

# Introduction: Building decolonial learning and teaching through connecting to our diverse pasts: a case for ukuzilanda

Robyn Tyler  
*University of the Western Cape*

Correspondence to:

*rrtyler@uwc.ac.za*

---

The authors of this special issue – Nondwe Mpuma, Martina van Heerden, Khanyiso Jonas and Robyn Tyler - are part of a cohort of early career academics in the Arts and Humanities Faculty at the University of the Western Cape. We are joined by co-author Athambile Masola from the University of Cape Town. We are all fewer than 5 years into our permanent position as a lecturer at our institution. We come from Lubaleko, Kariega, Durban, eMonti and Cape Town and we speak isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English and isiZulu. Our academic disciplines within Arts and Humanities include Linguistics, English Literature, Sociology, Academic Literacies and Historical Studies. The foregrounding of our academic, geographic and linguistic identity positions within the body of this introduction is intentional. The starting point for the special issue is the diverse identity positions that we occupy and have occupied in the past. We agree with Menezes de Souza that it is important within a decolonial project to interrogate our locus of enunciation (Mignolo, 2009; Menezes de Souza, 2021) in order to proceed more authentically as teachers and researchers.

We have been enrolled on an induction course called 'Towards the Professionalization of Learning and Teaching', part of which involves writing a professional learning and teaching

portfolio. As part of this writing process we met, many of us for the first time in person, in June 2022 for a three-day residential writing retreat with other early-career academics from our cohort. This retreat was hosted by our faculty learning and teaching specialist, Marijke du Toit and the Deputy Dean of Learning and Teaching, Zannie Bock. Marijke and Zannie have contributed an afterword to this special issue. For many of us, the retreat was the first professional gathering since the Covid-19 lockdowns and was therefore a particularly enlivening emotional and professional growth experience, as Martina describes in her paper. We were all made aware afresh of the embodied nature of our work being together in co-presence. Many of us reflected on the comfort of mutual vulnerability after working in isolation for so long. A feature of our social engagements on the retreat was the sharing of our multilingual and multicultural lives. This special issue constitutes a collection of reflections, which started on the retreat, on how the authors' diverse pasts come to bear on the present moment as we become a community of practice of tertiary teachers. The contributions are part memoir and part theoretical proposition and we hope will contribute to building a decolonial approach to teaching in higher education in South Africa.

The remainder of this introduction will outline the theoretical underpinnings of the special issue: decoloniality; ukuzilanda; vulnerability; and the situated literacies of teaching. Finally, an overview of each paper is given.

## DECOLONIALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

This special issue seeks to add to the growing body of writing on decoloniality in higher education in South Africa. In particular in this introduction, I draw on a recently published edited collection which focuses on language and teaching in South African higher education from a decolonial perspective: 'Language and Decoloniality in Higher Education: Reclaiming Voices from the South' edited by Zannie Bock and Christopher Stroud (Bock & Stroud, 2021). The twin crises of campus protests and COVID-19 reverberate through the studies which are presented in this volume. And as I write this introduction, the artificial intelligence tide is rising in institutions of higher learning across South Africa and the globe. Colleagues are scrambling to find the best AI-detecting software to prevent their students plagiarising a machine's writing. Others are learning from their students how to use it to enhance their writing. The dawn of AI in education provokes challenging questions about the purpose of assessment and the authority of the teacher as the chief knower and requires more sophisticated critical literacy than ever before. Decolonising education is a task which is never complete (Mignolo, 2009). It is also not detached from other social pressures and crises such as COVID-19, campus protests and AI development, but rather it is 'entangled' with these (Stroud & Bock, 2021).

The chapters in Bock & Stroud (2021) provide rich accounts of university teachers and students grappling with teaching content and methodology in order to 'change the terms of the conversation' (Mignolo, 2009). The focus in these and other studies has been on the 'what' and the 'how' of decolonial learning and teaching. In the present issue, we train the spotlight on the 'who'. Who is it that is teaching in our university? How did we become teachers? How can we be more human(e),

more inspiring, more vulnerable, more authentic, more powerful, in short, more decolonial teachers for our students?

