

Editorial: Contours of African Thought: Social Identity, Transformative Pedagogies and Decolonial Knowledge

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In the ongoing struggle to redefine knowledge production and academic inquiry within Africa, the collective call to decolonise epistemologies, cultural frameworks, and institutional practices has become increasingly urgent. This special edition of *Alternation*, titled **Contours of African Thought: Social Identity, Transformative Pedagogies and Decolonial Knowledge**, assembles a wide-ranging yet intellectually coherent and integrated collection of scholarly articles that collectively reflect on the shifting contours of African academic and social thought in the 21st century. The contributors, drawing on disciplines such as history, music, education, literature, linguistics, religious studies, public health, and digital humanities, confront the deeply embedded colonial legacies that continue to shape knowledge systems, social structures, and cultural imaginaries in Southern Africa as well as across the continent.

Central to these papers is a shared commitment to challenging Euro-centric paradigms and foregrounding African ontologies, experiences, and voices. Whether through the lens of historical performance in politically volatile times, as seen in the analysis of Wagnerian opera in 1913 Johannesburg, or a reconsideration of Ingrid Jonker's suicide within the gendered trauma of apartheid, each article offers a critical intervention that underscores the value of local context and indigenous knowledge.

Simultaneously, the collection highlights ongoing efforts within

African higher education to reimagine teaching, learning, and research practices. This is evidenced in explorations of qualitative research design in underrepresented communities, the role of MOOCs in responsive curriculum development, and the epistemic potential of digital humanities in bridging knowledge gaps. In addressing questions of language, several authors explore the transformative possibilities of linguistic decolonisation, particularly in dismantling the dominance of colonial languages within university curricula and affirming African languages as valid sites of scholarly engagement.

Together, these contributions do more than critique; they propose, and they imagine new academic futures anchored in equity, justice, and cultural authenticity. They demonstrate that decolonisation is not a singular act but a continuous process that involves recovering suppressed narratives, resisting structural inequalities, and cultivating spaces of epistemic freedom. As such, this thematic collection invites readers to engage not only with the challenges of decolonial scholarship but also with the creative and transformative possibilities it holds for African knowledge production in the present and beyond.

The volume is anchored in the intertwined realities of ‘Elements of Social and Cultural Identity Constructs in Transformative African Contexts’, and pinpoints a brief sample of formative cultural identity constructs – both past and present as well as both urban and rural narrative and ideology and gender critical studies.

‘Transformative Pedagogies and Curriculum Innovation in African Higher Education’, questions and addresses how Robotics MOOCs as a vehicle for community engagement within South Africa’s Open Distance e-learning (ODEL) landscape may be integrated into curriculum; the importance and role of teaching portfolios in HE; and the importance of considering the significance of whistle blower protection in the country.

Then, ‘Methodology, Decolonisation and Knowledge Production’ consecutively addresses decolonising colonial-language courses, the assessment of knowledge and skills in the African Digital Humanities; and the main considerations for constructively engaging artificial intelligence ethics in the uses of artificial intelligence in postgraduate and especially Master’s, and doctoral research for dissertations and theses.

As usual, we provide the edited abstracts of the volume for easy access to readers.



Elements of Social and Cultural Identity Constructs in Transformative African Contexts

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) exemplifies African identity through its vibrant blend of cultural, historical, and social elements, capturing both the nation's distinctive character and the wider themes of the continent. This embodiment is illustrated in Queen Labotsibeni's legacy, also known as Gwamile Mdluli, whose reign as Queen Mother and later Queen Regent from the late 19th to early 20th century showcased the resilience, wisdom, and communal values central to African leadership traditions. Through desktop-based research, in **'Elements of African Identity Frameworks in Action through Female Leadership: Queen Labotsibeni's Legacy in Eswatini'**, Sonene Nyawo, explores the reclaiming of cultural identity and historical agency through female leadership. Drawing on key elements of African identity frameworks, Queen Labotsibeni's approach to governance is explained as reflecting a deep engagement with social justice, rooted in Eswatini's distinctive cultural and spiritual heritage. Her leadership was instrumental in managing state affairs and rallying the Swazi people against British colonial land encroachments. Labotsibeni's solidarity with the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) further underscores her political acumen and commitment to broader Pan African ideals of liberty and justice. The article ultimately asserts that Queen Labotsibeni stands as a powerful symbol of African resilience and wisdom exhibited by a female leader. Through her strategic governance, cultural guardianship, and steadfast resistance to colonial exploitation, she not only redefined the role of traditional leadership amongst women but also reshaped the historical narrative of Eswatini.

