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Stories of the canon (stories of the self): towards an intra-active decolonisation of higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to decolonisation theory and debates in Higher Education by thinking from the practice of diversifying subject reading lists. To illustrate the scene within which diversification efforts unfold I draw on primary research designed to explore the function of a subject canon (Urban Studies). Researched and written as an autoethnographic rhizoanalysis, I show that texts' meanings are intertextually established through hegemonic processes of canonisation, which are curricular in effect; and which draw in readers as nodes through which the assemblage proliferates. Using Karen Barad's concept of intra-activity to better articulate the materiality of this curricular assemblage and our inseparability from it, I critique the common practice of *adding more diversity* for its failure to attend to underlying logics and its edging out of more radical responses. I then discuss the decolonial openings that intra-action makes possible, focusing on its potential for producing different knowledge(s) through reading and research.

Introduction

Rhodes must fall.

March 9th, 2015. University of Cape Town. Chumani Maxwele, a Political Sciences Student, throws human faeces at a statue of the British imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes (Guardian, 2015). In the days, weeks and months that follow, this single act catalyses many others across Africa (Ahmed, 2020) and worldwide (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu, 2018). Today, *Rhodes must fall* eclipses any singular moment. It has appended itself to other statues and efforts (Chigudu, 2020), found form as a series of hashtags (Frassinelli, 2018), awoken an affective politics of discontent in networked publics (Knudsen & Andersen, 2019), and helped symbolise and protest the dominance of white, settler, male, Euro-centric voices within academia (Charles, 2019). In response, promises for the diversification of faculty and subject curricula have been quick to emerge across Higher Education (HE) institutions worldwide, pronounced proudly within wide-ranging

strategies to decolonise the curriculum. Within these strategic summons, course reading lists are often presented as tangible sites for scholars considering their individual remits and actions.[1] In this motion curriculum becomes locatable and thus located in texts deemed required reading – those texts which are 'canon'. But whilst we may move towards diversification and decolonisation within the same breath, they are not the same.

Situated within wider decolonisation theory, it is clear that the work of decolonising the curriculum requires a far more layered response. Decolonisation – as a response to the 'epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence' unleashed by the settler colonisation of indigenous land and life (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5) – must be alert to the ways in which those same logics of domination are both present and perpetuated through white-settler forms of governance and institutions, including HE. Here, as in elsewhere, it must unsettle those structures which shape (im)possible relations between the university and its wider publics (Santos, 2017), as well as the frames wherein certain knowledges are privileged, leading to the violent exclusion of others (Santos, 2017). Moreover, where the curricular arenas we seek to decolonise are themselves caught within such processes of knowledge subjugation, there is a real risk that 'partial interventions may well generate perverse results' (Santos, 2017, p. 221). How, then, must we understand efforts to decolonise subject canons by re-writing reading lists for the worlds they are for, and futures, desired? *Bold efforts? Necessary work on the margins? Generative of perverse results?* Similarly, what is lost when the visceral discontent of Chumani Maxwele is transposed to a largely administrative task? How might that crowd out more imaginative responses? And how might we reclaim the dynamism of *Rhodes must fall* from metaphorical abstraction (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and set it towards decolonial futures?

It is in response to these questions that this paper makes a critical contribution to decolonisation theory and decolonising HE debates. Looking first to the concept of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), and the metaphor of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), I define the curricular canon within which diversification efforts unfold. I then move to outline an original method of autoethnographic rhizoanalysis devised to explore this canonical assemblage. Following a brief overview of its application to the Urban Studies canon, I present the central story of this paper: stories of the canon (stories of the self). This story narrates the textual and material ways in which meaning is (re)established through hegemonic processes of canonisation which are curricular in effect. Using Barad's (2007) concept of intra-activity to further define the materiality of this assemblage and readers' inseparability from it, I then critique the shortcomings of current diversification practices, and reflect on the decolonial openings that intra-action makes imaginable. Moving to develop this theoretical understanding for practical ends, the final section of the paper diffracts my own efforts with others' to model possibilities for imagining HE beyond dominant onto-epistemic frames (Stein, 2019). Such a move towards decolonial futures, I argue, is one of attuning ourselves to our place within the HE assemblage in order that we might feel out, reimagine, and perform it otherwise relationally, from within.

