Teaching and learning sensitive and controversial topics in history through and with decolonial love

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Abstract

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) school history curriculum of post-apartheid South Africa is littered with sensitive and controversial topics. Many history teachers and their learners do not know how to confront these topics, especially in multiracial, multicultural, and diverse classrooms. Therefore, this paper explores how the idea of decolonial love (Sandoval, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2006) could inform alternative creative pedagogies or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks that history teachers and their learners employ when engaging sensitive and controversial topics. In this paper I argue that decolonial love has the potential to enable both history teachers and their learners to engage with sensitive and controversial topics in history in ways that promote empathy, cognitive, social and epistemic justice, inclusivity, critical thinking, respect, love, and tolerance for others as envisioned in the CAPS document. This would, in turn, promote the transgression of knowledge boundaries for knowledge co-construction (Keating, 2013) and thus, enable a way of doing history that promotes pluriversal (situated) knowledges (Santos, 2014). Lastly, I argue that decolonial love can provide a useful pedagogical framework for teaching sensitive and controversial topics since it ties together different approaches to teach such topics.

Keywords: Decolonial love; CAPS; History; Sensitive and controversial topics.

Introduction

School History curricula round the world are littered with sensitive and controversial topics. These are histories that are often "most painful, most uncomfortable, and most [emotionally] taxing" (Godsell, 2019: 2) to teach due to the nature of history as an emotionally and politically charged discipline. These topics are usually distorted to avoid an emotionally and politically charged teaching and learning experience (Zinn, 2005; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015; Ortiz, 2018).

The current post-apartheid school history curricula in post-apartheid South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (2011), is one such curricula strewn with sensitive and controversial topics in its curriculum-knowledge base. It fails to provide alternative creative pedagogical approaches or a framework that history teachers and their learners can use to engage such topics. As such, both history teachers and their learners are unable to engage with such topics in ways that promote empathy, cognitive, social and epistemic justice, inclusivity, critical thinking, respect, love, and tolerance for others as well as promotion for knowledge co-construction (Keating, 2013), to enable a way of doing history that promotes pluriversal (situated) knowledges (Santos, 2014).

In this paper I explore how decolonial love, as a humanising form, can inform the development of alternative creative pedagogies or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks (Sandoval 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2006). These could assist in creating conditions in which both history teachers and their learners engage "… in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love." (Freire, 1998: 45-46). This is based on the understanding that "the potential of decolonizing pedagogies is partly to understand that there is no simple or fail-safe formula that can be used to guide teachers. Also, that pedagogy cannot easily be detached from the content, resources, [assessment] and teacher-[learner] relationship[s] that shape any particular educational moment" (McGregor, 2012: 7).

The first review of the literature is on the teaching of sensitive and controversial topics in colonial-apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. This is based on the argument that the absence of an appropriate pedagogical framework for teaching sensitive histories can

lead to the teaching of dishonest history.[1] I then outline my understanding of decolonial love and how it could inform alternative creative pedagogies or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks that history teachers and their learners employ when engaging sensitive and controversial topics. The study is concluded by making a case for the teaching and learning of sensitive and controversial topics in history through and with decolonial love by reflecting on my own experiences as a history teacher-educator.

Sensitive and Controversial Topics in History during colonial-apartheid and post-colonial-apartheid South Africa: A Literature Review

Wassermann and Bentrovato argue that sensitive and controversial[2] topics characterise South Africa:

> *In South Africa, controversy is never far away, be it in relation to the language of instruction in institutions of learning, university fees, ownership of land, or issues of state capture by corrupt politicians and businessmen. These disputes are but examples of a plethora of controversial issues which South Africans are facing today, and which invariably are underpinned by issues of moral complexity such as race, gender, class, culture, language, and, more generally, politics, economics, and social justice. Against the backdrop of South Africa's apartheid past, race, as its historical legacy, inevitably transcends most matters of controversy; other controversial issues conversely are more contemporary in nature and the results of political and economic policies adopted after apartheid ended in 1994 (Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018: 72-73).*

1 Drawing from Godsell's (2019: 2) conceptualisation of "honest histories"; I am also aware that my use of the phrase 'dishonest histories' is also contestable. However, I use the phrase to denote the opposite of what Godsell meant about "honest histories". That is, histories that "are [not] evidence based, that are [not] decolonised in that the people writing [and teaching] them are [not] continuously working to undo the colonial lens, who are actively [not] part of re-visioning and uncovering marginalised narratives (that were marginalised because previous histories served specific interests).

