

Reflective piece**Mixed metaphors, mixed messages and mixed blessings: how figurative imagery opens up the complexities of transforming higher education**

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Beginning by mixing it up

When studying the increments of transformation in higher education in the 'global South', we have found that understandings of the intersecting messiness of the lived experiences of the people who navigate the in/visible borderlands of higher education institutions are impoverished by the dispassionate narrative realism of educational research, and the word-based conventions of academic publications. This is particularly the case when representing the psycho-social nuances of misrecognition, delegitimation and microaggressions – which in many 'developing' and postcolonial contexts are pressing concerns when challenging legacies of oppression and attempting to address the disjunctures between the intended and the experienced.

In this text, we as the authors play with the affordances of this reflective SOTL arena to engage in generative international transdisciplinary reflections (Khoo, Haapakoski, Hellstén & Malone 2019) on

the value of what may be called ‘visual higher education studies’. We ground this reflection in our research practices, offering an intertextual negotiation between selected imagery authored by our participants in recent research projects. We do this to highlight how figurative evocation and processes of narration enabled insights into layered staff and student experiences of what is often unsaid in the hidden curriculum of higher education. In this process, we share our own awareness of the validity of figurative methods to explore that which cannot be not readily translated into other symbolic modes of communication and representation.

What problem requires rupture?

While we are heterogeneous individuals operating in different contexts, practices and disciplinary traditions, the desire to look ‘beyond’ has emerged from our frustrations with the norms of academic representation, and the limitations of conventional approaches to researcher-respondent/ subject-object relations, in higher education studies. In this we are not alone – there have long been calls for “new metaphorical images ... to capture and nurture the visionary blind spots in everyday higher education practice” (Bengtson & Nørgård 2014 in Bengtson & Barnett 2017:13) and to envision “new categories of thought, construction of new subjectivities and creation of new modes of being and becoming” (Dastile & Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013).

For a number of the authors, our awareness of the validity of figurative approaches to do this has come from our ‘other’ selves and lives – where we came to value how aspects of our disciplinary, practitioner and personal ways of being could be fruitfully brought to bear on higher education studies. The intention was to enrich the process or the artefact shared with others; to disable the familiar or taken-for-granted in the authoritative or promotional discourses of, and research on, higher education (HE); and to generatively explore the intersections, junctions and starting points in HE issues, allowing for liminal transgressions across the boundaries and territories that characterise this terrain.

Contemporary creative practice has at its centre a notion of difference that is pluralistic and heteronomic, where the very lack of consensus is where the ‘work’ happens. From such practice arises questions of authorship and an acute awareness of the politics of representation. Research *through* arts practice (Dallow 2003) deliberately ‘mis-reads’ the everyday and taken-for-granted as a central strategy, lending itself well to the various forms of social justice research which question microaggressions (Huber & Solorzano 2015) and their relationship to the machinations of domination and privilege (Leonardo 2004).

Much contemporary performing and creative arts in the global South is characteristically provocative and disruptive. The rich tradition in South Africa, where the lines between fine art and socially engaged arts practice were blurred during ‘the struggle’ against apartheid, continues to operate within the realm of critical consciousness and problematising societal structures (Berman 2017). Similarly, storytelling traditions have been appropriated critically by creative writers in the diaspora to explore the troubling socio-politics of the day. The Ananse genre of folkloric trickster tales is one such example, travelling from its birthplace in ancient Ghana to the Caribbean and other parts of the world with the descendants of captured and enslaved people (Vecsey 1981; Marshall 2009).

Drawing on these histories and traditions of socio-cultural critique and activism, Dina Belluigi (2015) established an online space for figurative texts which operate as counter-narratives of higher education, curated from the contributions of academics and students across the globe. Included in this open access site, which Belluigi uses for her own teaching, are reflections on how such texts may operate as liminal spaces across geographies, histories and realities.

