



## THINK PIECE

## Learning, Living and Leading into Transgression – A reflection on decolonial praxis in a neoliberal world

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### Abstract

Three scholar activists from South Africa reflect on what it means to *transgress* the limits of a neoliberal world and its crisis times, particularly considering transgressions in the service of a decolonial future. The authors explore three questions: i) What kind of *learning* can help us transgress the status quo? ii) How do we extend this learning into a commitment to actively *living* in transgressive ways? iii) What does it mean to *lead* in ways that re-generate a transgressive ethic in a neoliberal world? In a dialogical conversation format, the authors outline nine different but interconnected perspectives on learning, living and leading into transgression, with the aim of concurrently revealing the multiple layers of work that a decolonial future depends on, while demonstrating the ambitions of a pluriversal decolonial future through their writing. The intertwined narrative is not conclusive, as the processes marked out in brief are experiences that still need to be fully practised in new relations in times to come within academia-in-society-and-the-world with human and more-than-human actors. However, they do offer a generative set of questions, concepts and metaphors to give courage to boundary-dwelling scholar activists attempting transgressive research. These reflections seek to regenerate the transgressive 'decolonial gestures' (decolonialfutures.net) that we can undertake in a neo-liberal world, as an important part of environment and sustainability education practices. It draws out what an embodied practice of transgressive learning can entail when we become discerning of hegemonic discourses that reproduce the status quo. We pay homage to those decolonial scholars in the field of environment and sustainability education as we traverse this terrain, recognising their imagination and the transgressive movement that has come before us, but importantly we seek to also open pathways for those yet to come.

**Keywords:** *transgressive learning, decoloniality, pluriversal, emancipatory visions, transformation, education, sustainability, Africa*

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## Introduction

Within environment and sustainability education, there is much boundary crossing, and navigating of plural ecosystems of knowledges, world-views, cosmo-visions and identities. There is therefore a need to generate creative and participatory instruments for surfacing these multiple worlds and multifaceted stories in meaningful and care-filled ways. The ecological crisis is a symptom of a systemic crisis in society, with its impacts most often felt first by those less resourced in modernist terms. Contemplating transgressive learning and the decolonial visions that it accompanies allows us to surface and traverse the fault lines of neo-liberalism as we embrace and chart potential and emerging regenerative futures. We recognise those who have started to chart this path before and alongside us. Sibongile Masuku, Edgar Neluvhalani, Rob O'Donoghue, Eureka Rosenberg, Mabongi Mtshali, Mba Manqele, Lesley le Grange, Soul Shava, Justin Lupele, Overson Shumba, Tsepo Mokuku, Million Belay, Charles Chikunda, Leigh Price, Mutizwa Mukute, Cryton Zazu, Jane Burt, Tichaona Pesanayi (late), Caleb Mandikonz, Charles Namafe, Dick Kachilonda, Anna James, and Priya Vallabh are a few that we can mention in the field of environment and sustainability education in southern Africa.<sup>1</sup> These pioneers, comrades and community of practice partners, together with our liberation leaders and African feminist scholars (cf. Burt, James & Price, 2019; Kulundu-Bolus, 2020 – too many to mention here) opened and are opening the road for decolonial praxis in environment and sustainability education in southern Africa and beyond its borders. It is on their shoulders and in their company that we move transgressively forward in our writings here.

This paper shares our three perspectives, as we, as scholar activists, reflect on what it may mean to *transgress* the limits of a neoliberal world and its crisis times in our research and praxis, in the service of a decolonial future. These reflections, crystallised during our participation in the International Science Council's Transformations to Sustainability T-learning project in which we were all engaged ([www.transgressivelearning.org](http://www.transgressivelearning.org)), are the fruits of decades of work in the context of South Africa, the southern Africa region, the continent and the world.

Our inquiries stem from an intergenerational and intersectional appreciation of South Africa's apartheid past and the colonial impacts on formal and informal learning processes in Africa more widely. The breadth of the work that pulled us into this conversation includes the nexus of working as researchers, educators and artist practitioners in and at the intersections of the fields of educational sociology, primary and early childhood education, higher education, ecological economics, politics, social justice, anthropology, social learning, sustainable rural development, agroecology, water security, and environmental justice. Here we have fought policy battles, crafted research reports and learning support materials, created learning opportunities for thousands of professional environmental educators and young people across many countries, supported small and large youth social movements, contributed to the shaping of eco-schools, programmes and learning networks such as Fundisa for Change ([www.fundisaforchange.co.za](http://www.fundisaforchange.co.za)) and T-learning ([www.transgressivelearning.org](http://www.transgressivelearning.org)), and engaged with the cutting edges of environmental justice coalitions, all the while developing critical pedagogies and learning pathways for cultural transformations towards sustainability, ecological citizenship, practice-based arts research and expansive social learning praxis.

