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Creating and Curating: Three Voices from Namibia, Australia and the UK on Decolonising the Literary-Related Doctorate

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Introduction

This piece is the creative, critical product of constructive dialogue between graduated doctors, Josephine Mwasheka Nghikefelwa (Namibia/South Africa), Frances Wyld (Australia) whose doctorates are in literary-related work and who are transforming what is possible in decolonised doctorates in terms of perspectives, voice, research and writing and Gina Wisker (UK), researcher and examiner.

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Rumours that the doctorate is being decolonised are still much exaggerated. From our varied perspectives as graduated doctors (one, so far, an examiner), we see that for those whose voices it does not yet enable, it is largely the form and channel for white Northern Western male thinking and voices. Questioning whose knowledge has power, whose knowledge and voices should *also* have power, and must be included, celebrated and enabled to make overdue change, for an inclusive doctoral decolonisation process is long overdue. Decolonising the doctorate is crucial and essential as knowledge construction and its effective use spring from, survive and grow because of the diversity and vitality of the voices and minds engaged. Without the thinking, questioning, the research articulation and sharing of knowledge, knowledge ossifies, remains the product of and vehicle for a small, self-elected, self-serving, self-appointed blinkered elite and its use in practice becomes stale and outdated. We have only to look at the international and gender diversity of successful teams of biomedical scientists working with the 2020—COVID-19 pandemic to see that world and life changing research flourishes when a wide range, a richness of minds and voices are engaged as equals.

The doctorate is arguably the highest examined learning journey and recognised achievement that universities offer and recognise. It is a sought-after qualification leading to recognition and jobs within and outside academia, but is it in danger of remaining an exclusive vehicle for limited and limiting forms of questioning, knowledge construction and expression? In considering the intent, form and voices in the doctorate we must also think of those who supervise, examine and award it. Because of their official positions, both supervisors and examiners are powerful in recognising and enabling diversity and creativity. Gatekeepers, they can also be gate-openers and curators of this new knowledge.

Decolonising the Literary-Related Doctorate

Decolonising the literary-related doctorate, our focus, begins with questioning who is writing, reading, dramatising, creating and offering critique about what constitutes as knowledge and in what ways. This

decolonising process also questions who and what enables and effectively helps curate diverse knowledge and expression. Critical friends, community and family, supervisors, writing workshop colleagues sit alongside researchers and writers as their confident voices develop, acting constructively and critically, wisely using their knowledge about negotiating changes in content and form. The next curators are examiners who shepherd the work into broader view. On university websites including Edith Cowan, University of Queensland, University of Southern Queensland (Australia); University of British Columbia, (Canada); University of Auckland and Waikato University (New Zealand), literary-related, decolonised Indigenous doctorates are showcased, exemplifying successful models.

Decolonising the Doctorate—Context and Theorising

Higher education, research and writing, including literary-related expression are partners in decolonisation as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1998) both asserts and demonstrates in his writing, while Chinua Achebe (1962) reminds us of the power of writers to speak out, change minds, which encourages actions leading to transformation. In recent National Research Foundation/Economic and Social Research Council (NRF/ESRC) funded South African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) project research with undergraduate co-researchers on transitions into and through higher education (Timmis et al., 2019; Timmis et al., 2022), some fundamental theoretical considerations for issues and practices of decolonising higher education in enabling equality of diverse knowledge and expressions emerged, feeding our understanding of decolonising the doctorate. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 11) differentiates between colonialism (part of history) and coloniality (a continued mode of behaviour) exposing 'the invisible vampirism of technologies of imperialism and colonial matrices of power that continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations and epistemologies of modern subjects in Africa and the entire Global South'. de Sousa Santos emphasises epistemicide (2014), what Whitehead labels 'the