Stroud & Bock (2021) propose:

a particular interpretation of 'decoloniality', which would then comprise a 'delinking' of our humanity (Mignolo, 2007) from patriarchy (the inheritance of coloniality) in order to reinstate a 'culture of love' and relink with the memories, praxes of living and thinking that were disavowed by coloniality-modernity. Recapturing a life in love would mean an approach to social and personal transformation that is significantly about recalibrating relationships among selves and others and vanquishing or banishing the arrogance and spite that conserves oppressive orders and their institutions. (Stroud & Bock, 2021: 3, italics mine)

Stroud & Bock draw our attention to an oft-cited tenet of decolonial thought: 'delinking' (Mignolo, 2007). There is much that we as university teachers should delink from: a colonial curriculum, the exclusive use of colonial languages in our teaching, domineering relationships with our students etc. However, Stroud & Bock also introduce a different process in their introduction to the edited volume. They use the verbs 'relink(ing)' and 'recapturing' to describe this process. These verbs direct our attention towards the past. To be sure, it is not an attachment to a vision of an idyllic pre-colonial state. It is a more dynamic and vital connection to a continually evolving sense of who we are together and one which we connect in this special issue with the African notion of ukuzilanda (Masola, 2020).

## UKUZILANDA – FETCHING OUR TEACHING SELVES FROM THE PAST

As part of our endeavour to present a decolonial interpretation of our evolution as teachers and academics, we have recruited the concept of ukuzilanda. Here we are following and extending the academic meaning of this term as it is used by Athambile Masola in the discipline of

Historical Studies. Masola (2020) explains that in African cultures ukuzilanda involves 'connecting oneself to the past in the present moment'. She argues that the practices are associated with death and burial as well as the practice of ukuzithutha. Masola traces the biography of Noni Jabavu as a case of someone enacting ukuzilanda through physical travelling and archival work to unearth the stories of her family. Through this process she is able to make sense of her identity in relation to the past, and to choose which aspects of that past are important for the present and the future. Masola also argues that naming or listing (Cooper, 2016) black women thinkers through genealogies and remembering them through talk and writing is a way of resisting erasure of their histories (Masola, 2018). In this way ukuzilanda becomes an act of resistance. The discussions on the writing retreat which gave rise to this special issue comprised an act of ukuzilanda, as Jonas points out in her paper. The papers by Khanyiso, Nondwe and Martina all pay respect to previous teachers in various forms of listing.

McKinney (2022) situates ukuzilanda within a learning and teaching context in South African schools where the coloniality of language results in a monolingual English policy orientation to learning and teaching. In this context, McKinney argues that 'a dialogue of languaging between the past and present, ukuzilanda, is needed to disrupt the monolingual ideologies constraining emergent African language/English speaking children's opportunities to learn (Gee 2003)' (McKinney 2022: 14). The work of ukuzilanda that McKinney refers to in her article draws attention to literature published in African languages which predated literature written by Africans in English (Mukoma wa Ngugi, 2018 in McKinney 2022). In explaining that ukuzilanda creates a dialogue between the past and the present, McKinney resists ukuzilanda being construed as a throwback to an invented, fixed, prescribed cultural identity. We too are not interested in such a reductionist view of ourselves as teachers. Therefore, we are confident to explore the notion of ukuzilanda to test out whether it is relevant to ourselves as emerging decolonial teachers.

