Encounters with coloniality
Students' experiences of transitions from rural contexts into higher education in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper makes visible the experiences of students transitioning to higher education from rural communities and backgrounds in South Africa. In line with decolonial perspectives, the research adopted a participatory methodology that involved students as co-researchers. We argue that there is a lack of recognition of students from rural contexts, and their potential to re-shape higher education. We highlight their challenges of applying, entering and participating in universities and the loss of agency experienced. We then show how they found new agentic possibilities by analysing the cultural capital, practices, and local knowledges that students bring into the university space, and the improvisations they make to negotiate challenges. We argue that to re-shape higher education and transform curricula, institutions need to bring multiple knowledges into dialogue through a transformation process that links places, people, knowledge(s), and skills, offering students spaces for recognition and visibility to make sense of their own experiences.

Keywords: Curriculum, Decoloniality, Identities, Pedagogy, Rurality, Social Justice

Introduction

Expanding access and participation in higher education (HE) has been a major and on-going concern in South Africa since democratisation in 1994. Despite a welcome change in demographics and increasing numbers of previously disadvantaged students entering HE, widening participation and inclusion policy and practices continue to be problematic (Badat and Sayed, 2014; Cooper, 2015; Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2014). Of equal concern has been the continuing and significant lack of academic achievement of all students from historically under-represented groups (Cooper, 2015). This has led some scholars to assert that students' achievement dynamics are a function of the colonised higher education terrain

failing to embrace their social, cultural and personal experiences (Mgqwashu, 2009a, 2009b; Morreira, 2017). South Africa has a history of marginalisation and exclusion based on race, land dispossession and a domination of imperialist economic power through seizures of mineral wealth (Oyedemi, 2018). Students from rural contexts are one of the historically under-represented groups entering HE, who have experienced unique forms of disadvantage as a direct result of coloniality and the continuing legacy of apartheid.

The Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) study investigated how students from rural backgrounds in South Africa negotiate the transition to higher education and their trajectories through university. We argue that there is a lack of recognition of students from rural areas, and their potential to re-shape universities and, in this paper, we highlight the challenges for them, when applying, entering and participating in university. We show how students felt a loss of agency in comparison to their rural lives but found ways to recover agency over time. We emphasise the cultural capital, practices, and indigenous knowledges that students contribute. We show how students from rural backgrounds invest in the practices that shape their encounters with the university world, exploring the improvisations they make to navigate and transform themselves and the dominant knowledges and systems at universities, thereby reclaiming agency and epistemic becoming (Fataar, 2018; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998).

The paper will first discuss issues surrounding rurality and students from rural backgrounds entering and participating in HE. We then turn to the historical and continuing coloniality within HE, particularly in South Africa in order to highlight the extent to which universities are underprepared for students from rural contexts, introducing ideas of decoloniality and cognitive justice, to suggest how universities might respond to the needs of students from rural contexts. We then outline the work of Dorothy Holland on identity and agency in figured worlds, which, alongside decoloniality and cognitive justice has framed the analysis and findings. The study will then be introduced, along with key findings discussed in relation to our central argument. We will show how students from rural contexts are misrecognised, or seen in deficit terms and their agency, local knowledges and practices are rendered invisible. We argue that institutions need to acknowedge these cultural practices and bring such students into curriculum conversations as key agents in university transformation.

Rurality

Firstly, we discuss how rurality can be conceptualised and then turn to the key issues to be considered in relation to students from rural backgrounds entering university in the specific context of South Africa.

The relationship between race, geography, land and rurality is underscored by Gordon, who refers to a 'geography of race', in which 'white populations hav[e] more geographical space than people of colour...' (2015: 163). While we acknowledge that poverty is also prevalent in urban conurbations, and students coming from urban townships or settlements may also experience considerable disadvantages, nonetheless, support, infrastructure and

access to social services is far greater in urban than in rural areas (Ndebele, Muhuro, and Nkonki, 2016). Furthermore, rural communities tend to be contrasted with their urban counterparts in terms of deficit, disadvantage and passivity. Leibowitz et al. (2019), however, present the role of education in rural contexts as a space that inspires agency and an interactive conception of the educational project. Similarly, Balfour et al. (2012) contrast a deficit view of rural contexts, arguing for a generative and dynamic understanding of rurality, which values the contributions of actors and lived experiences in transforming contexts. Both perspectives recognise how cultural practices, indigenous knowledge systems and a deep sense of collective responsibility in rural communities tend to nurture greater community cohesion and identity (Masinire and Maringe, 2014; Odora-Hoppers, 2004).

Rural contexts should not be essentialised and homogenised (Roberts and Green, 2013). There exists a continuum of contexts of sparse population, small towns and large towns, and contexts of privilege and lack of access to resources may even exist side by side (Moreland, Chamberlain, and Artaraz, 2003). It is also important to avoid constructing oversimplified binaries, seeing rural as urban's 'other' (Cuervo, 2016: 18). Furthermore, experiences in urban townships may show many similarities to those of rural settings. Therefore, an understanding of rurality needs to recognise it as all-enveloping, but at the same time permeable, and intersecting with other aspects of human existence that occur in other locations, be these cultural, historical, institutional or physical.