In her paper **'Shattering the Chains of Apartheid Patriarchy: Ingrid Jonker's Suicide'**, Linda Sparks offers a critical feminist reading of the life and work of Ingrid Jonker, positioning her as a pivotal yet tragically constrained figure in South African women's literature. Sparks argues that Jonker's suicide cannot be understood outside the context of the pervasive personal and political patriarchies that shaped her existence, from the emotional trauma of unstable relationships with men to the ideological oppression exerted by the Apartheid regime, embodied most intimately through her father's prominent political role. Through an analysis of Jonker's life and literary output, Sparks reveals how the intersecting forces of gendered marginalisation and political alienation not only stifled Jonker's potential but also profoundly influenced her creative voice and psychological state. Sparks concludes that the study foregrounds the urgent need to examine how structural and intimate

forms of patriarchy silence women's voices, both in life and in legacy.

In this article, **'Using Empathetic-Reflective-Dialogical Re-storying to explore Gender-Based Violence in a Higher Education Institution'**, **Janet Jarvis** and **N.P. Mthiyane** reports on a recent study involving Slow Pedagogy, and the promoting of reflection and reflexivity as part of Empathetic-Reflective-Dialogical Re-storying (ERDR) as the research methodology. The method employed, allowed students to explore and share their observations of Gender-based violence (GBV) on campus. GBV, in its various forms, continues to plague Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), contributing to a hostile and unsafe educational environment. Cultural and social norms play a significant role in the prevalence of GBV within these institutions. Intersectional factors, including race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, significantly influence the experiences and reporting of GBV. Many students enter higher education lacking sufficient knowledge about consent, healthy relationships, and sexual boundaries, which can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication about acceptable behaviour. GBV has a profound impact on victims' physical and mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. For survivors of GBV to feel supported and heard, they need access to resources such as counselling services, legal aid, and healthcare. HEIs must implement comprehensive support and intervention strategies to address GBV effectively. Monitoring and evaluating GBV policies and programs is essential for ensuring their effectiveness. In this small-scale project, Bachelor of Education Honour's students explored their observations of GBV on campus.

Dorothy Queiros, in her paper titled **'Fit for Purpose: Designing Qualitative Research in Rural and Peri-Urban South African Communities'**, challenges the dominance of quantitative research methods in environmental management research by presenting a nuanced qualitative approach tailored to community-based contexts. Using three case studies situated near diverse protected areas, Queiros explores how local attitudes and behaviours toward conservation can be better understood through multi-method qualitative techniques, including nominal group processes, participatory mapping, and focus group discussions. She argues that these methods not only enabled rich, triangulated data collection but also empowered community voices and revealed spatial and cultural insights often overlooked in traditional research. Her paper illustrates how carefully designed qualitative methodologies can yield meaningful, context-sensitive outputs that inform both scholarship and practice, offering a transferable model for research in other rural and peri-urban settings across the Global South.

