Decolonial Dreamers and Dead Elephants

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Abstract

The 11 articles in this special themed issue examine the complexity of issues of power
between individual researchers, between researchers and community organisations or
higher education institutions, and between community organisations and institutions in
relation to community-engaged research and scholarship. The articles uplift the pain
and joy in community-engaged research, the harm and the benefits, the contradictions
and tensions, and the true gifts and understanding gained in research *with* communities
for the purpose of co-creating transformational change. We weave our own knowledge
and experiences together with these individual articles as we seek ways to reimagine
the future of community research and engagement. Specifically, we connect the near
obliteration of African elephants and loss of Indigenous ways of knowing in Africa with the
diverse communities, contexts and issues of power in community-engaged scholarship
represented in this special volume. We, like the authors, hold a *dream* for the future of
engaged scholarship that is more equitable, inclusive and morally just. We believe this
dream is not only possible but achievable, as evidenced by the work of the authors in this
volume.

We present an African indigenous knowledge system, Ubuntu, whose principles,
values and tenets simultaneously promote the conservation of the community as a whole
and the harmonious existence of the individual within the community. We posit that the
adaptation and adoption of this knowledge system within the scholarship and practice of
community-university partnerships and community research relationships may enable
the development of a mutuality and reciprocity that levels power hierarchies within the
personal, organisational and societal arenas of community-university partnerships. We

demonstrate that many of the cases described by contributors to this special volume resonate with this knowledge system, which itself has survived colonisation and its concomitant epistemicide. Together, the authors help paint a pathway for those who want to become decolonial dreamers (la paperson 2017) daring to reimagine the nature of power in research as we collectively find ways to dream bigger in order to uncover new and exciting possibilities for this work we call community-engaged scholarship.

Keywords

Indigenous Knowledge and Inquiry; Ubuntu; Power and Research; Decolonising Community-Engaged Research

Introduction

The depth, breadth and richness of this compilation of community-engaged scholarly work rendered it a challenge to synthesise and draw implications from the vast and ever-growing interdisciplinary field of community-engaged research. We were invited to consider what the contributions individually and collectively meant for the field of community-engagement scholarship and to draw some conclusions on where the field should go from there. This invitation was, and continues to be, a gift, as we were welcomed into a truly transdisciplinary and transformational international community of scholars intent on pushing the boundaries of our epistemological, ontological and inquiry-based scholarly paradigms and practices.

Originally from Ireland, Elaine now lives in Massachusetts with her family and is Associate Professor of Higher Education and special assistant to the President for Civic and Community Engagement at Merrimack College. Elaine has worked in US higher education for more than 20 years in the areas of access, student affairs and the institutionalisation of community engagement. Darren is an Applied Mathematician by training, who slowly surrendered some of his love for Mathematics to embrace all who enable its perpetuation, especially those beyond the borders of the academe. Darren has held multiple leadership roles at Durban University of Technology, South Africa, and serves on the board of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement. With gratitude, we accepted the invitation and humbly attempted to learn from and participate in a collaborative learning partnership with the authors, via the Author Collective process, before even attempting to draw meaning from, synthesise and illuminate some guideposts for future directions of the field. We were guided by the authors and guest editors, Margaret and Morgan, as well as those who have come before us in this work. Specifically, we wish to acknowledge ancestral origins and other sources of knowledge (Ubuntu, Irish, indigenous, feminist, African-American, critical, collective, collaborative and relational ways of knowing) that shape, guide and sustain our own paths in this work.

The 11 articles are authored by graduate students, community change agents, and university staff and faculty researchers from many backgrounds, disciplines, institutional types and countries. The authors identify important considerations for the future of community-engaged research, including our need as researchers to unlearn traditional positivist research practices in order to ensure the future of community-engaged collaborative research. This requires reclaiming feminist and Indigenous elements of research that are political, critical, affective and relational, have an ethic of care, and for which *love* itself is a research methodology (Fabos et al.).

Together, the authors help paint a pathway for those who want to become 'decolonial dreamers' (la paperson 2017), daring to reimagine the nature of power in research and in higher education more broadly, to truly feel like they belong (Fabos et al.), as we collectively find ways to dream bigger in order to uncover new and exciting possibilities for this work (Wong) we call community-engaged scholarship. Themes of disruption and dismantling of traditional research paradigms are present throughout the contributions

(Sousa; Loh et al.). The merging of knowledges (Osinski) and deep storytelling in public and community-centred spaces are further cornerstones of collaborative, co-created community-engaged research (Ross et al.; Haarman & Green; Fabos et al.).

