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Botha, L.; De Villiers, P.; Maungedzo, R.

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Research That Is Real and Utopian: Indigenous Knowledge as a Resource to Revitalise High School Poetry

Louis Botha
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6321-7950
University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa
Louis.Botha@wits.ac.za

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8899-899X
University of the Witwatersrand,
South Africa
Phillippa.deVilliers@wits.ac.za

Robert Maungedzo
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8941-9999
Anchor Comprehensive High School
and University of Pretoria, South Africa
robertmaungedzo@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article presents the reflections of a research team from the ZAPP-IKS project. ZAPP (the South African Poetry Project) undertook a three-year NRF-funded research project titled "Reconceptualising Poetry Education for South African Classrooms through Infusing Indigenous Poetry Texts and Practices". The research on which we report here was undertaken as part of that project. The team consists of an English teacher, a poet and an academic. Together, they attempted a research intervention at a Johannesburg secondary school. The article presents their reflections on the challenges, successes and potentials of the attempted research intervention, which was intended to energise and inspire the teaching of English poetry by drawing from and developing indigenous knowledges and principles. Presented as a play, a praise poem and a conventional academic analysis by the school-based teacher, the university-based poet, and the university-based academic, respectively, the article offers diverse analyses as an illustration of how research relationships may be understood, experienced and represented in various ways. These analyses draw implicitly and explicitly on conceptualisations of indigeneity and indigenous knowledges, as well as decoloniality, with the conventional academic analysis making use of Erik Olin Wright's concept of real utopias to frame its

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understanding of the project and the other two perspectives on it. Together they invite readers to challenge and transform the conventions that govern educational practices, research and representation, but caution against naïve idealism when doing so.

Keywords: real utopias; South African Poetry Project (ZAPP); decolonising education; indigenous poetry; isiXhosa practices

Background

An academic, a high school teacher and a poet walked into a First Additional Language classroom in 2017, and, with the intention of improving teaching and learning of poetry, staged an intervention. Their aim was utopian: to infuse the curriculum with so much thrilling and relevant poetry that the learners' entire education, and therefore their lives, would be transformed. They quickly discovered that their ideals would have to change in order to engage and thrive in the unpoetic, functional space of the high school. Although their experiment did not manage to create the utopia of equality they had hoped for, it yielded a number of insights that illuminated their assumptions, which helped them to understand how inequality and discrimination continue to marginalise indigenous knowledge systems, and that this is something stakeholders can change.

This article will present three forms of analysis of a research project that broadly aimed at indigenising poetry teaching at a secondary school in a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, hereafter referred to as Ukuzimela High School. The research team comprised a school-based teacher, a university-based poet/researcher and a university-based academic/researcher, and their respective reflections take the form of a play, a praise poem and a conventional academic analysis. We invite readers to participate in the further analysis of the project by considering each of the presented narratives independently and then drawing their own connections and conclusions as what Western academics may refer to as a "post-qualitative approach" in which engagement, rather than knowledge for its own sake, is central (Le Grange 2018). Semali and Kincheloe express that from an indigenous Andean perspective "[t]he point of the conversation is not the gaining of knowledge, it is to nurture and regenerate the world of which the individual is a part".

The research that forms the basis of this article and the focus of the three analyses is made up of insights gleaned from a multifaceted research collaboration between schools and universities, focusing on poetry in schools. An environmental scan sketched the material details of the school and its personnel, and more data were collected through participant observation of lessons, document analysis, questionnaires and interviews. This information will not, however, be the primary focus of this article: rather, we are concerned with reflecting upon the research processes and how these were perceived by the participants.

The aims of the research project were to interrogate the First Additional Language poetry curriculum and attempt to introduce indigenous poetry and practices to the exclusively English content and style. It took as its point of departure that Newfield and Maungedzo's claim still rings true, namely that "poetry is a defunct genre in most South African second language classrooms" (2006, 71). Indeed, some of the teachers participating in the study confirmed that the language, themes and images of the English poems appear alien to many of the learners and teachers who have to answer the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) questions in order to pass the school-leaving examinations. Despite the intentions of the ZAPP researchers to attempt to search for solutions to these challenges, they were met with resistance and limited success.

The article is structured as follows. First, we situate the research project at Ukuzimela High School within its broader, mother project of the South African Poetry Project (ZAPP). Then we frame it within conceptualisations of indigenous knowledge, research and decoloniality that we consider relevant to the project. Thereafter the three reflections are presented, namely, the teacher's evaluation of the research project in the form of a play titled *The Prince and the Damsel in Distress*; this is followed by a praise poem and reflections that constitute the poet's insights from the project. These two perspectives should be considered independently of, as well as in conjunction with, the third analysis, which uses the concept of "real utopias" to evaluate the project.

The South African Poetry Project (ZAPP) and the Quest for Relevance

Broadly speaking, in terms of its aims and methodology, the ZAPP project brings together teachers, poets and academics within education to contribute to energising the teaching and learning of poetry in high schools. The 2017 Annual Report of the ZAPP project states:

> The overall thrust of this research project is to contribute to knowledge about the transformation of education in this country, specifically the project of decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy. Rather than theorising this question, which has been thrust centre stage through the Fallist movement, through official calls at a range of educational institutions and through countless conferences and symposia over the past few years, this project attempts to implement decolonising pedagogic endeavours, to interrogate core issues, and to assess the impact, value and challenges of such endeavours. (Newfield 2017)

After several years of working without funding, in 2017 the National Research Foundation awarded ZAPP a three-year research grant to conduct research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Led by senior academics from two institutions, the University of South Africa (Unisa), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and with members from a range of South African universities and schools, the project is loosely structured around various interventions that

> hope to contribute to the healing of apartheid-induced teacher and student wounds, and to recognise their indigenous knowledge and cultural practices, rather than continuing to ape European poetry education while paying no more than lip service to indigenous South African poetry. (Newfield 2017)

