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The Salon is now in session: a reflection on UNISA's decolonial reading

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We want to thank the co-editors of this special issue, Su-Ming Khoo, Anique Vered and Sayan Dey as well as the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and advice. Our thanks also go to Puleng Segalo and Zethu Nkosi for believing in us from the very beginning and supporting the Decolonial Reading Salon, to Rozena Maart for facilitating its inaugural session. And finally, and most passionately, to all our co-readers at the reading group. With special thanks to Ompha Malima, Mpilo James Masiye and Thato Molamudi, who, by the time of writing this acknowledgement (July 2020), are not only our co-readers but are also taking part in the facilitating of the Salon.

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The Salon is now in session: a reflection on UNISA's decolonial reading

By Motlatsi Khosi¹ and Lenka Vráblíková²

Abstract

How can we – those who are involved in institutions of higher education as researchers, students, educators and administrators – contribute to the decolonial project? How can we dismantle colonial structures in ways that speak to and from our practices of teaching and learning? And how are we to engage with what has become known as ‘Decolonial Theory’ in our everyday practice inside the university? As follows from the work of thinkers and educators such as bell hooks, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, the control of the means of producing and reproducing knowledge is key for sustaining coloniality but also the very reason which makes educational institutions fundamental sites of decolonial struggle. Speaking from the experience of the initiators and facilitators of the Decolonial Reading Salon at the University of South Africa (UNISA), the authors of this article critically engage these questions by teasing out the ways in which Decolonial Theory – or, as the authors insist, *decolonial theories* – can be used in the everyday practice that seek to enact teaching and learning as ‘the practices of freedom’ in the institutions of higher education. In the first section, the authors position themselves and the Decolonial Reading Salon, providing an insight into why they decided to set out the initiative. The second section reflects on how the Decolonial Reading Salon is organized, structured and enacted to contribute to the disruption of what Spivak calls ‘epistemic violence’. The third section focuses on strategies which the authors employ to resist – or at least postpone – their own ‘will to mastery’ that defines the mainstream educational practice in heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality. The fourth section reflects on decolonial reading as a struggle for epistemic liberation that is profoundly collective as well as ‘hard work’. The conclusions, drawing from Hélène Cixous, positions the Salon as a means of finding, through learning, ‘a way out’ from the heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality.

Keywords: Reading as decolonial practice, decolonial theories, liberatory pedagogies, reading as resistance, collective learning

Introduction

“I wanted to tell you that for most of us [Chicana women writers] now it's not really a search *for* identity because we haven't really lost an identity. Instead, we're figuring out how to arrange, composer, all these facets of identity: class and race and belonging to so many worlds- the Chicano world, the academic world, the white world, the world of the job, the intellectual-artistic world, being with blacks and Natives and Asian Americans who belong to those worlds as well as in popular culture.” Gloria E. Anzaldúa, ‘Writing: A Way of Life’” (2000, pp. 237–238)

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In the above epigraph, reflecting on the ‘borderlands’ of ‘Chicana women’s writing’, the Chicana, feminist and queer theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa argues that rather than a search for identity, writing is about figuring out how various facets of one’s identity can be arranged, including the ways of belonging in the many worlds one navigates through. Taking as its cue the ‘borderlands’ of such irreducible multiplicity, this article poses the following questions: How can we – as those who are involved in the institutions of higher education as researchers, students, educators and administrators – contribute to the dismantling of colonial structures, as well as to find new ways of relating to each other that would contribute to such disruption? How can we dismantle colonial structures in ways that speak to and from our practices of teaching and learning? And how are we to engage with what has become known as ‘Decolonial Theory’ in our everyday practice inside the university? As follows from the work of thinkers and educators such as bell hooks (1994), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1992) and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2016), the control of the means of producing knowledge is key for sustaining coloniality but also the very reason which makes educational institutions fundamental sites of decolonial struggle. Speaking from the experience of the initiators and facilitators of the Decolonial Reading Salon at the University of South Africa (UNISA), we, the authors of this article, critically engage these questions by teasing out the ways in which Decolonial Theory – or rather, as we insist, *decolonial theories* – can be used in our everyday practice that seek to enact teaching and learning as ‘the practices of freedom’ in the institutions of higher education.

In the first section, we position ourselves and the Decolonial Reading Salon, providing an insight into why we decided to set out the initiative. The second section reflects on how the Decolonial Reading is *done*, i.e. how it is organized, structured, and enacted so as to contribute to the interruption of what Spivak calls ‘epistemic violence’ (1988). The third section focuses on strategies we employ to resist – or at least postpone – our own ‘will to mastery’ that defines epistemic practices in heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality, focusing specifically on how the instrumentalization of decolonial projects can be resisted. The fourth section reflects on decolonial reading as a struggle for epistemic liberation that is profoundly a collective as well as ‘hard work’. The conclusions, drawing from Hélène Cixous, positions the Salon as a means of finding, through learning, ‘a way out’ from the heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality. The goal of this article that provides an insight and critical reflection on our experience of the initiators and facilitators of the Decolonial Reading Salon is to inspire and help others who are involved in educational institutions in their own decolonial undertakings.