Exploring the canon as assemblage

This article, the book on your nightstand, the note in your mailbox – all texts appear before us as *always-already-read* (Jameson, 1981). Their meanings are bound to the situated

contexts in which they are produced and reproduced, and the unavoidable frames that accompany a reader's sense-making. Where the meaning of a text is just as variable as the contexts of its reading, the author no longer holds the monopoly (Barthes, 1977). The word Julia Kristeva tasks to describe this entangled sense- and meaning-making is *intertextuality*. Connecting texts across two axes – from authors to their readers and from a text to other texts – intertextuality renders culture itself a narrative process, whereby texts and other cultural artefacts, consciously and unconsciously link to larger stories at play (Kristeva, 1980). Texts, therefore, are cultural in every regard, in their coming into being and in the ways in which they're read. In this sense intertextuality decisively blurs the boundaries between texts and our situated, historical everyday lives.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1987) metaphor of the rhizome provides one route to sensing this scene. Substituting a 'tree-like' image of knowledge acquisition and production with the 'ginger-type' root system of the rhizome, they show the ways in which thought and meaning expand in every direction and all at once. The rhizome, they explain, is 'a semiotic chain … a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive' (p. 7). And so, *this article, the book on your nightstand, the note in your mailbox*, now extend to the mailbox itself, a conversation overheard between neighbours, the blackbird digging beneath the fuchsia bush, that pit in your stomach. Far from a corpus of individual texts, the canon is an assemblage of heterogenous and indiscrete elements that congregate and rupture. An assemblage that assembles with other existing and emergent assemblages, shaped and re-shaped in the thereafter. Always open, always provisional. Cut a branch off (remove a text from a reading list) the plant (meaning) will continue to grow from another point (another text). Yet there is no inevitability or randomness to proceedings (Deleuze & Guattari's, 1987). Assemblages are 'always concerned about questions of power' (Buchanan, 2015, p. 382), marking it a generous scene from which to feel out the emergent effects of efforts to decolonise HE.

My own turn towards seeing and seeking the canon as an assemblage in this way was prompted by my doctoral research (Bradley, 2015). This research sought to explore the seeming naturalisation of time within the Urban Studies canon, a discipline elsewhere acknowledged for its privileging of spatial imaginaries and academic maturation through a *spatial turn* (Halberstam, 2005; Warf & Arias, 2009). To explore the *feel* of time's naturalisation within the discipline I combined autoethnography[2] with rhizoanalysis (Honan, 2007; St Pierre, 1997), so that I might connect personal affects back up to wider processes of culture at play (autoethnography); all the while following the lines by which things came to mean and matter, and the emergence of connections without fixing them in place (rhizoanalysis).

The intended application of this autoethnographic rhizoanalysis was to locate central texts of the discipline *first,* and *then* enter and read the Urban Studies canon through those texts.[3] Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, my aim was not simply to locate or account for the absence/presence of time within the texts, but to facilitate movement in thought, continually unfolding sense connections, and active forgetting, so that I might bring forth *other* versions of the canon through my reading (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). I established three indicators[4] from which I identified four texts dominant within the discipline.[5] This journey towards seeking the texts of the canon, however, was far more revealing than I could have imagined at the time. Likewise, whilst debates on decolonising the

curriculum were not focused in my mind when I searched for the texts, the colonial, patriarchal and white-settler power structures that underpinned the canonical assemblage, once seen, were impossible to ignore. As the story which follows will now show, such dynamics were perpetuated through hegemonic processes of canonisation that far exceeded any central text or corpus, and grew in ways that were as material and affective as they were textual and discursive. And importantly, as the analysis attests, both readers and writers alike were drawn in as nodes through which the assemblage proliferated – outcomes which offer vital insights for the current concerns of this paper.

