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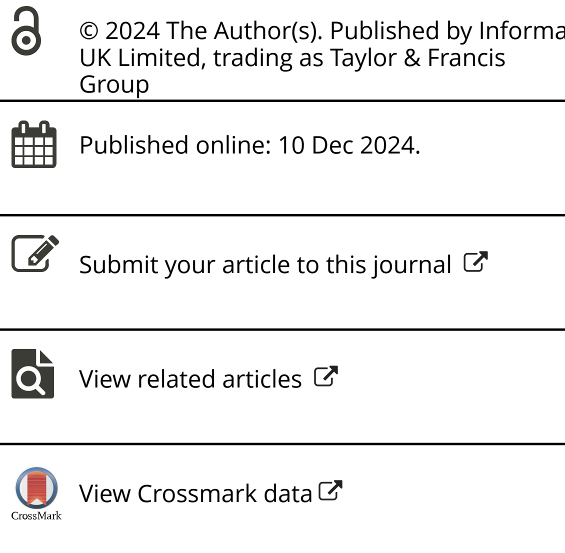

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Creative agency in the colonial encounter: foundations for a decolonial pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

This essay emphasises the imperative to move from discussions about decolonising education to the practical implementation of a decolonial pedagogy. This task necessitates challenging Eurocentric perspectives and incorporating diverse insights into curriculum design and pedagogical processes. By drawing on Edward Said's concepts of democratic humanism, worldliness, and contrapuntal, the essay argues for an expanded understanding of colonial and postcolonial contexts that highlight the agency of colonised peoples. It underscores the significance of acknowledging cultural connections and interactions as vital components of human formation. The essay explores how enslaved people at the Cape of Good Hope navigated their circumstances, establishing creative agency to shape their worlds. Briefly discussing the literacy practices of enslaved people and the literary portrayals of enslaved women, the essay illustrates how a decolonial pedagogy can offer a more inclusive and critical perspective on historical cultural formations.

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Edward Said's democratic humanism as impetus for a decolonial pedagogy

The ongoing debate on decolonising education in South Africa underscores a pressing need to move from discussion and polemics about decolonial epistemology to actual implementation of changes in knowledge systems, curricula and pedagogical approaches. The call to decolonise education in South Africa and across the African continent has sparked important debates about the purpose of education, emphasising the necessity of prioritising Africa-centred epistemologies. Rather than getting stuck in debates over definitions and theoretical posturing, the focus should shift toward how decoloniality can shape pedagogy, teaching, and curriculum design in universities and schools (Fataar 2022). The challenge is determining how curricula are constituted and taught within a decolonial framework. While some universities have initiated limited decolonial curriculum reforms, much of the debate remains symbolic and polemical. It is time to focus on the conceptual and practical terms by which curriculum knowledge is selected, organised, and presented. University departments and their programmes and modules must grapple with how decolonial frameworks shape their curriculum and pedagogical practices. This essay advocates for a decolonial pedagogy that challenges Eurocentric perspectives and addresses the practical realities of curriculum design and teaching. It highlights the importance of incorporating decolonial perspectives into school and university

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curricula as well as teacher education programmes to cultivate inclusive learning environments. Embracing a decolonial pedagogy requires understanding the interplay of power, cultural resistance and agency, allowing educators to develop curricula that challenge existing power structures and empower learners to engage critically with the world. For decolonial pedagogy to be effective, revisiting the canon of knowledge taught in schools and universities must ensure it reflects pluralism, inclusivity, and diverse knowledge systems. It also necessitates a shift from an exclusive focus on Western epistemologies to embrace indigenous, Africa-centred, and other marginalised knowledge systems.

Such a task aligns with Edward Said's advocacy for recognising the interconnectedness of human cultures and understanding historical and cultural contexts as essential to grasping our shared existence (Said 2004). Said's approach carries an ethical imperative to combat oppression and advance justice, positioning education as a transformative force that fosters mutual understanding and acknowledges our shared humanity. For Said, humanism involved engagement with the world, openness to others' experiences, and striving for a more just and equitable society. His conception of democratic humanism calls for a more inclusive and ethically responsible approach to what it means to be human, challenging traditional humanist thought, especially in its complicity with colonialism and exclusionary practices (Said 2004). Said advocated for a dynamic, responsive humanism deeply connected to struggles for justice and equality.

