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Exploring conference spaces through poetic inquiry: Loving demons and disobedient angels

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Abstract

This article foregrounds how educational research conference spaces can be activated to become contested spaces for dialogue, rather than disguised attempts to silence or jettison perspectives. This represents counter-hegemonic contestation. The argument draws on a dialogue between conventional and arts-based poetic depictions through *ex post facto* data production strategies to reflect on two national conferences in which the author was involved. The article argues that conference spaces embed multiple political, social, and historical elements, but are likely to be interpreted as dichotomising arenas between adversaries (angels) and proponents (demons) of dominant worldviews. The poem represents how elements of seeming contradiction and overt conflict embed each other. The two conference agendas are reconstructed discursively as both groups negotiate their relationship with each other. The poetic data displays the potential for conferences to move beyond agendas of self to engage those of the self-in-service for a greater social good. This article's agenda activates disobedience to harmonic co-option.

Key words: Academic educational research conferencing; hegemony and counter-hegemony; poetic inquiry; epistemic disobedience

INTRODUCTION

In this article I consciously choose to challenge the conventions of journal article design, construction and representation. The traditional article headings and sub-headings (separate and bounded categories) are deliberately erased through the deployment of elements drawn from outside academic writing genres which flow into each other, as representational fluidity. While the article indeed draws data from the field, it does not derive from a pre-determined research design process established before the (research) events unfold. Data gathering does not commence with a set of *a priori* questions that the researcher wishes to confirm or negate through field exploration. Freeman (1996) refers to this form of data gathering as an "*ex post facto*" process which, in contrast to the normative methodological approaches to research design, produces data after the event has already occurred. The act of data *gathering* thus reconstitutes itself as an act of data *production*. As a participant within the field, the researcher has the latitude to assemble an in-depth, first-hand subjective account of the social context drawing on his/her experiences, thoughts and actions during past event/s, and uses this critical reflection as a form of analysing moments in the social-historical context (Reddy, 2000). Whilst the retrospective account is an attempt to engage with the researcher's own past, as the author of the report, the researcher uses the past in order to construct interpretations of the present (and perhaps the future). The act of writing constitutes a form of life history inquiry which does not simply provide a narcissistic self-inquiry, but is motivated by the need to generate the process of building a theoretical perspective through narrative construction (Dhunpath and Samuel, 2009).

This article is empirically-grounded in the events of two national conferences at which I presented papers as part of two panels. Both panels focused on social justice considerations, not surprising for an educational research space within post-apartheid South Africa. The first conference, held under the auspices of the *Kenton Association*, took place in 2006 and the second, reconstituted as the *South African Education Research Association (*SAERA) was held in 2017. The Kenton Conference originally attracted mainly educational researchers from historically White advantaged institutions; its character as convening (White) liberal views was well-established. However, in 2006, the conference space was opened to a wider

diversity of perspectives. As an academic from a previously Black South African higher education institution, the decision to present research at this conference was a deliberative and political choice. My Black postgraduate students at the time had, in my view, a body of empirical research that needed to be presented at the doorstep of conventional White liberalism. The propositional content of our Kenton panel drew on alternative interpretations of social justice in the terrain of primary and secondary post-apartheid schooling.

By contrast, SAERA's 2017 conference was organised at a time when the association was seeking to reconfigure previously racially-aligned educational research bodies. I participated in the panel reflecting on the future possibilities of higher education researchers to activate a social justice agenda. In this second temporal context, my positionality with respect to the conference could be said to be different since I was an executive member of the organisation who had been involved in steering the formation of the new organisation. However, my political commitment remained the same: to open up spaces for critical exchange of divergent views. Notably, the Kenton Association had folded and realigned its membership within the new SAERA conference brand.

This article analyses how conference spaces are used to activate or silence critical dialogue. It consciously chooses to assemble multiple vignettes from the events of the two conferences to paint a picture of the textual action of conferencing. Stylistically, the article is represented in two broad formats: the first conventionally reflects *academic dialogues* between data and the extant literature/theoretical field; and the second, a *poetic data representation* of the conference spaces. This representational device is marked with normative line-spacing in the conventional sections, and compressed line-spacing in the poetic inquiry (Miller, 2018). (The choice of "poetic form" is discussed later). The primary audience for this text are those who organise, manage and convene conference planning and programmes, as well as those who constitute presentations and panels within educational research spaces. How are discursive conference spaces being constructed (practically and epistemologically)? How do they reflect the agenda of achieving greater social justice in the (educational) research terrain? The poem constructs a metaphorical thread to promote coherence in the unfolding narrative that explores the phenomenon of the article.

