

Deconstructing Otherness: A Decolonial Inquiry into the Experiences of Immigrant Students



Agrippa Mabvira ¹ 

¹ Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Social Work, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This paper engages in a decolonial exploration of the immigrant experience through the lens of "otherness." Drawing upon literature on postcolonialism and decoloniality, the paper sought to interrogate the discourses and structures that perpetuate the marginalisation and alienation of immigrant students within host societies. Data utilised in this paper emanated from a qualitative study that sought to capture the experiences of twelve immigrant students and twelve non-immigrant students from two secondary basic education learning institutions in Mthatha, situated in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The paper critically examines the role of colonial legacies, systemic inequalities, and cultural hegemony in producing and sustaining the otherness of immigrant students. In doing so, it offers insights into the complexities of immigrant identities and challenges dominant narratives that reinforce exclusionary practices. Ultimately, this decolonial inquiry provides recommendations that seek to contribute to broader discussions on social justice, inclusion, and the transformative potential of decolonising approaches in addressing issues of otherness within contemporary societies.

Correspondence

Agrippa Mabvira

Email:

agrippamabvira@gmail.com

Publication History

Received: 30th May, 2024

Accepted: 14th August, 2024

Published online:

11th September, 2024

Keywords: *Deconstructing Otherness, Decoloniality, Immigrant, Postcolonialism*

INTRODUCTION

The spontaneous increase in global immigration in the last decade has led to the pervasiveness of nativist sentiment and rhetoric.¹ Nativist sentiment in the South African context has been inclined towards dehumanising and representing immigrants as society's criminal elements and parasites.² This form of othering is a psychological and social mechanism that creates an "us versus them" dichotomy, where immigrants are viewed as fundamentally different from and inferior to the native population. In affirmation, Quijano attests that othering is rooted in colonial ideologies that justified the subjugation and exploitation of colonised people by depicting them as inferior and uncivilized.³ The continuous stripping of immigrants of their individuality and humanity by reducing them to negative stereotypes echoes colonial practices.

¹ Arturo Carrillo and Caitlin L O'Grady, "Using Structural Social Work Theory to Drive Anti-Oppressive Practice with Latino Immigrants," *Advances in Social Work* 18, no. 3 (2018): 704–26.

² Pragna Rugunanan and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama, *Migration in Southern Africa* (IMISCOE Research Series, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92114-9_1.

³ Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (June 29, 2000): 215–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>.

Accordingly, the current study seeks to investigate the othering of immigrant learners in learning institutions because schools are not immune to stereotypical dynamics and negative attitudes. Vandeyar and Vandeyar assert that schools are not culturally neutral or value-neutral but a reflection of the reproduction of coloniality in the larger community.⁴ This prompted Ndlovu-Gatsheni to conclude that institutions of learning are sites for the reproduction of coloniality; hence, they cannot be excluded when discussing issues of decoloniality.⁵ Consequently, any meaningful efforts toward decolonising society must involve challenging and transforming these institutional dynamics to promote genuine inclusivity, diversity and equity.

Therefore, this paper interrogates coloniality on the premise that the marginalisation and dehumanisation of immigrants in schools and communities are rooted in colonial structures and ideologies that continue to shape society.⁶ In affirmation, Opara attests that the legacy of colonisation has perpetuated hierarchies and inequalities which has led to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of immigrants.⁷ These structures and ideologies perpetuate a binary division between the coloniser and the colonised, where immigrants are often positioned as the "other" and are subjected to discriminatory practices and policies.⁸ This positioning is often marked by negative attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in general.

The negative attitudes associated with the relationship between immigrant and non-immigrant students mirror the dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised. The dynamics are tied to the historical nature of the relationship between different groups who have lived in South Africa and the antagonistic trajectory embedded into the social, cultural, political and economic fabric of the state.⁹ Consequently, this has created a situation whereby the reception that refugees receive is shaped by an extraordinarily subtle and variegated cocktail of national apartheid politics and local interests and sensibilities.

Therefore, this paper is in concurrence with Dutta who argues that in order to address the othering of immigrants from a decolonial perspective, it is necessary to critically examine the discourses and practices that produce and maintain colonial ideologies.¹⁰ This includes interrogating how colonial discourses of community are reproduced in educational settings and exploring alternative ways of understanding and practising community.¹¹ Accordingly, this paper seeks to challenge othering and amplify the stories and experiences of immigrant learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Othering refers to the process of constructing and reinforcing social boundaries between "us" and "them," where immigrants are positioned as the "other" and subjected to discrimination and marginalisation.¹² Vorster attests that 'us' is often clothed in a cloud of uniqueness and 'them' in a cloud of otherness.¹³ Therefore, 'Us' forms the in-group and 'them' the out-group. This demarcation is then followed by idolising the 'us' and demonising the 'them'.¹⁴ This binary opposition not only fosters division and exclusion but also legitimises discriminatory attitudes and actions towards the out-group.¹⁵ This dynamic

⁴ Saloshna Vandeyar and Thirusellvan Vandeyar, "Opposing Gazes: Racism and Xenophobia in South African Schools," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 1 (February 28, 2017): 68–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909614560245>.

⁵ Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa* (African Books Collective, 2013).

