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Holding space at the margins: a decolonial approach to academic publishing in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Publishing in Africa has long been debated among academics in the global south who recognise the marginal status of African academics' ideas and knowledge. Many of the solutions proffered in global north academics, such as internationalisation and collaborative research, often fail to address specific issues that continue to mark the unequal status of publications from the continent because of the location of the interventions. More recently, a growing number of scholars have argued for a decolonial approach to thinking about African academic publishing. The current paper adds to this growing body of literature and examines alternative considerations to publishing in Africa. This article focuses on the idea of space holding as a tool for navigating the publishing world and suggests the conscientious work by editors, experimental writing and thinking, peer learning and identification of scholarly archives that aligns with theoretical and methodological needs of African scholars.

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Introduction: towards a dismantling of assumptions

A growing body of literature indicates that an increasing number of scholars are questioning the unequal status of global academic publishing (Coetzee 2018; Musila 2011; 2019). The problem, it is argued, is the existence of a singular mode of knowledge production that emerges from and resides in the global north (Musila 2011; 2019). Indeed, as Grace Musila further argues, scholars in the global south fumble to fit in with the demands of ever-evolving and new research trajectories and theories, in a bid to get published by international journals and book publishers. In response to the problem of inequality in publishing practices and regimes, there have been interventions in terms of collaborations, internationalisation and mentorships. Yet, even then, the agenda is driven from elsewhere, leaving African scholarship vulnerable to appropriation and, in some cases, dismissal. Speaking on the project of internationalisation in the field of education, Winston Mano and Milton (2021) argue against the mass movement of students from the global south to global north institutions without the accompanied movement of global south academic contributions. As such, much of the work becomes empty rhetoric that fails to deal with the initial issues of inequality. Similarly, research cultures tend to

centre global north academic ideals while disregarding the realities that accompany many global south-based researchers (Musila 2019). The global flows of knowledge that disadvantage the global south remain intact.

This article makes the argument that it is possible to formulate opportunities for growing research through recognition of local practices of knowledge production. As such, the article acknowledges scholarship that take on a decolonial positioning, in which the centre is disturbed, expanded and approached from multiple locations. The idea of a decolonial positioning is reflective of a global trend in global south scholarship that espouses the act of questioning Euro-American centres of power, knowledge and being. Mainly associated with a group of activist scholars located in Latin America, decoloniality is a site for critical discourse and practices that aims to undo assumptions formulated around the assumed universality of Western modes of knowing, and replacing these with global south knowledges (Gallien 2020). Proponents of decoloniality including Maria Lugones (2010), Walter D. Mignolo (2007), Anibal Quijano (2007) and Ramon Grosfoguel (2007) among others have argued for the development of meticulous methodologies for critically unearthing invisible antennas of coloniality that continue to fashion contemporary worlds, systematically imbuing violence on the Other, as defined within the confines of Western modernity. Decolonial theory engages the various forms of epistemic violence that make it impossible to engage the world outside of colonial/modernity frameworks. In doing so, the interpretation of colonial and postcolonial worlds remain connected to Western modes of knowing. What decolonial theory enables is a generous expansion of spaces of knowledge production. It is from such studies that I take my cue in this article.

The struggle for the recognition of African knowledge systems is not new. Existing philosophies such as Ubuntu and other indigenous knowledge systems remind us of the existence of African modes of being and thought that pre-date colonialism. African philosophers, creative writers, political analysts and sociologists among others have created paths for thinking critically about the present state of affairs, in using critical post-colonial lenses as well as critiques of the neo-colonial regimes of power. While various theorists have identified the dismantling of coloniality using differing terminology, it is clear that a questioning of the effects of Western modernity has been ongoing since the entry of colonialism into the continent. Such theories do not always align ideologically, however. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014) for instance, argues that though many scholars embraced the idea of postcolonialism that was intended to rebuild and re-imagine African futures, it was a myth that has failed under the pressure of neoliberal globalisation. In other words, after colonialism, the continued oppression in the form of coloniality has influenced every facet of life in the global south. Indeed, African publishing, much as other facets of life on the continent, has been affected to the point that the search for an elusive legitimacy continues apace. African-based knowledges continue to be cast aside as unimportant or even irrelevant. As Musila (2011, 5) asserts, 'an entire vocabulary and discourse that dismisses attempts to affirm Southern and African intellectual initiatives' exists that labels such work as dated, "nativist", particularistic, et cetera'. What Musila is signalling here is a lens through which African scholarship is perceived.

