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Challenging the way we know the world: overcoming paralysis and utilising discomfort through critical reflexive thought

Reflexivity has been foregrounded as an important practice in scholarship regarding the scrutiny of ethical research and knowledge production. What is at risk, however, is reflexivity becoming counter-productive and consumed within the hegemony of Western practice, ultimately making little contribution towards disrupting power asymmetries. In this paper, we ask, at what point can critical self-reflexivity become productive, rather than self-indulgent and paralysing? Reflecting on the assumptions that underpin our scholarship, we ask, how can we utilise emotions of paralysis, discomfort and contradiction towards positive social change? Drawing on our experiences, we highlight the messy nature of reflexivity and argue that these emotions are important and entail a constant re-examination of the assumptions embedded in our pedagogy, scholarship and motives for engaging with the world. In so doing, we show how challenging the ways we know the world through reflexivity and critical thought are vital in the process of decolonising knowledge.

Introduction

Decolonisation has entered the forefront of the university agenda as social movements (such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo) and student protests and #MustFall movements (#RhodesMustFall, #Luister and #RhodesSoWhite) in universities across the world, seek to renew the struggle for the decolonisation of colonial legacies[1]. But what does it mean to be in this space of decolonisation, transformation and social justice? When calls for the decolonisation and transformation of academia and society have prompted for 'reflexivity,' (see for instance Romano 2018; Idahosa 2020; Idahosa and Vincent 2019) how can we ensure our engagement with the decolonisation and transformation process is not just a tick-box exercise, but rather informs our whole process, our being, our practice beyond academia, and how we come to '*know*' the world? In an academic space, particularly, where there is an obsession with packaging ideas neatly, how do we ensure we hold onto the 'messiness' (resistance, alienation, paralysis, emotions) that comes with the struggle for change?

Our critical self-reflections on the intersections between our identities and our social positions vis-à-vis our contexts, formed the data for this paper. Our reflections on the contradictions, disjunctures and tensions in our engagement with the knowledge production and change process were coded for patterns (Saldana 2009). In South Africa, some of these dimensions are currently being addressed by academics (see for instance Gqola 2002; Khunou et al. 2019). Kezia Batisai (2019) in particular, engages the politics of identity and exclusion in transformation discourses and the realities of being Black and foreign in the South African academy. Given our different identities (see next section), contexts and positionalities, interrogating the intersections in our experiences revealed an identical process of questioning our positionality within our contexts, our role in the knowledge production and change process and the tensions and paralysis that arose as a result. Drawing on the contradictions, disjunctures, absences, silences and ruptures in our experiences of fear, discomfort, isolation, crisis and paralysis (that occurred as a result of our movements between different fields and sub-fields, see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; McNay 1999), we discuss how a critical reflection on these contradictions can on the one hand be limiting, but can also provide the conditions for change. In so doing, we argue for 'reflexivity' as a

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1   These movements brought to fore the work of scholars like Angela Davis; bell hooks; Maria Lugones; Gayatri Spivak; Frantz Fanon; W.E.B. DuBois; Edward Said; Walter Mignolo, to name a few.

crucial foundation in addressing, challenging and dismantling power asymmetries. Edward Said (1978: 327) highlights the need for 'continual self-examination' and 'reflexively [submitting] one's method to critical scrutiny' to avoid 'degenerating into dogmatic slumber'. In delving into our own narratives and experiences, we warn against the distinction between critical and soft reflexivity; and why the former is fundamental in creating change. Situating the 'self' in the process of decolonisation avoids academia's tendency to externalise things as outside of the 'self', for instance, by addressing problems as 'over there' or 'back then' (see Jones 1999: 313).

Our journey to this process has been fraught with internal questions, and feelings of alienation brought on by closed off spaces within 'traditional' academic practice that does not recognise the grey area between the personal, political and academic, and the constant mediation involved in advocating for change. An alienation that, without space to reflect and confront, could have eventually stagnated our calls to action by silencing our voices for fear of getting it wrong, or being excluded for saying or doing the wrong thing. While our positionalities and identities differ, interrogating the intersections in our experiences enabled us to work through the common tensions that arise in the struggle for decolonisation/ transformation. It also enabled us to realise that reflexivity is generative, that is, while the emotions that arise during reflexivity have the potential for the reproduction of oppressive structures, cultures and practices, particularly when these tensions and discomfort are not interrogated, they also provide the conditions for transformation. In this paper, therefore, we unpack two central questions: *How can we utilise feelings of discomfort and contradiction towards positive social change? At what point can critical self-reflexivity become productive, rather than self-indulgent and paralysing?*

Reflexivity in the way we operationalise the concept, is an embodiment – a personal and internal and constant consciousness. It is deeply embedded in the process towards a decolonial future and understood as the ability to reflect, learn, unlearn, and dismantle overt and subtle legacies of oppression in the process of knowledge production and practice. It is a process of uprooting and uncovering intertwined layers of the personal and political. Specifically, it enables a critical consciousness of the systems, structures, rules, discourses and assumptions that operate to reproduce Eurocentrism at the individual and systemic level. In that sense, we do not see reflexivity as isolated to the personal, political or intellectual, but rather, a tool to enable the self to understand or see the link between the agent, structures and change. Critical reflexivity should make us hyper-sensitive to the multiple ways of knowing, being in and understanding the world. This type of embodied thinking destabilises linear ways of knowing, upturns logic

for complexity, and celebrates perception and experience over rationality and objectivity.

