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ADDRESSING SOME OF THE ELEPHANTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN RESEARCH EDUCATION: RACE AND REFLEXIVITY IN POSTGRADUATE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION: ON STARTING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Conducting research in South Africa is not easy. It is a country reeling from the legacies of apartheid, characterised by continued structural inequalities. I live in Cape Town, a place where neighbourhoods are spatially segregated by race and income distribution. The inequalities are blatant: on one side of the railway line, you find “white” spaces, which are characterised by natural beauty, affluence and western standards, while on the other side, you find conditions of extreme poverty: no formal housing, little or no access to water and sanitation – the reality for the majority of the inhabitants of the city. In Cape Town, every event, be it a natural disaster such as fires on Table Mountain or a cultural event such as a literary festival in Franschhoek, is seen and discussed through a racial lens. On the surface, it seems as if the rainbow nation lives peacefully forever after, reconciled and transformed through the miracle that Nelson Mandela performed. However, once you scratch the surface, things change quickly: race bubbles to the top and shows its ugly head, as diversity consultant Freeth (2013) observes.

Whatever topic you choose for your research, in South Africa you will have to engage with issues of race and, closely interrelated, class and gender: you might find it in the composition of your lab team, the use of language in meetings, the way your colleagues engage with you and each other, or in snide comments that are made. You may find it in the opportunities you have or do not have access to, information that is or is not passed on to you, networks that you are or are not allowed into. Trying to engage your colleagues, supervisors, friends and research participants in these issues is like walking in a minefield. You may be met with discomfort and silence, or with an

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explosion of emotions leaving you frustrated, confused and helpless, as well as feeling hopelessly inadequate at dealing with this complex situation. In my research I was hit by the depth of trauma and pain in personal stories shared by black and coloured students, and the daily violence they were exposed to, as well as the complete lack of knowledge about these stories within the white student body. I was similarly fascinated by the reaction of black students, after listening to some of the white students' stories of pain and struggle, when they realised that white people had problems too. I was mesmerised at the extent of misconceptions students had about the "Other"¹. I kept wondering, do these students never engage with each other? Do they never listen to each other's stories?

I am an outsider to this country, which added an additional layer of complexity to my research. My family and I arrived in Cape Town in 2010, after living in Scotland and in Botswana. My husband is from Kenya and we have two mixed-race children. Until we moved to South Africa, we had only encountered openness, support and curiosity towards our colourful family. After our arrival in South Africa, this open acceptance changed. I soon realised that race and, in my case, whiteness, mattered in a way that I had never experienced before. This made me uncomfortable yet also curious to better understand the issue of race in the South African context. I started to ask a lot of questions.

While you might think that being an outsider makes it harder to engage in difficult conversations, it actually made it easier in some ways: it allows you to ask questions and notice things that others do not. Social practices that seem "normal" for people who have grown up here to the extent that they do not even notice them, will hit those new to South Africa right in the face. What struck me most when I first started teaching in South Africa were, for example, students' seating arrangements. While the class consisted of a diverse range of students, each group of students sat with peers of their own skin colour. Not only was I met with discomfort and silence when pointing this out to my colleagues and students, nobody seemed to care.

I decided to make this part of my research: where does this lack of engagement across difference come from? And how could you disrupt this? How could you start a dialogue across difference, one that would not just reinforce beliefs and assumptions but actually open up spaces for understanding and learning? In this chapter, I will

1 I use "Other" (in capital letters and inverted commas) to foreground the socially and discursively constructed nature of the other: a "distant other" who in this case not only does not look like me but to whom I am always in some ways differently positioned in relation to power and privilege. This "Other" is always positioned as either more or less privileged than I am, and our relationship is always based on an unequal power distribution (see for example Zembylas 2011).

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reflect on some strategies that I adopted to initiate and engage in conversations on race and privilege in South Africa with my students, research participants, peers, colleagues and friends. As a postgraduate student engaged in research in South Africa, I strongly believe that reflecting on one own's raced, gendered, classed positionality and how it may affect your research is a necessary part of conducting your studies empathetically, critically and ethically.

