courses that include content that deliberately aims to interrupt the existing knowledge hierarchies, through a qualitative analysis of spaces where African knowledge is granted importance. The paper provides a snapshot of the potentials for change in South African higher education today, and of the ways in which theories of Africa, for Africa, and about Africa, are being generated and taught.

Keywords
Knowledge, decoloniality, higher education, epistemologies, South Africa

Introduction: breaking the greenhouse glass
I work in an institution that has been characterized as a ‘European greenhouse under African skies’ (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 emphasizes publishing prestige, secondly considers teaching load, and lastly includes either the taking on of administrative duties or social responsiveness, the University of Cape Town (UCT) 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. 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 that positions students as undeveloped and disadvantaged. So do most of my colleagues: as academics on the front-line of a system that sees many of our so-called previously disadvantaged students failing and being academically excluded, we have attempted to implement pedagogical and curricula changes that might do something to shift the terms of engagement. 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 alter the traditionally Eurocentric humanities in South African universities?

This paper thus reports on preliminary findings from a multidisciplinary research project we are presently conducting with colleagues based at three higher education institutions in South Africa — UCT, 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 take the specificity of African experience seriously, 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. It must be noted that whilst my colleagues and I are focusing on the uses of African content and African knowledge in humanities courses, our stance is not an ethnocentric one: instead of advocating for the ‘return’ of an indigenous knowledge that is somehow imagined as more ‘pure’ than other knowledge forms, we recognize the entangled nature of forms of knowledge in postcolonial Africa (such that it is impossible to categorize knowledge as ‘African’ versus ‘European’, for example). We are thus concerned with adopting and examining an epistemic lens that recognizes multiple knowledge forms as legitimate. I will return to this point below. I draw on two in-depth case studies of undergraduate humanities courses at the UCT 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 a contextual description of the particular institution I am examining here, 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, before discussing the data collection methods used. From here, I move to an examination of the two case studies — one from Anthropology and one from the 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.

**The English-medium university**

Under apartheid, universities in South Africa were divided by what was referred to as ‘race or population group’ and language. Whilst such racial classifications were of course social constructs, they were (and are) ones with very real material ramifications in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, ‘race’ continues to be used as an indicator both of racialized identity and of structured inequality in present day South Africa, in the absence of more nuanced categories. The university that I examine here was, under this racialized dispensation, predominantly white and, in terms of its curriculum and teaching, entirely English medium. Although UCT’s
racial demographic has changed in the post-apartheid era, its language policies have not. Despite concerted efforts to ‘transform’, it is still popularly considered to be amongst one of the most conservative nationally, and reactions to prior attempts at curriculum transformation have left academics wary after Mahmoud Mamdani accused the university of instituting ‘Bantu education’ rather than teaching critical African studies (Mamdani, 1998). Nonetheless, the university’s reputation is partly a matter of perception rather than reality: as an elite, research-intensive university, it carries a particular reputation of exclusivity that does not find favor in today’s national politics of transformation, despite its historical position of liberalism in comparison particularly to many Afrikaans-medium white universities. 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 from the 1920s onward and through the apartheid years, it is still perceived in the present, post-apartheid moment, as a white university. This is only partly a matter of perception, however: in many ways, despite the student demographic, the institution is still a white one, particularly in terms of its institutional norms and values. Recently, black academics wrote an open letter to the university denouncing institutional racism (Adjiwanou et al., 2014). It is perhaps unsurprising in such a context that black learners are often institutionally positioned as somehow deficient in that they lack the (Eurocentric) cultural capital the institution demands. 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, that create and maintain racialized categorizations, and that create and maintain the epistemological inflexibilities of the university system.

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 (which is still somewhat controversially categorized using apartheid’s so-called ‘population’ groups, with the aim to redress) shows white participation in higher education to be disproportionately large, with black, colored and Indian enrolment lagging behind (Council for Higher Education, 2012: 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 racialized 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 (Council for Higher Education, 2012: 50). In such an instance, it seems likely 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 three years, and 64% after four years (University of Cape Town, 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 people’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 other 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 Mignolo (2011: ix) would term ‘the colonial matrix of power.’ 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 legitimized 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
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dominate. 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 it 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 analyzed 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 university (in the temporal sense) 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 supposed deficiencies of the knower: rather, they need to unearth the power dynamics at play in the curriculum itself, and in the pedagogy that
recontextualizes knowledge for learners, and begin to consciously shift these if transformation is to take place. It is worth returning to my earlier point here that this is not to say that there is some form of prior, untainted indigenous knowledge that can be returned to and that should be taught in universities: such an essentializing viewpoint is neither practical nor realistic. Instead, we need to recognize the entanglements at play in the present, and the ways in which knowledge is organized such that some things count as legitimate whilst others do not.

**A place for decolonial thinking in re-imagining the humanities?**

Decolonial thinking, as seen in the work of Latin American theorists such as Mignolo (2011) and Quijano (2007) and as used in Southern Africa by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), is predicated on the idea that while colonialism delineates a temporal period of oppression that has come and gone, coloniality – the underlying hierarchizing logic that places peoples and knowledges into a classificatory framework such that the European is valorized – 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 that is considered legitimate. Quijano thus argues that a ‘colonial matrix of power’ (in Mignolo, 2011: ix) consisting of interrelated forms of control, such as patriarchy, racism, knowledge, authority, and the economy, underlies Western civilization. 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 civilizing 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.’ (Mignolo, 2011: xvii). Decolonial thinking aims to engage in ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo, 2011: 9) in order to envision social life, knowledge, and institutions differently.