murder of knowledge' (2016, p. 90) a deadly silencing, at every stage, instead asserting epistemic justice (Freire, 1970; de Sousa Santos, 2014; Whitehead, 2016) including access, recognition, reward concerning knowledges, research, forms of articulation. More recently, KaMpofu, (2019) argues for the importance of traditional forms of knowledge including oral histories and Indigenous technologies. Building on these arguments, in our work we assert and exemplify parity between doctoral work deriving from North/Western/European traditions and that situated in Indigenous and or Southern/Eastern knowledge communities, worldviews and knowledge construction systems. In South Africa, where Josephine gained her doctorate, historical protests against blockages to epistemological access include those against the introduction of Bantu education (1955) which literary author Zoe Wicomb explores (Wicomb, 1987; Wisker, 2000) and recent student protests (#FeesMust Fall, 2015–2016). Theorists and powerful educators (Chaka et al., 2017; Jansen, 2017; Maringe, 2017; Mbembe, 2016) explore the Africanisation of curriculum and knowledge in South African higher education drawing from Frantz Fanon's (1961) *The Wretched of the Earth,* renewing calls for the transformation and decolonisation and Maldonado-Torres (2011) engages theory with interventions. Transformation and decolonisation are not identical (Chaka et al., 2017; Letsekha, 2013) and Mbembe explains that historically in 'African postcolonial experiments in the 1960s and 1970s… "to decolonise" was the same thing as "to Africanize". To decolonise was part of a nation-building project' (Mbembe, 2016, p. 33).

Decolonisation, emerging as a strong argument since the 1960s (Ashcroft et al., 1995) does not necessitate complete replacement of European knowledge by (for example) African knowledge (Jansen, 2017). An alternative academic model is (re)-imagined (Jansen, 2017). Mgqwashu (2006, 2008) reminds us that access and voice are important steps to positive change, making deliberate relationships between language, thinking and access to higher learning. Decolonisation of the doctorate, as that of all higher education, is linked to epistemological access and a key to that access is language and forms of expression particularly for literary-related studies, to articulate thought contestatory response and to create new knowledge.

Decolonising the literary-related doctorate is initially influenced by the liberating politicising of postcolonial writing and critical practice which by questioning who was writing, about what, from where and in what forms enabled challenges to the canon and reading practices. Postcolonial literary practice as research and teaching also caused a fundamental repositioning of forms, roles and voices of literature, revealing literature as global and richly diverse. Decolonising the literary-related doctorate liberates and validates a variety of research approaches, forms of expression, changing the objects, subjects and voices (Wisker, 2006, 2022). Relationships of power and knowledge also change where the 'Contact zones' (Pratt, 1991, p. 35) of supervisory practices (Manathunga, 2014) and examination enable more equal dialogues, since the candidates have the insider knowledge, and supervisor and examiner roles are about enabling those voices of knowledge to be heard, curating it.

We argue that decolonising research and expression is not a matter of just adding another dimension or layer into an established hierarchy. Rather, different voices and forms, different perspectives and points of focus are prioritised, while the field itself changes so buildings in the field morph. Something new results: richer, more diverse, no longer as self-assured or as fixed. Dealing with the question of changing form, in the introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming* (2004), Nalo Hopkinson, Guyanan/Trinidadian/Jamaican/Canadian Afrofuturist refers to the work of Audre Lorde when answering this question:

> What do you think of Audre Lorde's comment that massa's tools will never dismantle massa's house?
>
> In my hands massa's tools don't dismantle massa's house – and in fact I don't want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations – then build me a house of my own. (Hopkinson & Mehan, 2004, p. 7)

In her own writing, Hopkinson doesn't want to dismantle everything, rather she seeks massive change, improvement, something new and different. Like the literary-related doctorate, this will involve diverse focus, expression and form. As noted elsewhere (Wisker,

2022), decolonised literary-related doctorates often theorise with both Western/Northern and Southern/Eastern theorists, highlighting innovations. Authors develop methodology and voice from their own Indigenous contexts, blending storytelling, images, family history with traditional critical voices, changing the form and focus of the doctorate, often combining across disciplines, the creative and the critical. Support and recognition for the emergent decolonised doctorate are seen in New Zealand and Pasifika colleagues' work which produced a report and advice to support writing at the doctoral level (Carter et al., 2016).

Decolonised Literary-Related Doctoral Theses—Groundbreaking Work

In this next section, Josephine and Frances share introductory comments and groundbreaking thesis work, while Gina (historically examiner), offers a curating dialogue. Our voices are different, but in critical curating work we often merge. Both Josephine and Frances explain their intentions in their doctorates, exposing cultural and gendered blinkeredness and bias in critical work on African drama, as taught in school in Josephine's case, and in Frances's case creating a new culturally influenced way of writing alongside others with creative liberating story-working. Gina's comments following each are from an examiner *curator's* perspective (not the words of the reports).