The danger of such a blanket dismissal of research is reflected in Musila's musings regarding missed opportunities (2019). She asks a set of thoughtful questions worth reproducing below:

What possible research directions, questions, interpretations and perspectives on human experience are we losing along the way as Africa-based researchers' work continues to be deemed dated or poor, because it 'fails' to engage with the latest theories on the subjects or frame itself in the legitimised registers as prescribed by the Northern academy? What would emerge out of these projects if, rather than being encouraged to adopt the registers and theories legitimised by the Northern academic machinery, they were encouraged to pursue the questions they deem relevant, on their own terms and in their own registers? How would the texture of the academy change if it was hospitable to these registers and textures, rather than panel-beating them into adopting the monochromatic registers and accents of thought legitimised by the North? (2019, 288)

In an attempt to engage with some of Musila's concerns, I explore ideas and practices that could be seen as useful tools of analysis, of thinking with or through which a researcher might find refuge while doing research in the location of the global south.

Decolonial approaches to publishing practices in Africa

I use a decolonial approach to writing and thinking to surface the kinds of alternative approaches one could apply in contexts of African publishing. What does it mean to apply decoloniality towards publishing practices? Drawing on the general idea of decolonial approaches as processes of disentangling from a perceived notion of truth, where truth and knowledge are generated from the centre and where centre is linked to colonial power, publishing from the margins means creating spaces that could enable deviation from the normative practices of writing and thinking work, where necessary. As expounded by Claire Gallien (2020, 28), the decolonial approach

does not restrict itself to a critique of the colonial episteme and world order. It entails a recognition of one's own positionality as scholar, critic, and speaker, recognizes the necessity to decenter and pluralize knowledge formations, and finally offers alternative ways to conceptualize and experience the world.

Gallien's invitation here is for scholars to come up with methodologies that work for their positionality within the academy, that can be used as tools to enable or generate knowledge. Gallien is of course also underlining the fact that such processes of knowledge production may exist outside of normative models. They may involve working with experimental spaces. Indeed, the ideas of experimental writing and thinking, and of knowledge communities are embedded in decolonial modes of knowledge production in the global south. Diana Brydon (2016), writing about the value of experimental writing in decolonial spaces, suggests that this form of writing is disruptive of existing schema of writing and production of knowledge because of its ability to trouble such paradigms. Beyond this effect, experimental thinking and writing can be viewed as interventionist practices that make it possible to imagine social justice. In theorising what she terms as the politics of 'scalability' in globalisation discourse, where scaling refers to standardised and universalised systems of knowledge production, Brydon argues for a recognition of experimental writing as interventionist (2016, 131). Writers use resources within their worlds to make meaning in ways not previously thought possible. In such practices

lies the power of decolonised writing and thinking. While Brydon is speaking specifically to literary practices, I apply her thinking to academic publishing and writing practices and their location in globalised systems of knowledge production. Brydon calls for a 'rethinking of scales' to form a more balanced approach to writing from non-Western worlds. In a similar vein, Christine Howe (2019) shows that the project of decolonial writing and thinking can mean embracing the uncomfortable truths of political injustice of marginalised cultures. It means recognising styles that are non-linear, which allow for the movement back and forth into history, to confront and heal those who have access to the writing. Decolonial writing and thinking can be projects about centring the margin. This can create discomfort. Indeed, one crucial question that Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asks in her book on black feminist thought is about what happens when marginalised subjects are centred in analysis.