We acknowledge that students from urban townships or settlements may experience poverty and lack of infrastructure that is similar to those coming from rural communities. Nonetheless, important differences remain. A World Bank report states that '[p]overty is higher in rural than in urban areas, and the gap between rural and urban poverty rates widened between 2006 and 2015' (Sulla and Zikhali, 2018: 10). Additionally, there is a lack of visibility of rural communities and their needs in terms of policy. Balfour, de Lange and Khau (2012) write that almost all education policy in South Africa is aimed at the urban elite. Rural education and rural educators are ignored. Furthermore, many teacher education programmes are not explicit in identifying how they prepare students for the realities of rural education (Islam, 2012; Masinire and Maringe, 2014), implying a policy gap in relation to the influence of rurality on HE access and transitions.

There also appears to be limited literature in South Africa on the influence of rurality on students' transitions, achievement and participation in HE. However, a recent study of low income young people migrating from rural areas to urban universities concluded that whilst rurality itself is 'not necessarily a disadvantage, when it intersects with low income (rather than high income and historical privilege), it manifests as a challenge in students' lives and the making of their new identities' (Walker and Mathebula, 2019: 15). This has been discussed in relation to the responses of institutions (Leibowitz, Bozalek, van Schalkwyk, and Winberg, 2015; Ndebele, Muhuro, and Nkonki, 2016). Leibowitz (2010), in a study of students studying linguistics in an Arts Faculty, suggests that the majority of student testimonies about prior learning experiences showed how rurality in South Africa combined

with race co-produced the repertoires in terms of practice, literacy and values that the students used to negotiate HE. Indeed, a multiplicity of factors affect university transitions from rural areas, including geography, financial resources, schooling, and language (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey, and Wickham, 2008). Jones et al. (2008) found that institutions were ill-prepared to support students from rural contexts but do not consider any strengths that students may bring to university or focus on the curriculum and modes of teaching delivery, areas that we address explicitly in our research.

Decoloniality and Southern Theory

In this section, we discuss the debates on decolonisation and decoloniality in relation to higher education in South Africa and their links to ideas emerging from the broader perspective of Southern Theory. In a study of rural students' transition to HE, it is critical to frame our discussion within the historical and current context of on-going colonialism in South Africa. Since 1994, decolonisation has been a process underway to remove the apparatus of apartheid and redress its history of marginalisation. Yet scholars are increasingly critiquing the clarity of the term 'decolonisation', referring to it as 'a complexly mutating entity' (Mbembe, 2016: 32). The term should therefore be treated with scepticism, as it has the potential to undermine our capacity for reimagining our institutions. The fact that decolonisation continues in South Africa yet colonial power has never gone away makes this caution even more urgent. *Decoloniality*, by contrast, denotes dealing decisively with colonial vestiges in knowledge generation traditions and knowledge itself, psychological enslavement and a sense of unworthiness. These have been engineered for many centuries through colonial institutions such as schools and universities, for example by privileging western methodologies and the languages of colonisers (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014). This sense of unworthiness and denial of indigenous epistemic frameworks creates the 'Native of Nowhere' (Kumalo, 2018: 2) in particular in universities that were historically white.

Mgqwashu (2016) reminds us that despite the so-called ending of colonialism, South Africa's education systems were not revised to draw from local philosophies of education or to restore pride and confidence in local traditional lifestyles, identities and knowledge systems i.e. they did not develop locally responsive and globally relevant education. Mgqwashu (2016) argues that this form of postcolonial globalism primarily benefits those living in cities and the value base has far less relevance for rural contexts, proposing that academics in Africa across all fields need to reclaim the power to redefine the purpose of education. Pedagogy should enable learning, we argue, rather than merely transmitting knowledge, and be relevant for all knowledges, irrespective of context (Trahar, 2017).

Decoloniality is strongly linked conceptually to 'Southern Theory' (Connell, 2017) meaning social thought, epistemologies and ideas from societies in the Global South (de Sousa Santos, 2014). These authors also challenge the hegemonic structures and knowledge dominance of the Global North, highlighting the need to bring different knowledges into intercultural dialogue. In the following section, we focus on critical debates

around knowledge democratisation and cognitive justice in South Africa to frame the work that we present in our study.

Cognitive Justice

Sebidi and Morreira argue that the first wave of HE reform in South Africa, following democratisation, provided access to the institutions but not the 'goods', or 'epistemic access' as 'curricula and teaching praxis continued to disadvantage students from poor families' (2017: 36). *Epistemological access* (Morrow, 2007) to a discipline is argued to be an essential part of being a university student irrespective of one's background. However, the term draws on Young's (2008) powerful knowledge proposition. Young and Muller (2010), following Durkheim, emphasise knowledge as external to the process of knowing and doing: '[o]ne does not recreate science through one's personal experience, because [science] is social, not individual; one learns it' (Durkheim, 1956: 48, cited in Young and Muller, 2010: 123). For Leibowitz (2017), a separation between learning and knowledge suggests the continuation of a Cartesian mind: body duality, which underpins much Western scientific thought. Whereas, from a sociocultural perspective, learning is always socially situated, experiential, embodied and affective, where the social world and the individual mutually constitute each other (Daniels, 2015; Lave and Wenger, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978).

By focusing on epistemological access, or lack thereof, a deficit discourse of under preparedness of the student becomes dominant. Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue in relation to academic literacies, that language is often seen as neutral and decoupled from the social context in which it is produced and the backgrounds of learners. They refer to 'decontextualised learners' as a discourse dominant in institutional policy and documentation. It signifies the ways in which students are separated from their history, culture and language and the different literacies they bring into the academy, and subsequent shifts required of them to engage with academic discourse are unacknowledged. Expecting students 'to take on a set of literacy practices, or 'ways of being', without such practices being made overt and open to critique, feels like an imposition on identity.' (Boughey and McKenna, 2016: 4).