Said critiqued traditional humanism, particularly the notion that Western knowledge represents the pinnacle of intellectual achievement. He argued that this

> imposing edifice of humanistic knowledge resting on the classics of European letters, and with it, the scholarly discipline inculcated formally into students in Western [and African] universities through the forms familiar to us all, represents only a fraction of the real human relationships and interactions now taking place in the world. (Said 1981, 21)

Students are taught that the 'humanities' represent the only accepted tradition that circulates a perspective where only a singular perspective is deemed worthy of study while excluding what is 'foreign' (Said 1981, 21–22).

Said's approach calls for questioning Eurocentric assumptions and colonial legacies in knowledge production, advocating for a humanism that embraces diverse, non-Western perspectives. In this context, decolonial pedagogy plays a crucial role by challenging the dominance of Western-centric curricula. It draws upon the works of Indigenous, African, Asian, and other non-Western thinkers, texts, and histories, offering students a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be human (Fataar 2018). This approach aligns with Said's concept of democratic humanism, serving as an alternative to traditional humanism by introducing perspectives that challenge and interrogate hegemonic knowledge systems.

Decolonial pedagogy proposes moving away from the universalist claims of Western-centric knowledge while maintaining the possibility of a universal humanism grounded in respect for difference and the dignity of all cultures. It builds knowledge rooted in the specific experiences of the colonised as a basis for broader struggles for justice. Informed by Said's democratic humanism, decolonial pedagogy engenders critical consciousness by empowering students to challenge hegemonic power structures and aligning education with the pursuit of justice and intellectual liberation. Such an extensive equitable decolonial approach enriches students' study of the humanities.

This type of educational change requires us to engage in respectful and inclusive conversation while searching for commonality and advocating for inclusive and sustainable futures. Through this process, education takes on the responsibility of critically examining structures of inequality and generating new approaches to creating a more equitable and sustainable world. To advance a democratic humanist position in education, I draw on Burney's interpretation of Said's scholarly work, which she terms a 'pedagogy of the Other' (Burney 2012). Such a pedagogy refers to a comprehensive philosophy and practice relevant to the discourse on the Other across various domains such as society, science, literature, arts, education and the curriculum. For Burney, Said's 'pedagogy of the Other' offers a way of understanding our intertwined histories with the Other, whether it

pertains to the Orient or Occident, East or West, depending on the context (Burney 2012, 195–208). Said consistently highlighted the close relationship between culture and the politics of imperialism, analysing how the Orient was denigrated and the subaltern subject was subjugated through imperial tropes that justified and perpetuated colonial structures. This approach represents a capacious pedagogy that underscores the worldliness of the colonised (Said 1981, 36). For Said, 'worldliness' refers to the idea that texts, ideas and cultural artefacts are not isolated entities but are deeply embedded in and influenced by the historical, political and social contexts in which they are produced and consumed. Said emphasises that literature and cultural production are part of a broader framework that includes power dynamics, specifically those related to imperialism and colonialism.

According to Abu-Shomar (2016), Said supports situating texts within their material and historical contexts, acknowledging that they are embedded in broader, more comprehensive circuits of cultural production, social history, and power relations, particularly between colonisers and the colonised. For Said, worldliness involves recognising that texts are entwined with political, social, and economic realities and play an active role in power relations. The concept of worldliness challenges researchers, readers, teachers, and students to engage with texts as cultural objects shaped by societal power structures. Worldliness requires a materialist inquiry into coloniser–colonised relationships. It advocates for an inclusive reading of history that foregrounds the complex lived experiences of subaltern groups (Abu-Shomar 2016).