In recruiting this term from the African intellectual tradition we intend to

open a 'decolonial crack' (Walsh, 2014; Bock, 2021; Tyler, 2023) in the colonial edifice of theory-making in the South (see Robyn, Athambile & Nondwe's paper). We hope that we will contribute to a growing African epistemology or way of knowing in our universities. Incorporating an African language term as a term of theory is disruptive in the sense that McKinney has expressed above. It is jarring to find an isiXhosa word in the title of a journal special issue when we are used to English monolingual publishing culture. It requires humility from non-African readers to steep themselves in the meaning of the term and the practice of ukuzilanda without demanding an immediate English translation, or as bell hooks puts it to 'listen without mastery' (hooks, 1994 :172). In other places we have therefore used call-outs to provide glosses of African language terms in English so as not to interrupt the speech with in-text translations. In Robyn, Athambile and Nondwe's paper, multilingualism is foregrounded as it is an edited transcription of our interview and we have retained the multivocality of the text.

## VULNERABILITY

Stroud & Bock (2021) suggest that connecting with our shared and diffuse pasts can resurface important alternative ways of being and doing to inform our current activity, such as teaching in higher education. Equally, they argue that 'spaces of vulnerability' (Stroud & Bock, 2021: 9) can interrupt the status quo to introduce a decolonial 'otherwise'. In spaces of vulnerability such as the sharing of our teaching biographies on the writing retreat, our embodiment as teachers comes to the fore. It is our bodies that allow us to communicate affect: we cried, we laughed, we sighed and we held each other's gaze in silence.

The memories and vignettes which are shared in this special issue are deeply personal. Authors have embraced vulnerability and written using the reflective genre which at times provoked discomfort, as made explicit in Martina and Nondwe's papers. In publishing these reflections, we are hoping that our vulnerabilities will be a sign of strength rather than weakness. Indeed, as Martina shows, vulnerability is often how we make

connections with other people, thereby extending our humanity. As a group of authors, we have grappled with the term *ukuzilanda* as a concept upon which to build our reflections of being university teachers. For some of us, the term was immediately productive and useful. For others it evoked a place of vulnerability. Would we all agree on what the term meant? Would we need to agree? Did we want to fetch ourselves if the past is painful and better forgotten in forging a new teaching identity? We invite readers to engage with these questions as they read the papers. Importantly, the collection of papers calls into question the notion of the lone author and academic. As scholars, we are socialised into a position of a neutral observer who writes from a decontextualised position, what Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza calls ‘a modernistic scientific inheritance of objectivity’ (De Souza, Deumert & Makoni, 2023: 169). Decoloniality confronts us with our positionality as researchers and teachers. Our reflections here point to the complexity of this positionality. In this special issue we touch on how land, language and people have produced our subject positions. As Ana Deumert states in the same book chapter, ‘our positionality goes beyond ourselves as an individual, it’s about our interconnections’ (De Souza, Deumert & Makoni, 2023:189). We believe that as southern scholars we have much to offer the global scholarship project in our sensitivity to positionality. Furthermore, in this special issue, we contribute to the theory of positionality by fleshing out the interconnections making up the ‘who’ that is teaching.

## TEACHING LITERACIES

A prominent theme in the papers is an exploration of the teaching-specific literacies which we have developed throughout our lives. Khanyiso focuses on the practice of marking papers with a red pen which she shared with her mother, a schoolteacher. The technicalities of orthography are also mentioned in papers by Jonas (correct spelling was emphasised in her childhood), Martina (playing with orthography and meaning through homophones) and Nondwe (parsing the

word ‘*ukuzilanda*’). Khanyiso also pays attention to the skill of critique, so necessary for academic pursuits, which her grandmother helped her develop through discussions about stories.

At this point I will offer a reflection on my own development of critical literacy. I cast my mind back to the literacy practice of bed-time story reading which I enjoyed as a child. There is one story which stands out. It is a retelling of a Chinese folktale that my father used to read to us called *The Five Chinese Brothers*. The story was beautifully illustrated in the book from which he read. I remember the town executioner being terrifying as his masked head loomed over the text. Each of the Chinese brothers had a special talent which helped him evade the executioner’s various means of extermination. One of the brothers was able to elongate his legs at will. This saved him from drowning when the townspeople threw him overboard far out at sea. In order to reach the seafloor to stand and save himself, the narrator says that he ‘stretched and stretched and stretched his legs’. It was a captivating image to a five-year old. Did his legs get skinnier and skinnier as they reached the bottom? Or did they stay muscular and strong so that he stood firm on the sandy sea floor? As my father extended each word, ‘streeeeeeetch’, so I ducked my head beneath the waves to watch the boy’s legs lengthen.