Our work has been grounded in empathy and practices of care, transgressive social environmental learning, and fugitive ways of re-imagining and re-sourcing the lived practice of decolonial love; always holding women, young people, children and the most marginalised in our societies in mind, which at times includes not only people but those creatures that are dying out and the soil, waters and air being polluted due to human arrogance, extractivism and exploitation. This paper extends its emancipatory visions in ways that show concern for the dignity of human beings, all sentient beings and the Earth that sustains us.

The paper explores the answers to three questions:

- i) What kind of *learning* can help us transgress the status quo?
- ii) How do we extend this learning into a commitment to actively *living* in transgressive ways?
- iii) What does it mean to *lead* in ways that re-generate a transgressive ethic in a neoliberal world?

The paper is structured as a dialogical conversation that is receptive to different perspectives all at once. Within it, lie nine different but interconnected perspectives on learning, living and leading into transgression. The intention here is to reveal concurrently the multiple layers of work that a decolonial future depends on, while demonstrating the ambitions of a pluriversal decolonial future through our writing. An essential aspect of this future is an openness to many ways of being and knowing in the pursuit of emancipation. In doing so, the paper decolonises the prevalence of single authorship or a single narrative by signifying many starting points to an ongoing conversation. It guards against a superficial ordering of the world through one perspective by inviting the space for us to collectively unravel what is missing and what we feel is needed. The hope is that by thinking collectively we can begin to evolve past the inevitable 'blindsided-ness' of 'one single story' by harvesting the knowledge that sits within and between each offering (Adichie, 2009; Santos, 2014). This paper is inspired by the call and response tradition of singing in Africa, where one person sings a phrase, and inspired by their contribution, the crowd sings back; this becomes an intuitive ongoing iterative process of improvisation and meaning making together. It is this kind of call and response education that is needed for environment and sustainability education, an approach to learning and education that is contextually responsive, adaptive and moves towards solidarity in this time of crisis.

As such, this paper insists on pointing to different places at once. Its methodological refrain urges us to understand that we need to begin here, and here, and also here – all at once! It takes us beyond the binary bound ideas of a thesis and an anti-thesis, by juxtaposing different perspectives. In doing so, it tries to be honest about the complexity of the world by loosening the tyranny of human arrogance that tries to portray the world according to human thought (Dickinson & Goulet, 2010, p. 14). Instead, we seek to show human thought trying to awkwardly fit the complexity of the world (ibid.).

This methodology is an essential part of writing and thinking into a decolonial future. By showcasing the intersections between different perceptions we can begin to tune our ears to

what it means to listen to an ‘ecology of knowledges’ and more so, what it means to attend to a pluriversal way of understanding any subject matter (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Santos, 2014). At the heart of this is a re-generative project that seeks to provide loosely hanging threads as multiple entry points into a future that is distinct from the past. By doing so we endeavour to transgress...

the very heart of [a] social and symbolic system that has welded together Being, Subjectivity, Masculinity, compulsory Heterosexuality, and (Western) ethnocentrism [and Anthropocentrism]. (Braidotti, 2011, p. 31, our addition)

We seek to re-seed a decolonial future through a germ of multiple beginnings. This paper serves as a metaphor for the need for generous interactions across a myriad of voices waiting to arrive. Readers of this dialogue are equally asked to collaborate with the ideas presented here by actively holding the different threads of thought in tandem. Yours is the work of hearing the intonations held in these perspectives (as well as those that you hold) and actively weaving the possibility of their synthesis.

## On learning into transgression

### ***Injairu: Morphing towards an undivided future***

Learning into transgression means learning to see and feel into what parts of oneself and the collective are left outside the ontological demarcations of our current reality. It requires that we lean into the parts of ourselves and the collective that have been forced into exile by the status quo. This kind of learning requires a stripping away of conditioned norms that no longer serve us or that were never of us. This is an act of “making credible non-western knowledges and practices that were placed on the other side of the line by abyssal thinking” (Santos, 2014, p. 226). Going beyond abyssal thinking means constantly meeting oneself and one’s community at the borders of what dignity for the Earth and all sentient beings should be in this world. It compels us to actively redraw and even dismantle these borders. We can only do this by believing that we are worthy of the dignity of an undivided life, in which all parts of ourselves are permissible, not only some (Palmer, 2004, p. 17).

An important part of this process is the need for constant reflection in motion. This evokes questions such as: What are we learning right now? What are we currently creating from what we are learning? What does this serve? What still remains in exile? What does this mean for our individual change and what does this mean for collective solidarity? This is a re-generative ethic that consistently asks us to consider and submit into the fire that which does not serve the evolution of the highest good – conceived as an affirmation of a ‘good life or buen vivir’ for the Earth, humankind and all sentient beings (Santos, 2014, p. 3).