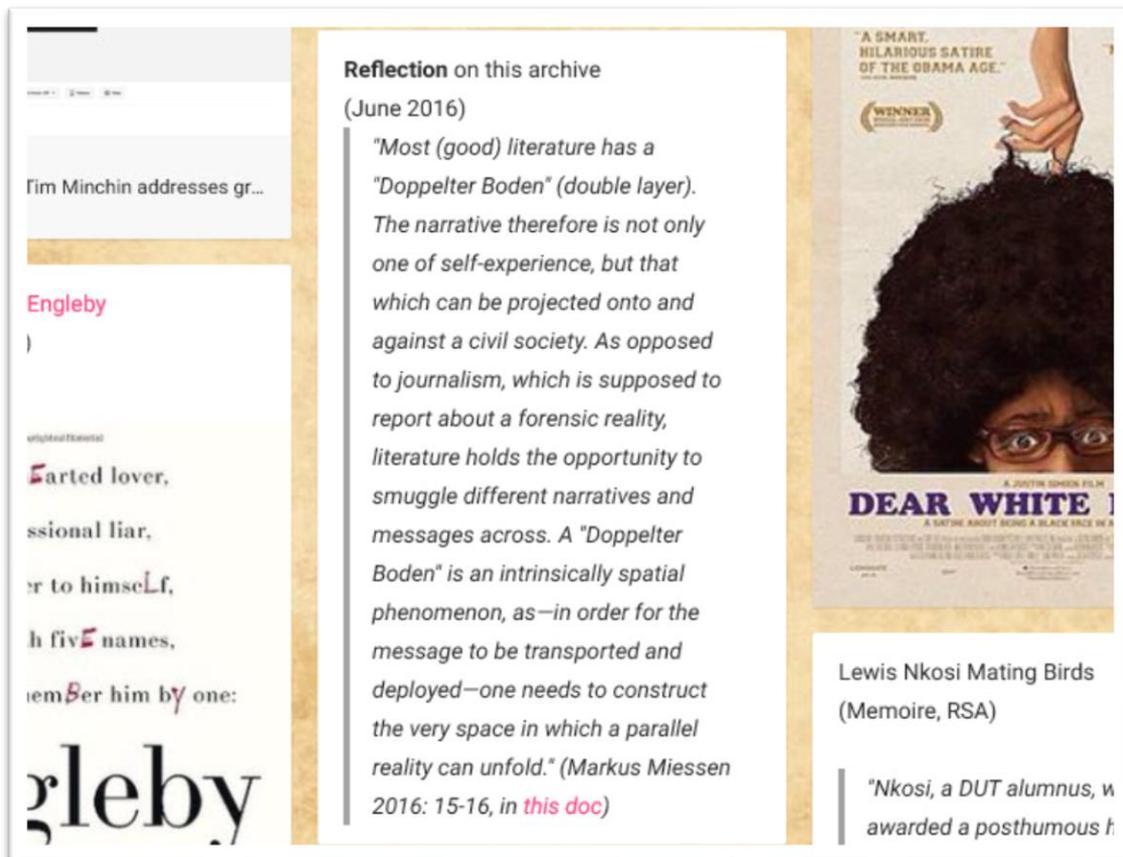


Figure 1: Screenshot of an embedded reflection as a rupture to the 'wall' of counter-narratives in 'the Higher Education Studies Arts Archive', 2019.

While all the authors of this article engage in teaching practice, this paper particularly concerns our research. We are interested in how the *process of figurative narration* creates the conditions for research participants to be active in authoring and interpreting their experience (Belluigi 2018). Narrative structures, stories, and metaphors help people to articulate, express and engage with the unfamiliar and troubling by associating it to that which is more commonly known and shared; what they anticipate the audience will know; and by providing a glimpse into how the author reasons, constructs and chooses to present their world. The contemporary psychoanalytic term 'imagery rescripting' encompasses various methods that utilise imagery to both assess and begin to address a person's underlying emotions and meaning-making on an individual level, and create awareness of their social situatedness (Dirkx 2001). Narration is valid for examining "circumstances wherein identity constructs and self-image are reconstituted in the face of oppressive circumstances" (Rolling Jr & Bey 2016).

Two dominant positions are adopted in the analysis of such storied experience: that ‘the self’ is constructed or revealed by stories, or that it is concealed by them. Underpinning these approaches is an understanding that between narrative and identity there are complex connections, and thus that the study of narrative is epistemological (Sclater 2003). Within the specific labour of ‘making’ and ‘reading’ such figurative work, such storytelling involves active re-construction of the entanglements of the intellectual, with the personal, individual, emotional and aspirational, as we discuss below.