One evening at bedtime, my dad’s naughty streak came out as he read this story. He used the same voice to read this line, but – with an extra long pause after the last ‘stretched’ – he substituted the word ‘legs’ for ‘underpants’! This was very risqué for white children growing up in the sheltered world of Christian National Education in South Africa in the ‘80s. He stretched his underpants! My brother and sister and I squealed with delight and fell about laughing in our pyjamas. From then on, that was the new version of the story. We would harangue him to read it PROPERLY, but of course in our hearts we preferred the crazy version. We were experiencing this sparkly thing of playing with a text, of entering it and contributing something of our own, of re-fashioning it to better suit us (cf. Janks, 2010). We felt that stories were there to be entered into. The world of a written story was polished and

beautiful, but not impermeable. The experience was irreverent, joyful and very memorable.

In the field of language in education I have come across very narrow definitions of what literacy is. I have been part of critiquing this and calling for, instead, a rich literacies approach for South African children (bua-lit, 2018). Reading the story of *The Five Chinese Brothers* with my siblings and my father is a thread in the tapestry of literacy events and practices which I bring to my teaching and research work.

## OVERVIEW OF THE PAPERS

Martina's paper opens the special issue by reflecting on the importance of belonging which is inherent in becoming an academic and the role of the writing retreat in fostering this. She explores impostor syndrome and vulnerability as a new academic and shows how the writing retreat is a vehicle for diminishing these uncomfortable experiences. Martina focuses on the co-presence of colleagues as powerful spaces for vulnerability and comfort.

In Robyn, Athambile and Nondwe's paper, the authors discuss the tensions and opportunities in recruiting this 'local', 'Southern', 'African' term, *ukuzilanda*, in academic discourse. Our discussion is multilingual and multivocal. Our meaning-making is an impossibility without employing different languages. We move between English (predominantly) and isiXhosa to tease out the meaning of *ukuzilanda* and to express our lifeworlds which are multilingual. The paper is also multivocal in that we make reference to other texts and thinkers which have influenced us, alongside family members, colleagues and friends.

Nondwe enlists literature for her exploration of *ukuzilanda*. She reflects on memory, particularly in the work of Toni Morrison. Nondwe reviews the cultural practice of *ukuzilanda* as she has come to understand and critique it. She questions whether *ukuzilanda* should focus on an individual or should respond more to collective memory. The concept of 'rememory' is drawn from Morrison's novel *'Beloved'*. Nondwe introduces the idea of self-fashioning and asks whether

*ukuzilanda* can incorporate the notion of self-fashioning, in other words can it look both forward and backward.

Khanyiso's paper lists the people who have had a profound effect on her journey toward being an teacher. She includes their full names: first names, surnames, clan names. In exploring her past to understand better what has shaped her teaching, she also excavates the literacy practices (Heath, 1982) into which she was socialised. Khanyiso refers to rehearsing the literacies of a teacher alongside her mother, being challenged to write in different genres by her, practising reading aloud with her grandmother and being socialised into a multilingual family by her grandfather. Khanyiso weaves the voices of her family members and a special teacher into her reflection to enrich the point she makes about their living influence on her teaching career.