Transgressive learning is thus conceived as a “generative force of becoming” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 288), in which we resign ourselves to an understanding that: “the sustainability of the future rests on our ability to mobilize, actualize, and deploy cognitive, affective and ethical forces that had [have] not been activated thus far” (Braidotti, 2010, pp. 413, my addition). This

way of learning often means letting go of and giving death to even that which we have reclaimed at some point in our journey, that which may have given us the strength to exist and resist – but whose strength at another point in the journey may stagnate our further progression. James Baldwin put it well and simply when he stated that “any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 117). This means that we have to continually commit everything to a renegotiation that is always aligned to what can create more solidarity, more cohesion, more expressions of our true selves in the world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Santos, 2014; May, 2015).

This kind of learning asks us to consider how we are implicated in the state that we are in. It requires that we look for what is both oppressive and liberating within ourselves and in the world. It asks us to dare to “transcend ourselves” at each turn whilst we continue to hold the flame of what it means to be a human seeking justice for the Earth (Okri, 1997, pp. 61, 66). Transgressive learning is about a commitment to movement that inevitably asks us to shed our old skins. It is about writing oneself right up to this present moment, by making sure that you (in community with others) are your own latest update of what is missing and what is needed in the world as you understand it. It is about the audacity of affirming that this is the only world we have. We therefore ought to try and live into it fully – together. Transgressive learning is about returning again and again to the fact that we are bound in fate with each other and the Earth (Okri, 1997, p. 70 and that we are the only vessels through which the future that we are longing for can be seeded within the present.

### **Dylan: Decolonising the charade**

David Orr (2004, p. 11) quoted Thomas Merton (1985) who once identified modern education as the “mass production of people literally unfit for anything except to take part in an elaborate and completely artificial charade”. Decolonising this charade and the educational systems that uphold it, is the task at hand, and involves a refusal to participate in the parts of the charade that reinforce privilege and exclusion. Learning into transgressive decolonisation is most likely a process of ‘unlearning’ – identifying how we might ‘unlearn’ the enculturated ways of being that encourage and reinforce coloniality. A good place to start is where Donna Haraway (2016) found inspiration. She quoted Marilyn Strathern (1988) who inspired the phrase: ‘It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas (with)’. Learning into transgressive decolonisation must fundamentally be a practice of challenging the very ideas we use to think ideas with. Are these ideas a product of coloniality? Are these ideas even mine? Did I inherit them? Do I really believe them? How do these ideas conflict with other ideas? Focusing on the ideas we use to think, is also a process of investigating our very intentions, and the tensions inherent in our intentions. Might we call them *(in)tensions*? It is an introspective, uncomfortable and sometimes painful act that each of us must participate in. Questioning our *(in)tensions* within our ideas might challenge our identity, sense of self or more. ‘Learning into transgressive decolonisation’ is being comfortably uncomfortable with tensions, and seeing tensions as a vital mechanism of transgressive and generative social learning (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). In the same way that conflict transformation research (Rodriguez, 2002) sees conflict as an opportunity for transformation, we need to be unafraid of the troubling tensions that lie dormant in our inner

ideas. Donna Haraway (2016) provided another mantra that helps us in this process, as she urged us to be brave and learn to ‘stay with the trouble’.

### **Heila: Building low theory out of the dust of the old**

Transformative, transgressive learning embodies often radical desires and ambition for change. Its ambition in crisis times is transgressing taken for granted, stale and out-of-date boundaries and norms. The question arises whether something can emerge from the dust of the old, or whether we are aiming at disconnected, radical emergence of the new, like in Žižek’s (2014) event, or a complete about-turn of a different kind?

There is no doubt that decolonisation and transforming education requires expanding our imaginations. Our environments need to be rebuilt with the deployment of new passions. But this is not a neoliberal chase after change. Ambivalence arises when at times we need the same passions to hold at least some of that which is historically valued in place, and to establish the valued in the first instance. Surrounding oneself in such ambivalence is not easy, we may well find ourselves forced into permanent reflexivity, doubt and paralysis. But, we can do work to shake off paralysis, by really thinking carefully and critically about the work of enabling change in our society. More importantly, it is the work of transgressively embracing the unknown, challenging the dust of old, the stale out-of-date norms, and planting that which we desire most in their place. It is the work of transgressive learning in times of crisis (cf. Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2017).

But where do we find this kind of ambition around us today? Art has become retrospective, and theory’s utopia got stuck in the academy (Wark, 2011). Commenting on the mechanisms that produce theory’s utopia as end-point in the academy, McKenzie Wark (2011) eloquently warned that we should not ignore the way that “colonnades of founding fathers and new masters” (e.g. Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Deluze) continue to surround us. He suggested that frenzied academic work caught in the new neo-capitalist regime of intellectual property produces a rising consumer demand that even prompts some to “chisel statues of new demigods while they still live” (Wark, 2011, p. 2). Wark remarked that some in the USA (e.g. Butler, Spivak, Haraway) at least appreciate the “double bind of speaking for difference within the heart of the empire of difference” (2011, p. 2). He remained silent on scholarly work in Africa. Are we in danger of falling into the same runaway split, learning into what could be misplaced ambition?