Holding space as decolonial praxis

Following the ideas above around decolonial approaches to African publishing, what does it mean to hold space for someone or something? As defined in the Cambridge dictionary, to 'hold' can mean 'to take and keep something in your hands or arms' or 'to support'.¹ The idea of support is further emphasised in the popularised phrase, holding space. Heather Plett (2020) thinks about holding space as the act of walking beside a person without making that person feel inadequate. Plett suggests a recognition of vulnerability, while still extending help in ways that can help to restore/support the person. While Plett's and other definitions of holding space seem to be aligned with popular psychology, I here borrow this term to apply to academic and editorial practices in African publishing. I suggest the practice of supporting someone or allowing them to express themselves without any form of forceful intervention, until such a time as when the person is ready. Holding space can occur at three levels. First, this can take place at the editorial level, during which there is possibility for active intervention. Secondly, peer writing groups can form a system for holding space, as well as encourage what Carli Coetzee (2018) identifies as cross-generational and transdisciplinary conversations among African scholars. Lastly, holding space can happen at the conceptual level, in ways through which scholars interact with particular archives of knowledge. I expand on each of these in the points below.

I borrow the idea of 'space holding' from scholars such as Sophie Pascoe et al. (2020) who identify it as an intervention into unequal academic practices that favour some, while disadvantaging others. In their assessment, they question the idea of precarity in academic practices, shaped by structural exploitation, extractive research practices, and other forms of inequality. They suggest alternative ways of engaging in academia through unpacking concepts such as 'holding space' which, they argue, can be achieved through tools like storytelling and active listening.² For them, acts of storytelling can be transformative, as are acts of active listening, which allows one to understand the other. How can the act of listening to one another dismantle hierarchies of knowledge production, for instance? Crucial here is the practice of sharing knowledge in a community setting, to sound out ideas without fear of judgement or dismissal. It allows for ideas to grow in a safe space. One could push this concept of holding space to think about editorial practices in Africa: how can we *listen* without prejudice? How do we find gems of

knowledge hidden behind that which we are instinctively drawn to reject? Space holding can also mean recognising spaces of vulnerability and uncertainty. In their work, Malgorzata Powietrzynska et al. (2021) ask an important question: how do we adjust in contexts of social inequality? While these authors are writing about their experiences as teachers teaching black and brown students during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the context of racial violence, I draw from their article critical ideas around working in conditions of inequality. Do situations of inequality warrant a change in attitude, or practice? Their suggestions take into account the lived and felt realities of the students, which they term 'contemplative equity pedagogy' (2021, 951).

My reading of the article suggests a practice of space holding, in which those in positions of power (editors, reviewers) can take into consideration the several factors that may affect an author who submits work for review. The first suggestion towards holding space then, involves editorial practices, a critical stage during which certain publications can be deemed as 'not good enough' or as substandard and therefore susceptible to rejection. The value of this stage of holding space became clear to me the first time I attempted to publish an article in an academic journal. I had struggled to put together an analysis of a radio play, having put in time and effort to 'perfect' my analysis. I presented the finished product to the journal Special Issue editor who took one look and sent the work back to me as 'unfinished'. Rather than send me on my way, the editor chose to spend time helping me to develop the paper as well as my ideas, thus enduring endless resubmissions from me until the article was ready. While this experience must not have been very pleasant for the editor, the fact that they held space for me changed my view about publishing and its possibilities. It also would influence my own work as editor of academic journals much later. The editor did what is often classified as invisible labour, yet the effect of that intervention of care is still felt until the present day. Coetzee (2018), who speaks about these forms of invisible labour that go into the production of a journal article, suggests that in order to create a shift in publishing practices, there needs to be transparency in the editorial practices that accompany the production of papers. Coetzee argues that editorial work is involves invisible processes of labour, unseen, and therefore unacknowledged and unrewarded. Yet, if, Coetzee continues, these were made more visible, then it would be possible to craft 'ethical and activist protocols ... for evaluating knowledge production from different parts of the world' (2018, 102). Such interventions would range from selection of reviewers from various parts of the world who would also be sympathetic to the efforts of some scholars that need gentle guidance into improving their work. Coetzee also argues that interventions at editorial and peer-review levels enable the convening of communities that open spaces for others. For journal editors like Coetzee and others who already practise space holding, the productive interventions happen during the 'in-between' moments of producing a journal article. Coetzee's assertion is crucial to the imagining of what an editorial practice such as the one described above could offer in terms of extending support to authors looking to publish, but who may not be familiar with, or who lack academic proficiency. It is a suggestion that also sheds light on the work that some editors put into producing a lucid and coherent set of publications, in spite of what papers looked like at initial submission. Coetzee's proposition is that attention must be paid to the invisible labour that goes into such publications. Such attention also enables the building of an

alternative system of care that makes sure that those who would ordinarily be left out of the publishing world, are accommodated.