ZAPP framed its research by means of questions that, among others, asked how indigenous South African poetry could be reconceptualised as a resource to enhance poetry learning and teaching, and how, therefore, this reconceptualisation of poetry as an indigenous, multimodal and evolving genre could impact upon the teaching and learning of poetry and on poetry canons in schools, as well as on transformation in language, literacy and literature classrooms. ZAPP's research philosophy is aligned with the dreams articulated in the Basic Education Policy, which espouses the values enshrined in the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996).[1] These documents argue and demand the restoration of dignity and equality to African languages, cultures and people.[2]

Vally and Spreen argue that languages and culture have come to be marginalised in favour of a curriculum that is geared towards more "globally competitive" subjects such as mathematics and science (2014). The ideals of the Freedom Charter and the Constitution have become utopian in the current context where "education is being moulded toward fulfilling economic goals in order to produce skilled workers to bolster the competitive edge of South Africa within a globalized economy" (Vally and Spreen 2014, 268). In this climate of globalisation and pragmatism, English is seen as sophisticated and aspirational, and therefore dominates.

In a bid to challenge this domination, and in light of critique from colleagues at the 2017 Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation Conference, the three-member research team responsible for this article decided to engage with ZAPP's attempt to conceptualise contemporary local poetry written in English and other Englishes, as well as rap, reggae and other poetic forms that emerge from the African diaspora, as indigenous poetry.

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1 For example: "Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages" (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996, 4).

2 The relevant clause states:

> "Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account:
>
> a. equity
>
> b. practicability
>
> c. the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices."
>
> (RSA 1996, 12)

Our research team decided in principle to recreate itself, with the understanding that, to become indigenous, English would have to imagine itself beyond the simple idea of a language, to a spiritual and intellectual system that was in contact with other language systems in our vicinity. We decided to incorporate the spiritual and relational aspects of indigenous epistemological and axiological principles into our methodology. In order to understand this, it is necessary first to offer some thoughts about indigenous knowledges.

Indigenous Knowledges and Coloniality

As is common in most attempts at identifying what indigenous knowledges and knowledge-making may entail, we begin by pointing out that defining what is indigenous is complex and subject to multiple interpretations. Consequently, we will suggest a few interpretations that may align with the perceptions of the teacher, the poet and the academic and their respective intentions.

Some definitions of indigeneity emphasise elements of identity. Thus, Reynar suggests that indigenous knowledge is indigenous precisely "*because it is incorporated in a way of life—part experience, part custom, religion, tribal law and the attitude of people toward their own lives and those other living things*" (1999, 290; italics in original). Clearly this conceptualisation of the indigenous is concerned with the ways in which indigenous knowledges are tied to cultural knowledge and practices, although it points this out in order to warn against extractivist and essentialising perceptions. Such an interpretation may well resonate with the understanding of indigeneity that is articulated in the teacher's play.

A second conceptualisation of indigenous knowledges is implied in Jacob, Cheng and Porter's discussion of indigenous education. They propose that

> Indigenous education is a spiritual as well as a physical or mental learning process—it embodies and transcends both the world of the present as well as the spiritual or metaphysical world that includes life before birth and life after death of the mortal body. In this way, the indigenous education process is better understood as an eternal reciprocal, interactive, and symbiotic learning process. (2015, 3)

This definition invokes the transcendental, intuitive and relational understandings of indigenous ways of knowing and sharing knowledge, which may be seen as central to the poet's expression of her experience with indigenous forms of poetry.

The third concept relating to indigeneity, which informs particularly the academic's analysis, is that of indigenous peoples as offered by Linda Tuhiwai Smith:

> "Indigenous peoples" is a relatively recent term which emerged in the 1970s out of the struggles primarily of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood … . [T]he term enables the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international arena … . [T]he world's indigenous

> population belong to a network of peoples. They share experiences as peoples who have been subjected to the colonization of their lands and cultures, and the denial of their sovereignty, by a colonizing society that has come to dominate and determine the shape and quality of their lives, even after it has formally pulled out. (1999, 7)

Tuhiwai Smith understands the indigenous as an identity employed in relation to anticolonial struggles and the search for ways of knowing and being that offer an alternative to the dominating culture promoted by European imperialism. Elements of these conceptualisations, as well as the ideas of decoloniality that they express, overlap in the ways in which they inform school-based and university-based perspectives.

Kaya and Seleti argue that "educational structures inherited from colonialism are based on cultural values different from those existing in most of the African societies" (2014, 32), and furthermore "education, especially higher education, in Africa has not been relevant to the needs and concerns of African societies" (2014, 32). In a chapter reviewing a number of theorists working on the Africanisation of the curriculum, Msila argues that the "African University exists at a precarious position" (2016, 57) as long it fails to nurture theory and practice that are not closely informed by indigenous knowledge. It is in this context that ZAPP proposed its research project, which aspired to "contribute to knowledge about the transformation of education in this country, specifically the project of decolonisation of curricula and pedagogy" (Newfield 2017). In broad agreement with Kaya and Seleti's analysis of South African education, the project aspires to contribute to "relevant" debates, policies and interventions, whose relevance is based in the fact that they "invest in the development of indigenous African theory building and interpretation of society … and [contribute] to addressing the needs of the African people" (Kaya and Seleti 2014, 32).