Stories of the canon (stories of the self)

I had no intention of entering the canon at first, only to tap gently to have it reveal to me its canonical texts. Yet as I narrowed down universities from which to request reading lists, sifted through edited collections, designed search strings to reveal texts most cited – enter it, I did. In journal descriptions, article titles and abstracts; keywords, authors and locations; dates, blurbs and course descriptors. In those texts which spoke of the texts I sought, there it was.

I didn't notice it at first. Maybe I'd had no cause to notice it. My assumption that I would identify the core texts and *then* autoethnographically rhizoanalyse them, remained untested due to the familiarity of what was emerging. Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, Glasgow, MIT, Harvard – *I know those universities.* David Harvey, Saskia Sassen, Jane Jacobs, Manuel Castells – *these authors make sense*. By virtue of the recognisable institutions being returned as top departments, and familiar names appearing on every reading list and every edited collection, my confidence grew that I was locating the canon from the outside, a mere observer on the edge.

It didn't take too many unexpected encounters to break me from that comfort. First was when I was refused access to reading lists from certain institutions. Direct email requests to course and programme leaders followed. Some returned the goods, others replied only to acknowledge that they were not publicly available. *Perhaps due to their status as intellectual property*, my own subject librarian suggested. This made them all the more desirable – *they must know the good stuff,* I mused – but also hinted at something else at play. I next stumbled when faced with the language used to describe the edited collections. *What does it mean for a publisher to describe their collection as a 'blue chip' item? What do influence, social media buzz and 'gold standards' have to do with academic ideas?* Then came the citation indexes. Inputting the same terms into two different search engines yielded wildly different results. *Why different? If they're not measuring absolute citation counts, what are they measuring?* The algorithms by which they tallied their respective goods remained strange and unknown to me right to the end. Finally, there were the more diverse thinkers that appeared. *W. E. B. DuBois, William Julius Wilson, bell hooks – not the most referenced or cited, but always there.* What was the significance of their inclusion?

My comfort broken, I realised that I was in fact starting to feel out the canon as an assemblage – a flux of authors, institutions, texts, ideas and entities. And as I made amends with the more unexpected presentations that were emerging, I grew to appreciate the ways in which academic ideas traversed the terrain. It was not their ability to advance knowledge within a given academic field or 'fill a gap'. Rather, it was their

capacity for connecting back up to other spheres and logics – other assemblages – that dictated their ability to mean and matter. Power didn't reside solely within the texts. It was not so neatly contained nor linearly traceable. Instead, its influence and effects were diffuse throughout the assemblage. Well-known markers of esteem – The Ivy league, The Russell Group, The Research Excellence Framework, for example – appeared to count prestige *and* manufacture it. Measures to rank universities served to extend the dominance of institutions ranked. Frequent and repeated acts of grouping certain texts, academics, institutions, and markers of esteem together rendered them familiar, sensible, and therefore canonical.

Beyond these outward acts of measuring and grouping, the assemblage worked inwardly to shape academic practice. Knowledge outputs that were associated with traveling well, travelled well. Journal articles, blogs, number of followers on Twitter – *these ways of communicating have traction*. Indeed, these were the modalities etched within collective consciousness – *we either use them or give ground to those who do*. Texts were distilled as blurbs, abstracts, quotations and keywords. The sensible was frequently lifted out of context: reproduced, reframed, reconstructed, rewritten. The rest erased from view, its existence hinted at by the courtesy of quotation marks and ellipses on the page. With citations too, they spoke not of a scholarly value but that which was revered (be it genuinely, performatively, or unconsciously) and/or easiest to reach – the dominant, the familiar, the sensible. And backed not only by author but by canon, the reach of these snippets to construct their disciplinary subject, and the world to which they spoke, proliferated fervently, advancing attention towards *that* content so that it might reproduce itself in other work.