Josephine -Critical Reflection

> In exploring the drama God of Women and its teaching in the classroom, I discussed postcolonial feminist critics' view that only Western trained feminist critical voices were being heard, thus issues in African women's texts were being misinterpreted from a Western feminist point of view. Combining across literary studies and education, my analysis of and teaching of the drama notes bias against the practice of polygamy which misunderstood and criticised local customs. When analysing literary texts,

I came across some writers who portrayed characters in an uncritical way, whereas others do it by intending at encouraging the audience to engage critically. Some authors may unconsciously reflect on how some societies are, to an extent of even implying that such societies should change. Contrastingly, most men and women live different lives today compared to 1940s and 1960s, when some of these fictional texts were written. I used Spivak, UK, US and African critics, differentiating their approaches, uniting them so that the Northern, Western critical voices are neither prioritised nor silenced noting: Spivak (1990, p. 9) strongly argues that 'we will not be able to speak to women out there if we depend completely on conferences and anthologies by Western-trained informants.' African writers appear to be in a race to write the experiences of Africans as mirrored in the real world of being an African man or woman in different African societies. Amos and Parmer (1984) argue that Western feminists' perspective does not speak to the experiences of African women; however, where it attempts to do so, it is often from a racist perspective. It is likely that Western feminists are increasingly speaking much of the African women's experiences, albeit not experiencing it themselves. Sharing the same sentiments, Zongo (1996, p. 179) states that, "[t]he explosion in the West has equally left a legacy of misinterpretation, misrepresentations, and outright distortions of African cultures and cultural productions". I believe the information on which people interpret or represent the world around them comes from a wide range of sources. This could either be from personal interactions with others, from their knowledge and experiences, cultural conventions, from the public media and precedents in their social world. Oftentimes, texts are seen as part of social events. However, textual analysis from my position as a postgraduate African woman, literary critic and teacher situates my perspective, enabling me to blend educational and literary approaches.

Josephine's Thesis Extract with Gina's Curator Comments

In exploring the drama *God of Women* and its teaching in the classroom, Josephine Mwasheka Nghikefelwa, a Namibian doctoral graduate from Rhodes University, South Africa, whose work I examined, discussed postcolonial feminist critics' views that only Western trained feminist critical voices were being heard, so issues in African women's texts were

being misinterpreted from a Western, or Western feminist point of view. She comments on textual critical practice and the teaching of literature, exposing cultural confusions and silencing which lead to reluctance to question either the text or the values replayed through ways it is read:

> Demeaning language is used by the chief in *God of Women*, while literature teachers gloss over the language, refusing or failing to interpret it so students are neither guided to notice it nor rewarded if they do.
>
> …Chief Lewanika used this figure of speech to demean his wives when they failed to produce a son. He assembled them and asked them about their sexuality using metaphors such as:
>
> Your granary has been depleted.
>
> You proved yourself barren beyond an ordinary desert.
>
> I know it cannot be you with your exhausted womb.

These metaphors demean and humiliate women, yet they were no further explorations thereof in the classroom (Nghikefelwa, 2019).

Textual analysis from Josephine's position as a postgraduate African woman, literary critic and teacher situates her view, enabling her to blend local knowledge with educational and literary critical approaches. Her insider knowledge exposes limited critical perspectives.

Frances Wyld's Reflection on Decolonised Methodology, 'Storywork'

> Writing my thesis was an exercise in having a voice as an Aboriginal person within the academy. More importantly I argued for the use of storytelling or storywork as a methodology to be used in teaching and research as a performance of liberation and praxis. Storywork honours Indigenous knowledges through a connection to the land that gives us life, something that is essential to this future of uncertainty amidst climate crisis, economic inequality, and a pandemic. I now have this methodology that connects humanity through stories. It is established through my Aboriginal knowledges. Further to that, writing about connections with cultural studies and semiotics can show that it is something humans

do. By using the work of auto-ethnographers, I can give the work a footprint within the social sciences. I can walk in two worlds and justify my methodologies and pedagogies. I have this now. And it is timely to use storytelling to call for a return to our ancestral visions and to ask non-Indigenous people to reconnect to their humanity to build communities for reciprocity and survival.

Frances notes:

I want to say that I want my legacy to be that which touches the coat tails of those who gave me a legacy. It is storied for me, for alongside the voices of mine within the references above are those who left me a legacy: Homi Bhabha, Toni Morrison, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Jo-ann Archibald, Marie Battiste, Paolo Freire and Doris Pilkington.