That said, as reflexivity becomes a part of academic life, lumped into the rhetoric of decolonisation, we examine how we can move beyond self-reflexivity being used as a token gesture and how we can avoid engaging in soft/superficial forms of reflexivity that work to reproduce, rather than transform, oppressive structures. This will be explored in greater depth throughout this paper, but the following briefly introduces what we mean by critical and soft reflexivity. It is important to note that while we make this distinction (a methodological rather than an ontological one), we do not intend to re-inscribe binaries by making a distinction between critical vs soft reflexivity, but rather, we acknowledge that it operates on a continuum depending on specific contexts and conditions, hence the need for a process of constant self-evaluation.

At its simplest, soft reflexivity is a surface-level recognition that things are unjust, but not necessarily engaging with the way in which the 'other' experiences the space, and therefore distancing oneself from that injustice. To engage in soft reflexivity is to resist opening oneself up to the discomfort of asking what the impact of one's political subjectivity has in perpetuating and reproducing relations of domination. To engage in soft reflexivity is to rationalise, make linear, neatly package and categorise difficult and complex ideas – occupying a comfortable space, distanced from action. At a subtle level, this type of reflexivity recognises unjust conditions but employs a strategy of distraction and deflection when issues of oppression and inequality are tabled. An example is the ongoing Black Lives Matter vs All Lives Matter discourse which works to deter a deeper engagement with the structural and embedded nature of the oppression of Black people – by shifting the focus from Black oppression to other challenges, which works to weaken the movement. By taking a business as usual approach, soft reflexivity reinforces the hegemony of White and Eurocentric powers. On the other hand, engaging in critical reflexivity is a hard and messy process but to attain change we all, regardless of our identity and positionality, need to do the hard work of confronting our raced, classed, gendered and heteronormative privilege and our complicity in un/intentionally reproducing relations of domination. This paper is for those who have begun the journey of working on themselves by questioning the contradictions and discomfort they experience in the struggle for change; but may be stuck in 'paralysis' and don't know what to do about it. Drawing on the contradictions in our knowledge of the world and experience of it, we offer a starting point for working through the implications of challenging and changing oppressive relations within our social context.

The paper is divided into four sections. We begin the paper with a 'prologue', addressing our individual reflections and the difficulties experienced in our scholarship with decolonisation and transformation. The second section teases out the similarities and differences in our self-reflections, knitting our experiences together to reveal the contradictions, similarities and ruptures in our narratives. Drawing on these similarities, in the third section, we show that whilst our contexts differ, the contradictions and paralysis we both experienced, revealed the dilemmas and limits of reflecting on one's identity and positionality as we move between different fields and sub-fields (McNay 1999). In the last section, we provide a discussion on why paralysis, contradiction, and discomfort, are important conditions for decolonial practice. We conclude that, if utilised critically (i.e. non-superficially), critical reflexive thought can be instrumental in the decolonisation and transformation process.

Prologue

Vanessa: Questioning my role as a non-indigenous academic producing knowledge on Indigenous peoples' rights

I am a mixed race, half Filipina-English woman working towards Indigenous rights and decolonisation from the UK. I first began to explore the question of epistemic change through critical self-reflexivity four years ago. Taking part in a 'Building Indigenous Knowledge' course in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and undertaking my undergraduate dissertation research with Māori scholars thereafter, I fell into the deep and perpetual questioning of my positionality. It was a unique experience – a course led by Māori scholars and leaders; a shared space with Indigenous peoples from across the globe, and an opportunity not many (and especially final-year undergraduates) have such a privilege to experience. I had arrived with two other students from the UK; we were anxious – but excited, not knowing what to expect, but ready to take further our own research interests voiced in our applications that had led us to receiving a place on the programme.

A strange sensitivity to our own identities emerged on our first day. After the Powhiri (traditional welcome) at a Marae[2], we engaged in introductions around a circle. As students from the UK, we became acutely aware, and almost began to question, whether we were meant to be there at all. Our positions felt acute alongside Māori, Aborigines, First Nations and Native Americans; especially coming from the geo-political context where colonialism violently affected the ancestral lands and livelihoods of those with whom we were surrounded. I was worried

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2   A communal meeting place where greetings, discussions, formal traditions such as funerals, and more take place.

that we were overstepping our place there, broaching space that felt reserved for the shared, differing but collective, experiences of colonialism; nervous about the weight of responsibility to listen, respect and acknowledge these experiences far from our own.

We felt a deep sense of gratitude for being in such a space that exposed a range of issues guided by the voices of Indigenous peoples themselves: something not afforded by our own learning experience back in the UK, and an issue that I began to question and feel deeply uncomfortable with. While my anthropology lecturers had considerable experience of working with Indigenous peoples and highlighting the ethical responsibility towards Indigenous knowledge, it troubled me that we never heard these experiences from the voices of Indigenous peoples themselves. I began to reflect – in the academic sphere, who speaks for whom? What responsibility does Anthropology hold to its own colonial past?