Notwithstanding the diversity of perspectives, approaches and contexts of the contributors, there is sufficient commonality for our commentary to comprise a voice of the collective that is more symphonic (voices in conversation) than cacophonic (voices clamouring for attention). We hope that our thoughts on the contributions represent an integration of those of the contributors and a meaningful reflection of the issues explored and their potential impact on the engagement field.

Dead Elephants and Ivory Towers

The impact of the hegemony of the Occident on knowledge processes across the globe and the subsequent responses to the power structures that prevail have been raised in many of the contributions (Haverkamp; Sousa; Osinski). We add our own here through an extension of the often used metaphor of universities as 'ivory towers', which depicts the spaces of the esoteric academe as distinct and distant from those occupied by mundane lay people outside of those towers. Although Sousa (in this issue) adroitly reconceptualises the community's positionality in his article, in the parlance of community engagement the community is considered to be part of those outside these ivory towers. Epistemicide, a consequence of the hegemonic dominance of Occidental 'ivory towers', is best illustrated by recognising that every piece of ivory bears testament to a dead elephant. This term was coined by De Sousa Santos (2007), and amplified by Hall (2018) among others, to describe a culling of knowledge systems in colonised territories. New 'ivory towers' followed the colonisers and many of these institutions of higher education in Africa continue to serve, reproduce and promote colonial Western values (Lebakeng 2006).

Further extending the metaphor, elephants were abundant and renowned for their memory (O'Connell 2015) in pre-colonial days, especially across Africa. Like the elephants, many of the flourishing indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) across the globe relied on memory as part of their sustainability. Oral dissemination of IKS across generations relied on memory and practice. These genres included, but were not limited to, fables, proverbs, myths, riddles and storytelling (Kamwangamalu 1999). The near obliteration of elephants in the African wild resonates with the notion of epistemicide. Marfo and Biersteker (2011) assert that education must (1) be locally relevant and (2) transmit a society's enduring values and best traditions across generations. Despite these compelling standards, the Euro-Western education system continues to dominate in Africa, *inter alia*, negatively impacting cultural identities and breaking intergenerational continuity in the core values and traditions. They argue further that these Euro-centric traditions that have governed educational practice on the continent, together with the history of colonial domination supporting those traditions, could have exacted a lasting impact on Africa's cultural psyche in ways that have profound implications for African people's sense of worth and identity. Equally, Australasia and the Americas and parts of Europe have not been spared the derogation of their IKS.

Although many of the First Nations peoples on these continents suffered epistemicide on a continental scale, many of their diaspora continue to be treated as subaltern through their limited access to higher education. This can extend to their experience of epistemic injustice through their participation in community-university partnerships (Haverkamp; Piñeros Shields; Ross et al.; Wong). This special issue represents a contribution to the realisation of knowledge democracy and/or epistemic justice. One of the collective appeals from the authors is to entrench these notions as part of the foundations of future work of engaged scholars and practitioners. All contributions are in alignment with the principle formulated by post-colonial scholars, of restoring equity to the epistemologies of, or epistemological access to, the subaltern.

Ubuntu, Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Power

Ubuntu, which has its roots in African traditional society and philosophy, means humanness or the quality of being human and espouses the ideal of interconnectedness among people. Gade (2011, pp. 316–18) defines Ubuntu, as it was understood through the different historical periods, as a human quality, connected to a philosophy and an ethic, as African humanism and as a worldview. As Darren and Elaine collaborated on this article, Darren shared his experience working with communities on a knowledge-sharing project between remote communities and a number of South African universities. His experience reflected so many of the themes running through the authors' articles we were reading. Darren shares this vignette here to illuminate relational power through African Indigenous knowledge.

A few years ago, I accepted an invitation to attend an inaugral gathering for a community-university partnership with a women's organization in a remote village about 90 miles from the closest university that was working with the women. The gathering was the first time the university and community partners were all meeting together. My university was one of three universities that were collaborating on a research project exploring contributions from the Global South in advancing knowledge democracy and epistemic justice in higher education. My colleagues and I were part of the team invited to join the gathering. The community leaders explained to us that the village was abuzz with excitement that they were to receive and host such 'distinguished' visitors as ourselves. The gathering was turning into a celebration of the academics.

In the days before the gathering, we made attempts to downplay the celebratory nature of the gathering with us as 'distinguished guests'. We held the view that in being treated with such heraldry, we were complicitly contributing to power differentials inherently at play in such partnerships. We insinuated that we were being treated like royalty. Our pleas were met with disappointment by our hosts who pointed out that we were being treated as visitors. They went to great lengths to remind us of their impression of Ubuntu which they had assumed we shared – that the village visitor is not so much a guest as they are a transient member of the village passing through or more personally a member of the extended family passing through, and as such the village should do all it needs to ensure that the planned first visit would not be the last. It did not matter who we were or what rank we held. It did matter that we were from afar and would therefore require greater rest and respite, which is why a 'pop in' was not even contemplated.