The poem "**Loving Demons and disobedient Angels**" challenges binary dialogue across variant participants; instead, it suggests that conferences' spaces could be active confluences of political and sociological histories, pointing to the need for conscious new disruptions. Drawing on Mignolo's (2011) critique of how the oppressed internalise their oppression, the article suggests that conference participants need to be epistemically vigilant of the forces of hegemonic co-option. Rather than capitulate, as supporters of social justice, educational researchers have a responsibility to be epistemically disobedient (*ibid.*).

Loving demons and disobedient angels

Around 2006,
after more than ten years
of the new heaven of a new legal democracy
I escorted a group of novice researchers,
postgraduate students/newly appointed academics,
naïve angels perhaps
to report their research findings
about their collaborative research project.
"Who sits at the margins of schooling?"
This was
a Department for International Development (DfID-UK) project
reporting back from their empirical fieldwork
looking comparatively across different regions
in South Africa
where race was/is the defining re-organising device in post-apartheid schooling
and in India
where caste has been a historical theoretical marginalisation device.

These student papers eventually became sections in ananthology, "*Inside and outside the school gates"* (Samuel and Sayed, 2003) which argued that marginalisation in post-apartheid South Africa schooling supported (and perhaps still upholds) subtle disguised forms beyond overt racist prejudice. By 2006, (inter)national condemnation of racial apartheid was already well-established and the report critiques naïve hope that the deracialisation of schooling would automatically engender a new spatial democracy. In his commentary on Bozalek, Liebowitz, Carolissen and Boler's (2014) book, Henry Giroux instead endorsed the need for "critical hope" as an action-oriented agenda to theoretically and practically counter the expectation that simply desiring or legislating change will bring about a new utopia, a new heaven (blurb on the back cover of the book). This too, was the underpinning agenda of my 2006 postgraduate students: to activate a discourse on the need to expand beyond heavenly faith in policy alone as a source of deep change in apartheid mentalities. Giroux (*ibid.*) argued that naïve hope policy and governance responses were often complicit with neoliberal agendas disguised as solutions to past injustice. He commented:

"Instead of being bathed in utopian hope, education has become the dumping ground of neoliberal ideology, modes of governance and policy. "*Discerning critical hope in educational practices"* engages, interrogates and affirms the notion that educated hope is the precondition for not only modes of pedagogy and education that are faithful to the precepts of justice and human rights, but also to the primacy of politics and democracy itself. This book…offers a counterpoint to a neoliberal culture in which cynicism and despair have become a permanent feature" (*ibid.*: blurb).

This article suggests a need for critique of how advocates for educational change are being set up in adversarial roles (as "angels and demons") whilst ostensibly embracing an opening up of the discourse of educational theory. This critique is mooted not as a form of despair or cynicism, but as a critical search for how divergent groups dialogue with each other. However, could this search for dialogue be considered another strategy of defending a neoliberalistic agenda ("utopian hope") or is this indeed, a manifestation of "critical hope": conscious action towards social justice?

The Kenton 2006 experience

Our student panel aimed to engage the DfID (UK) project's findings
about how different conceptions of inclusion and exclusion
beyond race and caste
were defining characteristics of social oppression.
Symbolic forms of violence were being meted out
via a host of other alienating factors.
Learners' and teachers' reports of the marginalisation within schools
as reported in the students' studies
took on various forms:
Gendered expectations of performance in certain subjects;
Better academic ability as a recipe for marginalisation
within a largely underperforming school space;
Valuing of sporting prowess
which sometimes negated academic ability.
Black foreign learners being excluded because they did not share the dominant national culture;
Black township teachers' benchmarking of educational quality
in relation to White schooling
where they sent their own children;
Black parents' complicity with the hegemonic conceptions that
"White teachers equate with better teachers";
Culture
Gender, Academic ability,
Sporting prowess, Xenophobia.
Complicity with White normativity[1].
This is the manna that hegemony feeds on.
My naïve but confident students interpreted their role
as casting devilish ideas
amongst a sea of largely White guardians.

[1]These findings are reported in Samuel and Sayed, 2003.

The faithful guardians nodded:
"Apartheid had created a lack of Black academics to think
creatively, empirically or critically".
Heaven and hell were bound to collide.
*
Voices from the conference floor,
mainly the trumpet sounds of the White liberal defenders
deflected the theoretical challenges of a social justice agenda behind the students' work.
The superior angels argued that
"the studies did not speak the language of academic research"
"was clothed in the biases of self-pity"
"was disrespectful of the dominant (heavenly) theorists in the field"
"was not adopting the vocabulary of academic research".
Above all, the students' reports were seen to undervalue
the attempts of the angels
to rescue the down-trodden miscreants from the oppressions of apartheid.
The neoliberal agenda fluttered in the spreading of paternalistic wings.