These reflective questions became focal after an evening over half-way through the course. We – the UK students – were asked to sit down by some of the Indigenous leaders who were over with the students from some of the universities. We were questioned about what we thought our role there was as researchers, asked about ethics and how much we knew about the detrimental impact of non-Indigenous research on the lives of Indigenous peoples. At the time, it felt like the implication was that we had no role to be there, to be engaging with these issues, not to mention to be doing research. It was at that point we felt the heavy burden of carrying the responsibility for colonialism's uncomfortable past, and its suffocating legacy into the present. Our doubts as British students surfaced; stiffening and putting into tension our roles there. What *was* my place there as a non-Indigenous person studying Indigenous knowledge? Likewise, how would I direct my specific area of study in an appropriate way? How could I conceptualise the full extent of what I had learnt on the programme, the challenges I faced, and articulate these experiences to a wider audience? I was caught grappling with the experiences and consequences of colonialism I had learned, cautious of not wanting to contribute any further to the implicating tendencies of Western research, while also questioning whom must bear the burden of change.

Nevertheless, decolonisation and Indigenous rights have become focal to my academic career. I have worked tirelessly to advocate for Indigenous self-determination, and to dismantle colonial frameworks. I have since gone on to do a master's degree in the UK; only to be disappointed that anti-colonial and Indigenous thought seem to remain side-lined in mainstream Development Studies. At times, I have felt utterly lost, questioning whether I should even be focusing on this at all – but recognising that this feeling is probably more symbolic of the alienation of working against a system that seems to treat Eurocentrism lightly. Tied in with that

alienation, those paralysing questions remain: What is my place here, advocating for Indigenous rights as a non-Indigenous person? Especially in a context where I am disconnected physically from Indigenous peoples? To summarise it simply, I have felt pulled by a great weight of contradiction: passionate about advocating for Indigenous rights, but worried that I am somehow perpetuating that very idealism that Indigenous scholars have worked fervently to be rid of[3]. Instead, how can I use these experiences and reflections productively?

Grace: Who speaks about and contributes to transformation and decolonisation?

My process of self-reflection began during my doctoral research in South Africa, which focused on transformation, in particular, the agency for individuals to effect transformation within their institutions. An angle of that research examined the question of who drives transformation? And who can contribute to it?

During this time, the student protest began in 2015[4] and one of the arguments that emerged during this process was the limits to the extent to which privileged groups could contribute to the transformation processes. The tendency was to question the contribution those who occupy a position of privilege can make to transformation processes and their commitment to effecting change. This presented a dilemma for me. My position was that factors like race, class and gender, though important, cannot be the sole determinant of an individual commitment to change[5]. My issue with this type of argument was that there is a tendency on one hand to give too much power to structural factors like our social positions (race, class, gender) and our administrative position. On the other hand, it essentialises experience and uses that as a universalising mechanism to determine what is good for others. For instance, I cannot say that because I am Black and I have experienced oppression, I understand what liberation means or what it means to bring about transformation. The problem with scholars who advocate for this approach is that they fall into the trap of positioning the African identity as homogenous, without critically examining the contextually diverse nature of 'African' cultures and identities and the implications for knowledge production, legitimation and representation.

I argued against a pessimistic politics and approach towards transformation. My approach hence countered the argument that White men, for instance, cannot contribute to transformation. I presented this idea at a colloquium, but

3   See link to Vanessa's reflection here.

4   The massive student-led two-year rebellion which led to a shutdown of universities in South Africa, began in 2015 and brought to the fore the institutionalised nature of racism, sexism and Eurocentric knowledge forms and practices within universities (Omarjee 2018; Booysen 2016).

5   See link to Grace's reflection here.

my argument was not well received. From the reception at the presentation and feedback from the piece, I could see that when speaking, those who occupied the position of privilege nodded, while those who occupied a 'marginalised' position, either had blank expressions or expressions of disapproval. Any idea that suggested the possibility of a politics where the privileged can be part of the transformation process was absolutely denied and flattened. In particularly tense situations, I was told that I had been colonised and was complicit in my oppression.

As a Black, Nigerian woman, this reaction forced me to take a step back. I did not want privileged groups, the so-called progressives, to use my position to reinforce their own notions of morality. The 'nods' received when making this type of argument and the accusation of being a 'White apologist' led to a feeling of betrayal. I wondered if I was arming the so-called 'progressives' with the tools to further entrench my oppression. My argument could be misinterpreted as eliminating the type of critical and epistemic reflection and engagement needed for transformation to occur. To reiterate, I argued for a link between consciousness, reflexivity and transformation (Idahosa and Vincent 2018). Given the responses to my argument, I began thinking about my identity and positionality and wondered if I was complicit in my own oppression. I asked, to what extent does this argument reinforce the oppression of Black people in South Africa? What role does my outsider positionality (my nationality) play in the position taken?

This process of reflecting on my identity and positionality and its implication for my scholarship, led to paralysis. I decided to stop speaking and writing on that issue. I felt I did not have the 'right' tools to make such an argument, the process of constantly reflecting on myself in relation to my politics and its implication for the transformation discourse in South Africa was constraining. I did not know how to frame my argument in a way that fosters inclusive transformation and if it would be useful to do so. At the centre of this paralysis was the tension between an internalised aspect of the social world, which made me feel like making such an argument as a Black person was a betrayal, and the part of me that felt there was something wrong with an essentialising and universalising discourse. I seem to have internalised the very ideology I was arguing against and this produced tension and paralysis.