ON TROUBLED KNOWLEDGE AND MUTUAL VULNERABILITY

As you engage with difficult and complex conversations around race, oppression and privilege, it is important to find a theoretical home, a home with which you feel comfortable. As I read up on South Africa's history, on the legacy of apartheid on the South Africa of today and, in particular, on its impact on education and on how students engage (or not) with each other, I found resonance with South African educator Jansen's term *troubled knowledge* (2009). Troubled knowledge is the indirect knowledge which is passed on from generation to generation; knowledge that is not conscious, but that defines how we see and engage with others. Jansen also calls it "knowledge in the blood" (p. 171), and defines it as "knowledge embedded in the emotional, psychic, spiritual, social, economic, political, and psychological lives of a community" (*ibid*). Jansen argues that it is this knowledge that keeps our communities apart; keeps us in our comfort zones. This knowledge has a darker side, as it draws out the "worst racial stereotypes, prejudices and aggressions" (Jansen 2004:121). He contends that for a social justice educator the most important thing is to disrupt this knowledge, as our classrooms are full of "bodies ... who carry knowledge within themselves that must be engaged, interrupted and transformed" (Jansen 2009:258).

I realised that my personal storytelling project disrupted some of the knowledges my students brought with them to class. It made students more aware of their assumptions and beliefs; it allowed them to see beyond the surface, beyond the masks that students across the rainbow nation were carrying in class, and made them care for each other. In their feedback on the project, they told me that they started to see each other as *humans* connected in a shared pain. In my readings I had also encountered the term *mutual vulnerability* ([Keet, Zinn, & Porteus 2009](#)), a key humanising concept in post-conflict societies that assumes we are all wounded in different ways and to different extents by the inhuman structure, in this case, apartheid. Could what my students were referring to be a growing recognition of this mutual vulnerability?

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While in general this project was positively received by students, some of the feedback started to make me feel uneasy. In particular, feelings of pity by students associating with white privilege – comments such as, “Ah shame! If I only had known about the struggles this student went through to come to university, I could have helped.” I noticed white students’ defensiveness, their denial of any sort of responsibility in the continued structural inequalities characterising today’s South Africa, and their difficulty recognising their own privilege. There was also a mounting anger expressed by some of the black students at this display of pity.

I found myself sitting with these explosive emotions in the classroom, unprepared and overwhelmed at how to deal with them, feeling more and more uncomfortable with what I was doing here. Did the telling of stories actually change anything? Or did I just re-affirm existing power relationships in the class? Who was I to challenge these knowledges? How could I prepare myself to challenge and question some of the emotions that were displayed in these conversations? What had I gotten myself into?

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE

There was a distinct moment in my study where I felt that I needed help and advice at how to practically engage with the challenges encountered in this space. You might find that in your usual academic environment it is hard to find somebody who is willing to engage with you on difficult topics such as privilege or race. Whenever I tried to engage my colleagues at my university, my supervisors, even my friends in conversations around issues of difference and the emotions that I found in my teaching and research, I was met with the same discomfort and silence. At times I questioned myself as to whether my obsession with race was outdated or no longer that important in the rainbow nation as portrayed in media and policy. It felt to me as if this rainbow fairy tale was used to keep difficult questions at bay, to hide some of the uncomfortable truths from our conversations – an excuse to not engage in these difficult conversations. It felt as if people were too afraid to tackle these sensitive issues, too afraid to open this can of worms, or too afraid of not being able to contain the worms once unleashed.

Lacking a sounding board for my questions and doubts, I eventually decided to create a space for dialogue myself, outside of the academic reality. I was looking for a space where I could engage with issues around race and privilege in a different way: less theoretical, less academic, based on the lived experience of the people in South Africa. Together with a few other women I participated in a dialogue group. This group was founded in the spirit of hooks’ (2000:8) feminist *consciousness-raising groups*, where, in our case, women of all colours and walks of life met on

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a monthly basis to engage in conversation and ask uncomfortable questions about what it meant to be human in today's South Africa.

If you can't find a space to discuss your thoughts and challenge your own understandings at your research site or university, consider creating such a space yourself. Connect with other postgraduate students to share, discuss and question your thoughts and even your findings. Find people in the community who share your passion and help you grow in your understanding and your postgraduate journey. Using social media to connect with others who are interested in discussing these issues could be another avenue to explore. I found various Facebook groups which helped me to understand current debates and discourses on race as well as gender in South Africa.