Decolonial reading at UNISA: desires and positionings

“Revolutionary struggle meant transforming the society from the bottom up, guided by a national consciousness that would transmute anti-colonial nationalism into a way of organizing a society for all, especially the nobodies [...]

Of necessity, it is profoundly creolizing, emerging out of an ability to forge out of a fractured environment, a vision of how differently collective life might be led, not simply drawing from ideas and practices of discrete national communities but from distinct domains of life, often thought to be profoundly opposed. Jane Anna Gordon, ‘Creolizing Political Institutions’” (2017, pp. 61–65).

As emerging scholars working at UNISA who have been – in their distinct, multiple and contradictory ways – strongly motivated by the desire to develop discourses and practices that are not only intellectually or aesthetically innovative but also politically transformative, Motlatsi and Lenka, the authors of this article, seek to forge what Jane Anne Gordon in the above quotation calls ‘a vision of how differently collective life might be led’. It is perhaps this desire that drew us to each other and to the engagement in decolonial undertakings, and, in particular, to initiate the Decolonial Reading Salon, as well as to endeavour to critically reflect on our collaborative practise of reading as an example of decolonial intervention that is presented in this article.

Motlatsi lectures in Philosophy at UNISA and her research is mainly on social movements, critical race theory and cultural studies. She was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa. Having graduated from Rhodes University and completed her honours in Political and international studies she would focus her MA research work, through the University of Cape Town, on the political community struggles of Abahlali Base Mjondolo³, with a focus on the movement’s philosophy as an example of an African philosophy in practice. It was through the lessons learnt during her time with the movement that would greatly influence her research interests. Lenka’s work focuses on transnational feminisms. Before joining UNISA as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, she studied visual arts in Czechia (a place where she also grew up) and continued her education in cultural studies in the United Kingdom. In this article Lenka has been inspired by the practice of the politics of ‘collectivity-in-difference’ (Roe, 2018), a way of doing collective politics which rather than seeking to overcome differences – that define our singular and embodied positionings and experiences – strives from them. Her approach is one that examines what it means to collaboratively write together. In particular, this is enacted in the writing by adopting both a collective voice (the ‘we’ which also signals a more just world-to-come)⁴ and that of the singular (understood as an index of the ceaseless mingling of the varied facets of one’s identity).

The Decolonial Reading Salon was initiated after UNISA’s Decoloniality Summer School that we both attended in January 2019.⁵ The Decoloniality Summer Schools have been hosted yearly by UNISA’s College of Human Sciences since 2013. The School, which itself started as a reading group, is a platform that offers a space for the interrogation of the ways in which institutions of higher education – through their scholarship and teaching – have continued to perpetuate coloniality, which we understand as the logic that drove the European modern colonialism and has been shaping the world ever since. The Decolonial Summer School that took place in 2019 was organised by Kelebamang Mokgupi, Puleng Segalo,⁶ and facilitated by the programme director Zethu Cakata. A month before the event, the organisers distributed a link to an archive of readings that consisted of books and articles on issues that were going to be discussed at the Summer School. The event itself took a form of presentations – followed by Q&A sessions – by South African and international scholars whose work has profoundly contributed to the

³ Abahlali BaseMjondolo is a social movement based in the province of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, whose name translates as ‘People of the shacks’. For more information on their work visit <http://abahlali.org/>.

⁴ For the articulation of this ‘we’ of a more just world-to-come, see ‘Affirmation III’, the 13th and final track on Prince’s 37th album *Art Official Age*. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikJmlnFjU7A>).

⁵ The Decolonial Reading Salon is one of many initiatives engaging with reading as decolonial practice. See for example the following initiatives: The University of Abahlali (<http://abahlali.org/university-of-abahlali-basemjondolo/>); Black Feminist Killjoy reading group (<https://blackfeministreadinggroup.wordpress.com/>); or WOCI reading group (<https://wocireadinggroup.wordpress.com/>).