Furthermore, to researchers who have "lived the colonial difference" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 9), the intentions and insights of the global field of decoloniality have relevance and resonance: "When your life experience is touched and formed in and by the Third World, geopolitics matter" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 5). The notions of decoloniality as articulated by Mignolo and Walsh have proven helpful in aligning ZAPP's project with the broad aim of "addressing the needs of the African people" in direct reference to the research interventions planned at the Ukuzimela High School, and the insights gleaned from the enactment/failure of these interventions. Mignolo and Walsh assert that "[c]oloniality … deals with and confronts issues and problems common to all former colonies of Western Europe in the Third World" (2018, 10). The ZAPP project focuses on the problem of enabling indigenous knowledges in the teaching and learning of poetry in high schools. It is argued that the pedagogical strategies used in teaching and learning poetry at the school, and how these strategies function to enhance or marginalise indigenous knowledges, serve to contextualise our findings.

We argue that the racialisation of education places a higher value on English as a mode of teaching and thinking, which casts indigenous languages and their attendant

knowledge systems as "other" and irrelevant when it comes to teaching and learning, the praxis of sharing and developing the skill of thinking. Decoloniality offers a critique of the

> logic of racialization that emerged in the sixteenth century, [that] has two dimensions (ontological and epistemic) and one single purpose: to rank as inferior all languages beyond Greek and Latin and the six modern European languages from the domain of sustainable knowledge and to maintain the enunciative privilege of the Renaissance and Enlightenment institutions, men and categories of thought. Languages that were not apt for rational thinking (either theological or secular) were considered languages that revealed the inferiority of the human beings speaking them. (Mignolo 2011, 275)

Indigenous African languages are the mother tongues of all learners and educators at Ukuzimela High School, who are committed to processing the English curriculum in order to perpetuate the success of the school in the matriculation results (the school has attained pass rates of 97% and 100% since 2012).

Our research experience suggests that delinking from dependency on English as a primary tool of understanding and articulating has proven to be the most productive mode in the classrooms at Ukuzimela High School: "[T]he decolonial opens up a way of thinking that delinks from the chronologies of new epistemes or new paradigms … so that they are not the point of reference and of epistemic legitimacy" (Mignolo 2011, 274). Delinking is a core process of decolonial thinking, both in theory and praxis, which are understood as "necessarily interrelated":

> [T]o begin with the doing-thinking, with the people, collectives, and communities that enact decoloniality as a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice and praxis; that is, with the activity of thinking and theorizing from praxis … . It is in this movement that decoloniality is enacted and, at the same time, rendered possible. (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 7–9)

For example, at Ukuzimela High School, the praxis of teaching a poem in the English classroom, as well as teaching a poem in the isiXhosa classroom, draws on the cultural capital of indigenous knowledge accessed via the mother tongues of both learners and educators. The language itself—including grammatical rules and the "funds of knowledge" embedded in the idiomatic rigour of the language—informs and develops the praxis, and vice versa, illustrating the decolonial alternative.

In articulating pedagogic strategies informed by indigenous knowledge accessed by virtue of isiXhosa (or any other indigenous language), we purposely delink from any activist notion of claiming these strategies' right to exist, for this would "[reaffirm] the imperiality of Western modernity disguised as universal modernity" (Mignolo 2011, 279). Through the lens of decoloniality, we offer these reflections as a contribution to existing discussions about the role of indigenous knowledges in the teaching and learning of poetry, and celebrate the resilience and resourcefulness of the teachers and

learners at Ukuzimela High. Decoloniality's interrogation of the mechanisms of geopolitics can also expose and problematise the ongoing challenge of relevance of educational theory and praxis. It can assist stakeholders continually to assess whether or not their praxis is addressing the intellectual and research needs of African people, or simply perpetuating the vast imbalance of value, on economic and ideological fronts, between the West and the Third World.

How "Indigenous" Became a Vexed Term That Excluded Its Referents

This section of the article is a creative representation of the English teacher's experience of the research project. A play written by Robert alludes to some of the obstacles that teachers face in delivering classes based on the existing set works, in the context of the high expectations placed on schools for a 100% pass rate in the school leaving examinations, as well as a vexing concept of "indigenous knowledge systems". Many of the teachers we interviewed believed that the concept of "indigenous knowledge systems" is a construct created for the benefit of language users who are unfamiliar with African languages and that it places the very indigenous language speakers and writers outside its frame, objectifying them. The fact that the global knowledge economy has, for some years, been focused on mining indigenous knowledge systems in order to make existing educational institutions more relevant and inclusive, has not revealed itself in the education policy.

The Prince and the Damsel in Distress

by Robert Maungedzo

Characters:

Prince

Ntombazana (the horse)

Dragon

Lady/Damsel

Various junglians

Narrator: *Scene 1: Once upon a time, in the land of Smoke and Mirrors, there was a Prince. This world reflected his alter ego and made him feel like he knew Everything*.

Prince: I had a dream and this is not a will-o'- the-wisp dream; it is philanthropic dream. I am going to leave my Smoke and Mirrors world and visit the people of the Jungle World. They have forgotten who they are. I will plant the seeds of Junglianism and then my mission would be accomplished. Now, shall I travel in my German sedan or I should use my horse? Hmm … I guess the terrain there is rough, rugged and tough, so I'll take the horse. Ntombazana! Ntombazana! Come!! We are leaving for the Jungle World.

Narrator: *Scene 2: The Jungle World*.

Prince: Here we are Ntombazana. Let's take a look at it. Let's take some rounds and have a good look at it. … These people are really suffering! They don't have resources, they're not meeting targets like in the real Smoke and Mirrors world. It's a mess! And they've lost touch with their Junglianism. There's a lot of work to be done!

Narrator: *Scene 3: After the Junglians meet the Prince, they discuss his visit among themselves.*

Junglian 1: Hey guys. These are some clever people from the Smoke and Mirrors world. They are here to save us from ourselves.

Junglian 2: What do you mean by that?

Junglian 3: They say they are here to indigenise us so that we can become Junglians again.

Junglian 4: Yhoooo! I am confused!!!

Junglian 5: They are here to teach poetry. I am happy. That English poetry is so hard to teach, I'm really glad they will do it for me.