It is expected that conference spaces will be infused with contestations of perspectives and worldviews, paradigms and methodologies, and arguments about representations and epistemology. However, this reaction to the attempt to raise social justice considerations was contested within the framed belief that the White schooling of apartheid was indeed the target that all South Africans should aspire to. The preferred theorists that had become the gods of the White historically-advantaged institutions expected the naïve demons to be the vanguards of old educational research quality. Bloch (2009) and Jansen and Black (2015) suggest that this discourse continues to dominate the landscape of South African schooling twenty years after democracy. External rather than localised culturally relevant knowledge epistemes were paraded as targets, sustaining Black educators' continued beliefs of deficiency. And another internal colonial agenda thrives. No wonder decolonisation and critiques of alienation of the marginalised within the higher education landscape have flared up in national public contestations (Habib, 2014).

I spent most of the time thereafter,
counselling my masters students:
"your worldviews are acceptable";
"your perspectives are equally valid";
"your academic research practices indeed do have merit."

But, they were not completely convinced.
They had been demoralised to believe that
their reading of their research worlds
were not acceptable interpretations of "educational research".
They believed they were indeed devils.

The following section draws on a personal reflective account of my invitation to and presentation at a panel discussion at a national SAERA conference (SAERA, 2017). I was keen to understand how social justice in educational research was being interpreted more than twenty years after the new democracy. The conference theme was "*Education in an era of decolonisation and transformation*" (October 2017) and the specific panel title was "*Is sociology of education pluralised or polarised? Reflecting on debates about education and social justice in South Africa*". My role was to serve as a respondent to a framing paper which was circulated before the conference. The panel arose out of an earlier colloquium held in June 2017 which aimed to explore divergent views on how to define, research and address matters of social justice within the educational landscape. The panel was expected to respond to the draft paper developed by the convenors of the panel to reflect the multiple interpretations of what and how social justice was understood and practised by higher education academics, non-governmental institutions and other research participants (students and supervisors of postgraduate research). It is not my intention to engage with the specific propositional content of the arguments presented in that orienting paper *per se*, as it is still being reformulated based on the input of the colloquium and conference inputs. My commentary below explores how the relationships of divergent partners are being brought together in the post-apartheid educational research landscape, and how

voices are heard or read. Like my students who presented at the earlier Kenton conference in 2006 more than ten years ago, I began questioning whether the space for educational dialogue is indeed being opened up. How do participants experience the conference dialogical space? Are we resorting to new or old framings of angels and demons?

These reflections and the poetic device adopted aim to show that this contestation is not a simple matter of presentations of dichotomies. The positions adopted by the divergent participants infuse recurring images that colour the theoretical space. The poetic device shows that despite colouring from different paint boxes, new portraits of conferencing and research explorations are emerging. In reflecting on the potential of "poetic inquiry" as an arts-based methodology, Miller's (2018) work in the field of care for the aged published in the *Journal of Qualitative Research in Psychology* comments that poetic inquiry, "is an emotional engaging way to interpret, represent and communicate research data…The poems provide an engaging, evocative and almost visceral experience of life in an aged care". This arts-based approach thus challenges notions that research work should be confined to rationalistic, evidence-based empirical data. Indeed, the data drawn for this paper has been extracted from field engagement, but is filtered artistically through the visceral dimension as a worthy source to interpret, present and communicate research findings that are simultaneously emotional, relational and theoretical. Miller (ibid.) comments that the emotive dimension of research and psychological practice is not yet fully harnessed as tools for building alternative ways of reading and experiencing the world. Narrativising is not a narcissistic indulgence, but a means to explore how we live storied lives that are fraught with recurring patterns as well as contesting paradoxes (Samuel, 2015).

The SAERA 2017 experience

Today, I am again feeling a reckoning forum:
I am expected to give account of my reading
of others' reading
of what social justice means.
I know that I must embrace the opportunity

to share my worldview.
But I am afraid that this agenda is merely
to position me into a pigeon-hole.
I am feeling
(and yes, my feelings matter)
that I am being asked to make choices between two options:
a "social realist position" and a "social constructionist position".
The framing paper frames me to respond to make these choices.

Despite the invitation to "open up the space to find common ground",
I feel boxed in.
The very choices are interpretations of the field.
I noted the orienting paper and conveners commenting that
they themselves do not necessarily agree with any of these positions.
So whose reading of the debate are we dealing with in this panel?