In engaging with the suggestions made by Coetzee (2018), Pascoe et al. (2020) as well as Powietrzynska et al. (2021), I am suggesting a form of engagement with African scholars that is akin to active listening, a form of engagement that can allow one to hear what the writer is driving towards, particularly when the writer does not have a full grasp of 'approved' academic language. What does this reading/listening form of engagement produce? How can we read from the location of the writer, letting go of prejudices and preferences? This, to me, is a practice akin to 'holding space'. In many ways, it allows us to hold space not only for those who would be left behind because of a lack of mastery of academic language, but also conceptually. But do we have room to acknowledge and accept knowledge that is unfamiliar? 'Holding space' according to Pascoe et al. (2020) can be about communal work, work of care and inclusivity. The issue then would be one of practical application: how do editors of journals create spaces for collective sharing and community building, where ideas of inclusivity are practised to accommodate those who may ordinarily be too intimidated to publish? What might these spaces look like? The various scholars cited suggest some of these spaces existing as workshops, or as communities and network-building. These spaces can also be created through an acknowledgement of the labour that goes into the production of a journal article.

The second approach to space holding involves 'experimental' thinking and writing as a mode of intervention into African publishing. By experimental thinking, I align with African American feminists' suggestion to allow or make room for alternative methods and ways of writing and thinking (hooks 1997; Lorde 1982; Patterson et al. 2016). Just as black feminist thought argues that experiences and stories of black women provide crucial locations for space holding and theorising in black feminist theorisation, so it is that we can expand this knowledge in understanding our writing and research practices (Patterson et al. 2016). Black feminist theorisation works against the grain. Where particular kinds of traditional theories are reified as the reference points for good and legitimate research; and where particular frames of research methodologies, practices and styles are identifiable with scientific truth; marginalised conversations, narratives and truths find themselves pushed aside, and often discarded as not good enough research. Indeed, certain journal practices have it as a rule to reject writing that does not embrace preconceived structures of writing – where formulaic presentation of data or findings are visible, with methodologies and theories and literature reviews positioned in specific patterns. There is reassurance in this kind of writing, the journals reason, especially if the writers are second language English speakers, for instance. Yet, it is now accepted that theories are excavated from specific spaces and times in history. If one is to write about experiences of place X, for instance, they would have to immerse themselves in the cultures of that space in order to make sense of it. What we tend to see over and over though, is editors and reviewers demanding that papers fit within a preconceived scientific method (panel beaten elsewhere), for example, to provide a framework for a paper on space X. This is the dilemma.

This in many ways speaks to my sense of how especially young African scholars learn to write publishable articles. In this way, a lot of younger scholars get stuck/tied up in their imaginings of what it means to 'write well' or 'write properly', often as a result of feedback from journals to which they attempt to submit papers for publication. My reflections here

dwell on this issue, focusing on what it means to speak of the familiar and the mundane in a language that can also reach a wider public. Here a researcher might feel stuck because of the possible vexed question of not being able to balance instinctive knowledge of the context, for instance, with the technical knowhow of writing a publishable paper. Take the example of the field of African Popular Culture. Within this field, research comprises examples gathered from everyday life, while the language and references are locally framed. In order to interpret and write about them, one has to find a way of balancing that local knowledge with theoretical knowhow. An inexperienced writer, in a bid to sound academic, might feel tempted to capture local examples using high sounding scholarly language that refers to cultures outside of Africa. This is despite the fact that the primary text in African Popular Culture will almost surely resist heavy theorisation. For a popular song to circulate, it locates itself in the language and realities of those who consume it. So, how can one write about that organically? How can one theorise organically? To put it another way, as suggested by Ashley Patterson et al. (2016), how can one write about one's standpoints, one's narratives and truths, in a context that also observes rigidity of methodologies and theorisations?