2 Larsson and Larsson (2021: 5) assert that there are several types of controversies, and these often are: "[*behavioural*, which is the] the first type of controversy, [which] can occur even though the defended positions can be factually wrong, for example, in cases where people are not sufficiently informed. The second type of controversy, the *political*, relies on Hand's (2007; 2008) distinction between private values, which are individual and embodied, and public values. The latter are foundational moral values on which governments in liberal democratic states plan and implement policy. The third type of controversy arises when each of the opposing views can be defended through rational reasoning. This is an *epistemic* controversy. Scientific over the correct interpretation of contradictory findings can be of an epistemic nature."

These sensitive and controversial topics often find expression in schools, especially in the school history curricula and classrooms (Chikoko, Gilmour, Harber, & Serf, 2011) since schools, their history classrooms, and curricula do not function in a vacuum; they mirror the societies that they are tasked to serve. Thus, both history classrooms and their curricula are "… sites where both inexperienced and experienced teachers and their learners encounter, and inevitably have to engage with, often uncomfortable and diverging "truths" about contested issues in societies." (Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018: 73).

This, however, was not the case under colonial-apartheid since education was provided along racial, class, gender, and ethnic lines. This form of education emphasised separateness rather than common citizenship. It was also rationalised as a civilising and Christianising mission meant to modernise and develop the natives (Kallaway, 2021), since the natives were seen as being primitive and their histories were considered an extension of European History (Maluleka, 2018). However, the civilising and Christianising mission did not bring about the desired modernization and development it promised. It brought about forced assimilation of the colonised into new colonial identities that eroded social bonding, indigenous beliefs, values, and identities, and it denied indigenous children knowledge of themselves (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022). It also brought about homophobia, subjugation, misery, suffering, enslavement, and various genocides to the natives and their land (Lushaba, 2009). The genocides that the colonised suffered at the hands of the colonisers were excluded from the official school history curricula. The decision made by the colonial-apartheid regimes not to include both the sufferings inflicted on the indigenous populaces by themselves, as well as the exclusion of teaching African histories 'formally' through the official school history curricula was the regimes way of avoiding what they considered to be controversial. What was ironic is that this move itself, was controversial, especially when looked at and judged from the present. However, the colonisers at the time did not consider or see this move as being controversial.

The pedagogical decisions that informed school history under colonial-apartheid were rooted in Euro-western forms of rationality and modernity which included rote learning that was teacher-centred, authority-driven, content-based, examination-based, and elitist (Jansen & Taylor, 2003). This was done to produce 'noble savages' (Hartshorne, 1992). This view is supported by Wassermann when arguing that:

> *Under [colonial-] apartheid, History was taught according to a positivist model in which it was claimed that "objective truthful History" was passed on to learners. Consequently, since both learners and teachers were expected to subscribe to History in an uncritical manner, educational engagement with controversial issues hardly*

> *ever occurred and multiple perspectives to topics were not explored. At face value at least, the idea was created that History was taught in a neutral manner. In reality, School History was dominated by an Apartheid paradigm, an Afrikaner Nationalist framework, and content to support this. As a result, History was used as a tool to legitimize Apartheid (Wassermann, 2011: 131).*

Since 1994, there have been various constitutional and educational reforms meant to bring about an end to the colonial-apartheid model of education (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022). Hence, Kader Asmal[3] argued that "society cannot reconcile itself on the grounds of a divided memory. Since memory is identity, this would result in a divided identity" (Asmal, 2003). These reforms were aimed at achieving three things where school history is concerned. First, making sure that history teachers and their learners acquired the necessary historical skills needed to effectively and meaningfully engage the past (Robinson, 2018). Secondly, developing a common national identity through studying history (Robinson, 2018). This was meant to bring together different peoples who never imagined themselves as belonging to a single nation-state (Weldon, 2009). Thirdly, the need to foster social cohesion with the hopes of transcending "racial, class and ethnic barriers by recognizing the problem of prejudice and the issues facing a multi-cultural society" (Robinson, 2018: np).