Three observations from the planning and execution of the visit are pertinent to this special edition. The first is that there are many 'meanings' of Ubuntu, some of which are employed in the field of community engagement – especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these are easily forgotten when meetings between university and community partners are exempted from the cultural nuances usually on display when Africans first meet each other. These exemptions usually occur when one of the parties may determine that said meetings ought to be formal and void of any fanfare. An open air gathering, surrounded by singers and dancers, then gives way to meetings in a village 'hall' too small to accommodate many of the villagers.

The second observation is that we had no choice but to surrender our stance as we were politely reminded that, as guests, we did not have a say in the nature and extent of the reception. It is the privilege of the host to determine what is manageable and it is to their satisfaction that the efficacy of the function would be assessed, not ours. They would gauge from the expressions on our faces and conviviality of our conversation whether they were succeeding as hosts.

The third was more of a realisation: that the village would welcome other visitors in the future. Neither the future visitors, nor those past or present, would be able to ascertain which of the visitors were more, or less, esteemed; nor would they be able to gauge by participation in their event alone, whether a correlation

exists between the extent of the fanfare and the esteem of the visitor to the village. As I recall the entire event, I remain at once embarrassed by our presumption, and delighted by one of my fondest memories. I remain embarrassed by the realisation that we had appropriated for ourselves the role of the coloniser in attempting some vague semblance of decoloniality in our quest to feign humility (by unconsciously exploiting power within the relationship to harness power over the outcome of an event). I remain delighted that our hosts did not condescend to our approach (by consciously exercising power within the relationship to mitigate and counter power over the outcome). Instead indelible memories were created that remain both theirs and ours (an unheralded artefact of our collaboration).

The African Indigenous Knowledge (IK) values of Ubuntu safeguard the conservation of the community as a whole and promote the harmonious existence of the individual within the community (Bonn 2007, p. 2). When visited by strangers (especially those who arrive in peace), the community seeks to welcome such visitors in a manner that promotes both the visitors and the community. If a relationship is established as part of the visit or ensues beyond, the visitor essentially becomes part of the community. In some ways this is akin to the notion of relational power, frequently described in most of the articles. This power within the established relationship is sustained if the values that underpin it are adhered to for the duration of the relationship by all parties. Otherwise the visitors retain their status as visitors and do not fully become part of the community. Whether these partners represent universities or communities, whether these partnerships span neighbourhoods, cities, states or continents, a welcome is a necessary part of orienting visitors into and across communities. This fundamental commitment to values and principles, akin to those that prevailed in sub-Saharan Africa prior to colonisation, could provide a means to begin the disruption of power differentials at play, especially when the preservation of the whole (the partnership) is being pitted against the interests of some of the parts (individuals or one partner). The illustrative unpacking of the multiple roles of boundary spanners, brokers, shakers and workers in the context described by Ross et al. (in this issue) is an example of the tension of differing interests of the parts and the whole, especially when one part plays multiple roles at various stages of the evolution of the partnership.

The African philosophy and principles of Ubuntu emphasise that the individual realises her/his humanness through the wellbeing of others and the community as a whole. Connected to the proverb, 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu', Ubuntu is identified as integral to traditional African values and generally translated as 'people are people through people' (Republic of South Africa). In its broad manifestations, Ubuntu generates amongst its adherents a strong sense of the self and of the community to engender compassionate, harmonious and respectful coexistence. This sense of interdependence is captured in 'I am, because we are and since we are, therefore I am' (Teffo 1999, p. 154). An adaptation of this principle of coexistence within the context of a community-university partnership is that each of the participants in the partnership is a participant because of the partnership and the partnership is a partnership because of each of the participants.

When power asymmetries threaten to rupture the partnership, participants may act to mitigate potential, perceived or real imbalances and this may lead one or more participants to suspend (yet not necessarily abandon) their right to dissent in favour of the common good. Alternatively, should knowledge hierarchies threaten participants, the partnership through other participants may close ranks to centre the voice of the threatened without silencing or diminishing the voice of the whole. In this issue, DeMeulenaere, Haverkamp, Loh et al., Lowery et al., Osinski, Piñeros Shields, Ross et al. and Wong explore, to varying degrees, responses to power asymmetries and their impact on the co-production of knowledge and action, while providing an account of the integrity of the partnerships over space and time.

