

THE SEARCH FOR ECOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE ENCOUNTER WITH AFRICAN EPISTEMICIDE IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the manufactured absence of African epistemologies, that we refer to as 'epistemicide', in formal education in Africa. The exemplifying case for our argument is the western hegemonic positioning of university and school-based knowledge in South African education during the past 20 years. This is taken up in the first half of the article where we illustrate how this (westernised) knowledge form is instantiated in the education body politik. The



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article concludes with a consideration of an 'ecologies of knowledge' approach which we argue opens a radicalising space for the inclusion of African-centred epistemologies. The pluralisation of knowledge traditions, via an 'ecologies of knowledge' approach, is the fulcrum of such an epistemological orientation.

Keywords: post-colonialism, epistemicide, higher education, cognitive in/justice, ecologies of knowledge, knowledge pluralisation, epistemology

INTRODUCTION

African epistemology has always had a marginal place in post-colonial African and global discourse largely due to its colonial history. Despite Africa's long-term post-colonial state the normativising effect of colonialism on marginalising African knowledge remains intact on the continent and is currently reproduced in various forms. This stranglehold effect is most evident in the western hegemonic positioning of school and university-based knowledge in post-apartheid South African education during the last twenty years (Gulson and Fataar 2011). Our argument in this article centres on the relationship between a western (post)colonial form of education on the African continent and the production of African 'epistemicide' within (South) Africa's contemporary education system. Epistemicide is used in this article as a metaphor for the epistemological marginalisation, or evisceration of African-centred intellectual traditions in formal education. Considering the complex cultural, political and social constructs of knowledge across the African continent, we have deliberately attempted to refrain from providing a static definition of African knowledge systems. For purposes of this article, we contextualise African knowledge as a reference to the embodied epistemologies of previously colonised/marginalised people on the African continent.

Epistemicide, we argue, is a product of the constant hegemonic western science model of knowledge construction, production and consumption that unproblematically circulates within education discourse and practice on the African continent as relevant, valuable and best practice. While we engage with various scholars on the issue of epistemicide, we specifically utilise Santos's (2014) concept of 'cognitive injustice' to illustrate how it produces 'epistemicide' and upholds the status quo of abyssal epistemology (Santos 1996; 2001; 2007) and as such fails to recognise (1) different ways of knowing; (2) the relevance of such knowing within particular socio-cultural and political educational contexts; and (3) how the failure of formal education to include the different ways of knowing within school and university-based knowledge systems create epistemological inequity, imbalance and conflict within educational and societal structures. Considering that South Africa's post-apartheid democracy is based on a social justice framework, it is important to analyse how South Africa's social justice ideology, policy and initiatives address

cognitive in/justice as part of its decolonising project (Subreenduth 2013a). In this article, we begin with a brief delineation of the key concepts used to inform our analysis – cognitive in/justice, epistemicide and abyssal epistemology. We then discuss how cognitive in/justice produces epistemicide which upholds abyssal epistemology. We do this by providing some exemplification for education policy and practice in South Africa to demonstrate the constitutive nature of cognitive in/justice. We conclude the article with an argument for an ‘ecologies of knowledge’ conception of educational work, which emphasises the need for critical engagement with the full range of knowledges that constitute academic or scholarly engagement.

COGNITIVE IN/JUSTICE AND ABYSSAL EPISTEMOLOGY

The concept of cognitive justice, coined by Visvanathan (2009), is based on the recognition of the conceptual equivalence of different knowledge forms and their co-existence. Visvanathan (2009) argues that different knowledge traditions are connected with different cultures and lifestyles and should therefore be treated equally. Cognitive justice promotes the recognition of alternative knowledges by enabling dialogue between what is often regarded as incommensurable knowledges. It is the conceptual terms of working with this apparent incommensurability that we, in this article, call attention to. We additionally align our views with Odora Hoppers who, for example, argues that indigenous knowledges have to be included in dialogues between knowledges without having to fit into the structures and standards of western knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is one knowledge form that has marginal status in the academy and education on the continent more generally. Other marginal knowledges include worker knowledge, non-formal adult literacy, and various popular or community knowledges. Odora Hoppers (2009, 604–606) points out that when indigenous knowledges (and other excluded knowledges) are treated equally, they would be in a position to play their role in making a more democratic and dialogical science, which remains connected to the livelihoods and survival of all cultures. Continuing in this vein, Santos (2014) argues that a claim for social justice cannot be advanced unless cognitive in/justice is addressed.