This concept of worldliness challenges the notion of texts as purely aesthetic objects, encouraging readers to consider the broader implications and real-world effects of cultural narratives. It underscores the interconnectedness of culture, history and politics, highlighting how cultural representations construct identities, including portraying the 'Other' in colonial and postcolonial contexts. A pedagogy informed by Said's notion of worldliness emphasises how the Other has been constructed through the stereotypes of Orientalism and colonial domination, which would unveil how the subaltern has been marginalised as powerless and inferior (Burney 2012). Said's framework clarifies the processes by which colonial subjects have been marginalised, shedding light on how colonial history, literature, and governance have framed the Other as subordinate and subjugated. This approach exposes the recurring representations of the Other and the role of Western-centric lenses in the subjugation of colonised peoples (Burney 2012, 197–198).

Contrapuntal readings as the foundation of a decolonial pedagogy

A decolonial pedagogy emphasises the social construction of domination, which is central to understanding the marginalisation of oppressed groups through the lens of worldliness – such a pedagogy advocates for multidimensional perspectives on people's social conditions and lived experiences. Said's concept of contrapuntal is crucial for generating such a perspective, as it provides a nuanced view of colonial experiences (Said 1994). Contrapuntal readings are essential in his perspectives on colonialism and cultural formation. They highlight how cultures are dynamic and interconnected, shaped by interactions and exchanges with external influences. Aspects of different cultures interact, merge and impact on each other. Such a view challenges the notion that culture and identity are fixed and unchanging. It emphasises the dynamic connectedness of cultures. Coming to grips with how cultures are made up dislodges simplistic views of coloniser and colonised, highlighting the multidimensional nature of cultural identities in the colonial period.

Contrapuntal readings involve interpreting texts from multiple perspectives, especially those of the marginalised or colonised 'Other' (Said 1994). Drawing on the musical term 'counterpoint', which refers to the simultaneous interplay of independent melodies, Said applied this concept to literary and cultural analysis. Contrapuntal readings require readers to read against the grain of dominant narratives. For instance, when examining a colonial text, one should consider the coloniser's perspective along with the voices and viewpoints of those colonised or silenced within the text. This approach uncovers underlying power dynamics and submerged histories of the oppressed.

Contrapuntal readings amplify suppressed voices or perspectives. They enable readers to acknowledge the dominant narrative while also recognising the often-overlooked voices of the colonised or oppressed, thus offering a fuller, more inclusive interpretation of texts and histories. A contrapuntal reading involves recognising the simultaneous presence of interconnected but opposing narratives, particularly between colonisers and the colonised. This method urges readers to interpret texts and historical accounts by acknowledging the diversity of perspectives that co-exist, often in tension. It demands that we listen not only to the dominant narratives but also to the suppressed or hidden voices, bringing to the forefront the stories of those marginalised by systems of imperialism and colonialism. Applying a contrapuntal reading to the lives of the enslaved, as I do below, opens up the possibility of a fuller, more complex understanding of their experiences, focusing on their creativity and active participation in making history. Contrapuntal offers a way to hear the stories of the marginalised alongside those of the dominant narratives, creating a richer, more ethical understanding of the past.

In the context of slavery at the Cape of Good Hope – a context from which I hail – we can realise a decolonial pedagogical approach through a contrapuntal (re)reading of the institution of slavery. This approach foregrounds the agency of enslaved people while emphasising the complex formative dimensions of their existence. Such a reading would be juxtaposed with more traditional political accounts of colonialism, which overlook the 'world-making' of the enslaved. Orlando Patterson, in his analysis of slavery, describes 'slavery as 'social death', portraying it as a big windowless building, a symbol of isolation … involving … the permanent violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonoured persons' (Patterson 1982, 13). A decolonial pedagogy that applies a contrapuntal perspective metaphorically opens the door to this building, inviting teachers and students to explore the social practices, cultures, and identities that enslaved people created despite their subordination. Patterson emphasises that enslaved people, stripped of power and denied independent social existence, endured 'the crushing and pervasive sense that one is considered a person without honor' (Patterson 1982, 12). Life for the enslaved was marked by a profound lack of freedom, being born into or captured by a world that stripped them of autonomy, subjected them to the will of others, and deprived them of fundamental human rights. However, contrapuntal readings challenge this one-sided account by highlighting the creative agency of the enslaved within the oppressive structures of colonialism. This approach shows how enslaved communities resisted dehumanisation, formed vibrant social networks and communities, and preserved traditions despite material and social constraints.