Both Curriculum 2005 (C2005) that was adopted in 1997 as part of the National Curriculum Statement, and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), introduced in 2002 included sensitive and controversial topics in history in their curriculum-knowledge base. Both the C2005 and the RNCS were designed on the principles of social transformation, human rights, inclusivity, and environmental and social justice (Maluleka, 2021a). However, both failed to provide alternative creative pedagogies or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks that history teachers and their learners could use to engage sensitive and controversial topics. What they merely provided were historical skills that both history teachers and their learners could use in engaging such topics. For example, both curricula asserted that the teaching and learning of sensitive and controversial topics in history ought to be taught through critical inquiry (Department of Education [DoE], 1997). History teachers were expected to make sure that their learners work independently "in formulating inquiry questions and gathering, analysing, interpreting and evaluating relevant evidence" (DoE, 1997: 11), and also engage with "a broad range of evidence and diverse points of view" and understand "that historical truth consists of a multiplicity of voices expressing varying and often contradictory versions of

3 Kader Asmal was the Minister of Education in post-apartheid South Africa from 1999–2004.

the same history" (DoE, 1997: 9).

The absence of alternative creative pedagogies or a pedagogical framework led to many history teachers, despite their subject being cluttered with sensitive and controversial topics and "the proclaimed value of teaching controversial issues", deciding "to teach History either in a neutral manner or by uncritically promoting official History as embodied in curricula and textbooks. In so doing they [were] hoping to side-step teaching controversial issues" (Wassermann, 2011: 135). One of the implications of this side-stepping has been the teaching of *dishonest histories*. This often led to the teaching of the past being ahistorical. This was partly to do with "the state and the education system [failing to] consider how much work was needed to dismantle colonial-apartheid education and rebuild something new in its place", and because of this, many history teachers "… decided to go back to teaching from the colonial-apartheid script because that was what they had access to" (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022: 75).

Because of the pedagogical vacuum of both C2005 and the RNCS, the CAPS school history curricula were introduced in 2011 to address this. However, like both its predecessors, the CAPS school history curricula merely offer history teachers and their learners, historical skills to use to engage with the past. It also fails to offer a pedagogical framework that history teachers and their learners can use in their engagement with the past, especially regarding sensitive and controversial topics. This is partly to do with post-apartheid South Africa being "divided in its understanding of [colonial-] apartheid's historical relevance for contemporary society and experiences; questions about *why* contemporary society is the way it is, and what caused it. This divided understanding of historical causality poses challenges for creating a shared national agenda since beliefs concerning the contemporary legacy of [colonial-] apartheid shape many of the defining questions that South Africa faces" (Robinson, 2021: 342-343).

This persistent pedagogical vacuum led Teeger (2015), who conducted a study that involved classroom observations, content analysis of notes distributed in class, and 170 in-depth interviews with in-service history teachers and their learners from multiracial schools in South Africa, to conclude that history teachers teaching the CAPS school history curricula continued to "side-step teaching controversial issues" (Wassermann, 2011: 135).

By teaching "both sides of the story"[4] or "both sides of the coin"[5], taught learners "… to ignore the contemporary effects of [colonial-] apartheid" (Teeger, 2015: 1776). Through such narrative pedagogy learners were taught *not* to "attend to the effects of histories of legislated racism on the present", to minimise *potential* inter-racial conflict in local school contexts, especially history classrooms, while ensuring that teachers maintained their positions "... as authority figures in mixed-race schools, and assuaging [white learners'] feelings of guilt and [African learners'] anger [towards past and present racism that is historical]" (Teeger, 2015: 1776). Although these history teachers meant well, teaching these topics could not be avoided. Despite how learners might have reacted in class, all learners came to history classrooms with a sense of their sensitive and controversial past. They learn about this past at home, the (social) media, in their communities, and beyond in the history classroom. They came to history classrooms with a fair degree of knowledge[6] and often bearing strong feelings about what occurred in the past, that they had not found in another school subject. Teaching sensitive and controversial topics allows history teachers to address historical inaccuracies or misunderstandings that learners might have (also see Robinson, 2022).