Furthermore, disciplinary practices providing access to a particular worldview, might still result in alienation of the students (Sebidi and Morreira, 2017). Students who come into HE with different knowledges or practices risk being positioned as 'other'(Morreira, 2017) reflecting Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, resulting from a prejudicial credibility deficit held by the hearer against the testimony of the speaker. This can lead to unequal participation in generating social meanings and hermeneutic marginalization of an individual or group (Walker, 2018: 2-3). Fricker (2007) outlines *epistemic reciprocity* to emphasise that we all need to give and receive in order to make meaning. Leibowitz (2017) also critiques the argument for epistemological access to powerful and recognised disciplinary knowledges and knowledge of the natural and social worlds. 'The problem with an emphasis on the known and the given is partly that it impedes the consideration of what other societies or

groups have to offer' (Leibowitz, 2017: 100). Leibowitz's alternative view aligns with De Sousa Santos' calls for bringing multiple knowledges into dialogue, where local and indigenous knowledges are valued alongside western, scientific traditions (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Leibowitz, 2017). Both Leibowitz and De Sousa Santos use the term cognitive justice to recognise the importance of bringing different knowledges into dialogue, offering a route to both epistemic and social justice. Cognitive justice allows for the unknown, for difference and selection criteria, for example, the purpose and questions, which need answering and consideration of how knowledge was produced are all critical (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

Transitions within and across cultural worlds

Having discussed decolonisation, decoloniality and cognitive justice, in this section, we outline a sociocultural understanding of transition, the importance of agency and different funds of knowledge in moving within and across lived spaces.

Space, place and mobilities

Massey (1992: 70) argues that 'space and the spatial are implicated in the production of history - and thus, potentially, in politics'. In South Africa, space is a deeply political and historical issue due to the displacement effects and continuing legacy of apartheid. Entering higher education from rural contexts suggests the importance of place and situational identities across different times and places (Kapp and Bangeni, 2011). Furthermore, for stories to be heard from under-represented actors, spaces for story telling must be created, where those in hegemonic positions can hear them and be unsettled by them (Tabensky and Matthews, 2015). We therefore pay attention to how the spatial configurations encountered open up or limit the possibilities for students from rural contexts and how they reinforce or augment inequalities or offer creative alternatives and avenues.

Socio-cultural, mediated practices

A focus on space and topographies contributes to the sociocultural tradition that recognises that human actions and behaviours are mediated and shaped by social, cultural, historical and material means (Daniels, 2015; Wertsch, 1991). This mediational perspective allows us to understand the role of the material within practices: including technologies, the body, artefacts and space within the social, cultural and historical context.

We adopt Schatzki's (2005: 11) interpretation of *practices* as 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding'. The emphasis on embodiment and material mediation highlight how practices are not just actions but are culturally mediated in different material and bodily ways. Lave and Wenger (2005) link practice to learning where understanding and experience are in constant interaction. Holland and Lave go further, proposing that 'social practice theory emphasizes the historical production of persons in practice, and pays particular attention to differences among participants, and to the on-going struggles that

develop across activities around those differences' (2009: 5). The importance of seeing practice in relation to history produced in persons is particularly important in a study of rurality in South Africa, where the continuing legacy of apartheid is particularly felt in rural communities.

Transitions to and trajectories through figured worlds

Moving from one context to another and negotiating transitions is always a matter of changes in the self, of becoming and therefore changing identities. *Transition* can be understood as 'identity making', in relation to individuals and social structures (Ecclestone, Biesta, and Hughes, 2010). *Trajectory,* by contrast, implies a path or journey through a particular lifeworld and is also associated with becoming and changing identities (e.g. Barnett, 1996). Transitions between different worlds and trajectories through cultural worlds and the relationship these have with identity making and agency have been well theorized by Holland and colleagues (1998) through the theoretical construct of 'figured worlds', a hybrid interpretation of identity, drawing on constructs from Bourdieu, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, incorporating agency, whilst nonetheless acknowledging the societal structuring, historical and cultural positionings that shape our future selves.

A *figured world* is 'a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al., 1998: 52). Figured worlds are social and cultural encounters in which the positions of those taking part matter, they are socially organised and located at particular times and places, for example, a rural community or a university. Through our encounters with different figured worlds over time, we gain new or changing identities as we participate in positions defined by the activities in that world. Identities are produced dynamically as the 'self in practice' (Holland et al., 1998: 31), which enables us to move beyond the social positioning and structures that reproduce inequalities and develop new or reformed identities within a community, principally through the idea of *improvisation*. Improvisations are the mechanisms for employing our agency through actions designed to resist or overcome the cultural and historical constraints that powerful structures and positions embody. Therefore, figured worlds act as sites of possibility (in terms of agency), but where our dispositions are mediated by relations of power (Urrieta, 2007).

Employing the concepts of practices, transitions and trajectories, figured worlds, identities and improvisations enables us to explore the influences of rural, cultural worlds upon the new worlds of HE including different practices, funds of knowledge (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda, 1999; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992) discourses and positionings encountered and the negotiations students make in relation to access, participation and studying at university and how this can lead to situated meanings of cognitive in/justice. In the following section, we describe our study and its methodology.