Slavery was integral to the colonial establishment of the Cape of Good Hope, which began with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) establishing a settlement in 1652. This marked the onset of European colonisation, with the Cape becoming a crucial outpost in the VOC's trade network by providing essential supplies for its ships. Initially, the indigenous Khoikhoi people engaged in livestock trade with the Dutch. As the settlement expanded, tensions escalated, leading to land expropriation and the subjugation of the Khoikhoi. The colony's economy soon became dependent on agriculture, relying on forced labour, including enslaved people and indentured servants. Slavery was central to the VOC's operations, with the first enslaved individuals arriving in 1658. Most were from the 'Indian Ocean region, including East Africa, the African Islands of the Indian Ocean, and South and Southeast Asia' (Baderoon 2014, 8). The enslaved population grew to more than 60,000 people. Islam was practised by many of the enslaved at the Cape, which, according to Worden (1985, 7), provided them with a degree of independent slave culture distinct from that of their owners. The Cape emerged as a pivotal hub in the Indian Ocean slave trade, with a diverse, multi-ethnic enslaved population involved in agriculture, domestic service and skilled trades (Worden 2012). This system entrenched deep social and racial divisions, laying the groundwork for segregation and, eventually, the apartheid system formalised in the twentieth century. The diverse origins of the enslaved people and their interactions with Indigenous people and European settlers significantly shaped the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Cape colony (Davids 2011).

Vincent Brown, in The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery (2008), highlights the point that despite the brutal and dehumanising conditions of slavery, enslaved people engaged with their environment in ways that demonstrated agency and resistance.

Brown's analysis explores how enslaved individuals leveraged social, cultural and spiritual resources to survive and resist, asserting their humanity despite severe constraints. This perspective challenges the notion of enslaved people as arbitrarily 'thrown' into agency-less victimhood within circumstances beyond their control (Capobianco 2010). Instead, it suggests that, even under oppressive conditions, enslaved people actively engaged with and shaped their world. Enslaved people at the Cape navigated their existence by living the creative underside of their thrownness through 'African modes of self-writing' (Mbembe 2002) and constructing and narrating their identities in response to social, historical and cultural contexts (Quayson 2003). These practices allowed them to engage in world-making that reflected both resistance and adaptability within harsh colonial conditions. Instead of passively accepting imposed identities, they actively integrated their social practices into the fabric of their historically contingent circumstances, creating a hybrid blend of linguistic, educational and cultural elements.

A decolonial pedagogy interrogates the historical processes that have shaped communities. Recognising these formative processes allows for a critical examination of the political, policy and structural dynamics of colonialism and slavery while also highlighting the adaptive socio-cultural, linguistic, religious and educational practices of enslaved communities. This approach would enable students to grasp the complex interplay and the evolution of practices and institutional histories among the enslaved. A decolonial perspective cultivates a nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary local and global cultures by countering ahistorical readings that might overlook the socio-political and economic conditions influencing cultural production during colonial times. It promotes an equitable view of how these cultures emerged and adapted within their specific historical and contextual circumstances.

Understanding the historical formation of slave communities at the Cape of Good Hope necessitates recognising the role of matrilineal descent in shaping social dynamics and identity among the enslaved. Shell (1997, 272) observes that 'the law of matrilineal descent allowed the enslavement of Muslim children, but not Christian ones'. As a result, the colonial enslavers encouraged the conversion of enslaved people to Islam, which, contrary to colonial expectations, contributed to the development of a cohesive slave community on the fringes of the city. Baderoon (2014, 11) argues that in the unique context of colonial Cape Town, where Muslim labour was preferred, Islam provided the enslaved with 'the possibility of an interior life and a communal space outside the control of slave-owners'. This gave rise to a vibrant community comprised of enslaved people, 'free blacks' who were formerly enslaved people, and various transient dwellers in this seaport city.

