



## Editorial:

### *Weaponising voices, language and writing in times of turmoil*

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Whilst sitting in Vietnam and watching what is happening in the world today, most notably in Afghanistan, a friend of mine furiously *WhatsApped* a multitude of messages. He could only marvel at the Taliban's victory. For him, as it is for me, the developments are simply startling. As the Taliban literally walked into the many provinces and simply took back Afghanistan after a twenty-year occupation by a world superpower, without any significant opposition, the pages of history were swiftly being written or perhaps, re-written? Tellingly, the tale of 'the women' was amplified the loudest. It was about *giving* voice to the oppressed, by a saviour – it was about those who needed to be saved from the barbarians. But history may well tell a different story. Well, that depends on who writes it from now on and who is allowed to read what 'they' will write.

What we saw was an obvious enunciation – people are tired of being told how to live, how not to live, how to do politics and how not to do politics. People, specifically subalterns, are tired of being told who their leaders will be and who cannot be their leaders. Citizens are standing up, not with hate but with a fiery resistance to western imperialism. The West, as my friend chooses to explain, 'is on the run.' And as it runs, the rest of us need to play catch up; or someone else will write our history, tell our story and define who we are. And so it is, in this moment, one of many moments, that we find an urge to reevaluate and rethink our existence. It is in this process that we find the courage to write or challenge what has been written.

It is time to write out of a world of silence.

Thus, for the citizens of and in colonisation/coloniality, the struggle continues. The struggle of the activist never ceases, and the work of the academic activist is particularly meaningful. It is when scholarly work is combined with integrity and relevance that new ideas emerge. With new ideas comes hope. Well, mostly. In the 1970s, intellectual and activist movements emerged in (administrative) decolonised

countries. These movements worked towards the asserting of their existence through language. They nurtured the idea that it was best not to use the coloniser's language. Language and its mediums (theatre, music, literature, art etc.) were seen as political tools that weaponised both resistance and oppression. It was important for them to use their language to allow their ideas to permeate and dispel what was written about them. It is thus encouraging that in this time of uncertainty and challenge, where learning takes place in isolation because of the pandemic, students are turning to literature and world events to make sense of and exert their existence. It is a moment fraught with existential questions and internal reflection. It is in moments such as these that great discoveries are made; where truths hidden are uncovered. When these treasures are brought to the fore, people find meaning and meaning gives purpose and direction. It is a creative process that adds to building and reconstruction, and it needs to occur so that the subaltern can assert themselves into the human circle. But it is also important for the viability of education and social cohesion. We need to build and develop, not destroy and damage. Though the process of building may entail a 'breaking-down' process, it is not destructive. The act and agency are ours. We should not, and cannot, want anyone else to do it for us. In this edition of the JDD, we have an intricate combination of ideas and expressions that weave the story of existence and voice, of knowledge and culture and of agency and emancipation. James's article, *Decolonising African vernacular-rooted sculptures of selected contemporary Nigerian and South African artists*, ponders and enunciates the realities of our 'African' present through an analysis of cultural imagery and symbolism. It is this artform that serves as a reflective tool for self-actualisation and 'the need to reconstruct African philosophy.' Significantly, the present in the artform is linked to the past in a process that calls for a re-curating, or as Naomi Beckwith, states 'we have to de- and reconstruct notions ... as we think afresh about the representations of those we want included in the historical record' (Grant & Price 2020: 16). What must be borne in mind in reading each of these writings is the link with history, its interpretation, recollection, effect and exposition. Sayni's article, which is a postcolonial reading of *Jacob's Ladder* and *The Revolutionaries*, captures the impact and effect of the past and present, of systems and structures of coloniality that have shaped Africa's development and tied it to a lifelong contract of subservience and dependence. But it is in the fortitude of the young ones, of fearless new leaders, capable and able to construct a vision of their existence combined with the ability to emerge themselves into the system and then write themselves out of it, that we recognise the potential to

break free. Sayni's interrogation is particularly relevant to much of what is happening in the world today. Although applied in an African context, it can be used to analyse occurrences in other parts of the modern world as it uncovers specific rationales and motives behind the exploitation of African countries by hegemonic western states. It is in this space that many parallels can be drawn between the 'functioning of a system of pillage' by western states in African and Muslim Majority countries. The peoples in both these spaces are considered inferior and backward, subject to the saviour complex from within aspects of western culture. The colonisation and pillage of Africa should not be read simply as a historical event, it is an ongoing process, almost a template of sorts, that is replicated in different ways in other parts of the world.