At best theory, like art, turns on itself, living on through commentary, investing in its own death on credit. At worst, it rattles the chains of old ghosts ... **What has escaped the institutionalization of high theory** is the possibility of low theory, of a critical thought indifferent to the institutional forms of the academy or the art world. **A low theory dedicated to the practice that is critique and the critique that is practice.** (Wark, 2011, pp. 2-3, my emphasis)

*Think low theory for transformative, transgressive learning, as those to whom we pay homage in the introduction have also been doing.* The method for thinking and working with low theory

involves dwelling in or creating a situation, at the same time remembering older situations for the ways in which they can ignite future possibilities.

Re-visit. Re-new. Re-vitalise. Re-invent. Re-imagine. **Low theory.** Re-generate. Re-exist.

Shall we now take what can be worked with from Dewey, Vygotsky, Bhaskar and the developers of other ‘high theory’ (as and from when it existed) to create ‘low theory’ for our times in the form of critique and practices in the everyday that matter, in ways that can overcome the separated nature of specialised knowledge(s), transforming our learning as we go? This is perhaps evident in the work of those we pay homage to above, and of bell hooks (1994) who taught to transgress with inspiration from Paulo Freire, Audre Lorde and others, and Donna Haraway (2016) who re-invented science studies with cyborgs and feminism to stay with the trouble. Developing low theory is a method for expanding the imagination, in times that are tough, yet pregnant with possibility. Such possibilities emerge for us in the work of decolonial environment and sustainability education scholars such as Shava (2009), Le Grange (2012), O’Donoghue (2016), Masuku (2019), Mudokwani and Mukute (2019) and researchers such as Chilisa and Ntseane (2010), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), Gqola (2017) and Kumalo and Praeg (2019), amongst others, on our continent.

Mbembe, writing in 2017, stated:

In our world of hierarchical division, the idea of a common humanity is the object of many pious declarations. But it is far from being put into practice. Old colonial divisions have been replaced with various forms of apartheid, marginalisation, and structural destitution. Global processes of accumulation and expropriation in an increasingly brutal world economic system have created new forms of violence and inequality. Their spread has resulted in new forms of insecurity, undermining the capability of many to remain masters of their own lives. (p. 161)

Not giving in to this, Mbembe (2017) in response reminded us of Fanon’s method:

... a *‘situated thinking’* born of a lived experience that was always in progress, unstable and changing. An experience at the limits, full of risk, where the thinking subject reflected in full awareness on his [her] history, his [her] very existence, and his [her] own name, and in the name of the people to come, those yet to be born. (p. 161, emphasis original)

## On living into transgression

### **Dylan: Reinhabiting place**

When I think of living into transgression in the context of decolonisation, I am transported to the ‘places’ we live in, and challenging the colonial, neoliberal histories that occupy these places and govern how we are able to live in them. There are many invisible meanings and memories to the places we live in that need to be lifted out and expressed in order for us to live well together, and avoid colonial amnesia. Gruenewald’s (2003, p. 9) concept of reinhabitation as a process of decolonisation is useful here:

If reinhabitation involves learning to live well socially and ecologically in places that have been disrupted and injured, decolonisation involves learning to recognise disruption and injury and to address their causes.

Working with place can be a profound catalyst and means for embodying, locating and holding decolonial action (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Along with this thinking I find it useful to look at Elizabeth Henry's (2014) and Somerville's (2007, p.149) process of developing 'new place literacy', a process in which "place learning involves a contact zone of contested place stories", where "changing our relationship to place, means changing the stories we tell about those places". Living into transgression is not shying away from, but embracing contestation, disruption and indignation, and using these as formative forces.

Living into reinhabitation is fundamentally interconnected with ecological thinking. Here social justice in space/place, is inherently tied up with ecological justice (Gruenewald, 2003). Henry (2014) drew on Scully's (2012) aboriginal place-based education:

... as a practice of both social and ecological justice – and opportunity for Canadian learners to be in right relations to the peoples and the lands of Canada through territorially and culturally specific teachings – it is a combining of place-based education with aboriginal education ... that creates an important 'unsettling of learners, but a familiar place where they feel they have agency'. (Henry, 2014, p. 20)

Living into and learning from indigenous movements can be particularly useful in considering 'living into transgression', as shown by Pesanayi (2019) in his eloquent recovery of the cultures of agriculture in Africa as a foundation for expansive, transgressive learning with small-scale farmers and college lecturers. Grande's (2004) *Red Pedagogy* informed an indigenous perspective on decolonising pedagogies, which highlights the importance of indigenous sovereignty, self-determined and self-directed communities in place as the ultimate goal of decolonisation. In the Standing Rock movement we witnessed a profound union between 'living-in' into transgressive decolonisation, that was deeply embodied by place. As Martha Chavès from the T-learning Network (pers.comm., 2018; [www.transgressivelearning.org](http://www.transgressivelearning.org)) reminded us: resistance is a process of re-existing, or living in ways that allow us to re-exist despite the violent pressures of coloniality.