Methodology

Research questions that guided the study, focused on students' negotiations of the transitions from rural home, school and community and how these negotiations influence their trajectories through HE. We investigated the practices that shape approaches to learning of students from rural areas in universities and the challenges they face in HE curricula, which remain imbued with colonialism and the potential contribution and challenges of digital technologies and social media both in rural communities and when entering HE from a rural background.

Research Design

Fieldwork was conducted during 2017 and 2018 at three universities: 'Urban' 'Town', and 'Local' (described later). All three universities have rural students strongly represented and are located in different regions (Gauteng and Eastern Cape). The research was conducted in two phases: In Phase 1 (2017) we worked alongside three groups of student co-researchers, one at each institution. Phase 2 (2018) involved focus groups and interviews with university staff.

In Phase 1, a participatory methodology was adapted from a UK project with undergraduate co-researchers (Timmis, Yee, and Bent, 2016) and participatory action learning approaches (Leibowitz et al., 2012). By working alongside students as co-researchers researching their own lives but with a structured support programme, we aimed to give the students an opportunity to investigate their personal histories and practices, give voice to their communities and the different knowledges they bring into the university space and to develop valuable research and advocacy experience. This form of participatory methodology is argued to be a 'decolonizing' mode (Bozalek and Biersteker, 2010), by avoiding a deficit positioning of under–represented students, recognising their agential capacity in the production of knowledge.

Volunteer and snowball sampling methods allowed us to select students from STEM and Humanities (including Education) disciplines who self-identified as coming from a rural background: 24 students from each university, 72 began and 64 continued throughout. The majority were born in South Africa with some from neighbouring Southern African countries, including Zimbabwe and Namibia. Rurality is both spatial and non-spatial and we sampled using both types of indicators. For example, we defined a rural area in terms of low population density, *and* in terms of the civic and commercial amenities available, including schools. We selected students who lived and attended school in a rural area (formal rural or tribal area) for at least the first 16 years of their lives.

Co-researchers participated in seven face-to-face workshops over approximately nine months, involving discussions, drawing, mapping and focus groups. They created longitudinal, personal accounts and representations of everyday practices in their rural communities and in their university academic and social lives by collecting a series of digital

artefacts using an iPad. These included diary entries, audio recordings, drawings and photographs, chosen to represent their lives and a final composite digital narrative. Multimodal methods reduced reliance on writing and language, especially in a second language (Rohleder and Thesen, 2012). Co-researchers subsequently participated in data analysis workshops and discussions with counterparts from the three universities. This resulted in their own publication, aimed at school students in the rural areas from which they come (see www.sarihe.org.za.) There were practical and ethical constraints (e.g. time available for analysis, the need to avoid sharing other people's data). Furthermore, we do not dismiss the power differentials that continue to play out in international funded research and acknowledge the limitations for co-researchers in shaping the aims/direction of the research.

Phase 2 investigated support for students from rural areas, inclusivity and curricula and pedagogic practices and contradictions[1]. Through convenience sampling, we conducted eight interviews with senior leaders (including Deputy Vice Chancellors (learning and teaching), Deans of Faculty, those responsible for first year experience and student counselling) to explore how they managed access, support under-represented students and the issues around rurality. Three focus groups and three interviews with academics from STEM and humanities disciplines were then conducted.

The qualitative data set for Phase 1 includes over 108 discussion workshop transcripts and over 400 digital documentaries (collections of artefacts) created by co-researchers. Data analysis was conducted inductively, multimodally and theoretically. A systematic, thematic and multimodal analysis of all data types was first conducted, resulting in 60 themes (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994)[2]. Thematic analyses were further interrogated collaboratively through whole team sessions including one with student co-researchers. These sessions allowed for deeper, theoretically informed, multi-layered interpretations of the accounts, drawings and digital artefacts (Pink, 2013). Ethical mindfulness was central to considering rights and responsibilities of all members of the team including co-researchers. Ethical principles were co-produced with co-researchers and discussed during their first meeting. For a more detailed discussion of the methodology, see Timmis, Mgqwashu and Naidoo (2019).

Institutional socio-cultural and historical contexts
In this section we discuss the different social and material conditions found in the three university settings where data were collected and where the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the three institutions have shaped the experience of students.

Town is a relatively small, single campus institution in a semi-rural small town, in a district experiencing high levels of poverty and unemployment. These factors mean that the

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[1] This paper is focused only on Phase 1 of the study (co-researchers' narratives), information on Phase 2 is provided for completeness.

[2] Quotes and examples of data in this paper are drawn from and represent the relevant themes.

majority of student enrolments are from outside of the town, which has resulted in a well-developed residential system. At *Town*, academics use research to inform their pedagogical practice and there is a specific focus on foundation programmes to support transitions to university learning, as the majority of students are from rural schools.

Local is a small university, principally located in a rural area, which has both a teaching and research focus, but Cooper's (2015) classification identifies it as a teaching intensive university. It is historically known for African activism, a source of pride for most students. It has three campuses spread across metropolitan and rural locations. Most students at *Local* come from diverse backgrounds and rural areas, from communities across Africa. Humanising pedagogy is the institution's philosophy, which emphasises universal academic support programmes and targeted psychosocial support.

Urban is a large comprehensive university with four campuses, formed through a merger of two institutions. *Urban* balances teaching and research with strong emphasis on learning with technology and online learning. Its learning and teaching philosophy is central to the University's strategic goals. Academic support is also prioritised with particular emphasis on first year experience. An extended orientation programme (academic and psychosocial), supports transitions for all students.