Activating the text is common throughout our approaches – regardless of whether it concerns the research process or product. Figurative phrases, stories and imagery elicit a shock, thrill or emotion (a “punctum” according to Barthes 1984) that is of more impact than their informational and aesthetic value. This has the potential to ‘activate’ the reader who is then drawn beyond that which is easily readable or received to a second level of meaning as “a succession of personal memories and unconscious associations, many of which are indescribable by the individual” (Cronin 1989:72).

Mixed blessings: students’ perspectives

In one study (Thondhlana & Belluigi 2017), we noticed that student participants utilised idiomatic expressions when articulating complex and fraught issues to their peers within small group discussions. The study explored how students’ experiences of group-based assessment were mediated and influenced by their perceptions of racial and gender societal asymmetries in a historically white institution in South Africa. At a particularly awkward juncture in the interaction, a white student used the phrase “biting the bullet” to express coping with the inherited necessity of affirmative action; at another point, two black male students described how academic competitiveness felt rigged – that the choice was to either “stay in your lane” or crawl over other students of colour like “crabs in a bucket”. The researchers began to pay attention to how such metaphoric expressions came closer to expressing the unsayable than more formalised speech, and seemed to be heard more, even by those of their peers who initially appeared combative and defensive.



Figure 2. ‘Keith’ constructed an image with chicken as characters in a narrative about wellbeing when within the parameters of relationships with powerful caretakers (above); ‘Sibusiso’ spoke of chicken ‘braai packs’ in his interview when talking of adapting to campus life (left).

As a socially constructive act, photograph-making enables participants to explore, both literally and figuratively, a 'way into' representing their experiences and expressing their perceptions for another's reception. In a project utilising a visualisation process akin to photo-elicitation, first-generation students created non-mimetic portraits of their positioning within and beyond their predominantly black university in South Africa, which they discussed during semi-structured interviews with the researcher (Alcock 2017). One example of a visual element that reappeared in participants' narratives, was that of chickens (Figure 2). Situated within differing contexts and storylines, this element enabled one participant to emphasise the necessity for powerful knowledge and relationships to survive and thrive in the university; while another participant utilised it to create humour about the changes he experienced, by contrasting 'free range' rural chickens to the rigid positioning of packaged chicken pieces displayed en masse within supermarkets.

Participation in that project proved generative for these students, creating multi-layered reflections which facilitated deepening self-awareness at an important time of their transition. The development of a counter-space enabled the students to cultivate a sense of collective belonging and voice (Jehangir 2009), indicated most clearly when they mobilised independently as a group to implement two initiatives which had no earlier precedent at that institution. As researchers, however, we grew concerned at how many aspects of the participants' communities and ways of being were being othered as deficit by the students, against the lure of aspirant middle-class identities (Alcock & Belluigi 2018). This research process altered how Andrea Alcock saw her professional practice in the university context, through the growing realisation of the extent to which significant student experience remains hidden, due to generational and socio-cultural differences, amongst others.

Mixed messages: assessment

Assessment utilises discursive formations which may be experienced as alienating, particularly when the subject is positioned as object or as a pedagogised other.

In her concerns with how the formal adult curriculum impacts artists' creative and critical development, Belluigi (2015) developed a visual narrative methodology (in collaboration with an artist and a psychologist – see Mestre & Knoetze 2005; Mestre & Belluigi 2010) to create the conditions for artist-students to express, explore and communally interpret their storied experiences of the assessment practices of fine art higher education curricula in South Africa and England (Figure 3).



Figure 3. 'Katy's' visual narrative of extreme alienation which resulted in a loss of creativity (Belluigi 2015:146).

A concern of the study was that by not situating the artist within interpretative process of assessment, the curriculum was enforcing a docility at odds with the educators' intentions, unwittingly denying the artist-students' agency and responsibility for how their artworks operated in the world (Belluigi 2017a).