⁶ Devin G. Atallah and Urmitapa Dutta, "Decolonization Unnamed: Echoes of Healing and Refusal in the Face of Dehumanization and Alienation," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 29, no. 2 (May 2023): 77–81, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000686>.

⁷ Ijeoma Opara, "Neither Here nor There: Exploring the Transnational Identity of West African Migrants Living in South Africa," *Acta Academica* 54, no. 2 (2022): 138–62.

⁸ Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez et al., "'You Gotta Keep Pushing': Immigrant People Regaining Ontological Security and Withstanding Coloniality," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 29, no. 2 (May 2023): 113–25, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000658>.

⁹ Opara, "Neither Here nor There: Exploring the Transnational Identity of West African Migrants Living in South Africa."

¹⁰ Urmitapa Dutta, "Decolonizing 'Community' in Community Psychology," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62, no. 3–4 (2018): 272–82.

¹¹ Dutta, "Decolonizing 'Community' in Community Psychology."

¹² Belinda Dodson, "Locating Xenophobia: Debate, Discourse, and Everyday Experience in Cape Town, South Africa," *Africa Today* 56, no. 3 (2010): 2, <https://doi.org/10.2979/aft.2010.56.3.2>.

¹³ Jakobus M. Vorster, "Racism in South Africa: Are We at a Tipping Point?," in *Togetherness in South Africa*, ed. Jan A. du Rand, Jakobus M. Vorster, and Nico Vorster (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2017), 59–78.

¹⁴ Vorster, "Racism in South Africa: Are We at a Tipping Point?"

¹⁵ Alexis Spire, "The Weight of France's Colonial Past on Immigration Policy," in *Multiculturalism and Integration: A Harmonious Relationship?*, ed. Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (New York: Routledge, 2020), 158–69.

is instrumental in perpetuating social hierarchies and power imbalances, mirroring the historical and ongoing impacts of coloniality where the coloniser was idolised and the colonised were demonised.

In addition, Krivonos and Helsinki assert that othering can be understood as a consequence of global coloniality which is based on the idea of classifying people in relation to the colonial matrix of power and marginalising non-Western subjects under Euro-centred world power.¹⁶ Therefore, by classifying and ranking individuals and groups based on their proximity to Western norms and values, coloniality reinforces the dominance of Western powers and maintains systemic inequalities.¹⁷ In this framework of classification, the South African 'Other' has been seen as not quite South African – too dark and not quite white – Europe's Eastern 'Other'.¹⁸ In South Africa, this manifests in the form of xenophobic attitudes and practices that further alienate and oppress those who are deemed to fall outside the narrowly defined boundaries of the national identity.

Thus, this paper maintains that coloniality is facilitating the persistence of immigrant othering. This latter argument gains credence in line with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's argument that coloniality survives colonialism because it is maintained in many aspects of the modern experience such as cultural patterns and the self-image of people.¹⁹ In the South African context, the self-image has been shaped by new forms of racialisation and ethnicisation at the lowest margins of the racial hierarchy where black immigrants had to join the ranks of black indigenous people and compete over scarce resources.²⁰ The convergence of black immigrants with indigenous black communities underscores the multiplicity of identities within the broader black category, while simultaneously highlighting the competition engendered by structural constraints brought by coloniality.

Xenophobia, or the fear and hostility towards foreigners, is a manifestation of the othering of immigrants in South Africa.²¹ It is important to recognise that xenophobia cannot be solely attributed to individual attitudes or actions but is deeply rooted in structural forces shaped by coloniality.²² These structural forces include historical residues of othering, neo-liberal political economy, exclusionary state practices, and negative media representations of refugees and migrants.²³ The colonial legacy of racialised social hierarchies and economic inequalities contributes to the scapegoating of immigrants for social and economic challenges faced by South Africans.²⁴ The section that follows explores the method through which data used in this study was gathered.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Information used in this paper is based on a qualitative study that sought to map the experiences of immigrant learners in South African Secondary schools utilising the Human Capabilities Approach as the theoretical framework. The study utilised two secondary schools in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape. The researcher purposively sampled 12 immigrant adolescent participants with 4 participants covering each of the following age cohorts; 15, 16, and 17. The study also utilised 12 School Representative Council (SRC) members of South African Origin, taking into consideration the systematic possibility of eliciting rich information for the study. Therefore, the total number of people who took part in the study is 24. To ensure that sufficient data was generated, one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions were utilised for data collection. Data was analysed through thematic content analysis. The study adhered to a variety of ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality with the

¹⁶ Daria Krivonos and Lena Näre, "Imagining the 'West' in the Context of Global Coloniality: The Case of Post-Soviet Youth Migration to Finland," *Sociology* 53, no. 6 (2019): 1177–93.

¹⁷ Walter D Mignolo, *Historias Locales/Diseños Globales: Colonialidad, Conocimientos Subalternos y Pensamiento Fronterizo*, vol. 18 (Ediciones Akal, 2003).

¹⁸ Krivonos and Näre, "Imagining the 'West' in the Context of Global Coloniality: The Case of Post-Soviet Youth Migration to Finland."

¹⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

²⁰ Itumeleng T. Hadebe, "The Relevance of Historical Context to the Study of Migration in Southern Africa," in *Migration in Southern Africa*, ed. N. Rugunanan and N. Xulu-Gama (IMISCOE Research Series, 2022).