The assemblage was difficult to grasp in its entirety but made itself known by the situated logics it hegemonically extended from, to and itself extended: *market-driven, neoliberal, power-hungry, colonial*. Many of the institutions that topped the rankings could be traced back to British settler states. York morphed into *New* York, Cambridge was a city in Massachusetts, there was a London in Ontario, Canada. Their shared nomenclature suggested more than just a common tongue, but common practices, traditions and cultures transcendent of geography. Past, present and future ways of academic working, situated within very particular and material ways of knowing, doing and being. This sharing of culture also took place in more personal encounters. Nods and gestures from one author to another in blurbs and on dust jackets gave clues as to the proximity of relationships and ideas within the assemblage: *mentors and mentees, frequent co-authorship, spouses*. Like business deals concluded on the golf course, academic practices of knowledge-making appeared prolific outwith office hours and university buildings, taking place in networked gatherings and closed events. Over weekends and trips away, around the dinner table, and even, perhaps, late at night whilst drifting off to sleep. The professional, the personal and the political were truly entangled. Ways of knowing were situated not just within the texts, but across working practices and the mundane activities of everyday life. It was culture that was canonical.

And where was I in all of this? White, Scottish, British. First-generation university student. Female, cis-gender and straight-assumed. Non-disabled. At every turn I was reading the texts through texts – through cultures established, borrowed and emergent – to make them sensible. Within this I came to recognise the increased frequency with which the canon had become the barometer against which I checked the accuracy of

my methods for finding it. *MIT doesn't appear on this list of 'top' universities, must be some-thing wrong with my search terms here. It's odd to see a non-Western, non-English speaking institution, is this ranking right?* My growing familiarity had ultimately returned a canonical sensibility. I had become a node in its network, policing its proper form, curating it in its own image as I went. And with horror I realised just how limiting my limited reading of the written texts had been as I'd unwittingly applied my indicators from within the assem-blage. Sifting through abstracts, blurbs, quotations, titles, keywords. Scanning for some-thing to hold onto. Filtering for relevance. Looking for the familiar. Learning to read, canonically.

   With increased reading, increased time with the canon, the greater its reach became. I could no longer claim my readerly imagination as my own, but directed towards reading *right* at every turn, it was now (co)constructed with the canon. *Even in the gen-tlest of taps it proliferates within me*. As I searched, read, and thought, it reproduced. In intellectual, virtual, and material spaces, I circulated amongst Others who were not unlike myself. When I turned to write and craft sense for my readers, I positioned myself and my writing alongside the dominant. I too sliced and diced, impassioned and detailed troves of unexplored depths to paragraphs, sentences and strings of words; moulded them for other contexts, other arguments and other agendas. Like Harvey, Jacobs, Castells and Sassen – like the authors before them, and the ones who came after – I wrote for, within and against the canon. My efforts decided by a value that was elsewhere established, accompanied by the ghosts of all that they didn't contain. Far from a sterile list, the canon was a far more intimately formed sensibility, a way of seeing, a literacy for knowing and interacting. An imagination already popu-lated by dominant categories, themes, and ways of doing. And crucially, within this I also came to see that 'time' never left the canon. Rather, its presence was curated by a limiting imaginary which measured, squeezed and ordered it in neat succession, through social, material and textual practices. It was feel-able and know-able only by those modes, and recognisable only in those forms. From there it was but a small step to realise that just as the canon configured my imagination, it affected a similar hold on others who looked upon it. The canon was Editor in Chief; its texts were but a mouthpiece for it to speak.