### **Heila: Escaping multi-form fractured selves**

Social exclusions have made us closed groups. Colonial intrusion and discord that fractured division of self, subject and collective must be exorcised (Mbembe, 2017). Layering the trouble with hyper-modernity and its cultural hypermedia influences, "it has become an impertinence to say 'we' ... The collective pronoun is to be distrusted. Only the self seems to be authentic" (Wark, 2011, p. 33). In a hyper-capitalist neo-coloniality, the world of 'Me!, Me!, Me!' shouts at us from selfie-sticks, blogs and self-framed social media sites. Eloquently stated by Wark, such a world is "... a world of free agents vainly attempting to establish themselves on the slender resumé of their own qualities" (Wark, 2011, p. 33). Historically fractured subjectivities, with

contemporary types of hyper-individualism, rob our imaginations while making us different, separating us from each other and world. The result is an inability to embrace the plurality and empathy necessary to think and act anew. While a deeply problematic legacy, we should not underestimate the power and potential of the space that this absence offers transgressive learning researchers-as-T-learners to regenerate and re-invent praxis as is being shown in contemporary transgressive learning research-as-learning projects in environment and sustainability education (McGarry, 2014; Burt, 2019; James, 2019; Mudokwani & Mukute, 2019; Pesanayi, 2019; Kulundu-Bolus, 2020).

The need is to transgress temptation to sync hypermodern selves with fractured selves. Achille Mbembe's reminder of how the colonial subject was produced via 'primordial displacement between the self and subject' calls for living transgression, recovery of *selves-in-community, situated in unfractured or at least less fractured worlds*. Colonial subjects were produced not only as the 'other', but also as nature-culture separatists in the mirror image of modernists. In such a setting, education must refract the processes of internal fracturing of selves (colonial and contemporary), of which the colonial West and now its extended globalised hypermodernity are guilty (Mbembe, 2017).

Cesaire's thought "put racism and colonialism on trial" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 156). His hope was for "an unconditional relationship with humanity". This remains an unfinished project, and must by contemporary necessity be extended to an unconditional relationship between people and planet, situated on a rapidly degrading planet, now in COVID crisis. Fanon's method was "to walk with others toward a world created together unendingly, irreversibly, within and through struggle" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 161). Such a method is what we have at our disposal today, as we seek to 'live transgression' in times where erstwhile and contemporary colonial transgressions and their aftermath in modernities of crisis conditions continue to require transgressing. In the spirit of the work that *low theory* can do, and as noted by Mbembe,

For a common world to emerge, critical thought had to be deployed like an artillery shell aimed at smashing, puncturing, and transforming the mineral and rocky wall and interosseous membrane of colonialism. It is this energy that made Fanon's thinking *metamorphic thought*. (2017, p. 162, emphasis original)

But the project of low theory is not only about launching critique, not only about smashing and puncturing. It must also be about restoring, reparation and regeneration. Creating new practices, activity, concepts and projects from the ashes that we sit in. The project of low theory is not simply an economic project, but a "process of reassembling amputated parts, repairing broken links, relaunching the forms of reciprocity without which there can be no progress for humanity" (Mbembe, 2017, p 182). It must also be about healing relations with the more-than-human, and reconstituting people-planet relations that are less destructive of the fabric of life. Seeing ourselves enmeshed in virus risk may help to steer creative forces.

### ***Injairu: Dancing between contradictory masks***<sup>2</sup>

Living into transgression is emerging into the world as your mirror. It means listening to the parts of yourself that are ‘triggered’ in your living world; the parts that are caught in fear in all its forms and the parts that can bring new life. Living into transgression means accounting for all the parts of yourself that are unresolved in the tensions that you see around you. It is about allowing the world to show you where its only healing and your only healing lies. An essential part of this reflective practice is understanding that our perception and relationship with the ‘other’ gives “the measure of our humanity, our courage, and our imagination” (Okri, 1997, p. 60). This is about bringing these messages that you hold about others home for you to scrutinise and learn with. We need to consider the sanctity of our choices in each moment by asking ourselves who we choose to be in the face of the world as it is. It is about listening to the reverberations of our actions by paying attention to the intentions that lie behind them.