Often, as one discovers a niche area of research, one feels the urge to present findings in a robust manner but is limited by what is possible within academic writing, and what is not. Is it possible for us to imagine practices of space holding as viable for the future of publishing in Africa, where imagination and context-specific instinctive writing and thinking have a place and to what extent can we do this, as editors and publishers? The sub-questions to this problem would include the following: What is allowed? What circulates? How do we train younger scholars to let go and dare to write while simultaneously helping them identify an ally journal? How do we deal with potential language difficulties, which I strongly believe sometimes prevent potentially excellent academics groomed on the continent from offering their best creative selves to the world? How do we balance formats that have become standardised in the publishing world, with the value of research on the continent? Within the humanities where narrative reigns supreme, how does one integrate that into writing and thinking? In many ways, I reflect here on writing as an intimidating exercise and try to think about experimental thinking and writing as a form of easing one from this writing difficulty. Much of the research I refer to recognises the difficulty of translating thoughts onto paper for a lot of young and upcoming researchers and academics in the African context. In the body of work I borrow from, there is an insistent call for researchers from non-Western worlds to find spaces for thinking and contributing to global research and knowledge. In this context, we need to ask what are these spaces, and how can we think about them vis-à-vis the researcher and academic in the global south?

In this article, I suggest that researchers in Africa should embrace experimental writing practices as inroads into their own research without worrying too much about what they are or are not doing right. Experimental thinking and writing rely on *instinct* as well as *auto/biographical knowledge*. But is it possible to offer a style of writing that begins from instinct and one's knowledge of the world while simultaneously acknowledging what others have produced in the field? Can experimental writing happen in synchronisation with referencing existing research and scholarship? Part of the reason for asking these questions is that much of what we know instinctively gets lost in the practical ways in which we apply findings. In the humanities at least, it is imperative that we

have the space to publish what we know without getting bogged down by ticking boxes. For instance, a paper might get rejected because the writer referenced too few papers or did not reference the 'experts' in the field. However, if the ideas in the researcher's paper are sufficient to provoke critical debate, is it at all possible for editors to hold space for these papers? A scholar who ticks all the boxes might have a seven-paged reference list, but what contribution is that researcher making? If the present argument as highlighted at the start of this article is that Africans produce 'raw data' that is processed elsewhere using sophisticated theory (Musila 2011), then the question to ask is: what can we do with the raw data to develop alternative theorisations? While I wholly agree that students ought to be familiar with existing methodologies of doing research when they as they enter into the trade of the academy, I believe that there should be space that allows scholars to publish using nuanced approach to scholarship. This calls for a pluriversal approach to writing and thinking (Mignolo 2011).

The third assertion regarding space holding has to do with the idea of peer learning. This idea borrows from scholarship in the field of linguistics and where documented work with postgraduates in an African setting exists. Speaking specifically about postgraduate students doing research in Higher Education, Fouad Asfour et al. (2020) think about different writing conditions and practices that would favour students in a multilingual learning environment. For instance, they point out that writing within certain conditions (such as peer group writing in writing groups as opposed to solitary writing intended for supervisors) can inspire epistemological breakthroughs among students. More importantly, they argue for 'plurilingualism [which] has shaped [their] own writing development and ... translanguaging as a tool for knowledge creation and growth' (53). Their project is about empowering student voices and for epistemological becoming. In their writing practices, they look at what it means to consider home languages (apart from dominant languages such as English) for critical thinking and the implications of using home languages (African) to think through difficult ideas. In other words, through using more than one language, combined with peer learning, they were able to see progress in terms of how students mastered academic skills. They question the extent to which writing is shaped by existing language ideologies, and how introducing home language writing practices enables a sharper engagement with academic writing. If, as they argue, knowledge formation is related to access to particular language knowledge, then it goes without saying that those from certain areas in the world (second, third language English speakers for instance, expected to write in English in their academic projects) have a disadvantage compared to those in English-speaking nations in the West. Suffice is to say, Asfour et al. (2020) shed light on the connection between knowledge acquisition and knowledge production. If a dominant language such as English is central to say, academic success, then it is harder for the student who is not a first language speaker of English to succeed. What if, they argue, students use their home language towards what, following Barnett (2009, 435), they call 'epistemic becoming'? They then suggest new writing practices that would expand epistemological access, thus preventing the regurgitation of cookie cutter knowledge. I find Asfour et al. (2020) enlightening in thinking about African academics' engagement with writing and thinking. One possible application of the suggestions made by Asfour et al. (2020) would be to increase writing workshops, in which writers would be encouraged not only to use home languages, but also to employ self-reflexive writing exercises, to practise writing local experiences in ways

that internalises rather than rejects the 'language' of the local, in embracing the mundane experiences they encounter and engage with.