Building on Santos’ claim, we argue that cognitive in/justice is a referent for the failure of the singular knowledge hegemony in South African universities (see Ramose 2003), as well as the general education politik, to recognise that people utilise socio-cultural knowledges to give meaning to their lives and that these knowledges therefore have epistemological validity. In the South African case, the singular, colonially inspired, western knowledge hegemony, established over a long period of time and across multiple governance orientations, is evidence of how western hegemony creates impenetrable epistemological enclosures when left unchallenged. The result is a denial of space for alternative African-centred knowledge forms to

become part of interactive heterodox knowledge traditions and conversations around education in general and at the South African university level in particular. This situation, for example, prevents the South African university from emerging as a site of knowledge pluralism and cultural inclusion.

Santos characterises the hold of western epistemological global dominance as ‘abyssal epistemology’ (see 2007; 2009; 2014). He explains that:

Modern western thinking is abyssal thinking. It consists of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of ‘this side of the line’ [western epistemology] and the realm of ‘the other side of the line’ [non-Western epistemology]. The division is such that ‘the other side of the line’ vanishes as reality becomes non-existent. Non-existent means not existing in any comprehensible way of being. Whatever is produced as non-existent is radically excluded because it lies beyond the realm of what the accepted conception of inclusion considers to be its other (Santos 2014, 1).

Santos proposes an understanding of western knowledge domination (abyssal epistemology) that is based on the non-existence or evisceration of other forms of knowledge. The success of western knowledge in fact depends on rendering other knowledges invisible. As noted above, this was the case during colonial and apartheid rule in South Africa (see Cross 1986, 185–200). Abyssal (western) epistemology could thus be regarded as complicit in producing the epistemicide of African knowledges. Abyssal epistemology has created such a deep rooted and normalised epistemological enclosure that it prevents the emergence of critical African knowledge forms to circulate in any substantive way within the dominant knowledge system. This situation, we argue, is exemplified in the dominant approaches to educational policy, knowledge, curriculum, pedagogy and research on the African continent and is evident in the South African case. Abyssal thinking is what underpins educational and knowledge transfer systems in African countries such as South Africa, producing a certain kind of knowledge as hegemonic, a certain kind of knowing and a certain kind of knower, all in sum adding up to a western form that is so saturated and thus normalised in knowledge systems that it is impossible to discern its insidious intentions of evisceration (Subreenduth 2013a). We also acknowledge that the dominance of western epistemology is a global problem that manifests differently in various contexts and across Africa. Keeping this in mind, we utilise South Africa as the context from which to analyse and understand epistemicide on the African continent. In this article, we utilise abyssal epistemology and epistemicide as analytical constructs to elucidate how cognitive in/justice plays out in the South African context.

EPISTEMICIDE AS A RESULT OF ABYSSAL EPISTEMOLOGY

The absence of African-centred knowledges and discourses within the formal knowledge systems of schools and universities on the African continent is the contrived manifestation of abyssal epistemology. In spite of this absence, African knowledge systems abound in a myriad informal education, community and local, traditional, urban and rural spaces (see Odora Hoppers 2000; 2009). However, Odora Hoppers (2001, 75) further explains that the absence of African-centred knowledges in formal education is illustrated by a situation where

subject contents are dumped onto children without any efforts to ensure that they first understand the subject in relation to their lived reality, a reality in which what is to be acquired via the school may only be a small part. In tertiary institutions, the intensity becomes more alarming. All the disciplines crucial to national development such as science, law, sociology and political science are not anchored in, or linked to any culture but the western one. Where African culture is brought up (often only in passing), it is presented as devoid of any epistemological content.