ON COMFORT ZONES, VULNERABILITIES AND CRITICAL EMOTIONAL REFLEXIVITY

While a theoretical framework to address the "elephant" may fit well with your lived experience, this might not always be shared by others. In my case, the notion of *mutual vulnerability and pain* (Keet *et al* 2009), became a bone of contention in our dialogue group. While black members of our dialogue group recognised white pain, they in some ways also invalidated this pain in relation to their own, and threw the term *white fragility* into our faces, warning us that listening to white pain could potentially re-traumatise black group members. White fragility is a term coined by DiAngelo (2011), an American anti-racist educator, and has been increasingly used in recent years to refer to white defensiveness in conversations around race. How did I, so keen on creating bridges for an understanding across difference, suddenly become the defensive "Other" – the white oppressor, the one who does not want to understand, transform or open up?

These debates coincided with the *#RhodesMustfall* movement, calling for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town. Many of our black dialogue members actively joined this movement, which was clearly defined as a black movement, with a call for white allies to show – silent – support, emphasising the centrality of black voices and black pain (The Rhodes Must Fall Movement 2015). Mutual vulnerability was the last thing on their mind. My theoretical framework and lived experience clashed painfully; suddenly theory *antagonised* my lived experience (Britzman 2002). It was a painful and confusing moment and left me reeling, questioning all that I had believed in, read on, and used as central tenets for my PhD study. I thought I had it all figured out. But clearly not. As Nigerian writer Adichie (2015) recently stated in her commencement address to Wellesley College,

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“Your standardised ideologies will not always fit your life. Because life is messy”. What was my role in this struggle as a white European woman? If I did not believe in reconciliation, in the possibility of white and black students to find a shared space, a shared vulnerability to allow them to imagine and fight for a better future, what did I believe in? Where did this leave me, my study participants and my study?

This time, Boler and Zembylas’s (2003) pedagogy of discomfort came to my rescue and helped me make sense of my messy emotions. The pedagogy of discomfort is based on the belief that only by moving out of our comfort zones will we be able to shake some of our own assumptions and beliefs about the “Other”; only by making ourselves vulnerable, and reflecting on our vulnerability and on the emotions that come with this vulnerability will we understand how our emotions are part of our socialisation. Zembylas calls this a *critical emotional reflexivity* (2011:1), which, as he explains, allows us to understand the historical nature and constructedness of the emotions we encounter.

The way I understand this is that we have to use our own emotions to recognise how our racial, classed, gendered identities have been constructed by our family, schooling, friends and communities. Our racial identities, for example, come with distinct emotional reactions in difficult dialogues. Through this lens my own defensiveness started to make sense. It was not just my own defensiveness, it was more; it was *white* defensiveness, born from *white* guilt and shame. Seeing emotions as politically and socially constructed helped me to distance myself from my own personal pain, to see the emotions I experienced in the bigger context of South Africa’s painful history. I realised that our black group members did not necessarily react to me as an individual, but to what I was representing as a white woman in today’s South Africa. In similar fashion black anger could be seen as politically, socially and historically constructed. Ahmed (2004) explains these emotions as symptoms of affective investments in social norms, accumulated over a lifetime, that make it so hard to shift our world views.

When I started to make sense of my emotional reactions in these difficult conversations, I found myself retreating more and more into an observer position, feeling like I had neither a voice nor an opinion. This is a difficult moment in postgraduate study, where you are seemingly supposed to have an opinion – a *standpoint* – at all times. But if you allow yourself to be vulnerable and to be open with your doubts, you might also find that over time you slowly learn to understand what *critical emotional reflexivity* could mean in practical terms; the slow and painful process of coming to terms with your own positionality and the emotions attached

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to it. I realised that I had to open myself up to challenge my own assumptions and beliefs, making myself part of the research process.

How do you become more reflective of your own affective investments? Personal storytelling, blogging and autobiographic writing might help. Write down your own story and see how your own understanding of self and other, of privilege and oppression might have changed over the course of your research. These do not have to be long stories – the digital storytelling format I adopted usually makes use of 300-500 words. They can be short vignettes that capture a moment, a feeling, or a doubt. Having to structure your thoughts into the form of a narrative can help you own and make sense of what and why you are feeling what you are feeling. Reflect on how your story supports or challenges the theories you chose for your study. Allow others to see your writing, comment on it and give feedback. This can be hard, especially if your thoughts are not fully formed or if you are struggling to find your argument. However, it is only in this exchange with others that you will be able to learn how to engage in difficult conversations in today's South Africa.