Contradictions in the way we know the world and our experience of it

One issue that emerges from the reflections above is the questioning of our positionalities in relation to our contexts, the knowledge production and legitimation process. The central issue inherent in the narratives is the question of legitimacy. Who has the legitimacy to speak for and about the other? Who

has the legitimacy to speak about and advocate transformation/decolonisation? And what conditions are necessary to reconcile these tensions and struggle for legitimacy as the marginalised/privileged and outsider/insider? Undeniably, both of our experiences led us to move beyond questioning our experience of the world, towards challenging how we come to know the world. The resistance we both experienced, while in different contexts and for contrasting reasons, raised some difficult dilemmas that provoked a re-assessment of power/knowledge production and promoting transformative change. While evaluating these dilemmas is incredibly important, our own scrutiny had stagnated the possibility for our own contributions towards the decolonisation process.

Given the different contexts, one similarity in our narratives is how questioning our complicity created the conditions for recognising the contradictions and discomfort we experienced. For instance: Vanessa began questioning her role as a researcher upon being challenged by Indigenous people about the historical consequence of Western researchers researching Indigenous peoples. As Tuck & Yang (2012) argue, when the misappropriation, misrepresentation and violation of Indigenous worldviews have sustained epistemological and ontological violence, questions of power and privilege in the knowledge production process are raised. She reflected on the ethics of her research vis-à-vis her positionality and identity, especially as a British woman. As her narrative reflects, it was this weight of responsibility to 'get it right', (given that she was implicated in the structures she was trying to critique), that sprung that paralysis (Hotere-Barnes 2015).

Similarly, Grace's doctoral journey and the contextual conditions during that journey (i.e. the student protests and the resistance against her stance on transformation) not only shaped her views on transformation but also created the conditions for her paralysis. In particular the contextually specific responses to her argument against a universalising and essentialising discourse led to the questioning of her positionality and legitimacy to speak about transformation (see Spivak 1998). An intersection of her quest to understand what role individuals play in the change process and the conflicting conditions in South Africa at the time revealed the contradictions in her knowledge of the world and experience of it. Not that she had not questioned this previously, but her prior questioning never put into tension her identity and positionality, particularly in relation to knowledge production. The response Grace received from some scholars and colleagues led her to question the way she knows the world, particularly in a context where the relations of domination rendered certain groups powerful/less. It brought to the fore the reality of anti-colonial scholars who voice a fervent refusal of colonial recognition (Simpson 2012; Coulthard 2014; Flowers 2015; Fanon 1986). Specifically, the point at which Grace felt as though her argument was an 'act of betrayal' speaks to Fanon's impulse of self-awareness

(Fanon 2008: xiv). The 'nods' from those in privileged positions, and disapproval from the marginalised and 'oppressed' groups, triggered an uncomfortable awareness that perhaps she had internalised the very ideology she was arguing against. The intersecting point at which she received colonial recognition and resistance against her argument brought an uncomfortable self-awareness. Wondering if she was complicit in her oppression, Grace was at once responsible for her body, race and nationality. As Fanon so eloquently states:

> It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person … I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors (Fanon 1986: 84).

Given the oppressive nature of power relations, how do we advocate a discourse of hope[6], a way of moving past essentialisms to foster change without reproducing oppressive tendencies? By coming together with both of our reflections, we reveal that the tensions of knowing where to place oneself within the debates on who can contribute to the transformation process exists on both sides. Unsettling these essentialising barriers, our reflections reveal that paralysis stems from similar questions – what is the right course of action to take? How can we ensure we are not being complicit in reinscribing structures of power/oppression?

These questions undeniably forced us to confront the politics of knowledge. Rather than solely critiquing Western knowledge for its impact on marginalised communities (Fanon 1963; Memmi 1965), our dilemmas on both sides have brought into focus that the 'political is personal' when calling for a decolonising lens (Kovach 2009: 83). Moving beyond merely challenging Western 'epistemicide' (de Sousa Santos 2014) from a distance, we were forced to re-evaluate our own personal choice of epistemology (see Kovach 2009), and the contradictions and discomfort entangled in that process of critical consciousness; and our own responsibility in knowledge production.

In that respect, the recent trend to ask 'whose knowledge counts' in postcolonial and post-development literature (see for instance, Rahnema & Bawtree 1997; Sylvester 1999; Matthews 2017) feels slightly contrived and superficial to any momentous change in the process of knowledge production[7]. This is not to disregard the movements towards dismantling the domination of Western knowledge, but to reveal that the reality on the ground is lagging behind

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6   Scholars like Paulo Freire (2004), Yusef Waghid (2008) and Wilson Akpan (2010) have written on the importance of hope and its link to attaining transformation.