Odora Hoppers' (2001) characterisation of contemporary educational and curriculum practices mirrors that of the colonial approach to teaching content, which was devoid of the cultural epistemologies of local people. South Africa's convoluted colonial and apartheid eras eviscerated any recognition of African knowledge as an integral part of its educational system and forcefully created cognitive in/justice through violent indoctrination. Fraught with inherent power dynamics over what knowledge is legitimate, both eras produced and instantiated western epistemology in the public domain as normalised and therefore hegemonic knowledge. The continued absence of African cultural epistemological content in relation to academic content, so powerfully described by Odora Hoppers (2009), is what produces cognitive in/justice and confers the status of epistemicide of African knowledges within the formal education systems on the African continent.

In reviewing contemporary South Africa, despite two decades of democracy, the country has not been able to shake off the taken for granted western knowledge, the repetitive and normalised colonial and apartheid knowledge that rendered African knowledge to non-existence within formal educational structures. While such invisibility of African knowledge was created to appear as normalised, the argument presented here is *not* that it is the non-existence of African knowledges that informs this absence, rather it is their manufactured marginalisation by dominant knowledge processes that confer on them the status of non-use, non-value and non-visibility within formal education system. This refers to Santos's discussion of the lines of separation created by abyssal epistemologies where social reality is divided into two realms: 'this side of the line' (western epistemology) and the realm of 'the other side of the line' (non-Western epistemology) (Santos 2014). Santos's argument is about

the invisibility of African knowledge in the presence of western abyssal knowledge. Even when African knowledge and history are included in formal texts, curricula or educational policy, it is often exoticised and/or uncritically added as a checklist of inclusion.

Epistemicidal thinking is the product of active processes of production through political and policy contestations in and around the state and socio-educational networks, in nation states, through networked activity across various scales, involving global policy production, social and academic networks, and local political activity (see Fataar 2006; 2011). In the next section, we discuss how epistemicide is actively produced and comes to constitute the singular knowledge mode embedded in the education body politik.

THE MODERN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

Questions that arise in light of knowledge marginalisation centre on how cognitive in/justice is generated through abyssal thinking that is produced and circulated in and through the academy or modern African university. There are at least two logics of epistemicide that take place within the academy and that establish and circulate abyssal thinking through their intellectual stances. The first is the severance of the knower from knowledge constructions (Maton 2000). This logic works because within the academy knowledge and epistemology are settled, canons are established ready for curriculum packaging and pedagogical transfer. This is based on the assumption that knower discourses (the African knower) must be distinct and kept separate from settled modern scientific knowledge. Conflating African knowers, their identifications, knowledges, politics, their ontological being and becoming, with modern scientific knowledge, according to the logic would sully settled modern knowledge, troubling knowledge itself and access to knowledge would be compromised. The argument is thus made that knower discourses be kept separate from modern knowledge discourses and that the academy is actively involved in this epistemic separation. They reproduce the myth that modern knowledge is settled knowledge. The political intent is to promote abyssal thinking and thereby secure African epistemicide, based on an on-going evisceration of black knowledges, ontologies, politics and subjective constructions, keeping these from entering academic and intellectual consciousness.

The second move to secure African epistemicide is through what we would call a type of research empiricism, that is, the mobilisation of research that confirms the epistemological/intellectual deficits of the African knower. This view mobilises research to advance a knowledge base about the African educational subject made up of an endless circulation of what is known. The research mode is neither generative nor critical. It, for example, circulates settled understandings of African education, that is, systemic collapse, curriculum failure and teachers and students' weaknesses

and shortcomings. Research questions concentrate on this failure, confirming its existence, a clear case of asking familiar questions and finding familiar answers. Post-positivist methods are employed to set familiar variables in familiar relationships with one another, creating familiar research outcomes, based on confirmation of widespread educational malfunction, and the conceptual deficits of teachers and students. It never really tells us anything new.

This type of research explains deficit in functional terms as a kind of lack, and suggests, implicitly and explicitly, the existence of a certain kind of axiomatic normative functionalism. Abyssal research confirms the deficit view of the African subject. The solution that follows confirms the need for narrow understandings of what needs to be fixed. This is accompanied by an untrammelled commitment to a narrow western formal school curriculum with little to no space for alternative epistemologies or for critical appropriations.

There is simply no space for African centred discourse infusion or the critical appropriations of, for example, African indigenous knowledges, or a critical focus on black consciousness thinking. These are presented and dismissed as a knower-inspired diversion from the immersion into the western coda. The educational deficits of the modern African subject are presented as in need of fixing. Their identities, knowledges and consciousness mobilisations are deemed to get in the way of this modern western project.