²¹ Dodson, "Locating Xenophobia: Debate, Discourse, and Everyday Experience in Cape Town, South Africa," 2.

²² Amanuel Isak Tewolde, "Structural Forces Shape Xenophobia in South Africa: Looking beyond the Human Agent," *International Social Science Journal* 73, no. 248 (June 12, 2023): 599–612, <https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12417>.

²³ Tewolde, "Structural Forces Shape Xenophobia in South Africa: Looking beyond the Human Agent."

²⁴ Jason Hickel, "'Xenophobia' in South Africa: Order, Chaos, and the Moral Economy of Witchcraft," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (February 3, 2014): 103–27, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.1.07>.

immigrant students. In addition, the study was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Data from the study highlighted that immigrant adolescent learners feel othered in South Africa. They attributed this sense of otherness to experiences of discrimination and various challenges they perceived as unique to immigrants. Focus Group Discussion participants also revealed a lack of initiatives by both schools to integrate immigrant learners, exacerbating feelings of otherness. Some of the comments by the students were as follows;

"It's hard to feel like you belong to a place where people do not like you and they have not accepted you."

"Sometimes they say kwerekwere this and that, it makes me feel not comfortable"

"Even in news foreigners are reported as a different type of people that is only here in South Africa to cause crime"

"Here, there is this concept of Us and Them which shows that we are not one and we do not belong here."

"Very often when they are referring to us they say These people like we are a type of people different from other human beings in South Africa,".

"Sometimes, teachers say things like these foreigners, they like books and they are clever.... It may sound like a compliment but when you look at it closely it says I am different from them. I am not like them."

When some of the Focus Group Discussion participants were asked if they felt immigrant learners belong to South Africa, some of them stated that they do not belong to South Africa and they must go back after doing what they are doing. Some of the focus group discussion participants said;

"They have their own country which is for them so they must go back when they are finished"

"I do not think that they belong because some of them cannot even speak our language"

"We are not one with them. You can see that they are different because some of them are too dark"

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Role of the Media in Facilitating Othering

Significantly, co-researchers reported how news plays a role in facilitating stereotypes. Indeed, mass communication and mass media have a huge impact on how people perceive society and the world around them, thereby shaping public opinion.²⁵ In affirmation, Himmel and Baptista underscore the pivotal role of media representation in shaping societal perceptions of immigrants, emphasising that what is often purported as "factual news" is far from neutral.²⁶ Rather, both visual and textual vocabularies are intertwined with historical genealogies of representation, which are heavily influenced by coloniality. The historical genealogies of representation portray immigrants through lenses tinted with stereotypes and

²⁵ Gwamaka Aliti, "The Media and Xenophobic Sentiments: The Case of Tanzania," *Journal of African Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 173–87.

²⁶ Rita Himmel and Maria Manuel Baptista, "Migrants, Refugees and Othering: Constructing Europeaness. An Exploration of Portuguese and German Media," *Comunicação e Sociedade*, no. 38 (2020): 179–200.

biases that perpetuate a narrative of otherness.²⁷ This portrayal not only distorts reality but also reinforces preconceived notions, fostering a climate where immigrants are viewed as outsiders or threats rather than individuals with diverse stories and experiences.

In addition, the media play an extremely important role in this process of constructing the barriers between *us* and *them*. For example, Hadebe documents how media coverage can remove migrants metaphorically from the population altogether through dehumanising language.²⁸ One notable example is media metaphors that depict migration as a type of natural disaster (often a flood) or migrants as animals, particularly insects (swarms). Bird and Dardenne add that narratives are constantly retold in every news story, resonating with previous stories, creating the sensation of an “infinitely repeated drama”.²⁹ Such media framing not only marginalises immigrants but also contributes to the normalisation of discriminatory attitudes and policies, exacerbating the cycle of exclusion and alienation.

Hooks states that if media and representation hold significant power, it becomes crucial to scrutinise who controls this media.³⁰ The individuals writing, producing and directing movies and news narratives wield substantial influence over cultural narratives and public perception.³¹ This concentration of power mirrors the coloniser's position during colonial times, where control and representation were similarly monopolised to maintain dominance.³² Coloniality, the enduring legacy of colonial power structures, persists in modern media through these imbalances. Just as colonisers dictated the cultural and social narratives of the colonised, contemporary media gatekeepers can influence which stories are told and how different groups are portrayed. This continuity underscores the need to challenge and decolonise media spaces.

Us versus Them

In the South African context, the dynamics of “us vs them” as reported by the participants in the current study can be intricately linked to the historical legacy of coloniality. Colonialism in South Africa, particularly under British and Dutch rule, established a system of racial segregation and exploitation that divided society along racial lines.³³ This division created a hierarchical structure where the colonisers, predominantly of European descent, positioned themselves as the superior “us” while relegating indigenous Africa and other non-white populations to the inferior “them” category.³⁴ The new forms of racialisation and ethnicisation after independence have precipitated a scenario whereby the immigrant is the new other.