After canon

It was uncomfortable to witness my own implications within the formation of the Urban Studies canon, and the onto-epistemic frames it made (im)possible. Equally, realising that a more central and heterogenous presence of 'time' in 'the urban' would ultimately be determined not by my intellectual efforts, but by the *canon*, was discomfiting to say the least. But like the story told, such moments gave way to points of learning within the duration of the doctoral study and beyond, moving my understanding of the canon towards its material and 'intra-active' nature (Barad, 2007), guiding an approach toward slow (Mountz et al., 2015) and anti-disciplinary (Ingold, 2013) ways of practising academia, and leading my making of a hand-embroidered, patchwork quilt as an alterna-tive thesis (Bradley, 2015). Likewise, a more gradual sense that these insights must be uttered alongside current debates on decolonising the curriculum has been growing in my mind, finding form in the writing of this paper.

This section will soon turn to diffract both the story told and these *after* moments of intra-activity, academic practice, and quilt-making through decolonisation theory, using them to agitate and imagine alternatives to the diversification agenda set out at the beginning of this paper. First, however, it is important to address the limitations and affordances of drawing on the 'canon' for decolonial analyses. Walter D. Mignolo (2002) reminds us that 'it is not unproblematic, to 'think' from the canon of Western philosophy' (p. 66), and perhaps we might extend this to thinking *with*. The canon is, after all, an assemblage of privileged knowledges; the 'dominant higher education field-imaginary' which sanctions and enables certain possibilities, whilst invalidating and invisibilising others (Stein, 2019, p. 146).

The reason for situating this work here, then, is not to suggest that the canon itself might be *decolonised*. Rather, it is to learn from this encounter at the coalface of the academic machine and become attuned to the dominant onto-epistemic frames through which it unfolds. It is to use it as a 'radar' for 'potential circularities and short-circuits' in the HE assemblage, revealing 'openings … that enact different kinds of relationships, and different possibilities' (Stein et al., 2020, p. 45); or a point from which to catch glimpse of the 'demonic grounds' through which HE's 'practices of domination' can be thought alongside non-replicative alternatives (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxvi). That is, this work seeks the canon as a portal through which HE makes itself known, and in a two-fold knowing, moves towards different imaginaries and potentials within HE and beyond.

The intra-active assemblage

To turn first, then, to the workings of the canon itself. Whilst told from the vantage of the Urban Studies discipline, *stories of the canon (stories of the self)* confirms the hegemonic networks which lurk within, circulate and shape disciplinary canons more broadly. It shows that texts' meanings, as well as those texts which surround them, are indiscrete and unlocatable, held within an ever-evolving network of relations. Kristeva's (1980) *intertextuality* not only anticipates this but foregrounds the co-constitutive relationships that exist between texts and their readers, to which the story also attests. As I reflect now on my journey through the rhizomatic tangles of the Urban Studies canon it is all too clear the ways in which my histories, positionalities, and every other textual encounter I'd had up until that point was not only paving a path, but co-creating an interpretation that was neither mine, nor the texts', but a dance between the two.

But whilst texts, broadly conceived, offered welcome points through which to anchor my analysis, the understandings I forged were equally populated by material and affective moments that exceeded them. From pain in my hip, neck and jaw as my body scaffolded a firm foundation for my mind to fly through the virtual realities of search engines, to a tomato soup stain which unintentionally marked the napkin on which I'd scribbled the 'good' search strings. Meaning was made through these relational, felt and affective encounters, between me, the texts, and all that exceeded them.

Perhaps even more difficult to grasp with the concept of intertextuality alone is the dynamism of these human-text(-*more-than-text*) interactions. This meaning-making endeavour was mutual. Just as I brought meaning to the texts of the canon, the canon repeatedly re-etched itself within my consciousness as I navigated, read, sensed, and came to know it as familiar. I, the reader, was written and re-written in the encounter,

coded to read *for* the canon, so that I might reproduce it for other readers and other texts. I was never on the edge of this assemblage. Despite my naivety that I might locate and hold myself there, the assemblage was perpetual, growing and proliferating within me. The power of the canon extended its hegemonic reach to structure my very knowing and being, and, for a time, fixed paralysing limits upon my ability to imagine otherwise.