The last approach to space holding is through looking at those who hold space for others conceptually through their writing practices. Academic writing encourages a removal of the self from the written piece. Yet, the self is often central to one's imagining and making sense of the world. In other words, the practice of removing oneself from writing can also mute one's ability to think clearly. As such, the works in which authors centre the self in writing, the autoethnographic approach to writing, has proved quite generative of new ideas. Within bodies of work such as black feminist thought, this is a methodology that is extensively applied. The work of Audre Lorde, bell hooks and others in the Global North are reflective of these processes. In my own writing, I have found such 'conceptual buddies' to help me think through some difficult ideas and phenomena. Working in the field of popular culture, I have found that work by scholars and thinkers such as Keguro Macharia (2016) Danai Mupotsa (2011) – both of whom advocate the practice of 'thinking with' particular scholars – Pumla Dineo Gqola (2015; 2021), Karin Barber (2018), Stephanie Newell (2006) and others as usefully making possible my own sense of how to engage academically with the subject matter I am confronted with. In other words, finding scholarship that resonates with one's thinking, as opposed to scholarship that *has* to be cited (often imposed at editorial and reviewing stages), is extremely fruitful, raising the question: what does it mean to explore African contexts, or write about experiences based on the ground using theories whose contexts one is familiar with? In response, I therefore look at work by African and Black feminists that has been successful. Outside Africa, I also think of authors such as Sara Ahmed's work that employs inquisitive methodologies, asking questions of ready-made concepts, unpacking, and rearticulating such concepts, lending them new breath as they become useful tools for interrogating the lived experiences of people of colour (Ahmed 2021). Or the work of African feminists in the realm of popular culture stands to provide example. Pumla Dineo Gqola's embrace of theory from a creative place in her books, *Rape* (2015) and *Female Fear Factory* (2021) for instance, is a case in point. Other modes of writing speak specifically to the location of African stories, data and methods as 'opaque'. Polo Moji speaks about Afrosurrealism as a method of thinking of and writing about Black or Afro-European literature and film. It is, as she argues, filled with 'lived life' (2019) of marginal living, or of living in locations of non-belonging. In my suggestion, I want to think about specific styles and methods of writing as processes of conceptual space holding, a way in which others can engage with African contexts in less restrictive ways. That through encouraging deliberate citation practices, for instance, we can begin to think of offering (where 'we' stands for editors and reviewers) alternative ways of writing and thinking.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored possibilities for increasing productivity in African publishing. By locating the article in the idea of decoloniality, where decolonial approaches suggest a disruption and or a relocation of the subject from margin to centre, I suggest that holding space as practice should be applied in both the editorial processes, as well as within writing and thinking practices. Space holding is read as both the support given by

editors who conscientiously take on activist and ethical positions to engage existing inequalities in the spaces of publishing; as well as the support offered by writers whose work provide conceptual support for authors who may find them useful. It also involves peer group support that authors in similar predicaments can offer each other. The article also delves into what it means to experiment with writing and thinking from one's location, and what becomes possible when one suspends the blocks that exist in publishing, in order to think more freely. The idea here is to discourage the idea of forceful intervention (in terms of prescribing who must be cited; how one must theorise etc), and rather, to listen to the source of the author's thinking, and work with the author in that way. Drawing on existing practices by editors who go out of their way to guide and help develop writing (Coetzee 2018), to writing groups that accommodate those that exist at the margins of academia (Asfour et al. 2020), I argue that holding space is a way of thinking that allows for marginal subjectivities to enter into research. The article asks that such practices be seen as useful in the way they invite readers to engage with the worlds that they seek to theorise. The different suggestions made in this article are meant to open up dialogue about the existing unequal relations within the publishing world, and ways in which we can think productively about narrowing the inevitable gaps that are created through these inequalities.

Notes

1. Cambridge Dictionary. 'Hold'. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>.
2. <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/04/22/holding-space-for-alternative-futures-in-academia-and-beyond/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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