7   Asking 'whose knowledge counts' in the discipline is an attempt to include other perspectives, rather than disrupt and dismantle the structural nature of the Western/Eurocentric knowledge production, hence Nabudere's (2006) argument for the need to question and interrogate the purpose of knowledge production.

the bubble of the academic sphere. We can state this with confidence because, while our contexts differ hugely, it is our own feelings of contradiction that have revealed this gap between decolonisation, knowledge production and practice. For example, Vanessa's own dilemmas of feeling 'lost' lends to an alienation of working against a system that seems to continue to treat Eurocentrism lightly, where there is little space to meaningfully discuss the impacts of colonialism. Grace's contradiction stemmed from promoting an argument of transformation that includes the agency and possibility for the privileged to contribute to change, but at the same time, feeling limited by her own agency and ability to speak within a context where there is a deep mistrust of the powerful and privileged.

Thus, how can we go further than simply asking 'what knowledge do you privilege?' (Boyd 2005: 1), towards legitimating a plurality of knowing? What personal responsibility do we hold in the knowledge production process? While we raise some pertinent questions about identity politics, it is not the scope of this paper to tackle that head-on. Rather, as we will unpack in the following section, we wish to highlight how challenging the ways we know the world through reflexivity and critical thought are vital in the process of decolonisation and knowledge production.

Paralysis, embodiment and the limits of reflexivity

As noted in the introduction, reflexivity is understood here as 'an emotional, embodied and cognitive process in which social actors have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their social and natural environment and to others' (Holmes 2010: 140). Reflexivity is, however, much more than thinking about one's positionality in relation to the research subject and context, it entails moving beyond our contextual positionality to questioning the assumptions that shape our interactions on a personal, intellectual and social level – challenging knowledge production and practice in the process. As de Sousa Santos et al. (2007: xxi) note, 'self-reflexivity, viewed as the discovery of hetero-referentiality, is the first step towards the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world'. The narratives discussed here highlight the emotional and messy nature of reflexivity – thinking about affecting or contributing to change in relation to one's identity and positionality is paralysing. Akram and Hogan (2015) have argued that 'achieving reflexivity and change is a difficult and fraught process, which has emotional and moral consequences'. While reflexivity and the contradictions it makes bare amplify feelings of isolation, they also highlight the fluidity, complexity, non-linearity, personal and emotional intricacies not often voiced in academia.

To elaborate, reflexivity enables the individual to challenge traditional and Eurocentric knowledge production by subverting objectivity for subjectivity and recognising the transformative potential of agency (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003; Bradbury-Huang 2010). Engaging this type of reflexivity may lead to paralysis as one literally comes to a point where one realises the contextually generated limits to one's agency to contribute to change. It is paralysing because there are inevitable social tensions in knowledge production, evidenced by the resistance Grace experienced. Kovach (2009: 83) highlights the difficulty with 'advocating an alternative view in the classroom, meetings, and hallways', which she describes as a persistent intellectual challenge that is 'exhausting and potentially futile'. Akram and Hogan (2015) further note how discontinuities in our experience and understanding of the self can lead to an awareness, and a shift between how we previously saw the world and how we see it now. The contextually embedded and corporeal nature of our paralysis stem from our unease about our identities and positionalities, and fear of the consequences of choosing to go against the grain. While Grace worries about betraying 'the group', being labelled a 'sell-out' and internalising the very ideology one is trying to work against, Vanessa worries whether the actions she takes meet the fulfilment and needs of the people with whom she is co-producing knowledge.

While self-reflexivity can feel isolating, it is clear in the literature that we are not alone in these paralysing feelings brought on by reflecting on our identity and positionality. Akram and Holgan (2015) note the difficult and emotional nature of engaging in reflexivity, hence our paralysis. Indeed, the term 'pākehā paralysis[8], refers to the 'emotional and intellectual difficulties that pākehā can experience when engaging in social, cultural, economic and political relations with Māori because of a fear of getting it wrong' (Hotere-Barnes 2015: 3). But, why does paralysis happen? How do we overcome the self-indulgent tendencies of reflexivity, towards transformative change that is not paralysed by essentialist framings of positionality and identity?

Through the reflexive process, those hidden assumptions and presuppositions about researching, speaking and writing for the other are brought to the fore. Paralysis and discomfort thus become a vital tool for examining the conditions of social interactions that privilege one way of knowing and being over another, thus, undoing the reproduction of power asymmetries. Thus, the way out of paralysis is to go through the discomfort and contradictions to enable change. While reflexivity is paralysing, and one may choose to ignore such discomfort, changing would often mean acknowledging and pushing past the discomfort as it opens up the possibility for change. Augusto Boal urges reflexive practice to 'reinforce our

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8   The term pākehā refers to a New Zealand settler of European descent.

grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not let that complexity get in the way of action or frighten us into submission or inactivity' (Boal 1994: xix–xx). One has to feel the weight of the past, its impact on the present and the implications for the future in relation to how knowledge about the privileged and marginalised is produced, reproduced and transmitted (Watkins & Shulman 2008; Boal 1994). It is this that opens up the possibility for challenging a universalised and essentialising way of knowing the world. The discomfort and contradiction discussed here is a condition towards critical consciousness, which can be likened to Tuhiwai Smith's (2012: 200) use of the concept of 'struggle' – 'an awakening from the slumber of hegemony, and the realisation that action has to occur'. Paralysis and the contradictions that it makes bare opens up not only the possibility for change, but the urgency for change.