## CONCLUSION

We view the contributions made in each paper of this special issue as an act of *ukuzilanda*. The authors centre people, relationships and places that have been pivotal in their journey into teaching. Following Masola (2020), people are identified and named as an act of resisting erasure (see in particular Khanyiso's paper). These family members, friends and acquaintances do not conventionally make their way into academic journal articles. Inserting them and centring their stories helps us to form a clearer picture of our positionality – a process which is crucial in becoming honest, aware teachers. Accounts are given of how domestic life including love, vulnerability and pain have shaped who we are as teachers. We hope that the reflections in the papers and afterword which follows gives the reader a richer insight into a cohort of early career academics and what is shaping us in this moment. Also, we hope to contribute to the theorising of 'becoming' an academic and a teacher in contemporary South Africa.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the guidance and support given by our mentors, Prof Zannie Bock and Dr Marijke du Toit of Arts and

Humanities Learning and Teaching. Your belief in this project from the beginning was a great catalyst for writing. We would also like to thank Prof Christopher Stroud and Prof Zannie Bock for comments on earlier versions of the special issue. The writing retreat referred to in this special issue (and a subsequent one in which we worked further on these papers) was funded by a grant from the University Capacity Development Grant. We wish to thank the funders and the DVC Academic of UWC for making these funds available to the faculty for this purpose. We also thank Uhlanga Press for permission to re-use Athambile Masola's poem 'Coconut'.

## REFERENCES:

- Bock, Zannie. (2021). Decolonizing linguistics: a Southern African textbook project. In Z. Bock & C. Stroud (Eds). *Language and decoloniality in higher education: reclaiming voices from the South*. Bloomsbury.
- Bock, Zannie & Stroud, Christopher. (Eds) (2021). *Language and decoloniality in higher education: reclaiming voices from the South*. Bloomsbury.
- bua-lit collective. (2018). *How are we failing our children? Reconceptualising language and literacy education*. <https://bua-lit.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/bua-lit-FINAL051218-2.pdf>
- Cooper, Brittney C. (2016). *But some of us are brave: Black women's studies*. The Feminist Press at CUNY.
- De Souza, Lynn Mario, Deumert, Ann, & Makoni, Sinfree. (2023). Conversation with Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza. In *From Southern Theory to Decolonizing Sociolinguistics: Voices, Questions and Alternatives* (pp. 169-198). Multilingual Matters.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. (1982). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. *Language in society*, 11(1), 49-76.
- Hlalethwa, Zaza. (2019, September). Art Week's daring new darling. *Mail and Guardian*. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-09-13-00-art-weeks-daring-new-darling>
- hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- Janks, Hilary. (2013). Critical literacy in teaching and research. *Education Inquiry*, 4(2), 225-242.
- Masola, Athambile. (2021). *Ilifa*. Uhlanga Press.
- Masola, Athambile. (2020). *Journeying home, exile and transnationalism in Noni Jabavu and Sisonke Msimang's memoirs*. Unpublished thesis: Rhodes University
- Masola, Athambile. (2018). *Ukuzilanda: resisting erasure*. Available at: <http://ixhantilam.blogspot.com/2018/12/ukuzilanda-resisting-erasure.html>
- McKinney, Carolyn. (2022). Coloniality of language and pretextual gaps: a case study of emergent bilingual children's writing in a South African school and a call for ukuzilanda. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.
- Menezes de Souza, Lynn Mario. (2021). Foreword. In Z. Bock & C. Stroud (Eds.), *Language and Decoloniality in Higher Education: Reclaiming Voices from the South* (pp. 6-19). London: Bloomsbury.
- Mignolo, Walter. (2007) Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of decoloniality. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 449-514.
- Mignolo, Walter & Walsh, Catherine. (2018). *On decoloniality*. Duke University Press.
- Stroud, Christopher & Bock, Zannie. (2021). Introduction: Loving and Linguaging in Higher Education: a decolonial horizon. In Z. Bock & C. Stroud (Eds.) *Language and decoloniality in higher education: reclaiming voices from the South*. Bloomsbury.
- Tyler, Robyn. (2023). *Translanguaging, coloniality and decolonial cracks: Bilingual Science learning in South Africa*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Walsh, Catherine. (2014) Pedagogical notes from the decolonial cracks. *Decolonial Gesture*, 11(4). Retrieved from <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/emisferica-11-1-decolonial-gesture/11-1-dossier/pedagogical-notes-from-the-decolonial-cracks.html>