Whilst it's not to say that Kristeva's account denies the presence of human mutability within and through intertextual networks, there remains a privileging of the pre-existing, human agent within that understanding (Truman, 2016). Moreover, although thinking intertextuality alongside notions of a rhizomatic assemblage helps secure a role for the more-than-textual, the potency of such things in shaping meaning, and having their meanings shaped, is not so easy to foreground. For the feminist philosopher Karen Barad (2007), such an entanglement between humans and texts, between humans and all things, is not adequately described as interaction, but rather, *intra-action*. Whilst inter-action defines pre-existing agents that engage in action whilst maintaining their independence from one another, intra-action argues that the entities are themselves co-constituted through the encounter. Viewed in this way, agency is not something to be exercised, but a dynamism of forces in which all designated 'things' are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing, and working inseparably (p. 141). Barad's philosophy does not shy away from the role of textual and discursive practices within this intra-active assemblage, but rather, flattens their hierarchical status to ensure that material phenomena and affective resonances are just as salient to the assembling of relations, and the question of how things come to mean and matter.

This scene of the intra-active assemblage confirms the impossibility of seeking the canon as an object discrete from ourselves. It reveals that even in the gentlest of encounters, the assemblage shifts and grows – connections are broken, and new ones ignited through anything and anyone it contacts. This contact does not have to be so bold as to attempt to mould the canon in the image of a more diverse reality, but as *stories of the canon* shows, the very act of seeking its shape, glancing upon it, brushing against it, constitutes a connective encounter. Indeed, it was not the case that I did not encounter more diverse thinkers or texts upon my exploration. But whilst they were present in name, the canon was always there in the background, drawing readerly attention to ideas and debates not necessarily intended by their authors. Those texts, just like every other text taken as a discrete unit, were present for how they served the canon.

Thought as a material and intra-active assemblage, it also becomes easier to appreciate the ways in which the canon's 'intertextual power networks work to exclude, make token of, or appropriate literature authored by Black writers, writers of colour, Indigenous writers, and LGBTQ + writers' (Truman, McLean Davies, & Buzacott, 2021, p. 11). This is a vital note for anyone working to decolonise the curriculum by producing more diverse reading lists. We must recognise that the sense and meanings of any texts added to the canon, and those ideas they seek to bolster, remain vulnerable to the colonial tendencies of the wider assemblage which continue to centre white-settler experiences and logics. At the same time, we must also remain alert to the real possibility that the ease of applying such approaches not only adds to their prevalence, but in effect crowds out more radical decolonial efforts. To paraphrase Jonathan Jansen (2017), there are no shortcuts; but to be clear, *Rhodes* will never fall by reading list regardless of its content. Likewise, the intra-active assemblage alerts us to be mindful of the many

connections through which texts are subverted to perform and perpetuate the central values of the canon, including within ourselves. That is, where colonisation has extended its reach to qualify the form of our very imaginations, the introduction of new and more diverse nodes 'will not in themselves be adequate to shift the underlying onto-metaphysical infrastructures of the modern/colonial system' (Stein et al., 2020, p. 10).

As noted in the previous section, however, this is not the revelation. Seeking 'the canon' was always likely to return this hegemonic, colonial-capitalist scene.[6] By thinking through the canon and its intra-active dynamic, however, we have a new landscape from which to imagine the inadequacies and harms unleashed through the all-too-common practice of *adding more diversity going forward*. More importantly, the image of the canon as an intra-active assemblage returns a map from which to work. Not only does it help attune us to the enormity of its power and reach *within us*, but in moving beyond textuality, Barad's intra-action affords a critical view of the entities, materialities, forces and affects through which the assemblage works, and where we might reimagine our resistance.