⁶ The marketing team included Katlego Pilane, Rivonia Naidu, Tommy Huma.

current thinking on decoloniality, critical race theory and feminism, namely Lewis Gordon, Rozena Maart, Nthabiseng Motsemme, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Mogobe Ramose.⁷

Attending The Decolonial Summer School thus gave us a unique opportunity to learn more about the excluded histories of Black peoples, current thinking on the decolonization and decoloniality, the function of institutions – such as the university – in their affirmation of the oppressive power of the heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality, and how Black Aesthetics which, when understood as a liberative practice and theory, helps us understand and tease out the power of marginalized peoples. The Decolonial Reading Salon came from our need and a desire which have already been under motion before the 2019 Decoloniality Summer School, but which was particularly propelled by a need and a desire to meet, share, and learn together about ourselves and each other. We also desired a space to critically engage with the questions central to the Decoloniality Summer School and its archive of texts in a setting that would not be constraint by traditional hierarchal learning dynamics. For us, what is missing from learning formats such as the one adopted by the UNISA Decoloniality Summer School is a level of engagement that would allow for an intimate and collective navigation of the rich and diverse body of decolonial thought whilst also providing room for our own embodied experiences and understandings.

Guided by anticolonial, critical and feminist pedagogies such as those articulated by bell hooks, we envisioned that this shift could be achieved by initiating a different learning format – a reading group.

For us, the format of a reading group provided a particularly potent way of disrupting the established ‘top-down’ hierarchy of mastery between the teacher (as the master who knows) and the student (as the one who does not know) where one’s place is perceived as ‘a given’, and that replicates the heteropatriarchal, colonial and capitalist power structures of the society as a whole.

bell hook describes a way of teaching where pedagogy becomes “the practice of freedom” (Hooks, 1994: 10). Hook’s work was greatly influenced by Paulo Freire and the Buddhist monk, Nhat Hahn, where the former would influence her understanding on how teaching can be used to challenge institutional unequal power. For Freire it is teaching that enables transgression, a movement against and beyond boundaries – such as the one which disrupts the above mentioned top-down dynamic of mastery – which makes education ‘the practice of freedom’ (hooks, 1994, p. 10). Similarly, a more direct ‘hands-on’ engagement that characterizes the learning format of a reading group, we further speculated, would practically support what Freire calls ‘conscientization’, where learners – in this case those who are students, researchers, teachers and administrators in the institutions of higher education – develop critical skills to recognize and disrupt the power structures that define the current world resulting in them become active participants in their own learning. Hooks under the influence of Nhat Hahn also stresses the role of the teacher and their reflexivity on the taught texts as well as the dynamics in the classroom. By doing so we gain a holistic understanding of the teacher as a subject transformed and is transforming learning.

We reflect on this understanding of holistic teaching where one is committed to learning liberational epistemologies and internalizing them and applying them in their practice. An Nahn quitted in hooks argues:

⁷ For more information on the 2019 Decoloniality Summer School visit this website: <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges/Human-Sciences/News-&-events/Events/2019-Decoloniality-Summer-School->.

“...the practice of healing, therapist, teacher...should be directed towards his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.”

The internalization of such liberatory thinking means being in constant critical reflection of one's practice and being. For Motlatsi this also involves being in therapy in order to ensure she process her experiences in a healthy way. For Lenka this means practicing yoga and spending time outdoors.

Critical reflection on hooks teaching as a holistic practice on the classroom as a collective effort that generates desire and excitement, and education as a means of enabling better, a more just worlds, strongly resonate with how we understand our engagement in education, and that motivated us to initiate the Decolonial Reading Salon. For Motlatsi, the various theories and their authors made her realize her goal to use alternative teaching methods outside of her vocation of Philosophy lecturer at UNISA. One of the challenges with working in an Open Distance Learning institution is their huge student enrollment that, at UNISA specifically, comes close to the total of 400 000 students.⁸ Motlatsi's teaching practice is thus greatly restricted (with generally under 5000 enrolled each semester in one of the modules she teaches at UNISA). The engagement with the students is reduced (for most departments) to email and telephonic communication, where students come to their lecturers with questions that demand direct and unambiguous answers, often taking the form of the above mentioned top-down learning dynamic of mastery. Under such circumstances, creating and applying a 'holistic' approach as well as creating a sense of collectivity that would generate pleasure and desire is extremely challenging. As Motlatsi cannot engage with all her students in a direct and personal way, the pedagogic effect is pushed from that of being 'a practice of freedom' towards instrumentalism where the teacher is positioned as mere 'source of knowledge' and the student as its consumer. Attending UNISA's Decoloniality Summer School, which Motlatsi has been regularly attending for more than 4 years, inspired her to create a space where she could not only learn about decolonial theories but also apply it to her teaching. For Motlatsi, learning about theories that engage with the ways in which oppressive systems of powers can be challenged made her realise that she must create the space she wants. Her experience of internalising the knowledge influenced her understanding of how one can teach in such a way where the texts and ideas could be 'understood' and be internalise; and not just consumed.