Narrator: *Scene 4: On his mission of rejunglisation, the Prince ventured deep into the jungle.*

Prince: Hey, Ntombazana, do you see what I see?

Ntombazana: No, what's the problem?

Prince: Come here. Look down there. What do you see?

Ntombazana (*admiringly and lusciously*): Hmmmmm! I see a beautiful lady, who, unlike me, seems to be enjoying life to the fullest. She's busy as a bee, with her business roasting meat for the Junglians.

Prince (*irritated*): Is that the only thing you can see? Do you not see the flames and that ugly-looking, thick-skinned beast?

Ntombazana: Yes, but this is a different world. You are used to the Smoke and Mirrors world …

Prince: Whatever! The beast's flame seems to be engulfing her. Look at her! She is trying to set herself free. I can smell roasted flesh. The lady is in distress. We need to

hurry up, Ntombazana!!! Look at those Junglians!! They seem not to care; they're not scared of the dragon! Not worried about the lady! Someone's got to do something!

Ntombazana (*sceptical*): Alright, here we go (*sprints to the scene*).

Narrator: *Scene 5: The Prince arrives at the classroom-chesenyama. The place is full of Junglians, the dragon and the lady are toe to toe with each other. The lady and the dragon are the centre of the Jungle Universe*.

Prince: Stand back, I've got this! I'm drawing my sword …

Narrator: The Lady, focused on serving her hungry customers, suddenly hears the thundering hooves and sees the eye-gorging light reflected by the shimmering silver of the Prince's armour and his blood-thirsty sword! She raises her arms!

Damsel: No, you foolish man. Stop what you are doing. Who the hell do you think you are?!! Hold it there!

Prince (*shouting*): Lady, move away from that monster!

Ntombazana: I think she wants you to stop.

Prince: But she's waving her arms. She needs to be rescued.

Damsel: Yes I'm waving my arms—I'm trying to stop you!

Prince: I shall strike this dragon … Die, monstrous abuser! Now you have met your match!!!!

Narrator: He stabs the sword into the dragon's paw. The dragon screams in agony!

Damsel (*sobbing*): You think you are a hero? The main man? You think you have made life easier for me? You have literally cut my life into pieces.

Prince: I saved your life, lady. Now you can lead your normal Junglian life.

Damsel: The dragon that you have just wounded is a vegetarian and in this place we don't have electricity. I feed these young Junglians on chicken that I singe on the dragon's fire! I don't have a gas stove or electricity …

Prince: I'm sorry, let me hold you …

Damsel (*pushing him away*): Don't patronise me! You assumed that I needed help because I am a woman, always readily available for you to rescue!

Prince: I'm so sorry …

Damsel: In this world—the Jungle world—I am the law. I make the rules and ensure that there is justice. The Jungle justice. You have crossed the line.

Prince: Askies …

Damsel (*boldly*): I run a business here and for me to survive and for all of these Junglians to eat, we need to singe and sell as many pieces of chicken as possible. It doesn't matter as to what type of energy or fuel you use to achieve the end. No dragon, no business! The clients will desert me and there will be no profit.

Prince (*softly*): Yes, your majesty …

Damsel (*aloud and slowly, as if she is dictating each and every word she utters*): Now here is justice! From today onwards until the Dragon returns, you will be my singe boy. You must ensure that there is always a constant supply of fire for my business. How you do it is none of my business. And remember!! We do not use firewood in this world; you had better increase production.

Prince (*shocked and surprised*): But I am only here for a short period …

Damsel (*authoritatively*): When you are in the Jungle, you become a Junglian, and in this Jungle, it is the survival of the fittest. You are now part of the system. More fire, more profit …

Narrator: And thus it was that each player found their role. Tune in for the next episode of *The Damsel and the Dragon*.

The Indigenous as the Point of "Epistemic Legitimacy"

Recalling the research question that directed ZAPP's intended research intervention—Can infusing contemporary South African poetry into the curriculum revitalise the teaching and learning of poetry?—this section will describe how the team's focus moved from the English classroom to the isiXhosa classroom, replacing the broad sweep of "contemporary South African poetry" with the indigenous isiXhosa, to focus on isiXhosa as a point of reference and "epistemic legitimacy" (Mignolo 2011, 279).

Initial visits to Ukuzimela High School revealed the school to be well-run and, despite its material challenges, able to achieve a 97–100% pass rate in the matric examinations, a considerable achievement. Teachers eagerly welcomed the project, in the hope and expectation that research members would assist them to deliver the curriculum. Notes from a meeting with teachers on 8 September 2017 reflect a request from teachers to assist with resources to help teach figures of speech, sonnets and "Shakespeare".

In the search of solutions to the problem of teaching English poetry at Ukuzimela High School, an interview with a teacher revealed a rich seam of knowledge in the isiXhosa poetry classroom. The isiXhosa poetry tradition is an oral tradition, which allows for greater self-expression than written poetry; in addition, it prioritises word-play, emotive power, conceptual and thematic rigour that is judged by the collective group of listeners who are steeped in the canon of isiXhosa poetry.

An interview with the isiXhosa educator is presented as a prose poem, a praise poem outlining the principles, values and purpose of poetry as she teaches them in her classroom. Introducing A.C. Jordan's seminal investigation of isiXhosa poetry and storytelling, *Tales of Southern Africa*, Z. Pallo Jordan writes:

> [T]he ethos of traditional society was enshrined in an oral legal, religious and literary tradition through which the community transmitted, from generation to generation, its customs, values and norms. The poet and the storyteller stood at the centre of this tradition, as the community's chroniclers, entertainers and conscience. (1973, xi)

For amaXhosa, the humanistic expression and sharing of poetry is oral and heard, understood and responded to spontaneously. This aesthetic value is key to understanding its relevance. The poet may bring in lines of well-known songs or poems, make reference to personal or communal history, exhort the listeners to take action, and celebrate or denigrate powerful individuals, land, celestial bodies, rivers, mountains or the sea. The broad definition of these poems, usually delivered extempore, is izimbongi. The following poem, describing the research team's encounter with the isiXhosa teacher at Ukuzimela High School, is loosely modelled on izimbongi: the poem uses rhythm, repetition and narration to celebrate a conversation and an individual.