Frances Wyld Extract from the Doctorate with Curating Comments from Gina

In her thesis 'In the Time of Lorikeets: Storywork as an Academic Method', Australian Aboriginal doctoral graduate Frances Wyld describes her work developing: a 'metaphorical palimpsest: *She sheds a skin to reveal the ancient hide of strength and beauty so coveted by myth*' (Wyld, 2014, p. 8).

She alerts the reader that 'Storywork' is 'part of the process called 'narrative as inquiry' and the layers produced within the writing suggest that a 'Storyworker is not afraid to allow language to be stolen and overtaken by myth' (Wyld, 2014, p. 8) referencing Roland Barthes' reworking of mythology, using trickster words.

Her voice is strong, immediate, leading us through her story and decolonised forms of research and expression:

This thesis then is a palimpsest, but not in the way you might think it is. If I told you the purpose of this research was to uncover my Aboriginal identity, to uncover what it is in me that makes me an Aboriginal woman, and to learn how to survive using Storywork as both an academic method and as performance of cultural safety – a concept explained later in the

> thesis – you might think this work involves a story gazing back into the past.

Frances refuses to simplify the complex intertwining her work develops, challenging our possible views:

> If it was built on a premise that the combination of western methods of writing as inquiry could simply marry with an Aboriginal framework as its research methodology, then perhaps you would be anticipating that this is the first layer which I will uncover, and that this 'fusion' will become my 'modern/postmodern' Aboriginal identity. This is an obvious conclusion, since it is well established that colonisation has written over first stories … First stories, or traditional stories that used myth, were until recently relegated to entertainment, through the rise of positivist approaches to 'serious' history.

The critical analysis, personal history, story and research methods are theorised and explained, showing method and self are interwoven, and that any simplistic expectations of what and how as an Aboriginal woman and doctoral candidate she would research and write fall short of the creative and critical complexity she is developing.

There was no uncovering of a family truth; no journey home… It uncovered another way of being a new 'first story' for the Self. The first layer of this palimpsest.

Frances calls her exploration and expression 'Trickster':

> It is a risky and in so many ways a treacherous approach.' 'With my trickster words I even fool myself.

She uses Indigenous feminist critical and creative voices to explore her own work including Aileen Moreton Robinson's critical repositioning in *Talkin' up to the white woman: Indigenous women and feminism* (2009) and Tracey Bunda's explanations of where voices and expressions can come from: 'Sovereign woman comes from that place that calls into being our warrior spirit that is defined in our relationship to other Aboriginal people and our land. In the context of continual colonisation, the

embodied sovereign woman exists to counter the coloniser' (Bunda, 2007, p. 85).

Frances notes that:

> To build my research position between two cultures I have to move, to fly… and so once again I experience the work in a more connected way: navigating my way forward, to land like the Murray Magpie in the right place. This is part of my ontology. The story must be mine to tell, and the research must work within my life - and so vice versa.

She also acknowledges family:

> Family is important to me; family members are tied up in my story, with me as I work, or missed as I travel to other places.

Neither compartmentalised nor silenced, she weaves a multicoloured bird of flight, a lorikeet, using storytelling, myths, wild encounters, self-reflection and engagement with Indigenous critical voices as well as Western, Northern literary and cultural criticism to do so.

Gina on Examiners

If we are intent on decolonising the doctorate, we also need to look at the choice and role of supervisors and examiners in this process. A cross-cultural supervisory team, and where culturally appropriate one involving Indigenous elders and other local (to the student) learned tribal (or similar) people, would be more sensitive to the focus and forms of doctoral student work, and sensitive to what the candidate aims to become and to do with the work (see Carter et al, 2016). I see my supervisor and here my examiner role as both someone who co-journeys with the doctoral work and candidate, and a curator of their work. I'm going to focus briefly here on the examiners since I was lucky enough to be part of the journey of these two doctors. Examining is both a gatekeeping and an enabling process. I feel uncomfortable in saying this because it sounds as though this powerful position also has some powerful role of