All three universities operate centralised technology support and a learning management system. *Urban* requires all students to have a mobile device; widely used in learning and teaching. Tablets are provided for the poorest 3000. The use of mobile devices for learning is encouraged at *Local* and *Town* but not supported centrally.

In the following sections, we present and discuss some of the key findings on students' lived experiences, focusing first on rural practices and contexts, then turning to transitions and finally university participation.

Indigenous knowledge practices and improvisations

Through mapping the stated home locations (Figure 1), we found that almost all co-researchers came from previously designated homeland areas, amongst the most remote and disadvantaged parts of the country.
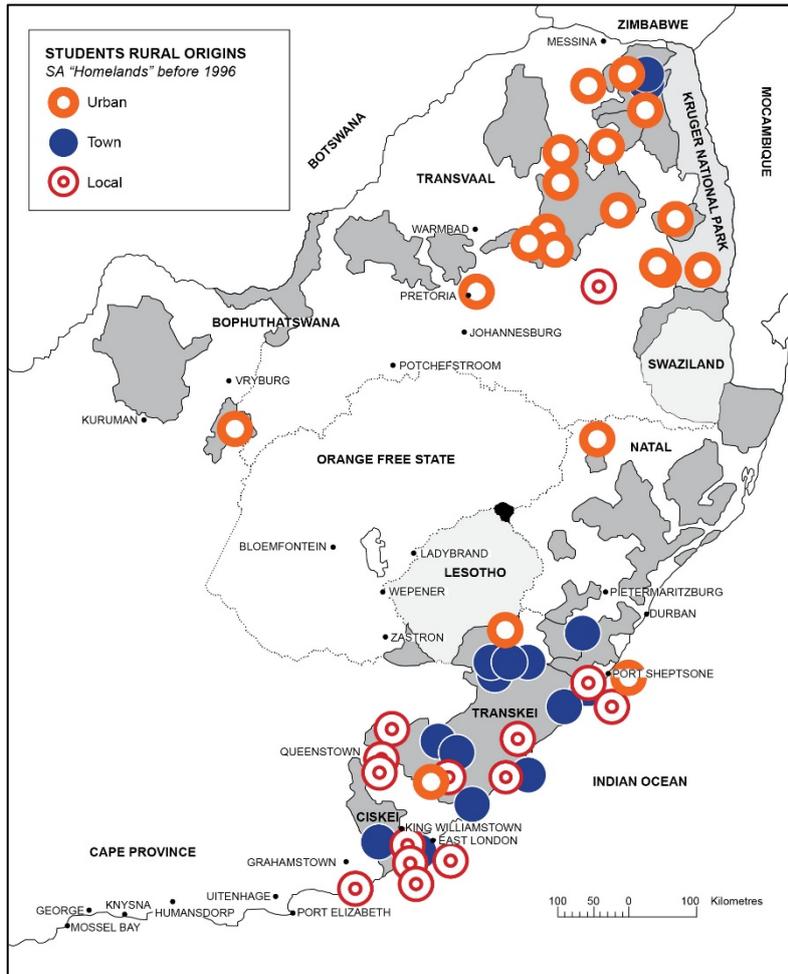
Figure 1: Stated co-researcher home locations by institution – circles can denote more than one individual

Through their digital documentaries and discussions, co-researchers showed that they come to HE with various knowledges acquired when growing up in a rural setting. Accounts showed a deep appreciation of the natural environment, such as rivers or forests, from an early age. Through this interaction with the environment during daily activities such as fetching forest firewood, herding cattle, and navigating flooding rivers on school journeys, co-researchers acquired a wide array of indigenous knowledges and experiences, which comparable students from urban settings may not be able to understand. For example, they attested to curing livestock, using traditional herbs, and understanding weather patterns.

> ...So, those practices that you must do before you milk a cow, so we are doing those things in our practicals, here at university, so it has helped me because I am used to the situation (Discussion group, LOCAL, 01/06/17, F.)

Our findings suggest that when students are studying natural environments in university, requiring practical knowledge, those who grew up in rural areas are likely to have

extensive first-hand experience. This knowledge is acquired from elders, parents and social organisations such as churches and clubs, who disseminate new insights through social and traditional practices. These examples show how students draw on diverse funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) to develop situated understandings through their own actions and those of others (Holland et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger 2005) creating opportunities for cognitive justice (Leibowitz, 2017).

It is important not to romanticise rural life and to acknowledge that in rural worlds, children and young people are positioned in very particular ways. Many co-researchers emphasised that they often resented required tasks and the expectations on them. For example, boys were often prevented from attending school or arrived late in order to tend livestock. Workloads were physically exhausting, which some felt curtailed schooling and play, emphasising the tensions between play, leisure, and black labour (Makhubu and Mbongwa, 2019).

Yet, rural life is also governed by a strong sense of collective responsibility from an early age (Moletsane, 2012; Odora-Hoppers, 2004). Time management is key to many tasks. With responsibility, comes agency, through the actions and decisions that are required to fulfil such responsibilities and play one's part:

> My father bought them [goats] .... "Son, the goats are your responsibility". So, they taught me a lot. Especially how to be responsible. (Evernote, URBAN, 24/08/17, M.)