The First Language

by Phillippa Yaa de Villiers

> Ah, language!
> After a long drive past factories and clinics and shattered camps, we entered the township with its crooked roads, small houses and dilapidated shacks; we left the trimmed lawns and neat fences of English and walked into isiXhosa, chatting and gossiping with its close relatives isiZulu, seNdebele, also seSotho, Setswana and vhaVenda, the languages in which these high school learners eat their breakfast and scold their siblings, the languages in which they complain about teachers, exams, having enough to eat or something pretty to wear, the languages in which they fight and reconcile, fight and reconcile. And borrow money. The crowded languages in which they love, grieve and legislate. We smelt the burnt pap of a language left unattended, the petrol smell of language only valued for how much money it can make for the boss. In the township we smelt again the sudden perfume of a rose cultivated in a place of discarded things. We felt the abandon of language to poetry in the ordinary words said by women, taxi drivers and policemen.

> Ah, language!
> The isiXhosa teacher told about the time when she was studying a poem by Mqhayi at Fort Hare University; a classmate stood up and spontaneously created a poem, and the lecturer said this person is gifted, let's sit and listen. And in that moment the student became the teacher, and all listened as her words rang in the air alongside Mqhayi's, vibrated in the imagination of each listener alongside the vision of each of their individual lives. Together. And after the poet had finished, the teacher proceeded with the lesson, and the lesson was questions. How do we keep old poems alive? If a poet is present, can they illuminate a poem by creating another? Is this gift present in each of us? The poem transforms a teacher to a student, a student to a teacher transforms the poem. The isiXhosa oral tradition tells us who we are, what we were, and what we can become.
>
> Ah, language!
> All poetry in every language began as oral literature, a sacred flame passed from poet to listener, seeding poets to come. In the isiXhosa class there was a poet who was spreading love for this thing called a poem. There were no groans because each time the learners learnt a new poem, she would create her response, and everyone would see themselves framed in this new poem, that they could hear and be heard by, in a language that became theirs as she gave it away. For example, recently they were learning a poem about parents, and the poet stood up and recited a poem about how important the mother is to the girl child, and several learners began to cry. The teacher asked why they were crying, and slowly she discovered that many of their parents had died. The school had never asked learners what was happening at home. Poetry reveals feelings, and feelings can show us that the everyday things we thought we knew, are somehow more.
>
> Ah language!
> The isiXhosa teacher said we learn to listen from oral literature, to reason, to interpret, how an idiom works on a Sunday afternoon, or a winter moon, and how when something is ungrammatical it sounds wrong. When I, a poet from another culture and language, listened to the isiXhosa teacher's story, I felt language stir in me, older than this educational system and the political system that imposed the educational system, ancient as an isiXhosa baobab that showered me with the haunting beauty of its scented golden flowers, and I felt transformed. English disappeared, and poetry reminded me what it is to be a human, connected, no more other than others who were speaking a language that was not mine. A poet's purpose is to create and share their sanctuary of words, sparks of a fire, a fire that keeps igniting, enlivening and enlightening, language beyond grammar, stammering into song, time without beginning, time without end: the poem!

ZAPP intended to contribute to the positive learning and teaching of poetry in high schools. The research at Ukuzimela High School involved discovering what resources are available and how they could be deployed to achieve this. To practise isiXhosa aesthetics (orality, word play, rhythm, group participation as a creative act in response to canonical texts) when teaching English poetry may make learners more receptive to the curriculum and could be a way of reframing poetry teaching and learning in an African context, which could enable a more equal distribution of the value of poetry among all languages. Indeed, the Head of the English Department confirmed that he

routinely draws on the rich linguistic resources in the classroom to illuminate English poems, although without the dense cultural context and historical relevance that the isiXhosa teacher was able to bring into play.

These aspects of poetry teaching may revitalise the mechanics of understanding "what a poem means" or identifying the figures of speech in a poem and the understanding of subjects beyond poetry itself. Furthermore, if the reader of the poem identifies with the poem to the extent that they see their experience reflected, the "universality" of the poem acquires a visceral and present meaning. In our exploration of indigenous ways of knowing, "the important thing is also to not waste time in some rather byzantine discussion on which African cultural values are specific or non-specific to Africa but to envisage these values as a conquest by a parcel of humanity for the common heritage of man, achieved in one or several stages of his evolution" (Cabral 1973, 16). While recognising the advantages and qualities of this culturally specific set of practices, we do not want to fetishise our Africanness, but rather draw on its particular aesthetic particularities for the benefit of learners and humanity as a whole, and particularly in classrooms where the dominant language of the teachers and learners is an African language.