ON OPENNESS AND RECIPROCITY

Reflecting on your own emotions, taking yourself out of your comfort zones, and allowing yourself to be critiqued, challenged and questioned will allow you to understand your own and others' emotional responses better. It can also give you pointers of how to respond to them. When I engage in difficult conversations now, I try to be more aware of how I respond emotionally to certain topics but also of others' emotional responses. Instead of seeing emotions as getting in the way of conversations, I now see them as an entry point to start a conversation about the emotions we have learned and how to *unlearn* these emotions.

Being more reflective about your own emotional positionality will also help you become more aware of the underlying reasons you are conducting research. As researchers we have to be very careful and open about – what I would call – our *political* agenda when doing research. I do not believe that research can ever be neutral, as much as education can be neutral. We all have our own political agendas and our own beliefs of why we are teaching what we are teaching or researching what we are researching.

Opening up conversations about race and privilege can be highly emotional and stressful for both you and your research participants. Does your own political agenda match with the one of your study participants? What do empowerment, change and transformation mean to them? A risk in doing this kind of research as an outsider is

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that you could be seen and critiqued, as I would call it, a *data vulture*, coming from the north to feed on data of the south.

But even if you are South African, within this context of deep inequalities, conducting research ethically is a challenge². Martha Nussbaum (2010:10) warns that, “[i]n a situation of entrenched inequality, being a neighbor can be an epistemological problem”. Your interpretation of your data, in my case reading my own and my participants’ stories, and your interactions with participants and colleagues will always be impacted by your cultural vantage point. Chaudry’s (2009) reflections on her ethnographic work in Pakistan as a Muslim Pakistani woman educated in the United States of America is a useful account of how important it is to continuously critique your own biases and your own frames of thought. This self-critique, or reflexivity, might be the most important thing you do in this type of research, in particular within a social justice agenda.

Mutual vulnerability involves mutual reciprocity. How can you make your research participatory and reciprocal, so that not only you will gain from it? You can collect beautiful, heartfelt, honest stories. I found so much openness to share, so much support and gratefulness from my participants to have found somebody to listen to their stories and to take them back home. But what will your study participants have gained? Telling your own story, making yourself vulnerable to your research participants is the first step. But what more you can leave with them and what more of yourself can you give them? Think carefully about the professional and ethically implications of collecting and sharing your participants’ data – about how you will present your participants to your audience, in particular if this is a foreign audience back home.

I watched an American student conduct research in one of the projects I was involved in and I loved her way of giving back. As an academic literacy lecturer she saw the need for academic writing support in her study participants and she gave this support generously during the time she was here. The way she conducted her study, her ethical and thoughtful engagement with her students, her lack of fear of critiquing our practice and her courage to challenge us deeply impressed me³.

2 See Chapter 3 where Simangele Mayisela addresses this topic in more depth.

3 See Chapter 20 where Collum Banda argues that researchers have a responsibility to communicate their findings to the public, and in particular to their respondent constituencies.

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ON GENTLENESS

In the struggle to understand yourself, do not forget to be gentle with yourself and your colleagues, fellow students and participants. Critiquing and questioning your own worldviews, from whichever part of the rainbow you may come from, can encourage a more understanding and empathetic approach towards the issues of race in postgraduate study in South Africa. In doing so, you might also be able to address your participants' questions (which may include uncomfortable questions about the motivation for your research) in ways that can facilitate a more open conversation with room for change and transformation.

I believe it is important to allow emotions into our lives as educators and researchers, to use emotions to reflect on why we react to certain situations in a certain way. It allows us to see our own lives as part of a larger social-economic and historically-shaped reality, to see our own emotional narratives as political. This also enables us the use our own narratives as a lens to understand how power and privilege is acted out in the micro cosmos that our classrooms or research sites represent – mirroring the larger society. By doing this, we may find ways to resist this normative nature of emotions governing how we act in and outside our classrooms or research sites to become critical yet ethical agents of social change.

Exploring the role of race in postgraduate research can be a process that takes you out of your comfort zone, leading you to engage with “Others”, as well as yourself on deep levels. Do not be afraid to be challenged, critiqued and ultimately transformed in your relationship with others. Enter into a dialogue with the literature, your students, your research participants, your colleagues, your friends, and yourself. Be open and allow yourself to challenge and be challenged and transformed by this process.

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