For Lenka, a desire to initiate the Decolonial Reading Salon with Motlatsi built from her engagement in feminist scholarship and politics as well as her experience of being part of numerous reading groups, which she has attended since her undergraduate studies. However, and more importantly, for her, engaging in this collective initiative is one of the ways in which she seeks to direct and focus her intellectual and political learning on decolonial and anti-racist epistemic discourses and practices, and a way of 'learning to unlearn' the embodied assumptions of the Euro-modern and imperial ways of thinking (see Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). She believes that the format of a reading group provides exceptional opportunities for practically conveying what hooks calls education as practice of freedom. For Lenka, inspired Alex Martinis Roe (2018), coming to read together– as a collective but always 'in difference', as unique individuals who recognise and respect each other in the face of a common goal not restricted by consensus – is one of the most powerful ways of learning that can contribute to the subversion of the current unjust status quo.

⁸ The figures for student enrolments in 2018 stood at a total of 381 483. For further information, see UNISA website at <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/Facts-&-figures/Student-enrolments>.

Organizing, structuring and enacting against epistemic violence

What constitutes the Decolonial Reading Salon as an initiative that strives to become a ‘practice of freedom’, a space of learning that would enable ‘conscientization’? And how is the Decolonial Reading Salon to be *done* – organized, structured, and enacted?

The Decolonial Reading Salon has been meeting monthly since March 2019 and is open to UNISA researchers, educators, students, and administrators. Inviting potential readers that would be not only from the ranks of ‘the academic staff’ was a deliberate decision and one which as we see it already disrupted the ways in which spaces of learning have predominantly been organized at UNISA. The striving for making the Salon as open and accessible as possible has also been reflected in how we have advertised the sessions. We put up posters across UNISA’s main campus, and invite potential participants via email, a newsletter and on social media. As part of the advertisement, copies of the text (or texts) that are going to be discussed in the respective session are distributed both off (in a folder on the door of Motlatsi’s office) and online. Regarding the location, we decided to run the Decolonial Reading Salon at UNISA’s main campus, as it is the place where the two of us – and most of our colleagues – are based, as well as a place where we can secure space for the sessions.

So far, between 4 to 16 readers joined each of the sessions, with the exception of the writing workshop which inaugurated the Salon, ‘Race, Writing, and Difference’, facilitated by South African decolonial and feminist philosopher Rozena Maart, which had over 30 participants. The participants in the Salon are predominantly Black women and men who both do have and don’t have previous experience with decolonial theories, and who come from different parts of the university – early career researchers, lecturers, professors, postgraduate and undergraduate students, learning support and curricula transformation officers, administrators, Human Resources personnel, as well as communication and marketing administrators. As our co-readers shared with us throughout the sessions, the reasons which led to joining the Salon were various and oftentimes overlapped. Those who made it known wanted to transform their scholarship and teaching, contribute to making positive socio-political and cultural changes in the institution as well as the broader society and, last but not least, to fulfil the demand for the implementation of decolonization and Africanization as a part of UNISA’s transformation strategy that has been requested from all its departments.

After the opening writing workshop with Rozena Maart, the Decolonial Reading Salon sessions have followed a format of a reading group. In two, hour sessions readers engage with one of the topics that draw but are not limited to those introduced at the 2019 Decolonial Summer School, such as ‘law and coloniality’, ‘decolonial feminism’, Black aesthetics’ or ‘Decolonising the university’. At the end of each session, the participants collectively decide on the topic of the next session. Following from this decision, Lenka and Motlatsi then do research in the area and select two texts to be read in the next session. The sessions begin with each reader sharing their thoughts on the texts and how they relate to their understanding of the decolonial project. This opening conversation emphasises the need for – and the value of – all to contribute to the understanding of the ideas presented in the texts, thus challenging the established hierarchies of who does and who does not count as the subject of knowledge.

This practice could be understood in relation to our reading of Gayatri Spivak’s essays ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988) together with Mogobe Ramose’s text ‘IN MEMORIAM: Sovereignty and the “New” South Africa’ (2007) which we undertook during the third session. In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Spivak famously examines how, in the coloniality of Western

(post)modernity, knowledge production is grounded in ‘epistemic violence’ that excludes marginalized individuals and communities (the subaltern) as contributors to knowledge. She argues that those with ‘intellectual privileges’, by positioning themselves as not having geopolitical determinations, maintain their privilege of ‘the subject of the West, or the West as Subject’ and constitute its correlate, the ‘Other as the Self’s shadow’. In this way, the ‘othered’ subjects and their knowledges are constructed as those in ‘the margins’, which, as Spivak reminds, can also be understood as ‘silent, silenced center’ (Spivak, 1988).