THE NULL PEDAGOGY VIEW OF HUMANS IN EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

Even in post-colonial states that claim as part of their decolonising projects a re-centring of indigenous/African knowledge (Subreenduth 2006), we offer the view that conditions for the dominance of such epistemicide are continually struggled over in the educational body politik as it articulates the messy and complex process of decolonising knowledge construction, production and consumption (Subreenduth 2006, 640). The dominant view considers knowledge to be formal, western and modern, predetermined, and unquestioned – what is required is a simple focus on knowledge transmission – the transmission of the abyssal knowledge that instantiates epistemicide and leaves no space for alternative knowledges, black knowledges, and critical appropriations of other ways of knowing. As a result of this knowledge/power mobilisation, epistemology is perpetually severed from ontology and axiology. There is little to no space for critical knowledge pluralism, broader and more engaging and inclusive curricula approaches and no space for creative pedagogical work. What is dominant is the transfer of closed modern, western epistemologies, curricula with no space for alternative ways of knowing, and pedagogy, and learning and teaching that concentrates on ‘simple transfer’ of abyssal knowledge.

We argue that the epistemicide of African knowledge is not the product of closed or *a priori* determined educational outcomes, but it is instantiated in adaptive knowledge systems that involve governmental processes, curricula fora and the modern day university. For example, South Africa's multiple educational policy and curricular changes since its transition to a democratic state evidence the vicious hold that western abyssal knowledge system has on post-colonial states. We have witnessed an impressive panoply of education policies during the democratic period (see Fataar 2011). Many iterations of policy making accompanied South Africa's search for an educational platform to address its complex legacy of inequality while searching for the appropriate policy mix to establish a sustainable and inclusive education system (Fataar 2006). In this light, political and policy contestation centred on appropriate curriculum orientations for universities and schools. These debates were settled largely by the instantiation of a narrow epistemological approach to knowledge chiefly driven by the assumption that the development stage of South Africa's teachers and students requires a restricted knowledge orientation. What arguably settled on the educational discursive terrain was a narrow, singular knowledge tradition that effectively side-lined a pluralised view that laid emphasis on equivalence among different knowledges and an active appreciation and engagement with different knowledge traditions.

As indicated above, this situation came about as a result of knowledge contestation. We do not subscribe to a static view of knowledge reproduction whereby knowledge is handed down from generation to generation. Knowledge hegemonies are not pre-given states. They are the result of political and policy contestation, popular media mobilisation, alliances, and tactical deployments of knowledge as power. The politics of knowledge is constituted in and through power struggles about certain ways of knowing. These get produced in governmental fora, academic and textbook production, by policy think tanks and networks, and in intellectual sites such as academic departments and research projects. The South African example illustrates how knowledge-power mobilisations have occurred around the notion of 'education in crisis' to situate a narrow formal school coda. Making available 'powerful knowledge' or the 'knowledge of power' (read formal, western knowledge) is the political response to the educational crisis.

We argue that a static view of schooling is at work in the abyssal knowledge orientation at play in the South African context. School education, we suggest, is based on a deficit view of children, teachers and school contexts. They possess what Mignolo (2009) calls a null pedagogy, a null epistemology – the idea that African teachers and students possess limited cognitive capacity, and little to no critical intellectual processing skills and capacity. African teachers are viewed in deficit terms as bearers of pathology, as unsophisticated readers, as professionals who can only manage simple transfer pedagogies while African children are viewed as uncritical knowledge consumers. African cultures are portrayed as fatalistic and revelatory

(see Guthrie 2013), in other words, their cultural-ontological make-up renders them preponderant for rote-learning, formalistic pedagogies and tightly scripted curricula. The quotation below from Guthrie (2013, 121) illustrates and provides justification for our argument:

Africa's many formalistic, teacher-centred traditions require students to learn revealed knowledge. This paradigm contrasts with the internationally encouraged progressive paradigm, which is based on incongruent epistemological assumptions and educational values that are widely regarded as embedded in Western notions of political and cultural superiority ... finding it consistent with the view that traditional formalistic teaching is appropriate for school teachers and students in cultures where epistemology is revelatory rather than scientific – in those cultures where it is appropriate, formalism is both a legitimate method and a legitimate end point. The future for improving the level of teaching in such countries lies in operating within the constraints of formalistic systems to improve the quality of formalism. The productive approach is to take this culturally intuitive teaching style and develop it further, rather than trying unproductively to have teachers adopt methods that are counter-intuitive to them.