generosity to welcome in different voices and forms of expression, or not. I don't think it's about a form of patronising generosity. Rather it is about being able to see good groundbreaking work in ways that some might not. This is important for the work of all candidates but in a cultural Indigenous context it has special resonance. Candidates might well reveal new, sensitive, pioneering, critical responses to western literature and use a different range of sources and references from other literary and non-literary sources to express their research questions, practice, discoveries and arguments. They might construct their work in forms drawn from their traditional, cultural contexts rather than a westernised context. Their critical engagements with these choices could be part of a crucial decolonising dialogue. For supervisors and examiners which here includes Gina and already or will soon include Frances and Josephine, this is about doing our jobs to recognise and enable appropriate reward for the work that challenges and extends both the form and expression as well as the arguments in research and research writing (or/including other forms of expression). Gillian Robinson and I worked with creative doctorates on a similar basis () and creative minded supervisors where one notes in relation to both their own PhD journey and that of their students that there is a tension between doctorateness and creativity which they help manage: 'helping them address issues of doctoralness and research rigour without sacrificing their creative agenda. The dissertation needs to commence with the inquirer/practitioner's own story' (Wisker & Robinson, 2016, p. 333). Catherine Manathunga (2014) refers to her supervisory work with culturally diverse students as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) considering both southern theory and decolonising the supervision of doctorates, in the context of the Southern African #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student campaigns arguing 'the intercultural postgraduate supervision contact zone is a key pedagogical site heavily implicated in these struggles over contested histories, geographies and epistemologies' (Manathunga, 2014, p. 233).

Work on the role of the examiner (Wisker et al., 2016) extends research based on examiner reports and characteristics of sound doctorates (Holbrook et. al, 2008; Kiley & Mullins, 2002).

There are also examples of decolonised doctorates in Canada and Alaska. For example, Merculieff and Roderick (2013, p. iii) propose a

tangible decolonial educational practice from Alaska: 'Native ways of teaching and learning as both a common interest and a vehicle for exploring cross-cultural differences and commonalities' relating concepts and terminology at the core of Alaska. Native ways of living well on this planet, contrasting with those perpetuated by the Western educational system. First Nations Canadian scholar Sara Davidson *(2016) uses storytelling in her thesis, and* Joyce Schneider (2018) as *tapestry weaving metaphors*. The aim is not substitution and erasure of one form of expression in favour of the other, but for exchange and cross fertilisation, a broader equality and diversity of focus, process, expression and outcome to help reshape the doctorate, the knowledge it provides and the effects of such knowledge. This is not a gift from those in power, it is co-construction to nurture and curate.

Earlier in South Africa and Australia, Gina revealed doctoral candidate engagement with issues of social justice, land rights and identity, traditional and culturally inflected forms of knowledge collection, knowledge construction, using visualising, song, dance, community and family voices in the whole research writing process and the thesis (Wisker & Claesson, 2013). This earlier research interviewed a doctoral graduate from Charles Darwin University who characterises doctoral work as creativity, storytelling and community engagement. Anna (Interview B, 2013) talks of the involvement of family, community, creativity, and method in her work on identity and place: a blackbound thesis, and two large paintings, of 'the wet' and 'the dry', where she was living and writing. She emphasises creative methodology and a rich journey for work through and beyond the doctorate, focussed on identity and place:

> That was a part of the process for me, to understand how I position myself within the PhD. And that the PhD wasn't just going to be an artefact of western academia, it was part of our Aboriginal life. So, when I was asked the question once: Is it just another academic artefact? I said no it's not because my mum sung this thesis with the paintings that I did and my daughters danced to it while I painted bits in between and now it's become a pathway for my family, particularly my daughters to be able to integrate successfully. So, they understand what the ceremony is and what it means to belong to the country and how to engage with people

in the country and extended families through the ceremonies and what it means to come into a university environment.

Anna's family and their engagement were part of her methodology, and she speaks from and for them and her community, about their relationship with the land. She also emphasises that knowledge, and its articulation in this changed, a decolonised doctorate offers a route, a pathway and a voice for future fellow students from Indigenous backgrounds.

Conclusion

Decolonising the literary-related doctorate is powerful. It involves challenging knowledge origins and expressions with creative, critical constructions to vehicle culturally diverse voices. We have explored here experiences and expressions from our different roles. For supervisors, examiners, and most importantly doctoral authors, it is a crucial and responsible role to be a small, rich part of such a change that expresses, articulates, curates and recognises different critical and creative voices in the doctorate and so helps decolonise this significant journey, work, artefact and the positive social and cultural change it must surely then enable.

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