Living into transgression asks us to witness the contradictions that play themselves out in the way that we live. This is a way of living that “reminds us of the painful gap between who we most truly are and the role we play in the so-called real world” (Palmer, 2004, p. 15). It asks us to position ourselves in the gulf between these contradictions as political praxis. This way of living must always be ready to unpack

... how it is that many equality strategies paradoxically legitimize and even expand the forms of violence and harm that they seek to dismantle, in large part because they do not depart from the binary logics and hierarchical processes that undergird inequality. (May, 2015, p. 82)

This commitment to non-binary ways of being and seeing are an important way for us to bring the complexity of the world home in its entirety. It opens up the space for us to act in alternative ways within everyday life and asks that we expand the possibilities and language around what these actions can be in the world. As the poet Rilke said: “take your practiced powers and stretch them out until they span the chasm between two contradictions” (1989, p. 261). Living in this way seeks to give life to an undergrowth of subversive possibilities capable of reshaping our world by de-centring the status quo. Pumla Gqola reminded us that the “activity between these two masked positions... is not simply struggle. You can dance there. And yes, there are ‘troubles and joys’” (2017, p. 11). This is an injunction to remember to joyously perform the creative release that can be found by placing oneself between troubling contradictions. Alice Walker (2010) similarly reminded us that “hard times require furious dancing”. For me this signifies the need for creative catharsis as part of living into transgression. This is how we stay alive to ourselves in the face of the resilience and complexity of a neoliberal world order.

It is this very life force that we need intact and whole in order to create a future worthy of our longing.

## On leading into transgression

### ***Injairu*: Relentless freedom experiments**

Leading into transgression means constantly asking ourselves how we can “resist the present, more specifically the injustice, violence, and vulgarity of the times, while being worthy of our times, so as to engage with them in a productive, albeit oppositional and affirmative manner” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 268).

The emphasis on working in ‘productive’ and ‘affirmative’ ways intimates that leading into transgression requires a sense of optimism geared at asserting the possibility of what could be, within the constraints of what is. Baldwin ruminated on how strange and essential our optimism is to our survival:

I can't be a pessimist, because I'm alive, to be a pessimist is to agree that human life is an academic matter. So I'm forced into being an optimist. I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever it is that we must survive. (Baldwin, 1963, n.p.)

In order to ‘survive what we must’ (ibid.), we need to have reverence for the learning and unlearning happening for everyone – because this is the only adequate place to start. Leading into transgression is an open invitation for each person to become more of themselves in response to what they reclaim as well as what they strip away. It implies the cultivation of a fierce and generous spirit capable of creating spaces that invite a multiplicity of being. It requires that we are vigilant to the hierarchical and binary bound colonial ethics of domination that play themselves out even in emancipatory spaces. We need to do this even whilst relentlessly experimenting with creating a kind of freedom for ourselves and each other across intersecting realities. Part of this ferocity entails owning the different responsibilities that are at play in order to create unity. Adichie squarely addressed the power asymmetries that need to be addressed as a part of this process: “The premise for empathy has to be equal humanity; it is an injustice to demand that the maligned identify with those who question their humanity” (2016, p. 1).

Leading into transgression acknowledges that we need to create an example of what freedom looks like – even when we are unsure of what it is or the language we need to use to call it into being (Smith, 2013, p. 274). It is about being lost together on the way to the future whilst insisting that this place we create right now is worthy of this unknown future. In order to do this, we need to dare to create a vision together while listening intently to what the space we are currently creating enables or inadvertently shuts down. The question to come back to as a collective is: What does this serve and what kind of future will it create in its wake? We cannot gamble the future by creating additional ‘isms’ and ‘schisms’ in the present from which we will have to recover later. It means embracing the fullness of that vision now in fierce and generous ways. Embedded in this practice is the necessity of making sure that the ‘safe spaces’ that we create are not an “escape from the real, but a place to *practice the real* we want to bring into being” (Smith, 2013, p. 277, my emphasis). This is a movement to uncover the full potential of being human, in a world that has purposefully set dangerous limits to

this. We can only do this by being fully aware of the two sides of our power and two sides of our love and to practise moving fluidly between the regenerative and emancipatory potential that sits within both of these impulses (Kahane, 2010, pp. 129, 134). Attending to solidarity in edgy ways is an important aspect of this. Here we need to try and lead each other into “a conception solidarity that hinges on radical differences and that insists on relationships of incommensurable interdependency” (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012, p. 46). Again, we might not always know how to do this, but we must lead in ways that try to bring this intersectional complexity into play.

### **Dylan: Solidarity within intersectional movements**

A key consideration for leading into transgression is encouraging solidarity within intersectional movements. This being said, solidarity can easily be conflated with unconditional unity, assimilation and wholesale ‘like-mindedness’. It is important to be aware that only some common interests are brought together in solidarity movements, while other interests, world-views and values might not directly relate to those commonalities. What effectively enables solidarity must be sensitively and delicately considered in transgressive leadership. Pellow’s (2016) work on solidarity and intersectionality in critical environmental justice is vital in this context, as often coloniality plays out in the form of enforcing a ‘we are all one’ ethos which drowns out difference, individuality and indigenous, brown, queer and more-than-human voices, in what he calls the ‘assimilationist’ perspective. Pellow (2016, p. 11) highlighted the importance of “racial indispensability [when referring to people of colour] and socioecological indispensability [when referring to broader communities within and across the human/more-than-human divide and their relationships to one another and the wider ecosystem]”. His concern is that an assimilationist perspective can often involuntarily and violently incorporate ‘others’ into one’s own vision of a society (Smith, 2005; see also Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2012). Rather, Pellow’s (2016) indispensability saw all communities (more-than-human and human) as interconnected, interdependent, but also *sovereign*.