Furthermore, an enquiry-based, multi-perspective 'truth-telling' approach to *doing* history, has led to a continued disregard for teaching how contemporary realities (i.e., material, epistemic, economic or otherwise) are informed and shaped by past realities which are characterised by multiple injustices and vice versa (McCully, 2012; Keynes, 2019). Robinson argues that this has led to some history teachers denouncing any attempt from their learners to construct their narratives about sensitive and controversial histories that may be different from those that their teachers held (Robinson, 2021; 2022). Furthermore, this has also led to some South African history teachers denying their learners, especially African learners, from constructing contemporary South African society as a legacy of the colonial-apartheid past (Teeger, 2015). There is, therefore, a need for both history teachers

4 In the absence of a sound pedagogical framework for teaching sensitive and controversial, Teeger asserts that South African history teachers use "both sides of the story" strategy as a pedagogical approach to fill the vacuum created by the absence of a sound pedagogical framework. This approach "… suggests there is another side to the story of apartheid: rather than merely a story of black victims and white perpetrators, it also, importantly, depicts a story of white victims and black perpetrators" (Teeger, 2015: 1185).

5 A phrase used by one of the teachers interviewed by Teeger (2015). The teacher unpacked it this way: "To obviously make them understand that it's not this black versus white situation, that there were whites who disagreed with apartheid and there were those that agreed, so they can get a whole idea of what it's all about" (1186).

6 This knowledge is usually non-specialised or non-formalised, thus everyday knowledge. That is not to say that as particular knowledge is not important, thus it cannot be valued.

and learners to create spaces where being vulnerable because of the past is acceptable and even normal (hooks, 1994). Vulnerability enables both history teachers and their learners to engage with a difficult past in ways that promotes empathy, cognitive, social and epistemic justice, inclusivity, critical thinking, respect, love, and tolerance for others as envisioned in the CAPS. This kind of vulnerability "requires a rigour of reading as well as a rigour of understanding historical narrative and positionality" (Godsell, 2019: 14).

The unfortunate reality of the continued absence of alternative creative pedagogies or a pedagogical framework meant to assist both history teachers and their learners to meaningfully engage with sensitive and controversial topics means that *dishonest histories* continue to be taught in our schools. Both teachers and learners are denied engagements with *honest histories* (Godsell, 2019). To transcend this, alternative creative pedagogies underpinned by *decolonial love* needs to be developed.

Towards alternative creative pedagogies or existing pedagogical frameworks that are decolonised

The 2015/2016 nationwide student protests which I was privileged to join, and were dubbed the #MustFall movement, re-ignited calls for the decolonisation/Africanisation/Transformation of education and schooling in post-apartheid South Africa. These calls were a result of a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix that continues to regard Africans as non-beings or non-human (Lugones, 2010). Hence, Maluleka concluded that the CAPS school history curricula also,

> *… continues to socially produce what journalist Nat Nakasa*[7] *called "natives of nowhere", who are primitive, inferior, irrational, and [African]. These are colonized people who, through the systemic and institutional exclusion of their ways of knowing and being, are dislocated from their being, culture, and indigenous identities (Kumalo 2018, as cited in Maluleka, 2021a: 76-77 (sic)). This has resulted in these colonized people being pariahs who are homeless, de-homed, unhomed, and worldless (Madlingozi, 2018 as cited in Maluleka, 2021a: 76-77).*

This is because the CAPS school history curricula, much like the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), continues to create "an artificial sense of *rupture* between past and present and fail[s] to adequately examine and address aspects of the past

7 Nathaniel Ndazana Nakasa (1937–1965), better known as Nat Nakasa, was a South African journalist who worked in the 1950s during the early years of apartheid.

that have left their remnants in the present" (Teeger, 2014: 73). The stories of ordinary people (i.e., social history) that have suffered political, economic, epistemic, ontological, and educational discrimination under colonial-apartheid and continue to do so well into democracy are overlooked for political history in the school history curricula (Mamdani, 1998).