In her current explorations of the traces of colonialism in teacher education in the Caribbean, Veronica Farrell draws on fables as communal products with a shared code of telling and receiving. Objects and characters in Ananse are invested with meaning derived from inherent traits or essences, with events of the story mirroring power relations in the world of humans. Using responses from semi-structured interviews that elicit graduates' retrospections of significant assessment events, Farrell is currently creating stories intended for meaning-making with a wider audience, including their HE educators. The stories appropriate the characterisation from animal fables and folktales described above, disrupting anticipated fidelity to the original exemplars. For instance, in the working draft of the 'story' (Figure 4) she uses the imagery of lion taming as an extended metaphor to disturb the assumption that schooling liberates.

Before Leah enrolled in the Cub Tamer Training Institute she had spent three years as an apprentice in an elementary school. She observed the methods that the experienced cub Tamers used to keep the cubs sitting passively in their little seats for long hours and waiting to do as they were told. She therefore could not wait to attend the university to become better at cub taming. She observed how the expert tamers used praise, reward, punishment and regulating the cubs' mealtime to ensure that they were docile and had self-control. She also imagined that she would learn modern methods at the institute, as well as try out some of the different taming ideas she had in mind. She thought maybe she could let the cubs play and explore naturally, so that their bodies would be supple and minds alert. Lion-hearted as Leah was, she thought to herself "Surely there must be more to cub training than making them obedient! Surely they could learn to find their own food instead of being fed bits and pieces to jump through hoops!"

Things at the Cub Tamer Training Institute started off very well. Leah learnt about mathematical reasoning and that each cub was unique. She was told about the importance of monitoring how each cub was developing by keeping written records. This worked well because she could work with the strong and struggling cubs according to their individual needs. To Leah's dismay, this did not go much further. The first surprise she got was to be told that she had no tertiary level skills. Before long she felt that she was being treated as if she was a cub. She was overcome with disappointment as she sat with the other trainee tamers listening to long lectures from the Master and Professor trainers. No one at the Cub Tamer Training Institute seemed to be interested in the ideas that she had been thinking about. All the trainee tamers were given the identical things to do. Leah had expected to learn to be a better cub trainer. She had thought she would get practice working with cubs so they could excel. Instead at the Cub Tamer University there was a curriculum with over forty courses and prospective Tamers had to complete these courses to earn credits and then be awarded a degree. So instead of learning to be a Tamer Leah found herself working at completing courses to earn credits and to prove that she had tertiary level ability. She found that she learned to be a university credit earner and not to be a competent cub tamer.

Figure 4. One of the current examples of Farrell's re-authoring of the experiences of assessment in higher education expressed during a semi-structured interview by 'Leah', a teacher in Trinidad and Tobago.

For readers, the story's emotive impact provides a disarming entry point for their introspections. Allegories with animal characterisation lure the reader/listener into deep thinking about the underlying morals concerning such human positioning and relations. The story provides insights into how 'competitive performativity' in the teaching profession (Ball 2003) may displace a teacher's core values.

Mixed metaphors: evaluation

Metaphors emerged too in the narratives of academic staff when characterising how evaluation within the meso-curricula (Nordin & Sundberg 2018) of higher education institutions relates to social reproduction (Belluigi & Thondhlana 2019). The phrase 'training the dog' was articulated by a participant to describe the assimilationist assessment literacy inherent to accelerated development programmes for black and women staff in an historically white institution in South Africa (Belluigi & Thondhlana 2017). This imagery of domestication and dehumanisation has powerful associations with a wry statement made early on in the history of subjugation in South Africa (Figure 5):