Decolonial thinking has its flaws: for one thing, it runs the risk of essentializing complex knowledge formations, such that binaries of ‘Western’ versus ‘African’ knowledge can be invoked by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), for example, without a recognition of the complex entanglements at play in either of those imagined categories. Furthermore, decolonial thinking can be seen as over-determining the role played by modern epistemologies, such that the reader begins to wonder how it was possible for critiques of coloniality to have emerged at all. Finally, Mignolo (2011) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) often present their theory without the backing of primary original research, such that one is left imagining tangible manifestations rather than being provided with evidence of them. Nonetheless, it is useful as a lens through which to think about the long-lived effects of colonialism as a system of knowledge-relations, and it is in this spirit that I present it here. I do not agree, however, that African writers whose thoughts are clearly the product of modernity – such as Steve Biko, for instance, a theorist to whom I return below – are somehow less adequate at expressing African experience simply because they engage with it through the terms of modernity. The stance
taken in this paper is thus one that takes African experience and theories seriously, rather than one that proposes the existence of a uniquely African epistemology. There is thus value in the elements of decolonial thinking that argue for polycentrism, and place decoloniality as one theory amongst others.

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’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 179). In other words, for Ndlovu-Gatsheni this is a deeply politicized project. Whilst I 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. Despite his reliance on decolonial thinking – which tends at times to result in his over-determining the effects of modernity on other African authors, and in his essentializing ‘Africa’ – Ndlovu-Gatsheni recognizes the entanglements of knowledge systems at play in present day Africa. He thus 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’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 180) the curriculum, the pedagogies, and the institutional cultures as they now exist. This position seems to me to be, in some ways at least, a useful lens through which to examine the university context of post-apartheid 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, thus lies in exploring the spaces in which African subjectivities and experiences are being taken seriously, in order to assess whether such transformations are meaningful or whether they are simply a shift at the level of content. Can meaningful transformation 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 used in this paper 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. 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, a 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 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 that 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 an anthropologist who lectures in an education development is also clearly relevant: I am trained in one of the disciplines discussed here, practicing in another, and am 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. 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. Participant observation allowed for access to the ways in which, in these courses at least, academics are attempting to recontextualize knowledge for students in a way that provides hope for meaningful transformation of the humanities.

Analysis. Case study 1: creating knowers in anthropology

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 from within rather than through an ethnocentric lens. As such, it prides itself on being a discipline that does not privilege one way of being in the world over another in its ethnographic/research-based work. However, 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 dangerous classificatory systems (Garuba, 2012; Zeleza, 2003). There is thus a tension at work within the discipline that has been well-theorized – on the one hand, it seeks to understand ‘the other’, whilst on the other hand, by positioning others as other it 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, 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986) brought home to anthropologists the difficulties and dangers of representation, an awareness that good liberal intentions might not be sufficient, 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 marginalized at the expense of the powerful, such that knowledge is still being generated about the less powerful while the elites are less frequently examined (Morreira, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2012b).

Course content and pedagogy

It is in this disciplinary context that the course I examine here 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 (1978) on Orientalism, which confronts students with the politics of representation, and the work of James Clifford and George Marcus (Clifford, 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986) on writing culture, which places anthropology as a discipline firmly in 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 for 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 (1958) *Things Fall Apart* and P’Bitek’s (1989) *Song of Lawino* on the grounds that whilst the discipline or science of anthropology may have been closed to (black) 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, 2011: 9). 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 that 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 within particular conventions, 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 relative 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

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 (2014), 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, often Eurocentric, 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, 2011: 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 African university. Education development has thus been instrumental in reimagining 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, which 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.
Course content and pedagogy

The course analyzed here 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 education development, 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. This collection of Biko’s writings forms a political treatise on black identity under apartheid, and argues that apartheid inflicted multiple damages upon black people such that they could not recognize the worth of their own ways of being in the world but instead emulated whiteness. It is, of course, a work that emerges from what Mignolo (2011) would classify as the colonial matrix of power, in that Biko draws heavily on European theorists and epistemologies in presenting his critique of racialized identities under apartheid. Given that there is no ‘untainted’ knowledge, however, and, more importantly, that the text is able to provide a perspective that centralizes and legitimizes the importance of black experience, it is able to work as a text that destabilizes the usual hierarchies of knowledge to which students are introduced in their first year of university. 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.’

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 the foundation course encountered an institutional barrier in the form of DP 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 (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Nyamnjoh, 2004), then the choice to return home to do so is an obvious one.

In my own courses 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 postcolonial 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 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 (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Nyamnjoh, 2012a) raises hard questions for academics. We do not necessarily see the gazes we seek to develop in our students as colonizing
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 (2011: 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 recontextualizing 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 and experience 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 very different humanities in South Africa’s future.

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**Notes**

1. 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).
2. This is not to say attempts are not being made to move away from the exclusive use of English in some spaces: see, for example, Hurst et al. (forthcoming) for a discussion of the use of translanguaging in classroom spaces at UCT.

**References**


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Author biography

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