I am not a sociologist.
Nor am I a member of the academic tribe of the discipline of the "Sociology of Education".
Does this mean that I am excluded from presenting
my view
about what is social justice
and whether education can achieve this?

*

The framing paper argued that the **social realists (SR)** believe
that providing access to those who have been excluded from "*powerful knowledge*"
constitutes what is "social justice".
But: whose "powerful knowledge" is being referred to?
Can this "powerful knowledge" be neutral?
Or universal?

The framing authors argue the social realist position
is not equivalent to "*knowledge of the powerful*".
Knowledge should be delinked from its producers.

So too, perhaps, it assumes that
Knowledge should be delinked from the targeted
consumers of that knowledge.

This is a cop-out:
This suggests that knowledge can exist independent of those who produce or consume it.

So does this mean that I adhere to the "other camp"?
The framing paper calls this a **"social constructivist"** position
which argues that one cannot separate the "knower" from the "known":
What knowledge is, is deeply entwined with whose knowledge it is,
and how it functions to regulate
ways of knowing, seeing and being in the world.

*

A more radical version of a social constructivist view would argue
that the knowledge cannot be separated from the organs of *power* within the society.
Powerful forces include religious, social, cultural or economic forces:
those who seek to regulate the kind of knowledge/ knowing that are deemed accepted
/acceptable.
Knowledge is deeply implicated in
matters of marginalisation
silencing
privileging
excluding.

The organs of hegemonic control
ensure that those who challenge the edifices of the "powerful knowledge"
are constructed as antagonistic to the harmonious world order.
Organs of power are about instituting the angels and demons.
Its regulative potency is co-optive.
And many remain silenced,
subjugated
or are ex-communicated, if not be-headed.

And the holy war between angels and demons unleashes itself.
Romanticisation, stereotyping and essentialisings of "the other" dominate.
Buildings of barricades become the daily pursuit.

While concerns to uphold, defend and guard the citadels of powerful knowledge are complicit with epistemological marginalisation, genocide, alienation: "epistemicide" (Mignolo, 2011), they nevertheless, parade their worldviews as neutral and in the best interests of the oppressed. They offer incentives to accept its worldviews because they are showcased as the benchmarks of quality. Those who contest hegemonic worldviews are left feeling unheard, not up to scratch or simply not sufficiently academically rigorous.

These hegemonic forces not only exist *transnationally* (often depicted as a global north and south contestation) (see Samuel and Mariaye, 2017; Bozaleck, Leibowitz, Carolissen and Boler, 2014), but are also orchestrated *internally* (within nation states, and/or within tribal academic communities) (Becher and Trowler, 2001) especially by those who seek access to the power of cultural definition in a social system.

This raises for me the following broader concerns
about the agenda of this session:
on whose behalf
are we having this debate about the way education
can or cannot achieve/contribute towards social justice?

Who sets the terms of reference of how this debate is to be held?
Who /which forces of power chose to define?
Who is likely to benefit from this exploration of these concerns?
What is the agenda?
It is not about "what is the question?"
but about "what lies behind the question?"

While the (dominant) hegemonic forces often declare that the terrain is open to diverse perspectives, the underlying agenda becomes a co-optive force. Individuals who differ from powerful worldviews are being asked to display their perspective, not necessarily to be listened to, but simply to be heard. Space is offered to the outsider to reveal their divergence from normative values. This serves to silence rather than celebrate counter hegemonic worldviews. It could be understood as a byproduct of the performativity and accountability regimes that are supported by the neoliberal agenda. Increasingly, education decision-makers look to acknowledge the voices of those who mimic globalised knowledge systems and discourses. Therefore, "quality assurance systems" become systems to perpetuate these declared hegemonic benchmarks (Berkhout, 2006). Localised knowledges recede into oblivion and the powerful retain their ascendancy. Knowledge exchanges are thus infused with an agenda of negotiating power. I too, saw myself as wielding my own powerful positioning to define and critique the academic arguments in the panel. Whose knowledge was I jettisoning?

The above representation might incorrectly suggest that the matter of negotiating knowledge systems is a confined agenda within disciplines in higher education conferences. However, the agenda of centralising and peripheralising knowledges is also at play in how professionals choose to interpret their roles in the practice of their work. For example, some teachers within oppressive regimes interpret their responsibilities as limited to being "technicians of the state". Onwu and Sehoole (2011) critique those who increasingly choose to be dictated to about the hallmarks of educational quality. This further contributes to capitulation to a performativity culture which celebrates superficial rather than in-depth engagement with the kinds of knowledges they mediate with their learners. Technicians become complicit in the de-professionalisation of the teaching profession by their choice to be concerned only with measurement and control of learners' performance (Jansen, 2004). Test scores and examination systems become driven by displays of performance rather than deep engagement with knowledge.