It is for this very reason that part of the struggle that we forged as Fallists[8] in 2015/2016 was also about contestations surrounding what ought to constitute university and school curricula, pedagogy and assessment in an African context given that the current curricula, pedagogy and assessment continue to embody Eurocentric knowledge traditions, ontological orientations, values, and beliefs that alienate the colonised (Mbembe, 2015; Ngcobozi, 2015; Badat, 2016, 2017; Heleta, 2016; Maringira & Gukurume, 2016; Bosch, 2017). We were calling for a *shift in the geography of reason* (Gordon, 2011) because we came to realise that there was an institutionalised and deeply entrenched coloniality and whiteness in the university and school curricula, pedagogy, and assessment processes (Alasow, 2015; Ngcobozi, 2015; Maxwele, 2016). This resulted, for example, in the unfortunate practice where the historical literature contained in the school history curricula, the pedagogy, and the assessment criteria often continued to portray Africans as people who do not face problems in their lives like everyone else, but as problems in and of themselves (Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019; Gordon, 2000; Nyoka, 2021).

There was a need to do away with the institutionalised and deeply entrenched coloniality and whiteness that continues to characterise South African universities and schools, especially their curricula, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional culture(s) and to create new *priori* that was decolonised and thus, re-centred the global South's, specifically Africa's epistemic traditions, pedagogies, and assessments more broadly speaking (Mbembe, 2016; Heleta, 2018; Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019). Hence, in 2015-2016, we as Fallists argued for, and proposed decoloniality as this new priori necessary to realise this.

Thus, in the current study, I explore how the idea of decolonial love (Sandoval, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2006), what Mbongwa calls radical love (cited in Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019), could inform alternative creative pedagogies or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks that history teachers and their learners can employ when engaging sensitive and controversial topics in history. "This is because love is rarely taken seriously as a political [epistemic or pedagogical] strategy in addressing the dire effects of colonialism

8 Fallist is a term that those of us who were part of the #MustFall protests use to describe each other and ourselves.

and continued neo-colonial domination and exploitation. Yet, key political movements of Black consciousness and Black nationalism are centred on love to challenge self-hatred" (Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019: 12).

What then is decolonial love? For Sandoval (2000), decolonial love is the kind of love that demands one to love oneself,— "it compels [one] to choose [one]self, [it] has no space for any form of violence or abuse, [pedagogical, epistemic,] racial, sexual, ethnic, cultural and religious" (Mbongwa cited in Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019: 23). This form of self-love is a way of transcending what West (1993:18) calls *nihilism* amongst Africans: "a disease of the soul" which "can never be completely cured", and thus, it "is not overcome by arguments or analyses; it is tamed by love and care".

Decolonial love also encourages one to recognise and affirm others' humanity in its wholeness despite differences (Sandoval, 2000). Hence, Maldonado-Torres (2008: 187) asserts that decolonial love recognises "alliance[s] and affection across lines of difference". This is love that "is predicated on a notion of 'equality', which denies the difference of the other" (Davids, 2019: 114). West (1993: 19) further asserts that, "there is always a chance for conversion – a chance for people to believe that there is hope for the future and a meaning to struggle [but that] turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth – an affirmation fuelled by the concern of others". This process of affirming one's worth and that of the other through this kind of love, would result in a situation where the re-humanisation of the dehumanised (colonised) and the dehumaniser (coloniser) occurs (Fanon, 1961; Freire, 1970/1996).