Guthrie's view is an example of dominant thinking about school knowledge, curriculum and teacher pedagogy based on the view that African children come from static and determinist revelatory (read non-rational) cultures for whom only formalistic teaching is appropriate. This is based on simplistic developmental thinking that views human progress in terms of cultural stasis, hierarchies and stages. Africans are thought of as at an earlier stage of development and therefore require an educational systemic and curricular approach commensurate with this developmental stage. This type of thinking circulates within transnational development organisations and loan agencies and persists to this day in academic circles, journals and scholarly networks.

This logic simplifies African teachers as mere transferers or implementers of the narrow modern western coda, via a process of transferring pre-packed content, stripped of intellectual depth, where knowledge is viewed as closed, uncontested and settled. The tight governmental surveillance regimes by which they have to implement this mean that teachers have very little space to exercise their own agency. Neoliberal surveillance tactics, governing through governance, the tyranny of data, self-management performative regimes, all serve to constrain teachers from working across abyssal thinking, challenging narrow curriculum construction.

PEDAGOGY/CURRICULUM

We support the view that critical curricular and pedagogical activity ought to play a pivotal role in transgressing the dominant western epistemologies so rampant in the South African education system. Yet, as discussed above, pedagogy, curriculum and especially texts used in school settings serve to propagate abyssal epistemologies. So the post-apartheid transgressions on abyssal epistemology prevalent in national

policy (see Department of Education 1995; 1997) that are undergirded by a social justice framework of re-centering indigenous knowledge and insisting on equity are moot in this instance. While such inclusions in policy are evident, little if any alternative knowledges are presented in substantive and critical ways to counter the apartheid Eurocentric history that excluded and invalidated African history. At the same time, while Odora Hoppers (2001) noted that the relevance of student reality was often not connected to formal education, we add that in the South African case, because the current generation of learners have no lived experience of the apartheid struggle, it is imperative that events of this era be historicised. Thus, curriculum and text resources need to push students beyond their own realities and experiences by providing multiple perspectives and alternative theoretical frameworks from which to re/read their lived experiences, experiences of the past, what is presented as common sense realities, and the dominant Eurocentric and canonical forms of knowledge. It is crucial that teachers' pedagogy critically examine how the legacies of colonialism and imperialism continue to inform contemporary educational discussions and thus has implications for the ways in which these are taught in classrooms (Willinsky 1998).

Furthermore, Subreenduth (2013a) interrogates the political context of knowledge and how knowledge shapes the inclusion or exclusion of perspectives, knowledge and dialogue in schools. For example, a Grade 11 textbook portrayal of the history of slavery on the African continent and the transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the new world presents these important events in the history of the modern world as a kind of heritage site, something to view from the perspective of a tourist. Slavery is not presented as the historical product of deeply unjust and inhumane Western-inspired practices tied up with capital accumulation and expansion, to be understood as central to human forms of degradation across centuries, with lasting consequences for human suffering. Textbook representations of slavery are presented for consumption and uncritically imbibe certain types of understandings and are a clear example of abyssal thinking at play – not an intensive troubling or critical consideration of power and forces at play in historical constructions of the modern world. In direct contrast to this abyssal use of texts, we draw on Kumashiro (see 2000; 2008) who advocates an anti-oppressive approach that re-centres marginalised theories, perspectives and discourses to intervene on repetitive mainstream narratives, images and discourses that frame them as common sense. It is to an appropriation of these types of critical approaches with regard to knowledge and texts that we believe South African university lecturers and school teachers should re-orientate their educational work and pedagogical processes.