Reflexivity, understood as a generative mechanism, thus emerges as both the cause of paralysis (hence its limiting nature), and the condition for challenging the way we know the world. While the persistent scrutiny of our personal and disciplinary presuppositions may lead to paralysis, it also opens up the possibility for change. The contradictions and discomfort produced by critical reflexivity forces the individual to recognise alternative ways of knowing the world and challenge how and in what contexts other knowledges are produced and represented. For example, Simpson (2004: 375) highlights the selective nature of Indigenous knowledge in the Western academy, which has done little to unsettle the 'colonial infrastructure and mentality' within institutions. Critical reflexivity also forces the individual to question how the knowledge they produce in their teaching, research and in the collaborative process challenges relations of domination.

That said, it must be noted that while the potential for reflexivity is always implied in crisis, contradictions and discomfort, the implication for change is influenced by the 'particular configuration of power relations' within that context (McNay 1999: 109). Thus, experiencing, discomfort and paralysis does not necessarily lead to change, it only opens up the possibility to initiate change when opportunities to do so present themselves. Adams (2006) notes that even when such opportunities present themselves, there may be structural constraints that prevent the individual from acting to transform. The capacity for reflexive transformation is thus not only dependent on individual factors but also on structural and contextual conditions that influence who has access to power and to resources to effect change. That said, the question remains, how do we move beyond complacency towards transformative change?

Feeling lonely, lost and experiencing discomfort, crisis and paralysis are all part of the reflexive process. The embodied nature of reflexivity exposes the tensions and contradictions in our everyday interactions on a personal,

intellectual and disciplinary level (see McNay 1999; Akram and Hogan 2015). Thus, the emotional and paralysing aspects of reflexivity reveals the embodied and social nature of reflexivity as it involves 'bodies, thought, talk and action' taking place within specific structural and contextual constraints (Holmes 2010: 149; see also, Anderson 2001). By coming to think, feel and do 'from the inside out', the living, attentive body becomes attuned with the world, accepting the inevitable complexity of life (Anderson 2001: 2; Abram 2017). The experiences discussed in the prologue highlight the emotional, embedded and social nature of reflexivity that emerged from our embodied sense of the world. In the end, the dialogue resulting from reflecting on our individual experiences not only enabled us to make sense of our experiences, it also provided the lever for moving beyond our paralysis by discussing and writing about it. Reflexivity and dialogue thus act as a counter-memory, enabling us to voice concerns together to address silence, fear and isolation. Without the possibility for dialogue, 'history hardens and freezes into repetitive patriotic narratives' (Watkins & Shulman 2008: 238).

But how do we move beyond reflexivity being used as a token gesture? There is a difference between the kind of soft and superficial reflexivity that a lot of academics engage in today (see Emirbayer and Desmond 2011), and the kind of critical reflexivity that is the subject of our argument. This type of critical reflexivity involves not just examining one's social position (race, class, gender, sexuality) and administrative position (student, Vice Chancellor (VC), lecturer, professor, manager) vis-à-vis the context – but also interrogating the assumptions and presuppositions that frame our approach to engaging and interacting with the world. It is about critically asking: Whose interests does our research/teaching serve? Who will benefit from it? Who is silenced and given a voice? Who is othered? (Smith 2012; Mukherjee 2017; Liamputtong 2007).

It would mean for instance, moving beyond the ideas of reflexivity taught in methodology courses which advocate for reflexivity (acknowledging the self within the research process) being used to establish legitimacy. Instead we must amplify research approaches that promote a genuine concern for the production of ethical knowledge where action and reflection, theory and practice, are brought together (Reason & Bradbury 2001: 1). In this regard, Lewis Gordon (2014,) warns of the 'danger of disciplinary decadence marked by the fetishisation of method'. Another example of soft reflexivity is an individual saying, 'I am progressive, I have reflected on my teaching and research process', without necessarily questioning the assumptions that underpin such processes and how they de/legitimise and privilege one way of knowing and being over others. The problem with this idea is that such reflexive practices 'often mistake brief instances of self-evaluation with authentic practices of reflexivity' (Emirbayer and Desmond 2011: 581). As Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 199-200) warns, although 'struggle' is 'an important tool in the

overthrow of oppression and colonialism' it can also be a 'blunt instrument' when used to reinforce hegemony. To battle against soft reflexivity, we must acknowledge and utilise emotions of discomfort, loneliness and paralysis because they are personal, embodied, political and critical to the reflexive process. Critical reflexive praxis thus entails a constant (re)examination of the assumptions embedded in our motives for teaching, researching and engaging with the other.

To engage in critical reflexivity is to challenge the way we know the world, to critique the 'presuppositions inscribed' in thinking, and acting on the world (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 39) and to question how knowledge is produced, circulated, legitimised and utilised. The implication of this is that we not only question our positions within the university, but we also question how those assumptions inherent within our discipline, shape our teaching, research and collaboration choices. This type of reflexivity acts as a guiding principle in our engagement within and outside the university as discussed in the next section.