A "Real Utopian" Perspective

Phillippa's account of the research experience seems to indicate that it was indeed the productive, respectful and inspiring knowledge exchange that the project intended. Her poem and reflections indicate that the project's aims and ideals for a democratic, dialogical co-construction of the project focus and processes, the building of cooperative relationships and sharing ways of learning, teaching and appreciating poetry, were, to some extent, realised. By contrast, the criticism put forth by Robert in his play about the Prince, the damsel and the dragon indicates that teachers' experience of the project was a far cry from its intended effect. The play suggests that the teachers experienced the research initiative as an uninvited and misguided crusade of indigenisation ("rejunglisation") conceptualised in a foreign context and indiscriminately imposed. One way in which one could understand this dissonance between the research aims and ideals and the teachers' account of them, on the one hand, and the poet's inspirational experience, on the other, is to frame these within what Erik Olin Wright refers to as "real utopias" (2007). For Wright, a "real utopia" is an empirical or theoretical model that realises the ideals of our visions and dreams within the context of a real situation (Wright 2007). That is, it is an example of how solutions based upon idealistic aspirations can exist in reality because they take into account actual circumstances as well as possible negative unintended consequences. Thus, Wright proposes the idea of "real utopias" as a way of drawing on utopian visions to "develop strategies that enable us to make empirically and theoretically sound arguments about emancipatory possibilities" (2011, 37). At the same time, he is adamant that a "real utopian holds on to emancipatory ideals without embarrassment or cynicism but remains

fully cognizant of the deep complexities and contradictions of realizing those ideals" (2013, 8).

In the third analysis of the overall failures and successes of the Ukuzimela High School research project, we realise that the attempt at pursuing a collaborative research intervention at the school took a utopian rather than a real utopian approach. That is, while the research may have been utopian in its aims, the "real" in real utopia means deliberately and practically accounting for problems and trade-offs that may occur (Wright 2013).

In taking this analysis further, we will simply be adapting and applying Wright's arguments and concepts to the Ukuzimela High School project in a straightforward manner. We will outline the four tasks involved in the exploration of real utopias, pointing towards the route along which such an agenda would lead us.

First Task—Identify Moral Principles

According to Wright, in order to develop the emancipatory projects entailed by real utopia, we have to carry out four basic tasks. The first of these is: "Specify the moral principles for judging social institutions" (Wright 2013, 9). Our initial task is to identify the moral principles to which we aspire as a research project, and how these pertain to prioritising indigenous epistemological principles in our research processes and practices. Wright suggests the three principles of equality, democracy and sustainability, so we will follow his lead.

He defines the equality principle as follows: "In a socially just society, all people would have broadly equal access to the social and material conditions necessary for living a flourishing life" (Wright 2013, 10). Applied to our concerns with education, indigenous knowledges and research, this principle compels us to consider the ways in which knowledge and knowledge-making can be made available to all in ways that would contribute to their flourishing at a material, social and spiritual level. To do this, we need to go beyond the conventional human rights discourses and instruments offered by the global North as the universal rights that form the basis of the pursuit of social goods, including education. This is because the conventional human rights basis of equality simply refuses to acknowledge alternative concepts of rights, such as those proposed by non-Western groups, including indigenous peoples. As Santos puts it:

> Conventional human rights thinking lacks the theoretical and analytical tools to position itself in relation to such movements; even worse, it does not understand the importance of doing so. It applies the same abstract recipe across the board, hoping that thereby the nature of alternative ideologies or symbolic universes will be reduced to local specificities with no impact on the universal canon of human rights. (de Sousa Santos 2014, 21–22)

For indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups, applying the equality principle to research also entails the near-impossible venture of breaking free of the paradigm since, as Mika et al. (2018) point out, such knowledge is evaluated according to existing dominant criteria. In such conventional research projects, data collection, analyses and the application of findings tend to proceed through the use of "Western-tinted indigenous frameworks" (Mika et al. 2018), particularly if the researchers wish to address the constraints imposed by dominant systems upon the flourishing of their communities. The equality principle for research and education requires a re-evaluation of the ontological and epistemological bases upon which knowledge is constructed, shared and applied. This requires the recognition of spirituality as integral to the ontological foundations of knowledge-making (cf. Chilisa 2019; Dei 2002; Kovach 2010) and the epistemological and axiological implications this engenders.

A second moral principle for judging the research project would be democracy. Taking a societal perspective, Wright defines it as follows: "In a fully democratic society, all people would have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things that affect their lives" (2013, 11). As Wright points out, this principle concerns the ability to make decisions about one's individual well-being and about public issues. At the meso- and micro-sociological levels of the education system and our research at the school, this translates to actors' ability to participate in and determine the content and processes of these domains, such as what curriculum or research design looks like, how these features come to take the forms that they do, whose values and ideas are included, and so forth. And given our concern with indigenising teaching, learning and researching, being democratic would entail adopting a relational orientation towards participation in these knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing processes. Noting the significance that traditional (indigenous) education places on "interpersonal relationships and reciprocal obligations", Mawere argues that "the task of education as a force that promotes interpersonal relationships remains crucial" (2015, 66). We get a good sense of what "relationship" means from an indigenous perspective from Harris and Wasilewski (in Romm) who explains it as being

> in the profound sense that we human beings are related not only to each other, but to all things, animals, plants, rocks—in fact, to the very stuff the stars are made of. This relationship is a kinship relationship. (in Romm 2017, 25)

It is through such connections that we as teachers, poets and researchers intended to develop an alternative approach to researching, teaching and learning poetry at the school. Such intentions are contrary to those of conventional educational and research practices, which tend to be extractive and concerned with the immediate outcomes. Rather, they point to the third principle of sustainability, which Wright describes as follows: "Future generations should have access to the social and material conditions to live flourishing lives at least at the same level as the present generation" (2013, 11). The sustainability principle extends the social justice imperatives of the equality and

democracy principles so that they not only apply to present conditions, but are also future-oriented.

Second Task—Critique Utopian Project

This brings us to the second task, namely, using the above moral principles, or any others that may be deemed applicable, as the standards for diagnosing and critiquing the utopian project. In order to do this, we draw upon two key documents relating to the research project, namely, a project overview that was drawn up and shared among the participants, and the research team's first annual narrative progress report. These documents will be examined for evidence of the extent to which the moral principles of equality, democracy and sustainability are present or absent within the project. The project will be further evaluated by using the principles to interpret the teachers' critique, represented by the play, *The Prince and the Damsel in Distress*, and the poet's perspective as expressed in her praise poem and reflections.