Such insights on epistemic violence were further developed through the reading of Ramose’s text. In ‘IN MEMORIAM’ Ramose examines the structural role of racism in knowledge production, where it is only those who are identified as humans – in contrast to those whose humanity is denied – who are considered to be ‘of no reason’. For Ramose – in accord with Portuguese decolonial sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) who conceptualizes this phenomenon as ‘epistemicide’ – genocide happens also on epistemic level, where the aim is to ‘annihilate and obliterate all the experiences of the indigenous conquered peoples, replacing their experience and knowledge with its own unilaterally defined meaning of experience’ (2007, p. 313). Ramose goes on to argue that the colonial aspects of our current reality both create and feed on reasoning embedded in racism that de-humanizes indigenous conquered peoples and thus constructs and maintains ethically unjustifiable boundaries in the construction of identity. To be sure, and as Ramose explains, ‘bounded reasoning’ operates through the inclusion and exclusion, is necessary for the construction of our identity and the othered identities. Yet, what is at stake is how these conceptual boundaries are understood and maintained in such a way that is against conceiving them as impermeable – an approach characteristic of in-ward looking, absolutist and dogmatic thinking that does not allow for the possibility of change of identity (Ramose, 2007, p. 323). Ramose encourages us to conceive of those boundaries as permeable, thus allowing ‘for the possibility of some kind of osmotic interaction that could result in the change of identity’. As he further develops, such thinking opens the possibility for a dialogue: ‘the dialogue towards the post-conquest South Africa [that] should proceed from the recognition of the complex history of the country’ (Ramose, 2007, p. 323).

As follows from our reading of Spivak’s and Ramose’s work, epistemic violence is a structural condition of knowledge production and reproduction in Western (post)modernity, which proceeds through hierarchizations that position certain humans as knowledge producers by way of excluding other humans. As we understand it, the Decolonial Reading Salon becomes a space in which the ways of how ‘othered subject’ and her ‘subjugated knowledge’ are constructed and thus pushed to the margins or act as a silent and “silenced center” can be interrogated in relation to particular epistemological practices. Furthermore, in our understanding, it is not only racism but also, as Argentinian-American philosopher María Lugones (2007) shows in her work, the key element of heteropatriarchy of European modernity, the binary gender divide that translates into to exclusive opposite notions ‘man’ and ‘woman’, that maintain and perpetuate epistemic violence, but also the traditional hierarchical structuring of the teacher-student relationship, the above mentioned ‘top-down’ dynamic of mastery.

To be sure, this type of mastery, as a particular colonial, capitalist and patriarchal way of relating to knowledge, has been widely critiqued in scholarship (see Singh, 2018) as well as by the various speakers at the 2019 Decoloniality Summer School.⁹ In the context of the Decolonial

⁹ For instance, in his lecture ‘On Theory – Critical, decolonial and Otherwise’, Lewis Gordon stressed the necessity for everyone, professors included, to come to the space of learning with a humility of a student who fell in love with learning.

Reading Salon, however, this resistance takes a different form. One of the ways in which we try to enact it is by trying to understand how, within the given contexts and embodied experiences, these hierarchies create the ‘othered subject’ and her ‘subjugated knowledge’ in order then to actively resist such processes of ‘othering’. In every session we therefore emphasize that everyone – in one way or another – contributes to our collective learning. In the way we structure the conversations as well as make decisions about their content, we put great emphasis not only on each participant to voice their interpretations and opinions, but also that their voice is heard.

This also implies that The Salon is not a space where one can just come, sit and receive ‘Knowledge’ but a space where active learning sits hand in hand with the creation of critical insight, self-reflection and novel understandings. One’s participation through the reading of the agreed-upon texts and the reflection on them in conversation with others in the group is thus paramount. As facilitators, we make sure that participants are fully aware of their role as active contributors to the collective learning process from the very start. For instance, those who have not read the texts in preparation for a session are not ‘left out’ but are also asked to share their experiences and understandings in relation to the questions under discussion. In the Decolonial Reading Salon, we recognise each other as contributors of knowledge production and reproduction that are not only able to contribute but also to ensure that all of us are contributing. Our community of decolonial reading is one where we check on each other, where individual participants encourage each other, and take responsibility in the process of learning with each other.

Learning to transgress: against and beyond our boundaries

Yet, as Spivak also warns in her famous text, because of our very positioning as ‘subjects of knowledge’, we – the scholars, students, educators, and administrators – cannot escape the complicity in the epistemic violence briefly described above. We all are inevitably implicated in the unjust hierarchies and power relations and thus in need of incessant, never-ending self-reflexive interrogations. In particular, we want to stress that our positions as initiators and facilitators of the Decolonial Reading Salon are far from innocent. Despite being at the beginning of our careers as scholars and educators, we are – as part of the university establishment – undoubtedly complicit in the perpetuation of some of the asymmetries we criticise and seek to undo. Similarly, we are aware that the fact that it was the two of us who initiated and are key to the facilitation of the Decolonial Reading Salon sets up a power dynamic where we have more influence not only over that is read but also how it is read.