In his paper titled ‘**Staging Wagner on the Witwatersrand: The Quinlan Opera Company in Strike-Torn Johannesburg, 1913**’, **Frederick Hale** contends that although Johannesburg had a quite lively music scene in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, opera developed slowly in that often-turbulent boomtown. Hale notes that residents who wished to experience that art form in its grand international forms depended for decades chiefly on visits by touring European companies which played Cape Town and/or Durban and ventured inland to the Witwatersrand. In both 1912 and 1913, Hale notes that the outstandingly talented Quinlan Opera Company from London visited the Union of South Africa and included brief seasons in Johannesburg in their international tours, which sometimes took the troupe to Australia. The latter of these coincided with the internationally observed centenary of the renowned Richard Wagner’s birth and appropriately featured several of his operas. However, Hale also noted that it coincided with the destructive miners’ strike, which briefly disrupted life in central Johannesburg. Hale argues here that, contrary to what has been published in standard reference works, the devastation did not seriously affect the operatic season or bring it to an early end. Hale concludes that despite this tribulation, the Quinlan tour was a lucid example of cultural transmission from Europe to the multi-ethnic cauldron of the Witwatersrand during its transitional years into a somewhat cosmopolitan metropolitan area¹.

Transformative Pedagogies and Curriculum Innovation in African Higher Education

In their paper ‘**Towards Defining a Place and Role of Community Engaged MOOCs in a South African Higher Education ODeL Context from a Curriculum Responsiveness Perspective**’, **P.M. Gouws, H.H. Lotriet, M.G. Kanakana-Katumba, and Denzil Chetty** explore the emerging potential of Robotics MOOCs as a vehicle for community engagement within South Africa’s Open Distance e-earning (ODeL) landscape. They adopt a dual methodology: a systematic literature review to assess the current state of Robotics MOOCs, revealing significant gaps and future research opportunities, and a curriculum responsiveness framework to evaluate how these

¹ Comment of the Editor-in-Chief: Greater clarity about the Miners’ Strike itself, as well as its presumed significance in the history of South Africa, is provided by South African History Online at:

<https://sahistory.org.za/article/1913-mineworkers-strike>

courses can be contextually integrated. The authors analyse macro-level factors such as economic transformation, sustainability, and Africanisation; meso-level considerations like institutional ODeL practices and language inclusion; and micro-level aspects such as learner diversity and individual needs. Anchored in the fast-evolving field of robotics, the authors contend for the importance of aligning digital learning innovations with both global technological trends and local socio-educational imperatives. They conclude with a practical example from the University of South Africa (UNISA), showcasing how a context-aware, responsive curriculum approach can position Robotics MOOCs as a transformative tool for inclusive, future-facing education.

In his paper, **‘Analysis of Teaching Portfolio Efficacy in Higher Education through the Lenses of Validity Theory’**, **Rubby Dhunpath** investigates the credibility and effectiveness of teaching portfolios as instruments for evaluating teaching excellence in South African higher education. Using empirical data from the 2024/5 National University Teaching Awards (NUTA), which involved 100 submissions assessed by 10 adjudicators, the study applies Validity Theory to explore the systemic challenges that undermine portfolio reliability. Drawing on an advisory note to unsuccessful applicants, the analysis identifies fourteen recurring factors contributing to portfolio failure, including misalignment with assessment criteria, weak integration of theory and practice, insufficient evidence, and lack of critical reflection. Framed through the dimensions of construct, content, and consequential validity, the paper argues that teaching portfolios operate as high-stakes assessment tools that demand robust validation frameworks. Successful submissions demonstrate authentic philosophical grounding, student-centred pedagogy, data-informed decision-making, and evidence of transformative practice. Situated within the South African context, marked by diversity, decolonisation imperatives, and epistemological access, the study contributes to scholarship on teaching excellence by proposing that portfolio credibility hinges on demonstrable validity across multiple dimensions. The article concludes with practical recommendations for applicants and adjudicators to address persistent challenges in portfolio development and evaluation.

Globally the identification of incidents of corruption and the reporting thereof is becoming more important. The role of the whistleblower is seen as a significant component in anti-corruption efforts. Part of the anti-corruption machinery in South Africa, is a legal framework for whistleblower protection, which governs so-called ‘protected disclosures’. This protection has the main objective to protect employees from being victimised for reporting corruption. However, whistleblowers are sometimes harassed at work, they face the threat

of losing their livelihoods or losing their lives. There has therefore been a call by broader civil society and many whistleblowers themselves, notably through a newly established structure called The Whistleblower House, for amendments to legislation intended to protect anyone who exposes any form of corruption. Through this qualitative desktop study, **‘Whistleblower Protection: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities from the South African Case’**, Cheryl Mohamed Sayeed and Syeda Lubna Bano Nadvi trace the legislative provisions impacting on whistleblowers and how witness protection is only used in exceptional circumstances, leaving many whistleblowers exposed to danger. The authors proffer some recommendations for improved protection. The authors note further that, while the significance of the culture of whistleblowing is encouraged, the risks need to be identified and addressed, or else other whistleblowers will become fatally silenced!