Central to the Ubuntu philosophy and ways of knowing is that each person exists through the other, mutually and reciprocally (Mabovula 2011, p. 42; Metz 2014, p. 71). In the context of the reception of visitors, arriving empty handed is potentially offensive. While the exchange of gifts (even a scarf or

food) is acceptable, the gift of a Western-style university has proven more pernicious. Ubuntu, as an African humanist system, promotes interconnectedness and interdependence with all life forms, and the communitarian African Indigenous Ubuntu values reinforce the social solidarity ethic and affirm cultural identity (Msila et al. 2015). In her doctoral study, Padayachee (2021) explores the extent to which Ubuntu values and fosters social responsibility and civic participation. She describes Ubuntu humanism to demonstrate its benefits to individual and community wellbeing and wholeness. The concepts of social responsibility and civic participation are explained to show the potential of Ubuntu values in inculcating social responsibility and active citizenry. These contribute to participatory democracy, which resonates with some of the overarching goals of engaged scholarship, often reflected as a quest for social justice.

If 'visitors' from the academe and/or the community who enter the arena of community engagement through community-university partnerships consider adopting an approach to power within partnerships that is akin to the coexistence espoused in Ubuntu, by focusing on the humaneness of all within the partnership, it may be possible to preserve the integrity and the wellbeing of the whole when confronted with power asymmetries that threaten to derail the partnership. Recognising some actors as more powerful does not necessarily imply that others are weak or weaker. This recognition could be the outcome of a 'full disclosure' of all interests and the identification of potential conflicts which may pose a limitation to the efficacy of the partnership. An example of this is a researcher who procures services for the partnership under the auspices of the university. Such a person in the partnership holds considerable power, but the rules of procurement may constitute a threat (weakness) to the partnership, especially where there is unanticipated expenditure. Procurement officers may need to be recruited to the community-university partnership at the beginning. They may require briefing on the *modi operandi* of the partnership as regularly as the community representatives may require briefing on the potentially debilitating procurement practices. Many of the partnerships described in the articles comprising this themed issue attest to perturbations in the partnership that had the potential to derail the integrity of the collective process (Loh et al.; DeMeulenaere; Wong; Osinski). While the responses varied, the integrity of the whole remained foregrounded in the responses to the threats.

Decolonial Dreamers: Dreamscaping the Future of Community Research and Engagement

The African indigenous knowledge system of Ubuntu holds principles, values and tenets that simultaneously promote the conservation of the community as a whole alongside the harmonious existence of the individual within the community. The adaptation and adoption of this knowledge system as a research ethic within the scholarship and practice of community-university partnerships and community research relationships could enable the development of mutuality and reciprocity that levels power hierarchies within the personal, organisational and societal arenas of community-university partnerships. The research methods, guiding concepts and values described throughout this themed volume resonate with the Ubuntu knowledge system, which itself has survived colonisation and its concomitant epistemicide. The authors together help paint a pathway for those who want to become decolonial dreamers (la paperson 2017), daring to reimagine the nature of power in research as we collectively find ways to dream bigger in order to uncover new and exciting possibilities for the practice of community-engaged scholarship. As we reimagine a future for community-engaged scholarship, how might we undertake the work in ways that promote harmonious existence and a deep interconnectedness and so move from being a visitor to becoming fully part of the community? This interconnectedness addresses the power imbalance that is reflective of a systemic disengagement with the community (Osinski) and is reflective of the deep, deliberate community-rooted relationships and research methodologies (Wong; Lowery et al.) that reflect the furture of this work.

The articles are bold evidence of the future of community-engagement research and can be analysed through la paperson's decolonial dreamers and dreamscapes where '[d]ecolonization is, put bluntly, the repatriation of land, the regeneration of relations, and the forwarding of Indigenous and Black and queer futures—a process that requires countering what power seems to be up to' (2017, p. xv). Within this frame and to affect public change we need to 'take effective decolonizing action, [and] have a theory of action that accounts for the permeability of the apparatuses of power and the fact that neocolonial systems inadvertently support decolonizing agendas' (p. xv). All 11 articles in this themed volume grapple with the multiple and transdisciplinary 'apparatuses of power' in community research and engagement and address, interrogate and counter those traditional structures of power within higher education and throughout our community engagement research. Taken together, these contributions identify emergent and impactful methodologies, relationships and practices that guide our considerations for the future of truly equitable, ethical, inclusive and just community-engaged research.