Many rigorous and ethically-minded academics have indicated that while the histories of the subaltern have been written, they have been written in ways that hide its reality, and that although written, have intentionally not been read. This is the argument put forward by decolonial and postcolonial scholars – an argument most recognizable in the work of subaltern theorists. In a post-occupation world, subaltern studies have worked to uncover the histories of groups that have been shunned to the periphery of humanity. Sayni states, 'The system of thoughts and customs related to this colonial era are, however, notoriously biased, dedicated to the interests of former colonial powers rather than to those of the local populations.' This is best understood simplistically as 'History is written by the Victors.' In the case of the theoretical school of subaltern studies, history is important for meaning, and to extract this meaning they turned to popular accounts of public history and memory so as to understand the people's desire to attain autonomy. These accounts are also the voice that facilitated political action despite imperial dominance, and, in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, Libya and South Africa, it is in these histories, stories and songs that we will find meaning and purpose and a different account of history. In this regard, the work has begun and will continue. Just as has been the case in Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia and Haiti.

It is here that the JDD's publications play a central role in contributing to the diverse forms of meaning and purpose. As imperial and colonial historiography obscured our presence and purpose, our writings will bring back our existence. What we write, critique, examine and publish will contribute to an understanding of who we are and what we stood for. Seabela's article, *Tracing Histories of Black 'Servants' at Zwartkoppies Farm through Narratives*, is particularly poignant in this

regard. It will serve as a resistance comment, of a recognition of agency and also of the perpetuation of the roles of the house 'nigger'. This is a term taken from a phrase by Malcolm X, who identified a specific kind of black man. According to Malcom, this person was a social 'slave' to the political and economic system that oppressed the majority of American Blacks. This person was identified as the 'house negro.' The house negro or house 'nigger' was that person who 'worked within the white master's house and identified with the white man's interests in opposition to those of the Black majority'(wa Gacheru 1985: vi). The perpetuation of this character is revealed in Seabela's work where the histories of black individuals as 'servants' or 'slaves' is presented in an analysis that makes use of oral histories. Seabela's article traces the histories of black individuals who were employed at the Zwartkoppies Farm by the Marks family. Seabela captures the past in a present moment, stating that the

*'black employee came across as a domestic servant rather than an employee of a national museum in a democratic South Africa. At one time, museums, like game lodges, were an extension of colonial and apartheid power. Currently, they are places where those who have lost power go to regain a sense of possession.'*

'Possession' is key here. It is a word that pierces like a knife. In these contexts, it is about ownership at any cost, of humiliation, indignity and degradation. In this clasp of possession, the ugliness of the human is often exposed. Possession is about power and ownership of the narrative, the means to write and tell the history to perpetuate a particular perspective. It is in this space that students need to disrupt, and forcefully dispossess, so that the subaltern's truth may be discovered. This is achieved through exposure to thought and alternate ideas as published here in the JDD.

Maqutu and Bellengere's contribution on the viability and validity of prescribing the text *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a case in point. It pushes for a recognition of how language and ideas disseminated in language studies perpetuate oppression. Maqutu and Bellengere raise the question of assimilation and accommodation rather than resistance and reinvention. They debate the methods and motivation for prescribing specific texts and bring to the fore complex ethical questions around perpetuating the submission to white supremacist ideas through education. This aligns with the arguments put forward by Behari-Leak et al. For Behari-Leak et al., the #RhodesMustFall moment presented as an instance of examination and critique. It was a moment of writing back. It meant recognising the official history for what