It is in this space between sovereignty and solidarity that transgressive leadership lies, or as Bhaskar (2008) articulated it, the ‘pulse of freedom’ lies in the tension between freedom and solidarity. Each individual requires the space to express this sovereignty and flexibility within the collective. Queer theory throws us a lifeline; fairn herising (2005) proposes the possibility of ex-centric research and queer flexibility as a means to sensitively navigate assimilationist perspectives. In the context of transgressive learning in universities, Temper, McGarry and Weber (2018) in their *Tarot of Transgressive Research* highlighted the power of ex-centric research and leadership which uses the research process itself to disrupt the academy’s exclusion of marginalised voices, by centring subjugated knowledges and advocating for their epistemic value. Queer flexibility is a useful ally in leading into transgression, as it implies an ongoing opposition to the status quo by challenging the idea that identity is static, and provides for transgressive methodologies that can be used as tools to disrupt hegemonic, normalised, and naturalised structures within academia.

### **Heila: Leading from the situation**

Creating new practices and projects from the ashes that we sit in requires *leading from the situation*, putting our living realities in focus, and ‘staying with the trouble’ as Haraway (2016) would put it. Here the living realities are those of everyday life where relationality between human/human and human/more-than-human intersect in daily struggles. The charge is to mend the metonymic fragments of the myriad social rifts between people founded via the colonial and apartheid atrocities,<sup>3</sup> and the myriad ‘metabolic rifts’ (Wark, 2015) to be found between people and degraded soil, between people and feral carbon, people and polluted water, people and coronavirus particles lingering in the air, and more. We need stronger subjectivities grounded in new relationalities, and for a stronger objectivity to prevail; not the fractured subjectivities noted above (in living into transgression), or the objectivity consecrated via the lens of the scientific method alone, but an objectivity that is more relational, and “grounded in a more extensive series of mediating links in the production of knowledge available for scrutiny” (Wark, 2015, p.146).

This is life beyond the peer-reviewed journal article. There can be no simple retreat into academic journals as an indicator of impact when there is racism, and no food, shelter, safety or love for the world. It is “the production and reproduction of our species-being, whatever it may be, that has to be a central concern of any critical knowledge” (Wark, 2015, p. 146) in the academy-as-linked-to-its-society.

Cohen and Colebrook (2016, p. 8) commented on the contemporary condition:

Insofar as there is a ‘we’ or an ‘us’, we cannot say, in good conscience, that we only found out that we were destructive once it was too late. The formation of a ‘we’ is generated from destruction and from the recognition of destruction: humanity as global anthropos comes into being **with** the Anthropocene,<sup>4</sup> with the declaration that there is a unity to the species, and that this unity lies in its power to mark the planet.

In this we recognise that *leading from the situation* is not a locally inscribed transgressive endeavour only, but is intertwined with our relationality to the wider planet, where we, *Sapiens*, with our immense diversities, are but one species, part of the multiplicity, and all have to reverse and transgress the already-made *problématique* of coloniality and planetary boundaries for a viable collective future to emerge.

Leading from the situation will require transgressions in the academy between academe, people and worlds. Inside of the academy, this requires disciplinary transgressions in which the humanities can ask difficult questions in a scientific border zone, while also speaking knowledgeably about sciences in a humanities border zone, and vice versa. Our teaching, research and community praxis is and must be border zone agile, and be “intensely local and global at the same time”.<sup>5</sup>

## Non-conclusion, cross current reflections and parting thoughts

### **Heila: Non-conclusion**

Most academic papers present an introduction, methodology, discussion and conclusion. Our think piece troubled this construction, instead sharing intertwining thoughts on an as-yet inadequately explored phenomenon. This conclusion is therefore a non-conclusion in the sense that the wider discussion of which this forms part, lies wide open before us. Across this paper we have sought to mark out some of the dynamics of what learning, living and leading into transgression might look like in a world where all have a place to be.

With this as background, our think piece traverses a range of what we see as nine important processes needed for habitable futures. These are morphing towards an undivided future (learning), dancing between contradictory masks (living), and engaging in relentless experiments with freedom (leading) [discussed by Injairu], decolonising the charade (learning), re-inhabiting place (living), and practising solidarity within intersectional movements (leading) [discussed by Dylan]. My own contributions join this intertwined story, with thoughts of how we might build low theory out of the dust of the old (learning), escape multi-form fractured selves (living), and lead from the situation (leading). Our intertwined narrative is not conclusive – nor can it be – as the processes marked out in brief are experiences that still need to be fully practised in new relations in times to come, and in academia-in-society-and-the-world.