The transformative potential of paralysis, contradictions and discomfort: Critical reflexive thought as decolonial practice

What is perhaps significant about our reflections is that, while we reflect from different identities and positions, it is clear that similar tensions and contradictions exist in our journey towards change. Reflecting on the discomfort brought on by the contradiction in our experiences is perhaps what decolonisation advocates for. It necessitates unpacking questions about who owns decolonial practice? Who is the legitimate purveyor of decolonised knowledge?

To come to challenge the way we know the world is not just to reflect on our identities, we have to engage in both cognitive and epistemic reflection, where we examine the intersections and contradictions that occur as a result of the difference between our experience of our context and our knowledge of it. These contradictions are also brought on by our movement between different fields and sub-fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; McNay 1999). In unpacking the rules of engagement within our disciplines and institutions, we reflect on our identity and social positions within our context. Because these different aspects of the social world have their own logic, they will often yield contradictions and disjuncture (McNay 1999). Our own self-reflexivity and paralysis ruptured our consciousness, providing a heightened sensitivity to the responsibility attached to knowledge production. Acknowledging these contradictions influences the way we see and know the world and has transformative potential.

Reflexivity is thus understood as destabilising Western notions of validity and legitimacy to appreciate the subjective and embodied nature of knowledge

production (Romano 2018). Fundamentally, that means critiquing notions of objectivity derived from Western science, where the emphasis on 'external evidence, testing and universal laws of generalizability' narrows the possibility of what counts as knowledge (Kovach 2009: 78). The reflexive paralysis we experienced reveals the dilemmas involved in upsetting and uprooting entrenched power. It is the tensions, contradictions and discomfort that enables one to challenge and shift the way one knows and interacts with the world (McNay 1999; Adkins 2003). It enables the individual to challenge the way knowledge is produced and who is legitimised/ delegitimised in the process of knowledge production. This will invariably have implications for decolonial practice – how the actor engages with the world.

Decolonial practice is thus a disruption of the normative frameworks that sustains Eurocentric order (de Sousa Santos et al. 2007; Gudynas 2011; Scott-Villiers 2011; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). Far from the rationality imbued in Western research, decolonial practice is what Fanon (1963: 36) describes as a 'program of complete disorder'. By evaluating our values, biases, assumptions, we take the creative leap (Bolton 2010) into reflexive practice and move beyond treating decolonisation as a watered-down project (Chambers 2017; Gaudry & Lorenz 2018). Decolonial reflexive practice thus refers to the process of challenging the ways we know the world, towards an acceptance and promotion of the multiple and plural ways of knowing.

Engaging in critical reflexive decolonial praxis, would mean for instance, questioning the foundations of disciplinary practices that present themselves as self-evident. While our disciplines may teach us critical thinking, they do not necessarily teach us to question how we know the world. They present themselves as natural and self-evident, thus we come to accept all we have been taught and learn how to critique without necessarily questioning the foundations of, or inserting ourselves in, our critique. An example is positivist knowledge claims and other schools of thought which advocate objectivity over subjectivity and a socially dis-embedded and disembodied self (Emirbayer and Desmond 2011). As highlighted in the previous section, knowledge production and legitimation is embodied – our presuppositions, which lie at the level of the subconscious, invariably influence the way we analyse and interpret the subject and if not reflected on, may reproduce universalised knowledge structures. Thus, Lewis Gordon (2014, 81) advocates for the importance of moving beyond one's discipline in the production of knowledge, what he terms 'a teleological suspension of disciplinarity'. This way we can move beyond those disciplinary methodological rules (noted in the previous section), that may carry colonial legacies.

Another instance is the notion of the insider/outsider discourse, where one can legitimately produce knowledge on a group because one belongs to that

group, while the outsider can never understand the experience of the other (see Metron 1972 in Emirbayer and Desmond 2011). In many ways, questioning this position is what we try to do here, as we ask who speaks about change and who produces knowledge on the marginalised? Variants of this discourse pervade the South African transformation discourse, where privileged groups are thought of as incapable of speaking for, understanding, researching, teaching and writing about Black experiences, transformation and decolonisation. Vanessa's narrative echoed similar sentiments as she questioned her privileged positionality in the knowledge production process. While we understand that this position stems from scholars' misinterpretation and the violent and unequal representation of marginalised groups, this approach is based on a presupposition that 'an insider's vantage point in and of itself leads to scientific discoveries unavailable to the outsider' (Emirbayer and Desmond 2011: 581-582). In the history of knowledge production such practices legitimise the position that marginalised groups are incapable of reproducing oppression. The problem with these approaches is that they advocate the replacement of one form of domination, culture and practice with another, thus knowledge structures and the occupants of powerful positions are merely replaced, thus reifying the very same structures they sought to change. Paulo Freire (2005: 56) has argued that 'if the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human, they will not achieve their goal by merely reversing the terms of the contradiction, by simply changing poles'.

Another assumption inherent in this argument is that the experience of oppression automatically leads to a politics of liberation, but there have been instances where assimilation occurs either out of fear of the consequences of fighting the structures or a recognition of some form of benefit from the current order of social relations (see Adams 2006). The danger of this position is that it works to also absolve marginalised groups of the need for 'genuine [critical] reflexive practice' (Emirbayer and Desmond 2011: 582). What is central here is that reflexivity is and should not be limited to one group, as it represents a way out of the limitations of one's position and the paralysis that comes with engaging in critical reflection. Engaging in critical reflexivity reveals the contradictions in the world and our context, it creates a discomfort and it is this that creates the conditions for change.