Co-researchers were used to improvising and problem solving, in contrast to later accounts, which suggest a loss of agency in coming into university, discussed below. Furthermore, many co-researchers were afraid of losing indigenous knowledges:

> By the time our parents and our grandfathers die, we will have lost all of that indigenous knowledge we have acquired because we are now so influenced by the western way of doing things. We are letting go of the critical things that make us African. (Discussion group, LOCAL, 7.10.2017)

These findings suggest that the skills and experiences acquired (for example, working collaboratively or being resourceful), need to be recognised for their contributions to university contexts. Equally, the 'critical things that make us African' and the 'indigenous knowledge' necessitate a 'fundamental paradigm shift ... to foster epistemic justice' (Kumalo, 2018: 7).

Transitions to higher education

Difficulties and poor resourcing associated with schooling in rural areas are well documented. Lower quintile[3] schools predominate in rural provinces (Van der Berg et al., 2017) and national testing results continue to show that rural schools are at a disadvantage (Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2014; Mdepa and Tshiwula, 2012). Co-researchers' narratives also gave numerous examples of teachers, materials and/or infrastructure shortages:

> ... in my primary level, like, I think that also affects the mental thinking of children to study under the trees, because you can't concentrate. ... you are not even paying attention' (Discussion group, LOCAL, 01/06/17)

> We had one computer lab but it was not useful because we don't have a computer teacher ...' (Discussion group, TOWN, 01/04/17)

Co-researcher narratives highlighted few university outreach programmes in rural communities and little preparation in schools, hence students' knowledge and understanding about university choice and application processes was very limited. Co-researchers valued help and encouragement from teachers, and the community including church and study groups.

In remote, rural areas, access to the Internet is more restricted (Chothia, 2017), exacerbating the challenges of finding out about different universities. This necessitated visits to Internet cafes and libraries, all considerable distances away, requiring taxi rides and significant costs:

> Didn't have access to Internet, had to go to town and often didn't have money. There is only one Internet café in town serving 32 neighbouring rural villages. (Discussion group, TOWN, 25/03/17)

Applying to university also necessitates considerable financial outlay and online applications (or printers). Co-researchers often needed help from teachers, church ministers, other schools or Internet cafes to apply online. This student is commenting on a picture of his teacher:

> She was the reason for me to be at URBAN in the first place she helped me apply using her device and her money to buy airtime for data (Evernote, URBAN, 03/08/17)

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[3] South African schools are divided into categories (Quintiles 1 to 5) according to the socio-economic status of the community in which the school is situated. Quintile 1 schools are the poorest.

While most found negotiating technology problematic, some co-researchers negotiated access with help from others:

'...I didn't have a phone and in high school there were no computers, so my friends had all these things and they helped and downloaded application forms, so they helped me to get bursaries and all that. (Discussion group, TOWN, 22/07/17)

Therefore, in applying to university, there was often reliance on serendipity, lone supporters or individual kindnesses, rather than systematic support or outreach programmes. It was these relational, spatial and material negotiations that enabled students to overcome their historic positionings in order to transition from one world to another (Fataar, 2018; Holland et al., 1998).

Participation and misrecognition

Co-researcher narratives documented their progress in negotiating the university space over time. As discussed above, rural practices and responsibilities helped their university trajectories. Nonetheless most experienced significant financial, social and cultural challenges.

Financial difficulties were present in almost all the co-researcher narratives, testament to the continuing economic struggles that many students face. Coming from rural communities with more limited access to information about bursaries, accommodation and without family networks in urban areas, presented real difficulties.

... yes we have transition from the village to the city life to the kasi life but also we still are surviving to be here, to stay here, because you can't come to school with an empty stomach...(Discussion group, URBAN, 17/07/17)

Several co-researchers recounted enrolling at other institutions and dropping out, or applying to the same institutions twice, due to financial difficulties. This highlights the lack of systematic support for applying to university and bursaries. Furthermore, bursary system requirements and delays impede progress in subsequent years. This co-researcher explains, beside an image of his test paper:

... that was my worst semester mark I ever got here in varsity I was so discouraged thinking nana I will never make it for this module, reason being I registered late this year because I didn't have money for registration I had to wait for NSFAS[4] to give me a

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[4] The South African National Student Financial Aid Scheme (http://www.nsfas.org.za/)

go ahead or to approve my application when it finally approved it it was bit too late for me to catch up ... (Evernote, URBAN, 24/08/17).

Language has always been a sensitive issue in South African HE, which has tended to individualise the problem, rather than recognising institutional, social and cultural limitations (Boughey and McKenna, 2016). Co-researchers gave many examples of how university staff appeared to be unaware of the particular socio-linguistic barriers students from rural backgrounds face, including the use of English for learning, teaching and assessment, previously not encountered or only to a limited extent. The accents of white and international staff made understanding even more difficult. Co-researchers observed differential treatment of black and white students by white lecturers, including finishing sentences or allowing white students to talk for longer. These are not just linguistic but socio-historical issues, linked to wider cultural practices. Coming from rural communities, co-researchers were not used to speaking directly to those in authority; they found answering questions in class very uncomfortable:

...at home you are taught that if you are speaking to an adult, do not look them in the eye ... it's a form of disrespect or something, and then when you get here ... to the lecturers, when you don't look them in the eye, it's like you are not listening to them. (Discussion group, TOWN, 12/08/17)

These cultural practices that students from rural communities bring into the university space are not always recognised or mediated, leading to them feeling 'unhomed' or occupying an ambivalent space (Kapp and Bangeni, 2011).