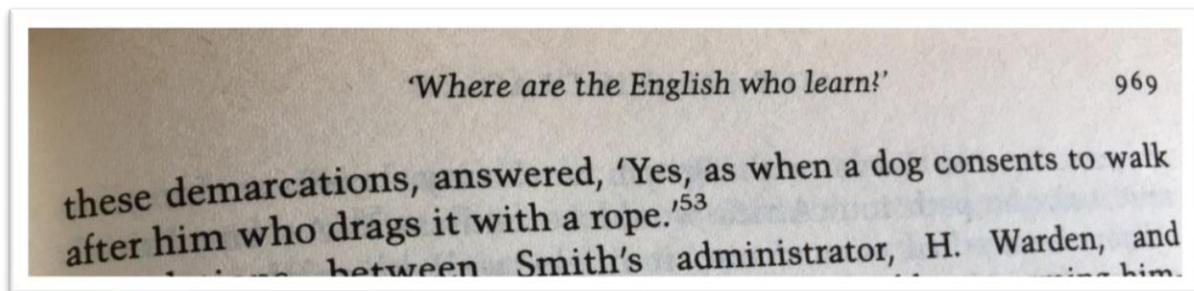


Figure 5. Figurative wording is utilised by a member of Moshoeshoe's clan in response to a colonial agent's question 'Are you content?' following colonial land demarcations (Mostert 1993:969).

When a black woman academic in the same study (Belluigi & Thondhlana 2019), described being positioned on a "tight rope" between conservative and radical orientations to transformation in the academy, the researchers were reminded of the evocation of that imagery in a comparable study. In her critique of such professional socialisation models, Venice Thandi Sulé (2014:435) writes that African American women academics undergoing such programmes in predominantly white universities in the United States of America "find themselves traversing an intellectual tightrope in which they are socialized to emulate the status quo yet they are compelled to enact non-traditional practices as a result of cultural and political imperative". Other idioms used by the South African study participants contrasted in their meanings to other contexts – such as the use of the term "swimming upstream like salmon" to indicate the futility of individuals' attempts as change agents against the might of the institutional culture; which differed to Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1998:21) use of this metaphor as the collective resistance and solidarity of academic activists, where "we will have to adopt a position of consistently swimming against the current".

Extending participants' contributions from authorship through to readership (Belluigi 2018), participants were asked to respond to the metaphors articulated by their fellow respondents, and to address their message to the imagined reader with whom they wanted the researchers to engage, to catalyse the impact of the findings (Figure 6).



Figure 6. One of the postcards created using participant-articulated metaphors of the university space (left), with one example of participant responses generated at a later point in the iterative research process (as discussed in Belluigi 2018)

Figurative language has power within readership more generally too. When included as titles, metaphors stimulate rather than contain debate (Delgado 1990). Grace Idahosa has used these poignantly in her research on first-generation women in academia, and academics' agency for transformation. Metaphoric language such as 'losing, using, refusing and cruising' portray the complex moments of losses, wounds, battles, rewards, accommodation and resistance experienced by women entering into a terrain not historically and conceptually reserved for them (Idahosa & Vincent 2014). These words reveal the complex and often intersecting nature of marginality where women sometimes reveal powerful forms of agency by using their marginality as a resource while simultaneously experiencing brute disadvantage in all its forms (Idahosa & Vincent 2014), thus emphasising Spivak's (1993) concept of the "impossible no".

The evocative terms 'pushing the bounds of possibility', 'the scales were peeled from my eyes' and 'I met a new version of me', conveyed participants' experiences of coming to consciousness and the process of critical engagement required to become an agent of change/transformation in other projects by Idahosa. They also revealed the complexity and difficulty with transforming oppressive university structures and cultures (Idahosa & Vincent 2018; Idahosa 2019). These symbolic descriptions highlight the dialectical relationship between individuals and structures as a necessary precursor to taking action aimed at transformation.

Openings: the work we do going forward

In varying ways, our interpretative approaches to such 'storying' are informed by "operative criticism" (Belluigi 2017b), in that we are concerned with how the author, text and reader *function* within higher education and *operate* in relation to dynamics within our research projects, and larger societal concerns. In some instances, such engagement has had a political role of direct use-value for the participants. For others, the act of counter-narration enabled counter-spaces to form momentary strategies for empowerment, or helped to build a sense of a possible future community. However, the extent to which we have been able to enact this desire has been varied.

This reflective text acts as a humble generative process of narration between four women across divides – an opportunity for each of us to engage in discursive processes to make sense of ourselves and the modes of politics in which we engage. Each of us has responded to the “indeterminate, swampy zones of practice” (Schön 1986:3) by developing a practice of artistry (Bleakley 1999) to grapple with the complexities of socially just research praxis.

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