The novels of Rayda Jacobs (1998), Yvette Christianse (2006) and Isna Marifa (2020) offer complex literary depictions of the status and experiences of enslaved women within the Cape's colonial context. Such novels are not widely read or studied in South African schools or universities as resources for a worldly appreciation of cultural processes. Literature like this would enable teachers and students to gain broader perspectives on subjecthood and identity formation. These fictional works depict the women's subjugation to the brutalities of slavery while also highlighting their agency in developing identities rooted in cultural memory, resistance and co-mingling relations with other oppressed groups. A recurring theme is the women's struggle to care for their children under cruel conditions, including the constant threat of having them sold. These relations were not just about survival but also about resistance and the creation of new, shared cultural expressions that helped to build a sense of community among the oppressed. Enslaved women and their male counterparts played an essential role in preserving and transmitting cultural practices, religious beliefs and social identities, which are foundational to constructing a cohesive community.

Another complement to contrapuntal readings is the exploration of the literacy practices of enslaved people at the Cape. It would reveal the socio-linguistic practices that shaped this community and the region's culture. Enslaved individuals brought diverse languages and literary traditions from their homelands. Many wrote letters in the Melayu language and with Arabic 'Jawi' script that were sent back home, communicating their living conditions and expressing a longing to return home and concerns for their families (Morton 2018, 63; Ward 2012, 93). They also composed

religious texts from memory that were used in the first madrasa school that the enslaved people established in 1794 in the Slave Quarter in Cape Town. In this area, enslaved and freed blacks formed a community practising a syncretic form of Islam influenced by Sufi traditions. Some texts written in the Jawi script – an Arabic writing script used for writing the Melayu language – remain with families in Cape Town, treasured as symbols of cultural memory (Jappie 2011).

A decolonial approach would focus on how the slave community played a significant role in the development of Afrikaans, one of South Africa's official languages today. Achmat Davids (1987; 2011) explains that Afrikaans emerged from a complex interplay of languages spoken in the Cape colony. It developed as a creole language co-created by enslaved people and their descendants, who spoke various languages, including Melayu, Portuguese and several African languages, in addition to Dutch. Early forms of Afrikaans integrated linguistic aspects from many world regions. These included words, syntax and cultural proverbs from various communities at the Cape. Davids's work on the origins of the language highlights the multilingual legacy of Dutch colonial times and the historical contributions of the enslaved to the cultural interactions and formations in the region.

A decolonial pedagogy would seek to provide students with an understanding of colonialism and slavery, in which understanding the hybrid formation of enslaved populations would be critical. It would seek to explain and illuminate the world-making practices of enslaved people. In this way, they would be recognised as creative humans whose adaptive practices were based on vitality and resilience. Their resistance to structures of domination was a mix of undisguised defiance and thoughtful adjustment of their cultural and everyday practices. Setting up social, religious and educational institutions provided a platform to support communities in overcoming their oppressive circumstances. A decolonial pedagogy would highlight this creative and adaptive community agency, thus giving students inclusive perspectives to understand the human experience during colonialism critically.

Conclusion

A decolonial pedagogy is essential for re-envisioning education. Reworking curricula and teaching practices in educational institutions would focus on interrogating ingrained Eurocentric biases and fostering responsive, decolonial educational processes. This approach aligns with Said's concept of democratic humanism, which emphasises the importance of recognising our interconnectedness and the complexity of cultural formations as central to the transformative potential of a decolonial pedagogy.

Said's notions of worldliness and contrapuntal provide vigorous perspectives for comprehending cultural formation in colonial contexts, such as the world-making processes of enslaved people at the Cape I discussed above. These perspectives would counter simplified binaries, showing how cultural identities are redefined through historical interactions. Understanding the history of cultural formations from the perspective of subjugation would explain the power dynamics of colonialism. Such a perspective is critical for the ability of a decolonial pedagogy to provide more nuanced explanations of history.

Thus, a decolonial pedagogy involves updating and changing curriculum content and adopting teaching perspectives capable of generating an understanding of experiences of subordination. It also critically appreciates diverse perspectives, including previously dominant ones. Such an approach encourages dialogue that respects differences and seeks common ground by cultivating solidarity to tackle global sustainability and strive towards a just world.

Disclosure statement

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