Socially, students felt positioned as inferior to their urban counterparts and struggled initially with peer-to-peer relationships, which affected well-being. There are strong expectations that everyone will 'fit in' and adapt.

...everybody seems to know what they are doing, everybody seems so comfortable and sometimes you even scared of asking other people ... But, at the same time ... university life must go on. You must just try to find a way to fit in. (Discussion group, TOWN, 25/03/17)

Co-researchers particularly highlighted this in relation to technology and online systems. They judged themselves to be 'slow' or 'computer illiterate', even though most of them have cell phones, which they can use with ease:

Like using a laptop was difficult for me because I was too slow. And when I look at others those who grew up in urban areas it was too much easy for them to use laptops ... (Discussion group, LOCAL, 01/05/17)

> ... here everything is submitted online, we do an essay online, we do everything online, so computer illiteracy also was a barrier ... (Discussion group, TOWN, 22/07/17)

This was fuelled in part by institutional practices such as testing on entry, and ubiquitous online assessment and course management systems. Co-researchers tended to see themselves in deficit rather than criticising the institutions for not recognising their needs or acknowledging practices they arrived with, for example using a cell phone. These examples show how technocratic values and expectations of specialised knowledges of a 'modern' university were positioning students as lacking (Danforth, 2016) which we have argued is another form of coloniality (Timmis and Muhuro, 2019).

Many of the examples above suggested that the co-researchers felt a loss of agency when entering universities. They indicated how much responsibility and self-direction they had had in their rural communities and in coming to university; they experienced a loss of this. They used phrases like 'foreign country' and 'horror movie'. Many expressed feelings of not knowing how things are done or of being powerless or different. We argue that such feelings arise from the lack of recognition of students from rural contexts who are treated as 'decontextualised' (Boughey and McKenna, 2016) and who feel 'unhomed' (Kapp and Bangeni, 2011). Developing these conceptualisations, the following section explores student accounts of learning and teaching, their improvisations and forms of epistemic becoming.

Epistemic becoming

Pedagogical practices and curricula were, unsurprisingly, frequently emphasised as being problematic in co-researcher narratives and discussions. Many commented on the limitations of their curricula and the lack of recognition of their backgrounds and rural knowledges. This was typified by this simple quote:

> You have to change, and the curriculum just stays the same. (Discussion group, TOWN, 02/05/17)

Whilst knowledge of the natural environment and its processes, farming and rurality are all relevant in HE, particularly in STEM disciplines, there is a tendency for curricula to imbue common issues with such complexities that students do not see themselves as having experienced any of them (Boughey and McKenna, 2016).

> Sometimes, before the professor planted, I felt like it [indigenous knowledge] wasn't acknowledged. (Discussion group, TOWN, 12/08/17)

> There was this other time Natural Science assess ... we had to assess the soil ... but I was familiar with that thing because before at home you know when it's planting season, before we plant we crop rotating ... assesses the soil if it is good to plant

> spinach ... actually our professor he was impressed like he loved it. (Discussion group, TOWN, 12/08/17)

As shown above, it is important to acknowledge that there were examples where individual academics responded positively and helpfully, going out of their way to acknowledge the backgrounds of students from rural communities (and others) and as highlighted earlier, institutions have many support initiatives and processes in place. Yet, despite these initiatives, students still felt unacknowledged and 'natives of nowhere' (Kumalo, 2018:1).

For those studying Sciences, the practical classes, laboratories and experimental processes were often new. Co-researchers felt their lack of prior experience (for example in relation to technology) was either, not accommodated, or positioned them in deficit, as this quote below illustrates:

> ... you know what the Dean said to some people at the beginning of the year when you wanna take CompSci? "You people will like not try to take CompSci ... you don't even know how to switch on the computer" ... You get there, they say "design your own game"... (Discussion group, TOWN, 01/04/17)

This was exacerbated by cultural differences, highlighted above, concerning respect for elders and difficulties in speaking directly to academic staff. These findings suggest how continuing coloniality manifests itself for students from rural backgrounds in learning and teaching cultures and practices, not just through curricula, through all aspects of university systems and relations (Mbembe, 2016; Nase Lebakeng and Phalane, 2006).

Nonetheless, our co-researchers successfully negotiated the university landscape and its pitfalls through their own agency and complex social and spatial relations and improvisations (Holland et al., 1998), including an understanding of how history has shaped them (Holland and Lave, 2009). Through improvisations, working with others, co-researchers developed new learning practices and forms of epistemic becoming, as they participated in university, with frequent reports of family and church support. Over time, students increasingly asked tutors for help and worked with peers, later using digital tools, for example YouTube and WhatsApp (see Figure 2).