How, then, can decolonial love inform alternative creative pedagogies or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks for teaching and learning sensitive and controversial topics in history? Firstly, decolonial love is understood as a decolonial pedagogical approach that considers education and the teaching of history, as a tool for empowerment and a way of confronting injustices (Villanueva, 2013). It "challenges the dominant practices of schooling and makes schools [especially their history classrooms], concrete sites for developing critical consciousness in the interests of working class, indigenous and [and the colonised]" (Buttaro, 2010: 2). In this sense, *Conscientização* or critical consciousness should be understood as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970/1996: 17). In other words, it concerns itself with establishing "opportunities to raise [learner] awareness on social issues, differential power, and how to work collectively to facilitate change" (Silva & The Students for Diversity Now, 2018: 2).

Secondly, by deploying decolonial love to inform one's pedagogical practices, history

teachers are better able to recognise that each learner experiences different social, educational, political, and economic conditions before their entry into, and during their participation in, history classrooms (Decolonising SOAS, 2018). By decolonising pedagogy, history teachers are duty-bound to make sure that they level the playing field for learners from different backgrounds as far as possible, and that it is their responsibility to respond to all needs of the different learners in their classrooms (Decolonising SOAS, 2018).

Thirdly, by foregrounding decolonial love in one's teachings, history teachers would be undoing colonial pedagogical practices that do not centre love for oneself and others. By foregrounding decolonial love in their teaching and learning of sensitive and controversial topics, both history teachers and their learners will be engaged in a pedagogical experience that is centred on love, honesty, trust, empathy, collaboration, and critical thinking (Freire, 1970/1996). Irrespective of the anxieties that might arise from engaging with sensitive and controversial topics, it is through such a pedagogical experience that history teachers and their learners would feel safe to contribute freely to the academic exercise, and thus benefit from a space that encourages honest meaningful engagement with past and present realities. This pedagogical experience resonates with Jansen's 'post-conflict pedagogy of hope', which he describes as follows:

> *Hope in a post-conflict pedagogy inside divided communities insists that the stories about oppressing and overcoming are mutually conceived and resolved. In other words, it is absolutely crucial that [history teachers and their learners] understand from the very beginning there were white resistors to slavery and colonialism fighting alongside the black cause (Jansen, 2009: 115).*

Such a pedagogical experience has the potential to inculcate historical consciousness in both history teachers and their learners, which the CAPS school history curricula "does not intentionally promote" although some evidence highlights that some history teachers in post-apartheid South Africa "do evoke very different forms of historical consciousness" (Robinson, 2021: 334). Historical consciousness can be understood as an interpretation of the past with the hope of understanding the present and the consideration of the future (Charland, 2003; Rüsen, 2004; Seixas 2006; Duquette, 2015). In other words, it is the deliberate act of showing how the past is dialectically and intersectionality connected with the present using alternative creative pedagogies, such as Arts-based pedagogies that are underpinned by decolonial love.

Fourthly, the fact that history teachers and their learners fail to recentre decolonial love in their pedagogical choices is an indictment to the embeddedness of coloniality in their

ways of being, knowing and *doing* history. Moreover, it is also an indication of the post-apartheid school history curricula's failure to fully delink from its colonial-apartheid past and from the modernity/coloniality project, especially where pedagogy, epistemology, and assessment are concerned (Mignolo, 2007; Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022). There is a need to unmask coloniality/modernity, not only to dismantle but to transcend it. Deploying decolonial love by history teachers and their learners to inform their pedagogical choices would enable them to solve the continued teaching of *dishonest histories* as well as dissolve the tensions that might arise from teaching *honest histories*. For example, history teachers and their learners would be able to embrace care[9] as part of their pedagogical experiences since it "embraces responsibility yet [. . .] usefully forces attention to the mediation and embeddedness of responsible relations in the interpersonal contact zones of the classroom" (Newstead, 2009: 80). Thus, decolonial love as a *caring pedagogy* goes beyond the co-creation and transmission of knowledge "… to include nurturing relations through which students dare to imagine how to reconstruct their world in new ways" (Millner, 2022: 7). Such a pedagogy does not "deny the importance of pain, grief, or anger in the coming to voice and agency but rather suggests the development of practices of emotional alchemy that are 'difficult … painful' but which enable their transformation into joy, courage, and love, 'without which there can be no wholeness'" (hooks, 2004: 156; Motta, 2014: 170-177).