Social identity theory posits that individuals categorise themselves into various social groups and derive their identity from these groups.³⁵ This categorisation often leads to an “us versus them” mentality, where individuals define their group in relation to others and strive to maintain a positive view of their own group.³⁶ This dichotomy of “us” versus “them” has been shown to trigger prejudice and discrimination between groups, even with mere categorization and ingroup identification.³⁷ Such dynamics are particularly salient in contexts marked by complex social structures and historical legacies of inequality, as evidenced in South Africa. Similarly, Global coloniality is based on the idea of classifying people in relation to the colonial matrix of power and marginalising non-western subjects under Euro-

²⁷ Onemore Mbeve and Lindile Nontobeko Ngwenya, “The Trajectories of Refugee Women from the Democratic Republic of Congo to South Africa: Challenges and Strengths,” *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 7, no. 1 (2022): 1–17.

²⁸ Hadebe, “The Relevance of Historical Context to the Study of Migration in Southern Africa.”

²⁹ S Elizabeth Bird and Robert Ward Dardenne, “Mito, Registo e ‘Estórias’: Explorando as Qualidades Narrativas Das Notícias,” 1993.

³⁰ Bell Hooks, “Cultural Criticism & Transformation,” YouTube, October 3, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQUuHFKP-9s>.

³¹ Aliti, “The Media and Xenophobic Sentiments: The Case of Tanzania.”

³² Tosin Tunrayo Olanisakin and Sulaiman Olanrewaju Adebayo, “Xenophobia in the Context of African Worldviews: A Synopsis of the Nigerian Situation,” *Journal of Health Psychology*, February 5, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053231223850>.

³³ Tewolde, “Structural Forces Shape Xenophobia in South Africa: Looking beyond the Human Agent.”

³⁴ Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America.”

³⁵ Vorster, “Racism in South Africa: Are We at a Tipping Point?”

³⁶ Kricheli-Katz, Tamar. “Us versus Them: The Responses of Managers to the Feminization of High-Status Occupations.” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (2019): 237802311987830. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119878301>.

³⁷ Tamar Kricheli-Katz, “Us versus Them: The Responses of Managers to the Feminization of High-Status Occupations,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (January 3, 2019): 237802311987830, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119878301>.

centred world power.³⁸ In this framework, the South African ‘Other’ has been seen as not quite South African by being too dark and not quite white.

Othering based on skin pigmentation

The comment by one of the participants “*We are not one with them. You can see that they are different because some of them are too dark*” resonates with the statement by Maldonado-Torres that there is an assumption amongst previously colonised populations that the ‘lighter’ one’s skin is, the closer they are to full humanity.³⁹ Oelofsen adds that the symbolic order in which white is seen as good and pure, while black is seen as the opposite, namely evil and tainted, is one which still permeates the global discourse.⁴⁰ One is prompted to recall the famous Clark doll experiment in which young African-American children were asked to pick a doll, choosing between a black and a white doll. The vast majority of children picked the white doll, justifying their choice through claims that the black doll was “bad”, “naughty” etc. First performed in the late 1930s, the experiment was reproduced in 2006, with very similar results.⁴¹ In South Africa, a similar study was conducted with similar results.⁴²

This shows that in minds people still have the mentality that whiteness represents superiority. Matsinhe, notes that the idea that foreigners are ‘too dark’ or ‘too black’ is part of the collective South African fantastic imagination.⁴³ As such, black immigrant learners have to traverse the school terrain amid prejudice and discrimination. Fanon often wrote of this as narcissism, a logic that props up the oppressor as the standard of human value whilst attempting to deceive the mirror image.⁴⁴ A consequence of this is self-hate, which by the processes of symmetric logic may be projected onto others nearby who are perceived as similar to oneself.⁴⁵ This substantiates the premise that the fragments of coloniality are still expressing themselves in prejudice towards immigrant learners.

The emphasis on differences in skin pigmentation can be understood as a tool for coloniality. According to Mignolo, the “machine for generating differences” was put in motion with the beginning of hierarchies in human groups, Indians on the one hand and Africans on the other.⁴⁶ Both are colonised; however, rather than being considered civilisations, they were labelled “barbaric and primitive”.⁴⁷ Thus, one can note how the objective of the matrix of power has been to classify, control and dominate the population. Thus, Europe constructed differences in relation to other countries and other cultures, models that continue to be repeated today.

Dehumanisation of the Immigrant

It is appalling that immigrants are being dehumanised as was done during colonialism. The role reversal can be understood in the context of arguments by Fanon that ‘The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor’.⁴⁸ This implies that Independence facilitates role reversal, whereby the formerly oppressed become prosecutors of one’s own people. Friedrich Nietzsche on reflection, cautions; “he who fights with monsters must ensure he does not become a monster himself.”⁴⁹

Fanon explains the manifestation of violence after colonialism by utilising three frontiers. Firstly, he states that the abused and violated colonised people ‘manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people.’⁵⁰ This explains how people get the tenacity to get to the extent of killing fellow black people. In the second place, he explains that the colonised people’s

³⁸ Krivonos and Näre, “Imagining the ‘West’ in the Context of Global Coloniality: The Case of Post-Soviet Youth Migration to Finland.”

³⁹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 240–70.

⁴⁰ Rianna Oelofsen, “Decolonisation of the African Mind and Intellectual Landscape,” *Phronimon* 16, no. 2 (2015): 130–46.

⁴¹ Oelofsen, “Decolonisation of the African Mind and Intellectual Landscape.”