Research on higher education pedagogies suggests that multimodal teaching approaches reduce university students’ cognitive load as they engage with learning at a tertiary level. In contexts where the medium of instruction is different from the mother tongue of students, cognitive load is likely to be higher for students who are not fully proficient in the former. Instructional videos that explain discipline content in learners’ mother tongue are potentially beneficial supplementary resources for lecturers and students. In **‘Reducing Cognitive Load through isiZulu Explanatory Videos in Introductory University Economics: A Pedagogical Exploration’**, Suriamurthee Maistry and Jessica Schroenn Goebel report on a qualitative study exploring students’ experiences of learning economics using videos featuring isiZulu explanations of economic concepts. The methodology employed for this study was guided by the tenets of Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), a robust data collection and analysis protocol. A purposive sample of thirteen participants was recruited from a Foundation Economics class. In keeping with the IQA procedure, data was generated through focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews. Participants revealed that video explanations of economic theory and concepts in mother-tongue language, that were accessible, conversational and connected with lived experiences, eased and enabled concept comprehension. They also contributed to increased student confidence and motivation, and reduced anxiety associated with assessments. Intentional, fluid engagement with both English and mother tongue was a strategic modus operandi, with students recognising the need to ultimately develop conceptual mastery in the language of instruction and assessment. Participants’ meta-cognitive awareness of their having shifted from superficial rote-learning towards deeper comprehension was of particular significance.

Methodology, Decolonisation and Knowledge Production

Alexander Andrason, in his paper titled ‘**African Languages at the Locus of Enunciation: Decolonising Colonial-Language Courses through Language**’, presents an autoethnographic inquiry into how university lecturers can strategically reframe the teaching of colonial-language subjects, such as Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, by repositioning the epistemic centre of instruction within African linguistic frameworks. Andrason argues that even when these courses are taught in dominant colonial languages like English or Afrikaans, educators can employ a range of decolonial interventions that elevate African languages as legitimate vehicles of both form and knowledge. He contends that these interventions span two dimensions: one focusing on *form*, by integrating multilingualism and translanguaging practices into teaching methods and curricula; and the other on *content*, by using African epistememes to explain and contextualise linguistic phenomena. Andrason theorises that such measures must be applied holistically and with sensitivity to specific course dynamics and learner contexts, enabling African languages not only to mediate knowledge but to shape and originate it. He provides a practical and theoretically grounded framework for reconfiguring language education in ways that resist Eurocentric dominance and affirm African linguistic and intellectual agency.

In ‘**Decolonisation of Africa’s Higher Education: A Reality?**’, **Eunitah Viriri** and **Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa** seek to assess progress in the decolonisation of higher education in Africa. The research mainly focused on the challenges hindering progress as presented by research findings from various countries. It brings together and discusses varied views on the transformational process and suggests the way forward to achieve the intended goals. It was mainly review of literature on decolonisation of higher education from indigenous voices of Africa. This was triggered by the observation of varying levels of transformational practices towards decolonisation of higher education in African countries despite the fact that the message was conveyed decades ago. Researchers identified diverse interpretations, numerous targets, leadership and attitudes of the continent as the major groups of challenges hindering progress in African universities. It was observed that even if countries may be eager to decolonise their higher education, unless these challenges are addressed, the project is far from being a reality. For the project to become a reality, the continent should have a common understanding and map the way forward. The study therefore recommends that African nations

should group and articulate policy regarding the issue and agree on the extent of Africanisation of higher education so that quality is not compromised.