### **Dylan: Cross-current reflections – Transgressing nostalgia**

This think piece is an embodied expression of learning, living and leading into transgression. The autonomy and freedom the three of us have had to explore and express the key ideas that captivate or haunt us in transgressive decolonisation is a *living* into transgression. This work, as detailed in this paper, is an embodiment of moving beyond abyssal thinking, gifting each other our attentive, empathetic and critical hearts and minds, with less nostalgia and more re-imagining. Within this multi-voiced, thickly described and multi-layered rendering (Ellingson, 2009) is perhaps a version of Wark's 'low theory'. The perils of the great nostalgia and its trappings might hinder our next steps. In times of peril and transformation, a danger may lie in tendencies to hold onto that which is dying. Here we see daily how political, economic and cultural leaders draw on nostalgia for answers.

Nostalgia is a dangerous habit and hard to break; the oppressive slogan 'let's make america great again' and the racism and prejudice it has created, reveals much about this tendency. What we need instead is a new dreaming of the future; tangible expressions of futures that tend to Heila's concerns regarding the fracturing of subjectivities; and enlivening of Injairu's plea for relentless experiments with freedom. If we are to be nostalgic about anything, it will need to be about something deeper, and further away than our recent capitalist past. If knowledges today are ecological, then like biophysical ecosystems today, these knowledges may be eroded, dammed, marred, poisoned and exploited, and further fractured by obsessions with misguided, dystopian nostalgia. Nostalgia is a reflex of fear, and in times of transgression may be our Achilles heel. Change from what we know is hard, and re-imagining with brave utopian imagination is what may be needed next.

### ***Injairu: Parting thoughts***

At the end of this dialogical discussion, I am struck by how much we are collectively holding in the balance as we edge towards decolonial futures. The work involves a self-reflective practice that acts out in the world. Dylan emphasised that it is a practice bound in interdependence that also requires sovereignty. It responds to many levels of institutional and state orchestrated harm that are resilient and pernicious in the way they commodify emancipation. The contradictions that such a practice emerges from can be confounding. The rational mind alone struggles to hold onto what must be held in the balance to create a future that is different from the past. Perhaps then it is fitting to also retire from dissecting these issues from a purely logical rational perspective. This is perhaps a source of the paralysis of which Heila wrote; a potential second guessing of every move; a place where the vitality of one's presence is diminished and incapacitated by the weight of history and the asylum it holds in the present.

These parting thoughts feed an urgency to remind us to stay courageously fluid and in motion in and through the spaces we find ourselves; to shake loose the discourse in a way that allows us to move out of a tight frame of reference. And to be light and buoyant enough to find the re-generative spaces in between. We purposefully sought to explore *learning, living* and *leading* (all doing words!) in order to contribute to a conversation that can collectively embolden our actions. Inspired by those to whom we paid homage at the start of this paper, we aim for expansive, transgressive learning that may allow our words and works to serve as proponents of low theory thinking – something that we can dance with and test the limits of in our waking worlds. May we recognise each other as transformative and transgressive agents in the world by the embodied love that we have, for the world, for the future, and for the dignity of our own souls.

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### **Endnotes**

1. These scholars have produced a large body of research work, much of which can be found in back editions of the SAJEE (available as open access material on <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/sajee>). Other examples of their work can be found in the edited monograph by Janse van Rensburg et al. (2002); more recent edited books by Lotz-Sisitka, Shumba, Lupele & Wilmot (2017), Price and Lotz-Sisitka (2016), Corcoran et al., (2017), amongst other journals and books. A fuller set of references to how much of this work has been

oriented towards a decolonial ‘politics of potentia’, can be found in Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2020). Instead of referencing all of the works, we provide access to the works via the above links and volumes.

2. Gqola, 2017, p.11
3. A good example of such a metonymic rift is the use of racial categories in official documentation to refer to people (e.g. Black African, or White, or Indian, instead of reference to a person).
4. In using the term ‘Anthropocene’ we recognise the often apolitical nature of the term, and note that it is only a few humans who, at the expense of others, have produced the metabolic rifts named under the banner of the ‘Anthropocene’ (Wark, 2015; Haraway, 2016).
5. A phrase used at a recent Rhodes University transformation summit.

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### Percentage contribution

Areas of contribution	Author	Percentage contribution
Conception or design of the paper, theory or key argument	Kulundu-Bolus	33.33 %
	McGarry	33.33 %
	Lotz-Sisitka	33.33 %
Drafting the paper	Kulundu-Bolus	36 %
	McGarry	32 %
	Lotz-Sisitka	32 %
Critical review of the paper	Kulundu-Bolus	33.33 %
	McGarry	33.33 %
	Lotz-Sisitka	33.33 %

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