⁴² Kristin Shutts et al., “Race Preferences in Children: Insights from South Africa,” *Developmental Science* 14, no. 6 (2011): 1283–91.

⁴³ David Mario Matsinhe, “Africa’s Fear of Itself: The Ideology of Makwerekwere in South Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (March 30, 2011): 295–313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.560470>.

⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

⁴⁵ Olonisakin and Adebayo, “Xenophobia in the Context of African Worldviews: A Synopsis of the Nigerian Situation.”

⁴⁶ Mignolo, *Historias Locales/Diseños Globales: Colonialidad, Conocimientos Subalternos y Pensamiento Fronterizo*.

⁴⁷ Rugunanan and Xulu-Gama, *Migration in Southern Africa*.

⁴⁸ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1990).

⁵⁰ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

confrontation with the 'colonial order of things' places them in 'a permanent state of tension.'⁵¹ This tension builds up and eventually erupts manifesting itself in the form of violence against one's own people. In the third place, Fanon argued that 'the native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor.'⁵² This concurs with the view that Independence leads to role reversal, whereby the formerly oppressed become prosecutors of one's own people. This brings to attention, Friedrich Nietzsche caution on reflections; "he who fights with monsters must ensure he does not become a monster himself."⁵³

The dehumanisation of immigrants goes against the African value of oneness as espoused by the doctrine of Ubuntu. Olonisakin and Adebayo argue that colonialism has shifted African perspectives from a worldview of collectivism and interconnectedness.⁵⁴ The shift came as a result of the imposition of foreign values and systems that often conflicted with local customs and beliefs.⁵⁵ This imposition created a legacy of cultural disorientation and a fractured sense of identity manifesting itself in a sense of insecurity and defensiveness towards external influences.⁵⁶ Thus, in contemporary contexts, immigrants and non-natives are often viewed with hostility and regarded as threats to social and economic stability.

Kwerekwere as a way of othering

The findings from the study revealed that immigrant adolescent learners are often called "kwerekwere," a derogatory term used to undermine their languages and, by extension, their cultural identities. This form of linguistic othering is deeply entrenched in the colonial legacy, where the coloniser's language was elevated above indigenous languages.⁵⁷ Therefore, through labelling immigrants with pejorative terms, native populations perpetuate a colonial mindset that devalues and marginalises those deemed "other".⁵⁸ This practice not only strips immigrants of their dignity but also reinforces a sense of superiority among the native population, maintaining colonial power dynamics and social stratification.

Tewolde also underscores how language is utilised in backstage talk, where different races and cultural groups engage in conversations that perpetuate negative stereotypes about others.⁵⁹ Such dialogues are often marked by increasing polarisation between "us" and "them," as Vorster points out.⁶⁰ This polarisation reflects the coloniality of power, where the dominant group constructs and maintains social boundaries to exclude and oppress the marginalised.⁶¹ Engaging in derogatory language and perpetuating stereotypes reinforces existing social divides and hinders the integration of immigrants into the broader society.⁶² Therefore addressing these issues requires challenging the colonial roots of these behaviours and promoting a more inclusive and respectful discourse that recognises and values the contributions of all cultural groups.

The undermining of other African languages as reported by study participants is not a new phenomenon as it can be traced to the colonial era. Historically, during the colonial era, African languages were marginalised and deemed inferior, relegated to the "barbarian" margins of folklore as described by Grosfoguel.⁶³ This colonial legacy of linguistic hierarchy continues today, as languages are not afforded equal status in practice. The association of certain languages with superiority and others with inferiority perpetuates coloniality by maintaining structures of power and dominance established during colonial times. Therefore, addressing this issue requires challenging these entrenched hierarchies.

⁵¹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁵² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

⁵⁴ Olonisakin and Adebayo, "Xenophobia in the Context of African Worldviews: A Synopsis of the Nigerian Situation."

⁵⁵ Olonisakin and Adebayo, "Xenophobia in the Context of African Worldviews: A Synopsis of the Nigerian Situation."

⁵⁶ Tewolde, "Structural Forces Shape Xenophobia in South Africa: Looking beyond the Human Agent."

⁵⁷ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁵⁸ Vorster, "Racism in South Africa: Are We at a Tipping Point?"

⁵⁹ Tewolde, "Structural Forces Shape Xenophobia in South Africa: Looking beyond the Human Agent."

⁶⁰ Vorster, "Racism in South Africa: Are We at a Tipping Point?"

⁶¹ S J Gatsheni-Ndlovu, "Why Decoloniality in the 21st Century," *The Thinker* 48 (2013): 10–15.

⁶² Matsinhe, "Africa's Fear of Itself: The Ideology of Makwerekwere in South Africa."

⁶³ Ramon Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms." *Cultural Studies* 21, no.2-3(2007):211-223.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Decolonising Knowledge/ Epistemic Disobedience

The research highlights a concerning reality: othering is present within school environments. This indicates that schools still bear traces of colonial influence, which can profoundly impact the mental well-being of immigrant adolescents. Therefore, this paper recommends epistemic disobedience, which involves challenging and deconstructing dominant knowledge systems and power structures. It is imperative to extend this critical approach to primary and secondary schools as well. One way of doing so is by revisiting the school curriculum.