One consequence of epistemicide is a naturalised acceptance and acquiescence, a kind of normalisation and hence evisceration of the West's deep complicity in genocide and barbarism and inhumanity. As Mbembé (2001) suggests, there is a need for the colonised to claim and assert their humanity because during colonialism

(and apartheid) they were never recognised as fully human but instead considered to be savage. Anti-colonial movements therefore claim humanity as part of their human rights and the connections between 'being human and being capable of creating history, knowledge and society' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 26). For example, Subreenduth (2013a) analyses two Grade 10 history textbooks and she focuses on the cover of one text that has a picture of Nelson Mandela on it. In analysing the visual she asks if this picture is a re-centring of the colonial gaze or post-apartheid desire for recognition and value. The focus text she refers to has a small black and white photograph of a crouching smiling black man (a young Mandela) dressed in pants, shirt and leather shoes, who is reaching for a small metal pot on the ground. The pot seems to have flames in it and the backdrop appears to be makeshift homes in a township. It is unclear where, when and if this picture represented any defining apartheid historical moments (perhaps Mandela's participation in the Defiance Campaign against the Pass Laws?). Given the lack of historicity, this visual only serves to re-centre the colonial gaze of the black man resigned to or with his circumstances. His western dress juxtaposed against the pot of fire on the dirt and the outline of shanties conjures the colonial mentality of acculturation without assimilation (Subreenduth 2013a, 228–230). The performativity of this text cover is powerful as it sets the tone for how the learner engages with history as presented in the book. This is the example of Santos's epistemicide and what Spivak refers to as 'worlding' (Spivak 1999). Worlding refers to how colonised spaces were constructed and ushered into the world through the Eurocentric mentality and made to be sovereign and normalised. The two textbook examples discussed above produced a hegemonic worlding of indigenous marginalised history. In other words, cognitive injustice results in worlding, in epistemicide and in keeping abyssal epistemology intact. Abyssal thinking is both an evisceration and a subsuming of African consciousness that misunderstands the scene of the crime, mistakes the crime for something benign, and deflects criminal complicity from its source, that is, western colonialism.

In fact, we suggest that western colonialism is consumed as a necessarily benign process central to the on-going march of human progress and civilisation. This is, for example, at play in the choice of literature texts, the colonial canon is circulated with scant and inconsistent reference to the great African authors such as Chinua Achebe, Wally Soyinke and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Worlding is relevant in understanding epistemicide because it continues to take place in subtle ways, such as the visual described above, the discussion of slavery and the choice of literature texts. It is important to recognise that worlding continues to occur in contemporary post-colonial states such as South Africa under the disguise of modernity, global competitiveness and educational efficiency (see Daza 2013; Rhee 2013; Subreenduth 2013a). In making these knowledge processes visible through concrete examples, we demonstrate how epistemicide fails to provide the subjugated African with the knowledges and intellectual skills to challenge longstanding popular constructions

that distort reality. As a result there is very little possibility to open up spaces for the assertion of alternative knowledge orientations that are able to counter and complicate the dominant modern knowledge canons.

The key conceptual question is whether and how we mount a challenge to such epistemological enclosures and how we may proceed to construct openings to incorporate alternative African epistemologies to counter African epistemicide. We argue that post-colonial education in South Africa today is thoroughly suffused with abyssal thinking, which influences its entire educational system and a cross-continental intellectual consciousness. There is very little space for systemic and knowledge modalities based on diverse epistemologies, subjectivities and cosmologies. African education is in the grip of abyssal thinking, that is, modern western conceptions of knowledge, curriculum, teaching and learning modalities.

Key to our argument is a consideration of how abyssal thinking, instantiated in a position of epistemicide in African education, is being reproduced and maintained through the cultural politics of education that determines what counts as legitimate knowledge, legitimate ways of knowing, how and to whom knowledge empowers and organises legitimate knowledge. Epistemicide of (South) African knowledge in formal education is evidence of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in society through calculated and insidious forms of colonialism and neoliberalism (see Subreenduth 2013b).

TOWARDS AN ECOLOGIES OF KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM

We conclude this article with comments about what can be regarded as an alternative platform for inserting an ‘ecologies of knowledge’, based on the notion of ‘cognitive atonement’ (Odora Hoppers 2013), which suggests that abyssal knowledge must atone for the symbolic, cultural violence and evisceration it visited on the epistemologies of Africa.