Lastly, by recentring decolonial love in their pedagogical choices, teachers stand a chance of developing alternative creative pedagogies, such as the use of poetry (Godsell, 2019) to assist them in their teaching of sensitive and controversial topics. This is tied to their idea of recognising that one's learners are different and require different pedagogical strategies to accommodate everyone to have a beneficial academic experience. There is no expression of love greater than this one since it enables both history teachers and their learners to come to terms with the fact that some, among them, continue to benefit from historical injustices, while others continue to be disadvantaged. This way, both history teachers and their learners would, hopefully, realise the importance of working "towards a transformative future that transcends coloniality and its power matrix" (Maluleka, 2021b: 84), in order to empower themselves to "foster their own identities, as opposed to forcing identities upon them" (Dollie et al, 2020: 276). This would result in the re-centring of colonised ways of knowing, being, and doing and thus facilitate engagement with possibilities towards change in the world for the benefit of everyone (McGregor, 2012).

9 Care is one of the cardinal pillars of decolonial love.

When decolonial love underpins the pedagogical practices of both history teachers and their learners, it has the potential of informing their understanding of the legacy of colonial-apartheid and its direct impact on contemporary South Africa in ways that promote empathy, cognitive, social and epistemic justice, inclusivity, critical thinking, respect, love, and tolerance for others as envisioned in the CAPS document (Robinson, 2021).

A case for the Teaching and Learning of Sensitive and Controversial Topics in History through and with Decolonial Love

What is clear is that sensitive and controversial topics in history cannot be avoided. This I first came to realise as a high school history teacher, and now as a university lecturer teaching and researching the past. However, it was through my use of decolonial love in both instances that I was empowered in my teaching and research of sensitive and controversial topics as well as my general interactions with both students, learners, and colleagues.

As a high school history teacher, I had the opportunity of teaching at two historically white schools based in Johannesburg, South Africa. These are schools that under colonial-apartheid admitted and employed only white learners, teachers, and administrative staff. However, with the birth of democracy in South Africa in 1994, "many [history] classrooms in [South Africa became] far more heterogeneous which meant that while there was potential for [history] classrooms to become spaces in which new relationships could be built across racial lines and past prejudices could be broken down, [history] classrooms also became potential sites in which the dynamics of the divisions in the broader society, in many ways the legacies of [colonial-] apartheid, could become exacerbated and perpetuated", especially since post-1994 school history "curricula included the history of [colonial-] apartheid, as well as topics that raised issues of grave social injustice from much further back, such as slavery" (Glanvill-Miller, 2017: 55).

At this point I was determined to turn my history classroom into a space where my learners could *see themselves*, and *feel themselves* more in the work we did in the classroom (Godsell, 2019). This, I believed, needed to be informed by the teaching of honest histories, a rigour of reading and an understanding of historical narrative and positionality, as well as reasoned enquiry into past realities and how they inform present realities (Glanvill-Miller, 2017; Godsell, 2019). To achieve this, the following questions came to mind: how should I teach my learners who come from a divided society about their divided past without instilling anger, discomfort, hurt, offence, and risk and reinforcing those divisions that

already exist amongst them? How do I promote empathy, cognitive, social and epistemic justice, inclusivity, critical thinking, respect, love, and tolerance in my teaching of sensitive and controversial issues? How do I empower the learners to value multi-perspectivism when they engage the past in relation to the present? How do I make them realise that historical narratives are often partial and fragmented, and are frequently politically motivated? Hence, the need to continuously ask: "whose histories, whose voices, whose writing, whose knowledge" is legitimated in the historical record and whose is not? (Bam, Ntsebeza, & Zinn, 2018: 1).