Debates have ensued regarding how the current curriculum in basic and tertiary needs to take a decolonial turn that addresses historical biases whilst promoting inclusivity.⁶⁴ Decolonising the curriculum involves rethinking and reframing the content and methods of education to reflect the diverse realities and histories of South Africa and the African continent at large,⁶⁵ thus decolonising the curriculum aims to dismantle the epistemic violence and hegemony of Eurocentrism, placing African perspectives at the centre of teaching, learning and research.⁶⁶ These arguments are essential to this study's assertion that decolonising knowledge and practising epistemic disobedience are critical endeavours in challenging the structures that perpetuate the othering of immigrants.

The discussion on decolonising the curriculum falls within the broader discourse on epistemic disobedience which involves challenging established norms and engaging with ideas that defy traditional perspectives, particularly those influenced by colonial legacies.⁶⁷ This is necessary because as argued by, Ndlovu-Gatsheni one of the strategies that has sustained the hegemony of the Euroamerican-constructed world order is its ability to make African intellectuals and academics socially located in Africa and on the oppressed side to think and speak epistemically and linguistically like the Euro-American intellectuals and academics on the dominant side.⁶⁸ This has led to the reproduction of colonial knowledge. This trap has made it very difficult for African intellectuals and academics to sustain a robust and critical perspective of Euro-American hegemonic knowledge and the asymmetrical power relations it enables.⁶⁹ Thus, epistemic disobedience can ensure that mainstream education is detached from the Eurocentric roots of knowledge, constituted by Western universalisms.

Decentring Eurocentrism

The responses provided by participants within the context of this study offer valuable insights into the manifestation of Eurocentrism in contemporary society, particularly concerning issues of discrimination faced by immigrant students. This can be noted from how some participants indicated that they were mocked based on the darkness of their complexion. This echoes Oelofsen's observation that the symbolic order in which white is seen as good and pure while black is seen as the opposite, namely evil and tainted, is one that still permeates the global discourse.⁷⁰ Consequently, immigrant students, often coming from non-Western backgrounds are judged based on Eurocentric standards such as being demonised for their complexion exacerbating feelings of alienation and exclusion.⁷¹ Therefore, decentring eurocentricism which involves challenging the Eurocentric hegemony can play a role in creating a situation whereby there is less black-on-black hatred anchored in Eurocentric standards.

In addition, decentring Eurocentrism is essential for promoting equity and social justice. Equity and social justice are crucial in the South African context due to historical injustices and ongoing disparities that have marginalised certain groups within society.⁷² In addition, Ajani and Gamede attest

⁶⁴ Liisa Laakso and Kajsa Hallberg Adu, "'The Unofficial Curriculum Is Where the Real Teaching Takes Place': Faculty Experiences of Decolonising the Curriculum in Africa," *Higher Education* 87, no. 1 (2024): 185–200.

⁶⁵ Oluwatoyin A. Ajani and Bongani T. Gamede, "Decolonising Teacher Education Curriculum in South African Higher Education," *International Journal of Higher Education* 10, no. 5 (May 6, 2021): 121, <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v10n5p121>.

⁶⁶ Chuma Himonga and Fatimata Diallo, "Decolonisation and Teaching Law in Africa with Special Reference to Living Customary Law," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 20, no. 1 (2017).

⁶⁷ Patricia O. Daley and Amber Murrey, "Defiant Scholarship: Dismantling Coloniality in Contemporary African Geographies," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 43, no. 2 (May 24, 2022): 159–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12422>.

⁶⁸ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁶⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*.

⁷⁰ Oelofsen, "Decolonisation of the African Mind and Intellectual Landscape."

⁷¹ Daley and Murrey, "Defiant Scholarship: Dismantling Coloniality in Contemporary African Geographies."

⁷² Oelofsen, "Decolonisation of the African Mind and Intellectual Landscape."

that Eurocentric perspectives have historically perpetuated systems of oppression and inequality by reinforcing hierarchies based on race, ethnicity and nationality.⁷³ These hierarchies have perpetuated black-on-black hatred and eventually the othering of the immigrant population.⁷⁴ Therefore, by challenging Eurocentrism, Africans can confront the legacies of colonialism and imperialism whilst working towards a more just and equitable world.

Appealing to the Principle of *Ubuntu*

Van Bredda defines *Ubuntu* as an African concept that refers to humaneness between people within a community.⁷⁵ Shutte adds that “when we appeal to the African ancestral resources, for a more precise definition we re-discover the African motto, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*; that is, “a person is a person through other persons.”⁷⁶ According to the *Ubuntu* theory, no individual’s rights are greater than another’s; therefore, every individual in a community, including both immigrant children and adults, for example, is important and should be heard and respected.⁷⁷ Therefore, xenophobic violence in South Africa can be understood as a manifestation of anti-*Ubuntu* behaviour in Africa.