Considering the project overview, for instance, under the heading of "Research Methods and Ethics", it states:

> Researchers will partner with educators, poets and education officials to conduct this research and implement the interventions. The aim is to prioritise, amongst others, the valuing of relationships, a respect for the interconnectedness of all things living and non-living, an awareness and deliberate addressing of power relations. (Newfield 2017)

This statement seems to indicate a foregrounding of relationality and an awareness of power imbalances that point to the principles of equality and democracy as outlined earlier. That is, the statement reflects a conceptualisation and pursuit of connectedness that is more in line with indigenous interpretations.

The desire to establish respectful and democratic relationships and processes could also be identified from the project's progress reports. These record several meetings where the primary purpose was to establish the scope of the school's relationship with the research project. The first of these was held on 31 July 2017, when the research team met with the school principal and the school's Head of English Department to introduce themselves and the research project. At this meeting "[i]t was agreed that the school liaison person [Robert Maungedzo, the teacher in our team] would brief the HOD about the project, and that the researchers will draw up a document which outlines the team's hopes, intentions and processes for the project" (Newfield 2017). At a second meeting on 7 September 2017 the research team again met with the principal for an interview, which primarily sought to understand her views on the priorities and ethos at the school. The team also engaged in some initial discussions with Heads of Department for English and Home Languages, a few teachers, and a group of students who were interested in poetry. After several more attempts at meeting, a proposed programme for research at the school was circulated among the research team, eliciting information on the team

members' availability and possible contributions to activities with the school. The progress report also records the following:

> On **Wednesday, 1 November 2017** [the research team] met with the English department at the school. At the meeting the project team outlined the main aims and research approach of the project, including methodological issues and proposed interventions. The teaching staff in turn pointed out what challenges they faced with regard to English teaching, as well as what their hopes and expectations were for the collaboration with the ZAPP researchers. The two teams also developed a preliminary timetable for research activities at the school. (Newfield 2017)

This extract and the references to the meetings between the school and the research team all point to efforts at establishing collaborative processes and relationships, through which the research partners could understand and negotiate their aspirations for the project in a manner that was equitable and allowed all parties to "participate meaningfully". From this point of view, it would seem that the project, to a significant extent, observed the moral principles of equality and democracy as ideals that inform this utopian endeavour.

The teachers' critique of the project, as represented in the play *The Prince and the Damsel in Distress*, however, documents a different interpretation: it is clear that the relationships pertaining to the research project and those participating in it are unequal in several respects. First, the play notes the material inequalities between the Prince's world and that of the Junglians, whom we can assume to be those of the university-based participants, or researchers, and the school-based participants, or teachers:

> **Prince**: …these people are really suffering! They don't have resources, they're not meeting targets like in the real Smoke and Mirrors world. It's a mess!

The play also implies that inequalities that may typically exist between university-based research participants and school-based research participants were not addressed by the project. In the following extract it is clear that the Junglians feel that the project, with its aims of indigenisation, is being imposed upon them by "some clever people from the Smoke and Mirrors world":

> **Narrator:** *After the Junglians meet the Prince*.
>
> **Junglian 1**: Hey guys. There are some clever people from the Smoke and Mirrors world. They are here to save us from ourselves.
>
> **Junglian 2**: What do you mean by that?
>
> **Junglian 3**: They say they are here to indigenise us and so we can become Junglians again.
>
> **Junglian 4**: Yooooh! I am confused!!!

> **Junglian 5**: They are here to teach poetry. I am happy. That English poetry is so hard to teach, I'm really glad they will do it for me.

The Prince, as the embodiment of the Smoke and Mirrors world of the university-based researchers, acts unilaterally, without taking any time to consider alternative perspectives to his own. Ignoring the advice of his horse, Ntombazana, he acts forcefully upon his understanding of the situation, disrupting what seems to be a productive relationship between the Junglians, the Damsel and the dragon.

It is clear, then, that the teachers did not experience the project as an attempt to build the kind of egalitarian and democratic relationships envisaged by the research team. In terms of the utopian principles of equality and democracy, understood from an alternative perspective of indigenous worldviews and values, especially, the project seems to have failed miserably.

What about the poet's perspective, though? One could argue that, through language and poetry, she managed to find a relationship characterised by equality and democratic exchange. In the isiXhosa poetry lessons she identifies and is inspired by traditions that break down hierarchies of knowing by encouraging participation and the sharing of language as a collective resource. Also, in line with our interpretations of equality and democracy, the knowledge exchanges that occur through teaching, learning and researching about poetry are characterised by a sense of political and spiritual purpose that is directed towards the flourishing of the community, as a community of practice, and also towards challenging and informing the dominant paradigm. It would seem that the poet has gone some way towards the project's vision of creating a connection between the indigenous knowledges that are available to home language speakers at the school, the knowledge holders from the university and the school, as well as bridging predominantly Westernised knowledge traditions and indigenous ones, which are informed by indigenous principles of relationality.

Third Task—Consider Alternatives

Based on our assessment of the extent to which the values of the project were realised, the third task is to consider alternative structures or processes upon which to build the project, based on their desirability, viability and achievability. These three criteria, Wright contends, "are nested in a kind of hierarchy: Not all desirable alternatives are viable, and not all viable alternatives are achievable" (2007, 28). The criterion of desirability is the purely utopian element that may identify the moral and philosophical ideals of the project, but does not offer actual implementable structures for realising these ideals, because it does not engage with the evidence—the pedagogical practices in use at the school (represented by the dragon in the play). The difference between a utopian and a real utopian approach is, therefore, the consideration of issues of viability and achievability. When it comes to these two criteria, Wright suggests that our search for alternatives should prioritise the viability problem (2013). The viability problem puts aside whether a project could be realised under the given circumstances and instead

is concerned with possible consequences and the sustainability of the project, should it be carried out. In other words:

> The exploration of viability brackets the question of the political achievability of the proposed alternative under existing historical conditions, focusing instead on the likely dynamics and unintended consequences of the proposal if it were to be implemented. (Wright 2007, 28)

The achievability problem, on the other hand, when faced with a desirable and viable alternative, asks what it would take to make it happen. This problem, Wright suggests, is very often too difficult, given the high level of uncertainty associated with trying to anticipate possible future outcomes based on existing conditions and configurations. By paying attention to viability, however, we may positively influence the achievability of a proposed project, since it is more likely that people would work to achieve a desirable project once they are convinced of its viability (cf. Wright 2013). We will offer a brief illustration of how the viability of the project could be considered by turning back to the perspectives of the teacher and the poet, starting with the poet.