Education quality and action

New marginalisations emerge in dichotomous spaces:

Some believe

educational quality is about providing access

to knowledge currencies to assist one to succeed in the globalising hegemony.

Others believe

education quality is about contesting epistemological supremacy, imposition and control.

Some prefer

educational action which celebrates achievements of "**the self**".

Others prefer

educational action which mandates the "**self in service of the wider social system**".

The self in service of humanity.

Some believe "All of the above".

Who are the angels and who are the demons?

However, binary options of beliefs and preferences of education quality and action tend to create more "cocooned states" and the borders of their worldviews increasingly become policed (Hargreaves, 1994; Lather, 1997). This is a recipe for inclusion and exclusion that does not open up dialogical spaces for disrupting each other, but sows more hostility.

Disruptions ought to acknowledge the value of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2011), which is a conscious attempt to recognise the puppet strings by which we are being manipulated. It is an opportunity to re-question in whose interests advocates propagate "chosen" worldviews about education quality (Hooks, 1994; Spivak, 2017). Who benefits from the worldviews that are professed (Samuel, Dhunpath &Amin, 2016)? What persons, paradigms, perspectives and privileges are we complicit in upholding or rejecting? And whom do we alienate in the process?

This opening-up is NOT a relativistic pluralism. It is a conscious effort to question the deeply embedded hegemonic agenda behind all forms of knowledge development. Pursuit of knowledge will always generate those who are included and those who are excluded.

Our responsibility in disrupting all forms of knowledge-making is to question whose agendas we are serving. This includes debates around caricaturing and stereotyping that accompany, for example, many agendas around the "decolonisation debate". Such agendas (given the consequences of the suppression and oppression of the past) often tend to polarise "us" against "them", or "us without them", which further undermines any future possibilities of collaborative solutions (Jansen, 2017). In these instances, the coloniser and the colonised are often inaccurately conceptualised as homogenous entities with definitive redemptive or demonising caricatures. Deeply pained by the histories of injustice, the oppressed understandably dream of a utopia where one can rid oneself of the oppressor. This could justify obliterating the oppressor if not through overt violence (and fire), but in more enduring symbolic patterns of exclusion, which exoticise or demonise "the other".

However, both the oppressed and the oppressor are already deeply intertwined in each other's existence. ***"Us is already embedded with them"*** and *"**them within us**" (ibid.)*. This suggests that the contestation between angels and demons is unlikely to yield a productive future. Elements of our personal identities already infuse elements of those whom we critique. We simultaneously bear characteristics of both angels and demons. We are both loving and demonising as both angels and demons; we are complex, intersected and unable to be untangled. Furthermore, it is recognised that as individual selves, we cannot be disconnected from a broader collective of other selves. Olivier (2017) suggests the need to transcend our selfish tendencies to privilege our personal, pleasure and profit agenda. He cautions that we have a constitutive responsibility to the next generation to guard the planet from our complicity in self-destruction.

Our research agendas can infuse social justice
when we abandon our need to canonise and demonise opposites.
We are loving demons and disobedient angels simultaneously.

Listen carefully to the wind.
It whispers loud noises which could implode our world.
Our agenda must save ourselves not for just ourselves

But to save the world.

Conference spaces must be for the demons and angels in us to flutter our wings.

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'Parental choice in the learning of Mauritian Kreol at school: the motivational factors'[1]

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ABSTRACT

Against a backdrop of doubt, fear[2] and contestation regarding language dynamics, we studied the motivational forces underpinning the decision of about 20% of Mauritian parents to enrol their children for the study of Mauritian Kreol (KM) as an optional subject for six years. A narrative methodology was used. The deployment of narrative inquiry allowed us to obtain rich, textured data from 11 participants and afforded us deep insights into the factors underlying their decision-making process. Biographical interviews conducted over a period of three months brought to the fore a plethora of individual experiences that had influenced the parents' decisions. The findings revealed that, even though the collective factors pertaining to ancestry, ethnicity, identity, culture and religion could not be negated, the choice of KM as optional language subject was notably influenced by personal factors. The first of these wasthe degree of academic support or coaching parents felt they could provide to their children. Second,parents' own language experiences and notions of language learningplayed a role. Third,parents felt they could attempt to reverse adverse patterns and representations that they had internalised during adolescence.

Keywords: Mauritian Kreol; Creole; parent choice, narrative inquiry, motivational factors.

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[2]The fear pertained, for example, to the fact that the learning of Mauritian Kreol (a French-lexified Kreol) would affect the learning of French, a compulsory subject at school until Grade 11.