From the many definitions of power contemplated in this edition, we choose to focus on the notion of power as the capacity to act and/or influence, particularly within the processes that constitute knowledge production, dissemination and mobilisation (Cooper, Rodway Macri & Read 2011). Loh et al. explore the tensions between the dominance of academic knowledge, yet present the tensions as opportunities for disrupting and transforming towards greater equity in the relationships. For these researchers, equity in community-engaged research relationships is achieved through reflective practice and an ethic of care as trust is developed over time. The researchers agree that it is 'messy work' that requires a lot of communication, trust, reflection and time. Yet a relational approach to power provides hope that we can be part of the change we seek in all of our relations. A relational approach to power reminds us that no matter what practices we have institutionalised, our individual beings, organisations and communities are always in a process of becoming.

In this process of becoming, the authors are aware that the partnerships themselves are often challenged by the unequal power relations they are trying to confront. All authors in this issue speak to the importance of the relationships in spite of differentials in power between and among individuals and institutions of higher education and communities. Yet the authors remain visionary, optimistic and hopeful about the possibility that a relational approach to power can support deeper, more transformational partnerships, and ultimately breaks the binary between community and university. These deeper relationships could over time help the readers of these articles see the 'possibilities for a decolonizing university' (la paperson 2017, p. xxii) as well as the time, resources, strategies, trial and error, and humility it would take for those situated within the academy to effectively and equitably partner with communities.

> It makes us sad when you ask us these questions'… I knew then that my work, my constant informal interviewing and asking about the loss ... had imposed upon the people who I had come to love a painful exercise of knowledge production (Haverkamp, in this issue).

While there is consensus among the authors that relationships, trust, humility and vulnerability are important in countering power imbalances, Haverkamp challenges us to go further as she holds space for 'the political, relational, ethical dimensions of collaboration and engagement' and resituates PAR within 'a feminist and indigenous ethics of care'. A *love–care–response* is not a research methodology legitimagised in the academy, yet is reflective of the values of Ubuntu and is an approach that offers a way for community-engaged researchers to counter the harm communities and individuals can often experience at the hands of external researchers.

Harm can be experienced when community knowledges are commodified by the academy. Haarman and Green's framework encourages us to consider that some forms of knowledge should refuse the university and intentionally carve out spaces apart from the university where both community and Indigenous knowledge is valued without turning them into commodities. Haarman and Green, as decolonial dreamers,

contend that power imbalance is indeed a result of the systemic disengagement of universities and academic researchers from the broader community. They propose or dream of 'elicitation of concerns via public work for public things', whereby community-engaged researchers can rebalance power structures toward the community, 'elevating the community voice and allowing the community to drive research on *their* articulated concerns and priorities, while also allowing public things to provide the environment for priorities to emerge' (Haarman & Green, in this issue, italics added).

Ross et al. (in this issue) provide decolonial dreamers with a framework for understanding how 'power is negotiated in the boundary zones of partnership'. They use *third generation cultural historical activity theory (CHAT)* and activity systems as a conceptual framework to 'analyze the structural and cultural dimensions of the boundary zone in which research, learning and action in our partnership have occurred … [using] research and data to span, broker, and shake institutional boundaries for the purpose of youth violence prevention and intervention (YVPI)'. The authors reconfigure power and place in an attempt to ensure that power is realigned, harnessed and directed towards transformational and systemic change to improve the lived experience of youth with whom they work. Such efforts are not without risk and not always successful. In their article, the authors reflected on how they did not achieve all they wanted as their 'boundary work expanded, shook, but ultimately maintained boundaries between organizations intent on addressing the drivers of youth violence. In the end, by creating the space around the needs of the formal leaders and decision-makers, the YVPI created a new boundary that has made it difficult for grassroots and community-based partners to enter the boundary zone'. The authors asked a crucial question all community-engaged researchers should ask when unable in our work to achieve our own intended goals: How might we 'open spaces for other boundary shakers in these moments'. And how do those of us who have been in this work for some time open space for the next generation of community-engaged scholars to influence the direction of our work?

The authors in this volume are not the first to critically consider the harm and good derived from the power relations at play in our community engagement and research. But the depth of the explorations in this one volume has surfaced much insight for the future of this work. Our hope for the field is that this volume opens us all to the possibilities they have set before us. The richness across three continents, numerous disciplines, geographic communities and social issues is immense. Each time you return to this issue, you will assimilate new learning and understanding. The lived experiences and the repository of knowledge within communities remain all too often unheralded, unpublished, unrewarded. The academe cannot continue to draw from this repository of knowledge, skills and experience without fully acknowledging, legitimising and rewarding the work being done. In closing, we encourage all partners committed to the future of engaged scholarship and practice to continue this work, to disrupt, dismantle, disassemble, reassemble (la paperson 2017) and dream a community engagement and research dreamscape that births power-with (Piñeros Shields, in this issue) and where the subaltern takes the leading role in partnerships from inception to resolution of the problem.

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