> The only way to adapt to the situation of this new concepts is to attend tutorials where now you get a chance to ask any questions you have in tutors then you go through social networks, like you can go through YouTube, you can go through Google to google these terms ... or you meet your peers, they can help you. (Discussion group, LOCAL 01/06/17)
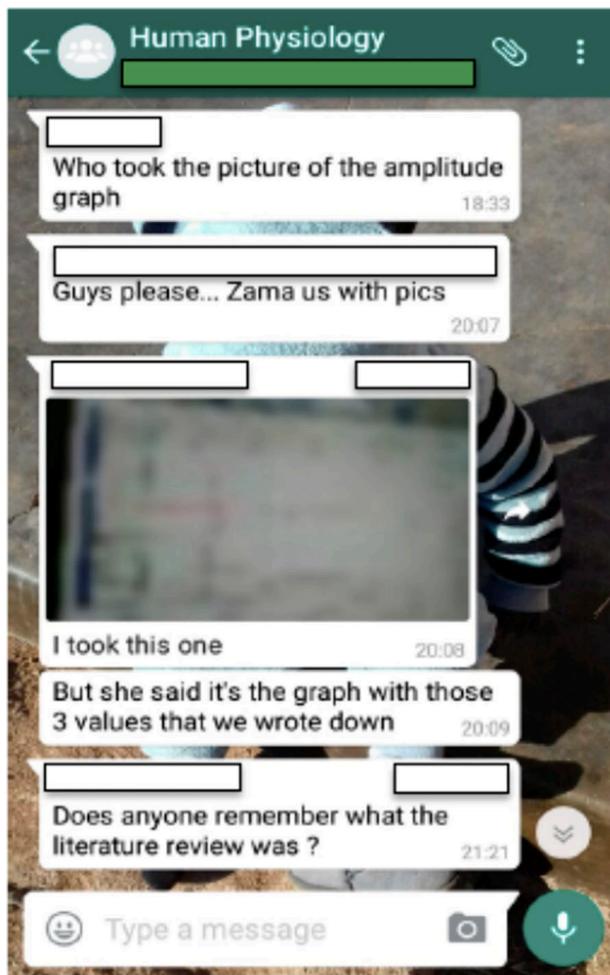
Figure 2: WhatsApp group studying conversation (Evernote entry, reproduced with permission from the co-researcher).

Co-researchers often related tales of 'resilience' and survival, whilst, there were poignant counter narratives. These survivalist discourses helped to reposition themselves within the figured world of university by authoring new 'successful' subjectivities (Holland et al., 1998). Whilst not as common as the survival narratives, there were examples of resistance to adaptation and change, offering a more pluralistic form of becoming:

> Adapting to the changes means changing my lifestyle - that is close to impossible. There is a Xhosa saying that goes "ungamkhupha umntu ezilalini kodwa awunakuzikhupha iilali emntwini". This means that even though I'm no longer in the rurals, the values I got there can never be erased. (Google Docs, LOCAL, 04/18)

Discussion and conclusions

The co-researchers in our study engaged in different forms of epistemic becoming as they negotiated the diverse spaces, practices and positionings across different figured worlds. Whilst they invested wide-ranging cultural and historical funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Norton, 2010) to assist in negotiating the transitions into the university space, they

were often confronted with the unfamiliar, with different social practices and specialised knowledges that were alienating and where they felt positioned as inferior and without agency (Holland et al., 1998). Our findings resonate with Fataar's (2018) argument that experiences outside classrooms and across multiple, lived spaces can contribute to developing emerging identities and ways of being in the new cultural world of academia. Identities and modes of belonging are not constructed individually and solely within academic spaces and discourses but within a set of interconnected social, cultural, historical and material relations (Holland and Lachicotte, 2007; Lave and Wenger, 2005; Schatzki, 2005) which suggests that epistemic becoming is relational and experiential and cannot be separated from our histories and experiences or what we seek to know (Leibowitz, 2017).

Since #FeesMustFall, university students have been calling for greater social justice through the realisation of a decolonial agenda in formal education. The findings presented here, show the breadth of the values, experience and knowledges that students from rural communities bring into universities and the opportunities they present for developing new forms of pedagogy, curricula and epistemic dialogue. However, universities do not appear to have embraced these opportunities adequately, as shown in this study, where students experienced multiple challenges in accessing, applying, arriving and engaging, due to the inequalities and bewilderments of a technocratic and continuing colonial HE system (Danforth, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). Many of these inequalities and unrealistic expectations could be avoided or mitigated by recognising their backgrounds and prior experiences and seeing these as a starting point for higher education, for example, locally responsive and globally relevant pedagogies (Jansen, 2009; Trahar, 2017).

Like Fataar and Bourdieu, who also uses the term 'misrecognition' (James, 2015), we conclude that students from rural backgrounds struggle for visibility and voice. Co-researchers in our study often felt alienated and excluded by curricula, systems and cultures. This disconnection to their prior histories' and experiences may, we argue, be a factor in low retention rates. Therefore, it is critical to shift from positioning students from rural areas as lacking legitimate cultural and epistemic backgrounds and acknowledge the knowledges and practices that they bring to university from their rural areas, celebrating and integrating these into curricula. Understanding and acknowledging the potential of these experiences to contribute to curriculum development and seeking ways to open up spaces for the recovery of agency of rural students is essential. Without such spaces, we suggest HE will continue to perpetuate marginalisation and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007).

We have shown the particularities of epistemic becoming for students from rural communities across complex, multiple social and temporal landscapes and that these need to recognised. Doing so we argue, would constitute a significant move towards decolonising universities in South Africa by challenging notions of powerful knowledge, how it is determined and by who. What was powerful knowledge once for a place, or people, may no longer be that powerful or powerful in the same way. it is in this context we argue that curriculum needs to be seen as an educational experience posing *current* problems to solve

(Pinar, 2008) by bringing mutliple knowledges into dialogue (de Sousa Santos, 2014). We argue for curriculum as a process of transformation that links places, people, knowledge(s) and skills. Finally, involving students from rural contexts and other backgrounds, as key agents in curriculum development to explore new spaces for rethinking how multiple knowledges might be brought into dialogue, is an important next step.

Acknowledgements

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