Digital Humanities (DH) colloquia are important in shaping scholarly practices, fostering interdisciplinary exchange, and promoting capacity building within the DH field. Yet, there is limited research on how such gatherings influence the development of DH, particularly in underrepresented contexts. In **'The Role of Digital Humanities Colloquia in Reimagining 21st Century Humanities'**, Johannes Sibeko examines the role of DH colloquia in capacity building and their contribution to the reimagining of the humanities in the 21st century. Drawing on 53 presentations held between 2020 and 2025 under the SADiLaR DH colloquia series, the paper analyses the range of topics, participant backgrounds, and regional representation to understand how these events shape individual competencies and broader disciplinary practices. Using thematic interpretation, the paper identifies recurring themes across colloquia titles. Sibeko categorises the selected presentations under three regional groups: South Africa, Africa (excluding South Africa), and Outside Africa. The regional analysis enables the exploration of patterns of collaboration and knowledge exchange across local, continental, and global contexts. This categorisation reveals how DH platforms foster transnational networks, facilitate methodological innovation, and reinforce the relevance and societal impact of the humanities. The argument is that capacity building through DH colloquia extends beyond technical skill acquisition. It encompasses the development of critical, collaborative, and reflective competencies that influence research culture, pedagogy, and disciplinary evolution. By situating these findings within contemporary debates on the value and transformation of the humanities, the paper highlights the strategic role of DH colloquia in repositioning the humanities for excellence and impact. This work contributes to a better understanding of how structured scholarly events can function as catalysts for disciplinary renewal, knowledge dissemination, and cross-cultural engagement within the rapidly evolving landscape of DH.

Denzil Chetty in his paper titled **'Mapping the Gaps: A Baseline Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in the African Digital Humanities'**, presents the findings of a baseline assessment conducted as part of an Advancing African Digital Humanities Project at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Chetty's research seeks to identify conceptual, cognitive, and epistemic gaps within the field of the African Digital Humanities. Implemented through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative online surveys and qualitative focus group discussions, Chetty engages 2,650 participants (2,184 survey respondents and 466 focus group participants) across multiple

provinces in South Africa. His findings reveal significant disparities in digital humanities knowledge and skills among students at the University of South Africa (UNISA), underscoring the necessity for targeted capacity-building interventions. Key findings indicate limited awareness of the African Digital Humanities as a discipline, uneven access to digital resources, and critical skill gaps in areas such as digital curation, data visualisation, and computational analysis. Chetty advocates for broader interdisciplinary stakeholder engagement to embed the African Digital Humanities more deeply within Africa's knowledge economy. By mapping the existing gaps, he provides an empirical foundation for strategic planning and resource allocation in future African Digital Humanities initiatives within higher education.

Johannes A. Smit, in his '**Decolonial AI Ethics and AI Use in MA, PhD, and Postdoctoral Digital Humanities Scholarship**', reports on the AI User Group he initiated in 2023, for MA, and PhD NIHSS scholarship grant holders, as well as postdoctoral fellows. The group organised regular workshops at which AI tools were demonstrated, tested and discussed in a framework of the production and upscaling of original, innovative, accountable, responsible and responsive and transformative, and decolonising scholarship. The workshops also included seminal aspects of AI Ethics, training in the use of AI tools in relation to specific research project approaches and focuses including prompt-engineering, and the institutional and personal access to and affordability of AI tools. Significant outcomes are that, especially in decolonial epistemics, MA, PhD and PDRF scholarship are driven and directed by original, self-steering research in consultation with, and under the supervision of supervisors and mentors; that scholars'/ researchers' agency in AI-supported research remains paramount; that scholars' agency of data/ information generation and curation, is seminal to transformative decolonial epistemics in the global South; and that AI-supported scholarship needs to be accompanied by the scholars' data/ information ownership and use, so as to ensure peer recognition of original contributions to knowledge and epistemics. The driver of AI-supported research, is the scholar-researcher, and all AI-generated information relevant to a project needs to be cognitively processed both individually and interactively in scholarly communities of practice, for purposes of decolonial impact, and epistemic transformation, and growth.

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