The strategies which we employ and which, in our understanding, help us resist – or at least postpone – our own ‘will to mastery’ that characterizes the heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality can be summarized in two points. Firstly, we take seriously the task of practising incessant critical self-reflection of our actions and attitudes in relation to the Decolonial Reading Salon, the university establishment, as well as the society at large. For us, this is an individual as well as a collective endeavour. The fact that the two of us who have initiated and continue to facilitate the Decolonial Reading Salon is significant in this regard. Throughout our collaboration, we have created an ethico-political and affective relationship of trust that feeds from our differences, that are irreconcilable and sometimes in conflict with each other. This relationship enables us to check on each other, provide critical feedback, support (especially emotional) and help.

In addition, we are particularly aware of the danger of the instrumentalization of decolonial discourses and practices that keep and fortify that which they wanted to dismantle in the first place:

the logic of coloniality, and the institutional structures and actors who benefit from them. As US-based decolonial scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have powerfully argued, ‘easy adoption of decolonizing discourses’, that turns ‘decolonization into a metaphor’ inevitably ‘kills the very possibility of decolonization’ (2012, pp. 1–3). In our approach, we therefore insist that decolonial interventions in the knowledge production and reproduction cannot be reduced to the scholarly proficiency, to what Singapore-based sociologist Leon Moosavi pointedly calls ‘intellectual decolonisation’ (2020). For such an approach benefits primarily those who have already been ‘at home’ in the institutions of knowledge production and reproduction, such as the universities, and who are ‘at home’ in the English language, and in language-based learning in general. Clearly, an ability to understand a complex theoretical text or to speak English are not ‘virtues’ one just happens to have, or simply a result of one’s ‘hard work’, but skills and abilities that are cultivated through structures of informal and formal learning to which – in the heteropatriarchal and capitalist coloniality – differently located and embodied actors have different access (Collis-Buthelezi, 2016). It is because of this that our decolonial intervention must include a value of engaging as a collective with the text and theories.

Through her work as an initiator and facilitator of the Decolonial Reading Salon, Motlatsi had to critically engage with her vocation of a Lecturer at UNISA. This is the very space that gives her access to Decoloniality Summer School, provides the Decolonial Reading Salon with the seminar rooms as well as the platforms in which to share and print the prescribed materials. Their (Junior) lecturer position is the first level of engagement between her and the participants, in that as a facilitator she (with Lenka) is the one that chooses the course material, mediates the discussion as well as ensures that the key theories that she and Lenka identify are engaged in the discussion. In making the attempt to break away from traditional teacher/learner dynamic she focuses on using her ‘power’ to increase and ensure the contributions of participants. It is assumed that those who have done the readings are the ones who are able to contribute more to the discussion, as a facilitator she has so much to say by virtue of having done the readings (which is brought on by a sense of responsibility for her role in the group).

Lenka enters in the role of the initiator and facilitator of the Decolonial Reading Salon as UNISA Postdoctoral Research Fellow. In everyday interactions in South African academia, Lenka, who is from Czechia, is primarily perceived as a white European, a perception which particularly in the context of the post-apartheid settler colonialism of South Africa endows her to privileges and benefits which she hitherto has not experienced and/or was not aware of. This propels her to critically reflect on her positioning in relation to coloniality and particularly whiteness, and on how she can meaningfully contribute to the project of their dismantling. Similarly to Motlatsi, the position of a UNISA academic gives her access to resources and facilities necessary for the running of the Salon. Her background in feminist theory and cultural studies and the recent study of decolonial theories helps when she and Motlatsi select the texts to be read in the Salon. In her contributions during the sessions, she draws on her experience of being a part of feminist readings group which she has been attending or co-facilitating since 2010. In particular, she strives to help create a space which would not follow the usual patterns of academia, where it is mostly voices of those who are professors, who are men and who are white who tend to be the loudest and thus the most heard.

In addition to practicing individual and collective critical self-reflexivity, our second strategy through which we seek to resist our own ‘will to mastery’ and promote practices which would not follow the patterns of colonial logic consists in the fostering of plurality and inclusivity in every aspect of the Salon. For instance, this is reflected in our approach to decolonial

scholarship, where we insist that the decolonial theory is not one but multiple – a rich and diverse body of *decolonial theories*. Practically, we encourage the understanding of decolonial scholarship as intrinsically plural endeavor by reading, in each session, two instead of one text. In terms of participation, we try to make the Decolonial Reading Salon as inclusive and accessible as possible. This involves not only the already mentioned decision to open the Salon beyond the ranks of the academic staff, and to make the decisions about the themes and topics to be discussed in the sessions with other participants. It also involves an active effort to involve our co-readers in the over-all facilitation and organisation of the Salon. By doing so, we seek – to implement words of bell hooks again – to open the Salon to its own transgression, and to enable rather than prevent movement against and beyond its – and our – boundaries.