The article thus far focused on the on-going play and hold of western modern epistemology on the South African educational imagination. The argument presented is that such a narrow epistemological orientation, based on new and old discourse productions and circulations, is continuing its hold on education in Africa with consequences for ways of being, and the emergence or non-emergence of new forms of consciousness and knowledge production that recognises and integrates the socio-cultural epistemologies of the very people the education system is designed to educate. An on-going assertion of a condition of epistemicide prevents the emergence of understanding the complex ecologies whereby black and poor African children learn and become educated. Rather, epistemicide continues to position black and poor African ways of knowing and being as deficient and in need of westernising.

We invoke what is referred to as ‘post-abysal epistemologies’ (Santos 2007) as a space to pluralise, problematise and critically incorporate African-centred epistemologies and a critical appropriation of black-centred discourses in education, curriculum, learning and teaching on the African continent. As Santos explains, post-abysal epistemology, while forging credibility for alternate knowledges, does not imply the discrediting of modern scientific knowledge. It implies its counter-hegemonic use. Such use consists of exploring the internal plurality of knowledges and sciences, in other words, the deployment of alternative knowledges and practices that have been made visible by post-colonial, black consciousness and other radical epistemologies. A plurality of knowledges or an ecology of knowledges approach demands co-presence and incompleteness, inter-subjective dialogue, thinking beyond the western canonical line, and an incorporation of the knowledges of the subjugated, the repressed, and those knowledges that have been discursively marginalised.

The university remains one site for such a post-abysal epistemology and counter-hegemonic power-knowledge activism. At the philosophical level, we have to ask whether it is possible to establish a dialogue between western and African philosophy. Thus posed, the answer cannot but be a positive one: they have in common the fact that they are both philosophies. As Santos argues, for many western and African philosophers, it is not possible to refer to an African philosophy because western logic is that there is only one true philosophy (Santos 2007, 16–33). We believe such denial and incommensurability have to be transcended, in other words, abyssal lines have to be destroyed. The philosophical task is to confront the problems of incommensurability, incompatibility or reciprocal unintelligibility. Andreotti 2011 argues that through a philosophy based on intercultural translation, it is possible to identify common concerns, complementary approaches and contradictions. Such intercultural translation would open space for a type of post-abysal thinking in African education that would counter the abyssal thinking associated with modern education.

Intercultural translation would lay the basis for engaging the full and complex learning and knowledge ecologies of the African child, working critically with cultural, indigenous and everyday knowledges as it establishes a critical conversation with narrow western knowledge. Intercultural translation provides space to work with the funds of knowledge approaches of Moll (1992) and his colleagues, who provide a methodology to work ethically and epistemologically with the cultural, domestic and local knowledges of people, mapping schooling and learning onto such knowledges. Such an approach supports an ecology of knowledges position that makes it necessary to sustain different epistemologies. There are many small-scale attempts in the African academy and sites all over the continent where post-abysal knowledge frames are beginning to emerge, slowly challenging the dominant knowledge canons. For example, there is the Village School Program in Namibia that emphasises an educational model connected with the cultural knowledges of

their learners (Brock-Utne 2000, 137–139). The school's educational programme is geared towards connecting in a culturally sensitive manner with the culture of the children, which means the children are better able to integrate their life knowledges with the knowledge of the school. Emphasis is placed on community participation in the school, the use of mother tongue instruction, and culturally sensitive teaching material. The curriculum is produced with emphasis on local relevance. The task is to map these types of projects and thinking onto more and larger knowledge projects at institutional sites that would be able to unleash a more widespread engagement with dominant knowledge forms on the continent.

The argument in this article is made for an intercultural translatability that works beyond narrow epistemological codes and is able to democratise and pluralise our knowledge ecologies. We extend Spivak's work against the hegemony of western comprehensible and argue, as she does, that unless we question the incomprehensibility of western epistemology to others we cannot infiltrate the current epistemological local-global circuits that claim possibilities for knowledge production (see Spivak 1999). Herein is space for critical epistemological work that accords full humanity and consciousness to Africans, in the areas of a philosophy of co-presence, a historical sociology of emergences, power-knowledge counter-hegemonic work, marshalling complex educational ecologies, and mapping of community and cultural funds of knowledge into intellectual processes in educational contexts and teachers' work.

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