If the academic project is aimed at affecting some kind of change on the social world, this invariably leads all who engage with the change process to question: who drives such change and who is empowered/disempowered by our actions? We live in a world of contradiction – but this contradiction and the discomfort it produces is a useful tool for reflecting on our identity and positionality vis-à-vis the context and grasping the particular issues that need to change. To engage in

this type of reflexivity and open up the possibility of epistemic change, we must ask ourselves[9]:

- What contradictions and discomforts are raised in the process of unsettling power?

- What are the hidden assumptions and presuppositions that influence our social and intellectual enquiry and how does it reproduce/challenge knowledge structures?

- Whose experiences, knowledges and identities are being foregrounded or elided in knowledge production and legitimation processes?

- What are the disciplinary principles (how our disciplines discipline us), the mechanisms of legitimation, validation and universalisation that influence our knowledge production?

Carefully examining, weighing and reflecting on these questions are vital if we are to develop an approach that recognises the plurality of experiences, knowledges and ways of being. If our current discipline disciplines us into distorted modes and ways of knowing, then it stands to reason that the only way out is to interrogate the taken for granted aspects that present themselves as self-evident. We must ask, what social, cultural and intellectual relations underlie the production of Eurocentric knowledge. This form of reflexivity must occur at the level of the disciplinary, social and intellectual and is necessarily embodied, emotional and personal. Ultimately, this is a call to break from traditional academic processes, instead welcoming the fact that complexity, uncertainty and struggle is 'energising and full of possibilities' (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003: 21) in attaining epistemic change.

Epilogue

In this paper, we draw on our experiences of fear, discomfort, loneliness, crisis and paralysis in arguing for critical self-reflexivity, and an awareness of discomfort and contradiction, as a starting point for decolonised practice. We interrogate issues of discomfort, contradiction and paralysis that arise in the process of reflexivity. We show how our experiences and the scrutiny of our own positionality at the level of the body, social and intellectual, fundamentally challenged how we 'know' the world, and opened up the debate for critical reflexive thought as a lever for epistemic change. In so doing, we emphasise the embodied and emotional nature of critical reflexivity. We argue that critical reflexivity, discomfort and paralysis

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9   We address these questions at various points in the paper.

are central to transcending the indulgent tendencies of superficial reflexivity, in the struggle for transformative decolonial practice.

This paper, i.e. writing about reflexivity, discomfort and paralysis, represents one aspect of our response to the experiences discussed above. While the scope for changing oppressive structures and practices is limited given our 'early-career' positionality, as well as other identity and contextually related challenges, we are able to find alternative spaces. On a personal level, for Grace, engaging in this type of reflexivity meant choosing to challenge the dominant conceptions of what transformation means within her context. For example, challenging the tendency to treat Africa as a unified entity in the arguments for transformation and being critical of whose voice is silenced and legitimised in the transformation process – rather than abandoning such arguments to avoid exclusion and isolation, and where her initial inclination and response to accusations that she was complicit in her own oppression was to take a step back and completely avoid it. Reflexively examining her positionality enabled her to accept the paralysis and discomfort of challenging and questioning the unequal processes of legitimation and modes of silencing inherent in the transformation discourses. This meant recognising that even those who occupy a marginal and oppressed position do have to engage in critical reflexivity so as to ensure they are not reproducing the very structures and practices they aim to change.

For Vanessa, this meant a realisation that the superficial nods as the common response to her work on Indigenous rights reveals the amnesia that Britain has on these issues. On a deeper level – although lonely, uncomfortable, and somewhat isolating – engaging with Indigenous rights while being in the UK has shaped her critical consciousness to see, viscerally, the ways in which colonial legacies are imprinted and entrenched in the current British landscape. These imprints range from political decisions based on colonial undertones (such as Brexit); to policies, practices and everyday narratives that continue to have a disproportionate impact on Black people, and people of colour. Situating the self has helped her move past the paralysing question of what her role is in being a non-Indigenous person advocating for Indigenous rights. This has led to an understanding that her role is not and should not be to 'speak for' Indigenous peoples' experiences, but to re-centre the problem of whiteness, 'Britishness', and the colonial legacies that underlie these personal feelings of discomfort, contradiction, alienation, and isolation.

The process of reflecting on our experiences and writing about the messy, paralysing, emotional and embodied nature of reflexivity, enabled us to embrace the contradictions in our experiences and resolve, at least in part, our issues with our positionality and legitimacy in the knowledge production and change process. It must however be noted that the process of reflexivity is never complete, it is a

constant and continuous process. While we cannot say we have completely moved past our paralysis, one consequence of engaging in critical reflexivity and recognising its messy nature, was the decision to continue writing and challenging dominant and unequal power relations on a personal, methodological and disciplinary level. Questioning our experiences both within and outside the academic terrain (critical reflexivity) enabled us to challenge the ways we know the world. By acknowledging discomfort and contradiction as a unique aspect of change, we begin to uncover the opportunities afforded to scholars passionate about decolonisation and undoing power asymmetries in knowledge production and legitimation process.

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