Struggle for epistemic liberation as collective and HARD work

And yet one of the hardest tasks to any decolonial undertaking is to arrive. We did not expect huge crowds to come and join us in our reading. Although, as mentioned earlier, the first session – the writing workshop led by Rozena Maart – had over 30 participants, the following ones have been of a much smaller scale. However, we believe – and against the doctrine of the neoliberal culture which has become to dominate higher education all over the world – that learning, and decolonial learning in particular, must not be reduced to the exercise of quantified performance monitoring utilised to discern education’s profitability.¹⁰ Additionally, it also seems to us that the Salon’s small scale contributes to making it a learning space that allows for intimate and collective engagement which feeds from our own embodied experiences and understandings, a space for which we longed for and aspired to initiate in the first place.

Similarly, and as we stated previously, we are aware that we cannot engage in this work neither alone nor outside of the current institutional sites of education. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres argues, the control of the means of producing and reproducing knowledge (i.e. institutions of higher education) is key for sustaining coloniality. As he further develops in an essay, which we read during our second session, coloniality – in order to keep this control – ‘aims to make it impossible for *damnés* [a notion Maldonado-Torres, following Franz Fanon, implies as a name for subjects who appear at the crux of the coloniality of knowledge, power and being] to assume themselves as questioners’. This is because questioning ‘is a key part of self-understanding and of understanding and knowledge in general’. ‘Knowledge and understanding’ he further clarifies, ‘are fundamentally inter-subjective affairs’. He therefore argues that one of the key tasks of decolonial undertakings is that ‘[t]he *damné* has to break from the solitude of its prison to be able to reach out to an Other [because ...] speaking, writing, and the generation of questions are part of the drama of a subject that starts to regain its humanity in reaching out, without masks, to others’ (2016).

The Decolonial Reading Salon seeks to be a space that encourages its participants to ‘reach out without masks’, to be able to contribute from ourselves, from our embodied experiences and our reflections on them, so that we can ask each other questions which we may otherwise not have had courage to ask. The Decolonial Reading Salon thus aims to be one of ‘various forms of community’ described by Maldonado-Torres where through ‘thinking, creating and acting together [... we] can seek to disrupt the coloniality of knowledge, power, and being and change the world’ (2016).

¹⁰ On the relationship of decolonial interventions and the ‘corporate university’ see Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni work (2017).

Maldonado-Torres argues that this act of thinking and creating is one which for those whose knowledges are excluded cannot exist within our colonial world. Within this context, our work becomes one of acknowledging the ways in which we are drawn into a colonial logic and our ‘decolonial turn’ also means doing the hard, emotional work of breaking free from everyday actions that affirm the colonial logic. As follows from the above, such work cannot be done alone as our end goal is not a salvation of an individual but that of a collective. However, this is not to argue that actions of an individual are not important. Rather, we believe that if we can see and understand how our individual actions can affirm institutional power, then our individual actions can also serve to affirm a collective humanity, one that stands in contradiction to an idealized notion of the Western (post)modern subject. Additionally, as Maldonado-Torres further develops, acts that reject the colonial logic do not, by definition, seek recognition from the master, an idealized ‘powerful’ (Western) subject. In contrast, in collective initiatives that struggle for epistemic liberation such as the Decolonial Reading Salon, the recognition stems from the collective space of sharing. There are no certificates or credits given for attendance of the Salon. Neither do distinguished speakers give plenary lectures to large audiences. Those who come to read with us do so, as it seems to us, out of love and rage, in their desire to ‘reach out to other *damnés*’.

However, decolonial reading is HARD WORK also in other senses. With the Decolonial Reading Salon, we also want to help counter the tendency to reduce the enormous potential of decolonial thought that is embedded in its complexities, differences and contradictions among and within the various texts and singular authors, into a dogmatic doctrine characterised by sweeping generalizations and hasty conclusions. This task demands that we each also take responsibility for our own reading and commit ourselves to rigorous critical scholarly work accompanied by compassion and never-ending self-reflection and self-critique that makes us aware of how ‘knowledge’ is a ‘power formation’ and ‘scholarship’ – and ‘philosophy’ or ‘theory’ in particular – are discourses which tend to subjugate other discourses and disciplines.

At the same time, however, we are aware that such commitment is, for some, made almost impossible in the current ‘corporate university’ and the late capitalism more broadly. For instance, it needs to be taken into account that students, educators, researchers, administrators and interns are affected differently and to different degrees by the conditions of the ‘corporate university’ and the late capitalism. Reflecting on these conditions forces us to think critically on the vulnerability of our own positions and the lack of time, as well as of those who come to read with us, and other economic, epistemic, social, cultural, linguistic, geographical and institutional walls and barriers¹¹ which might make joining the Decolonial Reading Salon difficult for our co-readers (for instance, accessing UNISA’s main campus demands a lot of effort from those who rely on public transport as it does not pass the main campus building).