Van Breda argues that the causes for such a breakdown can arguably be attributed to colonisation and apartheid and their devaluing of African ways of thinking and being through the imposition of Western, capitalist ways, particularly individualism.⁷⁸ Van Bredda argues that it now seems apparent that when *Ubuntu* is expressed in contemporary post-colonial South Africa, it is within groups, rather than between groups.⁷⁹ As a consequence of this, the foreigners are victimised through xenophobic violence because strong in-group *Ubuntu* can result in strong out-group hostility, resulting in persistent and deepening fracturing of society. Maphosa and Keasley refer to this as “a dangerous and damaging kind of rainbow nationalism.”⁸⁰

Individualism was uncommon during the pre-colonial era because there was an emphasis on communal living through *ubuntu* which promotes empathy, respect, and solidarity.⁸¹ Therefore, appealing to the principle of *ubuntu* can help recall and revive the values that inherently reject the othering of immigrants. The shift in perspective is crucial for addressing and dismantling the hierarchical and discriminatory structures that have been perpetuated by coloniality.⁸² This can enable societies to counteract coloniality’s divisive and exclusionary tendencies and heal the social rifts caused by historical and contemporary forms of othering.

CONCLUSION

This paper has engaged in a decolonial exploration of the immigrant experience through the lens of “otherness.” Data used in the study highlights that immigrant adolescent learners feel othered in South Africa, attributing this to experiences of discrimination and various challenges perceived as unique to immigrants. The study recommends the implementation of epistemic disobedience, which involves challenging and deconstructing dominant knowledge systems and power structures. It also encourages embracing the principles of *ubuntu*, which promote empathy, respect and solidarity. Accordingly, the findings of this study underscore the need for continued efforts to address and dismantle the remnants of coloniality in contemporary South Africa.

⁷³ Ajani and Gamede, “Decolonising Teacher Education Curriculum in South African Higher Education.”

⁷⁴ Mavhungu E. Musitha and Mavhungu A. Mafukata, “Crisis of Decolonising Education: Curriculum Implementation in Limpopo Province of South Africa,” *Africa’s Public Service Delivery & Performance Review* 6, no. 1 (January 30, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v6i1.179>.

⁷⁵ Adrian Van Breda, “Developing the Notion of Ubuntu as African Theory for Social Work Practice,” *Social Work* 55, no. 4 (October 2019), <https://doi.org/10.15270/55-4-762>.

⁷⁶ Augustine Shutte, “African Philosophy: A Historical Overview,” in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. Richard A. Wright (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 41–63.

⁷⁷ Sylvester B Maphosa and Alphonse Keasley, “Disrupting the Interruptions: Re-Considering Ubuntu, Reconciliation and Rehumanization,” *African Renaissance* 12, no. 2 (2015): 16–47.

⁷⁸ Van Breda, “Developing the Notion of Ubuntu as African Theory for Social Work Practice.”

⁷⁹ Van Breda, “Developing the Notion of Ubuntu as African Theory for Social Work Practice.”

⁸⁰ Maphosa and Keasley, “Disrupting the Interruptions: Re-Considering Ubuntu, Reconciliation and Rehumanization.”

⁸¹ Shutte, “African Philosophy: A Historical Overview.”

⁸² Maphosa and Keasley, “Disrupting the Interruptions: Re-Considering Ubuntu, Reconciliation and Rehumanization.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ajani, Oluwatoyin A., and Bongani T. Gamede. "Decolonising Teacher Education Curriculum in South African Higher Education." *International Journal of Higher Education* 10, no. 5 (May 6, 2021): 121. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v10n5p121>.
- Aliti, Gwamaka. "The Media and Xenophobic Sentiments: The Case of Tanzania." *Journal of African Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 173–87.
- Atallah, Devin G., and Urmitapa Dutta. "Decolonization Unnamed: Echoes of Healing and Refusal in the Face of Dehumanization and Alienation." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 29, no. 2 (May 2023): 77–81. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000686>.
- Bird, S Elizabeth, and Robert Ward Dardenne. "Mito, Registo e 'Estórias': Explorando as Qualidades Narrativas Das Notícias." 1993.
- Breda, Adrian Van. "Developing the Notion of Ubuntu as African Theory for Social Work Practice." *Social Work* 55, no. 4 (October 2019). <https://doi.org/10.15270/55-4-762>.
- Carrillo, Arturo, and Caitlin L O'Grady. "Using Structural Social Work Theory to Drive Anti-Oppressive Practice with Latino Immigrants." *Advances in Social Work* 18, no. 3 (2018): 704–26.
- Daley, Patricia O., and Amber Murrey. "Defiant Scholarship: Dismantling Coloniality in Contemporary African Geographies." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 43, no. 2 (May 24, 2022): 159–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12422>.
- Dodson, Belinda. "Locating Xenophobia: Debate, Discourse, and Everyday Experience in Cape Town, South Africa." *Africa Today* 56, no. 3 (2010): 2. <https://doi.org/10.2979/aft.2010.56.3.2>.
- Dutta, Urmitapa. "Decolonizing 'Community' in Community Psychology." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62, no. 3–4 (2018): 272–82.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- Gatsheni-Ndlovu, S J. "Why Decoloniality in the 21st Century." *The Thinker* 48 (2013): 10–15.
- Grosfoguel, Ramon. "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 211-223.
- Hadebe, Itumeleng T. "The Relevance of Historical Context to the Study of Migration in Southern Africa." In *Migration in Southern Africa*, edited by N. Rugunanan and N. Xulu-Gama. IMISCOE Research Series, 2022.
- Hickel, Jason. "'Xenophobia' in South Africa: Order, Chaos, and the Moral Economy of Witchcraft." *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (February 3, 2014): 103–27. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.1.07>.
- Himmel, Rita, and Maria Manuel Baptista. "Migrants, Refugees and Othering: Constructing Europeanness. An Exploration of Portuguese and German Media." *Comunicação e Sociedade*, no. 38 (2020): 179–200.
- Himonga, Chuma, and Fatimata Diallo. "Decolonisation and Teaching Law in Africa with Special Reference to Living Customary Law." *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 20, no. 1 (2017).
- Hooks, Bell. "Cultural Criticism & Transformation." YouTube, October 3, 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQUuHFKP-9s>.
- Kricheli-Katz, Tamar. "Us versus Them: The Responses of Managers to the Feminization of High-Status Occupations." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (January 3, 2019): 237802311987830. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119878301>.
- Krivonos, Daria, and Lena Näre. "Imagining the 'West' in the Context of Global Coloniality: The Case of Post-Soviet Youth Migration to Finland." *Sociology* 53, no. 6 (2019): 1177–93.
- Laakso, Liisa, and Kajsa Hallberg Adu. "'The Unofficial Curriculum Is Where the Real Teaching Takes Place': Faculty Experiences of Decolonising the Curriculum in Africa." *Higher Education* 87, no. 1 (2024): 185–200.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 240–70.
- Maphosa, Sylvester B, and Alphonse Keasley. "Disrupting the Interruptions: Re-Considering Ubuntu, Reconciliation and Rehumanization." *African Renaissance* 12, no. 2 (2015): 16–47.
- Matsinhe, David Mario. "Africa's Fear of Itself: The Ideology of Makwerekwere in South Africa."

- Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (March 30, 2011): 295–313.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.560470>.
- Mbeve, Oncemore, and Lindile Nontobeko Ngwenya. “The Trajectories of Refugee Women from the Democratic Republic of Congo to South Africa; Challenges and Strengths.” *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 7, no. 1 (2022): 1–17.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *Historias Locales/Diseños Globales: Colonialidad, Conocimientos Subalternos y Pensamiento Fronterizo*. Vol. 18. Ediciones Akal, 2003.
- Musitha, Mavhungu E., and Mavhungu A. Mafukata. “Crisis of Decolonising Education: Curriculum Implementation in Limpopo Province of South Africa.” *Africa’s Public Service Delivery & Performance Review* 6, no. 1 (January 30, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v6i1.179>.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*. African Books Collective, 2013.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- Oelofsen, Rianna. “Decolonisation of the African Mind and Intellectual Landscape.” *Phronimon* 16, no. 2 (2015): 130–46.
- Olonisakin, Tosin Tunrayo, and Sulaiman Olanrewaju Adebayo. “Xenophobia in the Context of African Worldviews: A Synopsis of the Nigerian Situation.” *Journal of Health Psychology*, February 5, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13591053231223850>.
- Opara, Ijeoma. “Neither Here nor There: Exploring the Transnational Identity of West African Migrants Living in South Africa.” *Acta Academica* 54, no. 2 (2022): 138–62.
- Quijano, Aníbal. “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America.” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (June 29, 2000): 215–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>.
- Rodriguez Ramirez, Daniel, Jennifer Aimee Martinez, Lizeth Hernandez, Mitzy Acevedo, Cristina González Leyva, Melissa Paz-Flores, Kenzie Gill, Regina D. Langhout, and Steve McKay. “‘You Gotta Keep Pushing’: Immigrant People Regaining Ontological Security and Withstanding Coloniality.” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 29, no. 2 (May 2023): 113–25. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000658>.
- Rugunanan, Pragna, and Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama. *Migration in Southern Africa*. IMISCOE Research Series, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92114-9_1.
- Shutte, Augustine. “African Philosophy: A Historical Overview.” In *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, edited by Richard A. Wright, 41–63. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993.
- Shutts, Kristin, Katherine D Kinzler, Rachel C Katz, Colin Tredoux, and Elizabeth S Spelke. “Race Preferences in Children: Insights from South Africa.” *Developmental Science* 14, no. 6 (2011): 1283–91.
- Spire, Alexis. “The Weight of France’s Colonial Past on Immigration Policy.” In *Multiculturalism and Integration: A Harmonious Relationship?*, edited by Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes, 158–69. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Tewolde, Amanuel Isak. “Structural Forces Shape Xenophobia in South Africa: Looking beyond the Human Agent.” *International Social Science Journal* 73, no. 248 (June 12, 2023): 599–612. <https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12417>.
- Vandeyar, Saloshna, and Thirusellvan Vandeyar. “Opposing Gazes: Racism and Xenophobia in South African Schools.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52, no. 1 (February 28, 2017): 68–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909614560245>.
- Vorster, Jakobus M. “Racism in South Africa: Are We at a Tipping Point?” In *Togetherness in South Africa*, edited by Jan A. du Rand, Jakobus M. Vorster, and Nico Vorster, 59–78. Cape Town: AOSIS, 2017.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. Agrippa Mabvira is a distinguished scholar who recently earned his Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. He is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow within the Department of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand. Prior

to that, he served as Teaching Assistant within the same department. His research interests span a wide range of crucial topics, including Immigration, Decolonisation, Intellectual Disability, Education, Photovoice, Participatory Action Research, Acculturation and Child Welfare.