In terms of the viability of infusing indigenous knowledges and principles into the researching, teaching and learning of poetry at Ukuzimela High School, one possible kind of result could be that demonstrated by the poet's encounter with isiXhosa poetry. This demonstrates the possibility of teachers and researchers sharing a knowledge connection that is infused with the spiritual, political and intuitive elements that characterise the indigenous relationality sought by the project. This outcome indicates that it is indeed possible to cultivate the indigenised knowledge relationships to which the project aspires, thereby inviting the participants to explore how this has been, and could be achieved.

By contrast, as suggested by the teachers' critique, for various reasons, none of the parties represented by the prince, the Junglians, the damsel and the dragon may undertake the conceptual journey needed for this collaborative project to succeed. This answer to the viability question suggests that the project is unsustainable, thereby thwarting any further attempts at achieving it.

Fourth Task—Theorising Alternatives

The fourth task involved in exploring a real utopian solution is theorising ways in which to get from the current reality to the idealised alternative. For our project, this undertaking requires that we develop conceptual tools that will take us from how the project was carried out to how we would have liked to enact it. Taking its research, teaching and learning components together, we propose the networked relational concept of learning as a possible framework for advancing the real utopian project of transforming poetry teaching, learning and research.

As with the other tasks, here we will only mention potential approaches and concepts for the purpose of illustration. The first of these is a further theorisation of decoloniality to address the broader processes of validation and subjugation that structure the inequalities between and within societies, communities, knowledges, and ways of doing and being. Bearing in mind that the oppressive dehumanising, discriminatory and extractivist enterprise of colonisation continues its perverse modernising project through globalisation and hegemonic Westernisation, we will follow Maldonado-Torres in defining decoloniality as referring to

> efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world. (2016, 6)

ZAPP's overall project is implicated in this counterhegemonic effort through its intention of repositioning indigenous knowledges as a valuable source for deconstructing and then reconstructing the seemingly inevitable future set out by what Maldonado-Torres refers to as "modernity /coloniality" (2016). This is in line with Dei, who alerts us that anti-colonial education is concerned with "macrosocial processes, as well as the economic, political and psychological realms of domination" (2016, 6) and becomes a site for resistance as well as for "a search for new futures of mutual coexistence" (Dei 2016, 6). Clearly, then, decolonisation is a significant component of our fourth task of developing a theoretical framework for realising our real utopian project.

A second theoretical approach would be cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). This approach is considered appropriate for the real utopian project because it is concerned with analysng development in the form of learning and change within an activity system of individual, communal and societal relationships that are historically developing and mediated by tools, rules and the division of labour (Daniels et al. 2013).

With regard to the fourth task of theorising transformation, we wish to also mention Sannino's concepts of conflict and transitions, which examine why an initially successful collaborative project between a university and a local elementary school was not sustained (Sannino 2008). Using cultural-historical activity theory, Sannino begins by explaining that a leading or dominant activity is one that governs development and gives rise to and shapes other developmental activities. A dominant activity can be replaced or displaced by another dominant activity through transitions. However, Sannino suggests that developmental transitions may not correspond with institutionally available structures or individuals' needs. She therefore proposes "the notion of transitional actions which typically move sideways across boundaries between dominant and non-dominant activities, with potentially long-term sustaining significance" (2008, 332). In the context of a research intervention, participants may resort to transitional actions when faced with conflicts: "inner doubts that paralyze the

individual who faces contradictory motives" (Sannino 2008, 332). Applying these ideas to our utopian research project, we realise that the demands of the leading activity of assessment-driven learning, as well as the institutional structure and available resources, constrain teachers' perceptions of what can be achieved with the non-dominant innovation. However, like the isiXhosa teacher and the poet, they may nevertheless make sideways initiatives. These "may indeed be attempts to continue the newly introduced non-leading activity … [and] may be oriented at enriching or changing the dominant activity from inside in small steps" (Sannino 2008, 337).

Concluding Remarks

The analyses in this article are not intended to be extensive, but, rather, illustrative of some of the basic elements entailed in using a real utopian approach to analyse an educational intervention. We believe, with Crain Soudien, that the education community is not asking the tough questions about "the continued viability of global lifestyles normatively calibrated around excess" (2013, 839), which our education systems support, often at the expense of marginal groups or communities. The intervention also highlights that the concept of marginalisation is itself problematic: South Africa's majority population group is African and they are the holders of the indigenous knowledges that come with their home languages. Their marginalisation is conceptual rather than actual: the problem is one of value.

In presenting the reflections of Robert and Phillippa Yaa as a play and poem, we have purposely engaged the imagination and sought to delink from formal Western protocols of scholarship. Our intention is to provoke, challenge and invite readers to apply the totality of their consciousness to the issue of indigenous knowledge in a context that is strongly influenced by Western mores. However, these devices are not entirely for the purposes of entertainment: we aspire to stimulate debate. Educational transformation is a high stakes game that should be neither optional nor indiscriminate for educationalists seeking social justice.

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