Finally, engaging in the Decolonial Reading Salon also enables us to critically reflect on the enormous amount of work that it takes to maintain the visibility and viability of decolonial thinking and practice inside educational institutions. It makes us acknowledge work which is not always recognized as work or valued as important work but is indispensable to the continuation of the decolonial project and thus is not to be taken for granted. This work, carried out by individual administrators, students, educators, and scholars, makes decolonial thought and practice possible in the institutions of higher education and contributes to the overall project of decolonial struggle

¹¹ For the use of ‘walls’ as a productive way of reflecting on the patterns of inclusion and exclusion in higher education, see Sara Ahmed’s work on the universities in the United Kingdom see Sara Ahmed (2012).

outside of them. It also has been enabling the two of us to engage, through reading, in this project in making, the decolonial thinking and practice.

See you at the next session of the Decolonial Reading: from here to elsewhere

“There has to be somewhere else, I tell myself. [...] Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds.

And that is where I go. I take books; I leave the real, colonial space; I go away. Often I go read in a tree. Far from the ground and the shit. I don't go and read just to forget -No! Not to shut myself up in some imaginary paradise. I am searching: somewhere there must be people who are like me in their rebellion and in their hope. Because I don't despair: if I myself shout in disgust, if I can't be alive without being angry, there must be others like me. I don't know who, but when I am big, I'll find them and I'll join them, I don't yet know where.” Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out, Forays’ (1986, p. 72).

In the above quotation, the Algerian-born French writer Hélène Cixous reflects on the situation she was born in and which she describes as ‘unlivable’: a situation of a Jewish girl in Algeria under French colonial rule, in the wake of the Second World War. Cixous proposes a ‘way out’ from this ‘the Empire of the Selfsame’, a heteropatriarchal colonial economy which is deadly for everyone, by searching for ‘somewhere else’, where ‘*it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds’. As we interpret it, this ‘somewhere else’ is both an individual and collective journey and a place, which is not only a scene of ‘writing’ in artistic, political or philosophical sense, but also a scene of learning.

The Decolonial Reading Salon aspires to be such a journey and place. Stemming from the UNISA Decoloniality Summer School which we both attended in 2019, the Salon is its continuation, yet, simultaneously, it is outside of it. It encourages the sharing and the proliferation of its teachings in a way that would enable engagement not constraint by traditional hierarchal learning dynamics, and that would be unreducible to the mere consumption of established doctrines. We approach collective reading as a means and space for sharing, communication, transformation and imagination ‘in resistance’: reading becomes a politically, intellectually and poetically subversive and innovative practice. In this sense, the Salon can be described as a site of intellectual and political disobedience, one of the ways of engaging in decolonial practices that Walter Mignolo describes in his text ‘Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom’(2009). Collective reading, as we understand it, helps us imagine a way out and away ‘from the ground and the shit ... from the real, colonial space’ so formidably described by Cixous in the epigraph above.

As we insisted throughout the article, the Salon strives to disrupt the ‘top-down’ learning dynamic where the teacher is defined as the sole ‘master’ and ‘source’ of knowledge, whereas student’s knowledge is only rarely recognized, thus reducing the student to a mere knowledge consumer. This shift, we believe, allows for an intimate and collective navigation of the rich and diverse body of decolonial thought that would provide a room for our own embodied experiences

and understandings. This then forges the conditions under which we can help each other to reflect on our own limitations, allowing to ask questions and challenge each other in ways which might have otherwise felt intimidating in a traditional classroom 'top-down' learning setting.

Another key aspect of the initiatives that strive for epistemic liberation, such as the Decolonial Reading Salon, that we identified in the article, is the practice of incessant, never-ending self-reflexive interrogations. As follows from our discussion, it is paramount to undertake this both individually and collectively, as well as to put emphasis particularly on 'the dangers of intellectual decolonization' towards which those engaged in educational institutions – such as the two of us and our co-reader in the Salon – are particularly prone to. We also stressed the significance of fostering plurality and inclusivity in every aspect of the teaching/learning practice. Finally, we reminded ourselves and the readers that setting up, facilitating and actively participating in initiatives such as the Decolonial Reading Salon is also 'hard work' not only intellectually but in the senses that might be less visible but that are vital to their existence. These include emotional and administrative work, as well as the work to overcome the various barriers that define the 'corporate university'. Our hope is that the reflections on our experience of the initiators and facilitators of the Decolonial Reading Salon presented in this article as an example of our engagement with decolonial thought and practice will inspire and help others who are involved in educational institutions as researchers, students, educators and administrators in their own individual and collective undertakings.

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