Towards an intra-active decolonisation, relationally, from within

The image of the intra-active assemblage described reveals the onto-epistemic deficits we are not only thinking of, but thinking in. Decolonisation, therefore, must also attend to the onto-epistemic frames in which we make sense of the work (Stein, 2019). Barad's intra-action provides a fresh perspective on the nature of this scene, moving from the products of the canon towards a curriculum performed through our assembling with it. This shift in focus from the *canon* towards the *self* also parallels a desire for decoloniality that takes root not within our institutions but in our own minds and practices, and those of our students and colleagues (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This, by definition, cannot and must not be prescriptive. Yet knowing the trajectories of this work within my own self, I am encouraged by the sense that modelling otherwise is helpful in nurturing imaginations beyond 'higher education as we know it' (Stein, 2019, p. 144). The final section of this paper therefore looks back to reading encounters and research methodologies as fertile spaces of knowing otherwise and, taking a relational approach, thinks my own efforts alongside others' who have inspired.

The assumption of decolonisation through diversification of reading lists gravely misapprehends the realities that we are dealing in. Moreover, the ease by which we arrogantly assume our power to reshape the curriculum through the re-issuing of a more diverse catalogue is emblematic of the colonial logics that underpin our teaching through such instruments. As a curation of 'proper' knowledge intended for student consumption the reading list operates within similar motions of *epistemicide* (Santos, 2014), not least when we cast our minds to the writing and re-writing that occurs within our assembling with the curricular canon. What if we reappropriated the reading list and subverted its materialities, processes and practices? What if students' diverse and situated knowledges were valued rather than moulded? What if the reading list became a site of 'social dialogue' (Jansen, 2017) in which we and our students worked collectively to uncover that which is absent(ed) and (un)imaginable? In my own teaching practice, I've made efforts towards such motions by supporting students to curate, annotate and mix their own lists in zine form, and have long put Katherine McKittrick's incisive question

– where do you *know* from? – to work in place of the othering icebreaker: where are *you* from? (Zuroski, 2020). It is not so much these specific practices that are of note, but rather, the attempt to honour students' knowing, their communities, and the publics beyond the academy to which they are connected, that perhaps holds promise here.

Our readings of the readings on the reading list are similarly fraught with colonial tendencies. Intertextuality is not simply a concept but a dominant reading practice and active force in perpetuating 'colonial, patriarchal and canonical power structures' (Truman et al., 2021, p. 838). But what if we read intra-textually via the text that is written on the self? What if we read relationally, seeking and seeing the ways in which we emerge as meaningful within the constellation of other selves and materialities that make up the assemblage? What if we taught students to read rhizomatically: to 'run lines' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4) and avoid those tendencies of fixing 'order'? (p. 7). Open to the 'the felt materiality of the various intra-acting elements' (Truman, 2016, p. 91), rather than hostage to them, reading intra-textually could be a method for performing more diverse and anticolonial thought within, and beyond, the classroom. The advantage of seeing the curricular assemblage intra-actively, therefore, is complemented by the effort to practise it in such a way.

Related to this are the research methodologies primed for academic inquiries. Methods prevalent within the colonial-capitalist canons of the Global North tend toward the knowing of their objects/subjects, and a fixing of realities. Sabi Redwood (2008) describes such modes of knowledge production as violent activities, whereby the 'strange is made to appear familiar', the 'otherness of the other' is ordered, and the unknown is transfigured in the process of its knowing (n.p). Such tendencies once again do little to mask their colonial underpinnings. And yet other ways are possible. Recognising the extent to which these prevailing methods were similarly sustained by (and sustaining of) a linear view of time in my doctoral research, I chose to represent my thesis in two forms: a textual document, and a hand-embroidered, patchwork quilt. The quilt, on the one hand, was devised as a mirror to show up the masculine, binary and sanitised aesthetic of the electronically produced traditional thesis text. Knowing that no textual intervention would be sufficient to secure a heterogenous presentation of time(s) within the canon, this work also sought to 'do' and 'make' time differently in the more-than-textual assemblage of the canon by invoking material and slow modes in the quilt's making and extending an ongoing invitation to others to participate in its reading (Bradley, 2021, n.p.).