it is and then dismantling it to expose the fault lines. It is a disruption which leads to growth, development and meaning. It is in this uncomfortable space and process that students and academics find purpose and channel their learning towards a curriculum that is relevant and real. In the article, *Exploring disruptions of the coloniality of knowledge, power and being to enable agency as disciplinary activists for curriculum change*, the authors raise the spectre of agency. And agency matters. For instance, Guha (founder of subaltern studies) discovered that gaps in the historical detail of Calcutta were mostly linked to the peasant revolts whenever the Bengalis were successful in keeping the British out or when they engaged in resistance. The official history detracted from the Bengali's agency and resilience. Subaltern historiography is thus between the lines of history. In effect, it is not about erasing the official history but understanding the history to make sense of it and then to write back into history. It is time to write out of a world of silence. This is what our authors are doing. Each in their own platform and through a peculiar lens. All have validity.

So, from agency to disruption to dispossession (although it may sound negative, its application is indeed positive) we find the stirrings of a new vision. Perhaps a new version of the 'TransInter'. These are our language militants, our change specialists. In his contribution to this edition, Hailu's piece, *Did Ethiopia Survive Coloniality?* considers the importance of change and adaptation. For Hailu 'epistemic decolonisation, is needed to prevent the invasion of the cognitive empire by the modernist influences of civilisation and development.' Despite not being formally colonised, Ethiopia needs to reinvent itself in order to free itself of a dominant, yet repressive, world-knowledge system. For Hailu, as others in this edition, an examination and critiquing of history, legacy and cultural heritages is necessary because '[d]ecolonization of anything requires knowledge and understanding of its historical foundation and formation' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Just like the TransInter in Sayni's discussion of *The Resolutionaries*, Ethiopians need to develop a sense of consciousness which matures into a collaborative activity focused on ethical leadership and the development of their country. This indicates a connection with one's immediate environment and society, because, ultimately, knowledge is about benefit and relevance. It is about building, creating, healing and cohesiveness. Custodians of knowledge have an ethical duty to use knowledge constructively and 'ethically university-based academic leaders must become public intellectuals who engage the larger public through writing, speaking, or acting' (Parsons 2013: 2). An academic cannot withdraw into the ivory tower and estrange their work and its

relevance from the society in which they exist. The ethical duty is understood from the ‘Greek ethical ideal of adding “character” to a society’ (Parsons 2013: 4).

It seems that we have in many instances failed to understand the relationship to voice, speaking, personal power, understanding and the resolution of conflict. There is thus a fear of surrendering to a new way of doing things, of a new beginning, of a new understanding. Fear of realising the impossible because such truths meant an unravelling of our so-called certainties. This is cognitive dissonance. In the realm of higher education there is a permanent tug-of-war between history and reality, and between the elders and the youth. In charting a way through these turbulences, the *Journal of Decolonizing Disciplines* has opted to give a voice to the youth despite the fears that paralyse so many of us and our colleagues, to the extent that voices are often muted or silenced through gatekeeping or self-censorship. It is no longer a question of not listening. Many of us have to admit that it is about who is talking and what is being said that makes it difficult for us to listen. So much so that we ignore that which is relevant. Consider for instance that in the field of sociology, the ‘fathers’ of the discipline are considered to be Weber and Durkheim, but

*‘If we treat their younger contemporary Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje’s book Native Life in South Africa (1916) as the classic of world sociology it really is, we are obliged to consider different issues: the role of colonising violence in shaping societies, the significance of land in social structure, and the patterns of non-recognition that have shaped sociology.’ (Connell 2016: 4)*

These are the themes that are unpacked in each of the different articles published in this edition, and this is what makes these ideas so powerful. For us, recognising these hidden treasures, their relevance and the link with the activism of the youth in calling for decoloniality in all aspects of our society is akin to recognising that we are all equal. It is about facing our fears, about having the courage to look at history, to look at what we have been told and taught, to question the past and to note and dismember the euphemisms of ‘a great civilisation’ so that we can move forward. Weaver (1948: 116-117) eloquently states,

*‘There is no correlation between the degree of comfort enjoyed and the achievement of a civilization. On the contrary, absorption in ease is one of the most reliable signs of present or impending decay.’*

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