I employed decolonial love in my teaching of controversial and sensitive topics in history since I understood decolonial love to inform a *humanising pedagogy* that is rooted in the Freirean notion of humanisation and focuses on the pursuit of one's full humanity (Freire, 1970/1996; Giroux, 2004). This is because "humanising pedagogies [sic] can become decolonising pedagogies when they involve a reframing of pedagogical practices and theoretical frameworks so that they are forced to explicitly confront coloniality with the aim of dismantling colonial practices" (Zembylas, 2018: 7).

I often used the 'silent conversation'[10] approach to help my learners deal with the emotional toll that comes with learning sensitive and controversial topics in history (Glanvill-Miller, 2017) while at the same time recognising and valuing their prior knowledge, literacies, and identities, thus emphasising their full participation in the teaching and learning process (Fataar, 2016). With this approach, I was able to foster meaningful humanising dialogues among my learners related to the issues taught. These dialogues were characterised by two conditions, namely acknowledging the situated selves; and the ontological need for, and right to, voice one's views (Roux & Becker, 2016; Zembylas, 2018). This made me a *risk-taker*, who fully acknowledge and embraced the social utility of history teaching. I consciously made my learners aware of the relationship between the present and the past, and I was not scared to push the boundaries because I was always ready to seize all opportunities to engage controversial issues in my teaching (Kitson & McCully, 2005).

Other pedagogical strategies that I often used, such as the use of poetry and other arts-based pedagogies were all underpinned by decolonial love which allowed my learners to question and critique the geopolitics of knowledge production; thus, enabling them to face

10 The 'silent conversation' approach uses writing and silence as tools to help learners explore and respond to stimuli related to a topic in depth as articulated in the *Facing History and Ourselves* website: https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/big-paper-building-silent-conversation. Accessed on 16 March 2023.

coloniality at its multiple and complex manifestations and to work through its unmaking (Zembylas, 2018).

As a university lecturer of history, I continued to rely on decolonial love to teach sensitive and controversial topics in history to my students in similar ways to how I taught my high school learners. However, it was at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic that I saw the value of centring decolonial love in my teaching when I had to teach large classes in an online/blended mode at a rural university, the University of Limpopo, South Africa (Maluleka, 2021b). The department in which I was employed in at the University of Limpopo did not dedicate some of its teaching times to tutorials since they did not have a well-established cohort of graduate students to assist with tutoring; and that the university was short-staffed only exasperated matters (Maluleka, 2021b). Because of the decolonial love I had for my students, I employed WhatsApp as a pedagogical tool in establishing and running tutorials. I knew that I "had to think of innovative ways to engage students beyond the scheduled lecture times to make up for what could 'normally' be tutoring periods. That is where WhatsApp comes in. I employed WhatsApp because I wanted to create conditions conducive to engaging students who have felt alienated from the university due to pervasive modernity/coloniality. This I believe was a show of decolonial love, in that, I employed a platform that was not consistent with university rules on teaching and learning platforms to make sure that all students were meaningfully part of the academic project" (Maluleka, 2021b: 87).

These are some of the insights on various aspects of how I deployed decolonial love to ensure that all my learners and students were meaningfully engaged in the academic project and that they succeeded. Those experiences, could be of interest to in-service history teachers and higher education practitioners keen on enacting decolonial love through their teaching to challenge the many inequalities and injustices that continue to confront them and their learners and students.

Conclusion

There is still much to be done to improve how both history teachers and their learners engage with and learn from teaching and learning about sensitive and controversial topics in history. Decolonial love, a form of radical love that is humanising, can enable individuals to work towards alternative creative pedagogies that are decolonised or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks in pursuit of a school history that is inclusive and engaging.
In this paper I discussed how sensitive and controversial topics in history were treated in the

school history curricula under colonial-apartheid as well as in post-apartheid South Africa. I then discussed what decolonial love is, and how it could underpin alternative creative pedagogies that are decolonised or contribute to existing pedagogical frameworks. Lastly, I made a case for the teaching and learning of sensitive and controversial topics in history through and with decolonial love by reflecting on my own experiences of using decolonial love in my teachings, as well as other interactions as both a high school history teacher and a university lecturer teaching history, and how these experiences can be of interest to both history teachers and university practitioners keen on enacting decolonial love through their teaching.

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