This is but one example of a growing range of alternatives that deliberately resist the urge to fix and tame, and instead look to perform *differences* that exceed textual representation. Feminist post-structural and post-qualitative (MacLure, 2013; St Pierre, 2000), research-creation (Truman, 2021), embodied (Perry & Medina, 2015), relational (Tynan, 2021), resurgent (Simpson, 2022), indigenous (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008), black and anti-colonial (McKittrick, 2022), and diffractive methodologies (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1997), for example, often embark with such aims in mind. With hindsight I can appreciate the ways in which my own work has been journeying in relation to these inspiring endeavours: experiencing, feeling out, glimpsing and disrupting the differences that matter. To draw on Donna Haraway (1997), this journey has also been one of witnessing the different ways such moments have been recorded on my own life and body, and then knowing the importance of voicing them now, in this form, and for these debates.

Vital parallels must therefore be drawn for decolonisation efforts as they sit in relation to our everyday modes of research and knowledge making. If we are to take seriously our desires and demands for a decolonised curriculum, we must turn this inquiry upon ourselves, and the structures, materialities and practices we think from, within and without. We need more autoethnographies which attend to these questions and illuminate the everyday, situated cultures of academia. We must imagine modes of doing, knowing and being in academia that are forged through anti-colonial logics. We must also keen ourselves to the intra-active nature of this work and remain agile to the imagining of new methods which don't automatically preconfigure our paths back into the colonial tendencies of the assemblage. Indeed, I believe that in this opening of ourselves and our practices within the intra-active assemblage we may find the means to nurture our knowing and being, and that of our colleagues and students, towards more diverse and plural ways, and in doing so help gesture toward decolonial futures (Stein et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a critique on the seemingly benign practice of diversifying reading lists as a tool for decolonising the curriculum. Using autoethnographic rhizoanalysis, I have unravelled the means by which ideas circulate the curricular assemblage. Animating the textual, discursive, material and affective routes by which dominance is maintained, *stories of the canon (stories of the self)* points to the colonial ways of knowing and being that the assemblage extends from and extends. Confirming our inseparability from this assemblage and these processes, I develop from thinking the canon intertextuality towards imagining it intra-actively. In advancing a relational and material understanding of the onto-epistemic frames in which current practices and imaginaries are embedded, both the insufficiencies and possible harms of diversification practices become newly appreciable. Far from leaving us inert to the cause, however, this understanding opens the door for intra-active responses that exceed text, and which are likely to be far more potent than the addition or amendment of any one text or reading list could ever hope. Such an approach, I argue, also redirects the question of decoloniality from the products 'out there', to our minds and practices, and the means by which we might move towards decolonial futures, relationally, from within.

Notes

1. A UK based web search (February 2023) of 'diversify reading lists decolonising the curriculum' reveals the widespread promotion of this practice.
2. Whilst it's not unheard of for academics to turn the method upon their own craft (Warren, 2016; Thomson, 2017; Read & Bradley, 2018), I'd argue that it remains underutilised, not least in matters of decolonisation. The cited works share a common interest in the delicately balanced conditions under which academics work towards their professional identities and career development. The tensions involved in speaking up and speaking out, whilst maintaining status, is a likely factor in the relative lack of HE-focused autoethnographies.
3. Ethical approval was granted for this research from the University of Glasgow (CSS/2011 0105-2).
4. A combination of prestige groupings, league tables and rankings were used to discern 'top' institutions. Results were collated from library search engines and citation indexes to identify

articles and edited collections with the highest citation counts. See Bradley (2015) for full write-up.

5. Castells, 2000; Harvey, 1989; Jacobs, 1961; Sassen, 1991.
6. With sincere thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this point.

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