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## Against colonial residues, towards decolonising assessment: a case study of a university history course

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### ABSTRACT

Assessment remains a power nexus in Higher Education, where remnants of coloniality pool. The power that assessment holds makes it an important site for decolonisation. The purpose of this article is to present an experiment, and open a discussion, on the decolonisation of assessment. We argue that bringing assessment into the decolonisation project is important in a social justice move towards addressing coloniality in Higher Education. This can work to ensure epistemic access and epistemic justice in Higher Education classrooms. In this article, we explore some ideas towards decolonising assessment in Higher Education, offering some alternative assessment practices. We explore a case study of a History course in which the assessment practice was varied and creative. We argue this to provide decolonial paths into assessment while drawing on other assessment traditions. We examine how assessments in the form of a play, portfolio, and reflective essay offer a space for emotion, collaboration, reflection, and ultimately humanisation in assessment. We argue that drawing on varied forms of assessment through multiple types of reflective, collaborative, and imaginative assessment constitutes an important experiment in decolonising assessments in Higher Education. To do this, we draw on assessment and decolonial theory, both wide and varied fields. In this case study, we draw on data from a history module in a Social Science course in a Bachelor of Education program in a South African university. This means that we are embedded in a specific national context, but we argue that the questions we raise are universal.

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## Introduction

Assessment is a key aspect of how Higher Education functions. Assessment of any course is where a large amount of the power and purpose of the course lie. In her analysis of assessments, Nkealah conceptualises assessment as a shifting field:

... assessment in higher education is like walking through a forest path that is anything but straight. No matter which direction one tries to take assessment there is always some kind of problem when it comes to implementation. Sometimes the problem is only evident on close scrutiny, and may affect only a handful of students, but it is still a problem (Nkealah, 2023, p. 10).

Decolonisation is a similarly shifting field, defying simple definition by its nature (Mignolo, 2011). This article opens questions about how and why we need to be thinking about decolonising assessment.

We present a case study that offers potential for the decolonisation of some more traditionally used assessment practices in Higher Education (Asamoah, 2019). Assessment in Higher Education is an evolving field. Within this field, decolonisation of assessment is an emerging literature. There are exciting developments across the global South and elsewhere, for example in intercultural education in Latin America, indigenous pedagogies in Australia and Canada, and decolonisation itself in South Africa

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(Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Crossouard & Oprandi, 2022; Eizadirad, 2019; Godsell, 2021; Hill et al., 2023; Levy-Feldman & Libman, 2022; Mackinlay & Barney, 2014; McArthur, 2016; Morcom & Freeman, 2018). These innovations range from formulating assessments around indigenous knowledge and practices (Hill et al., 2023) to understanding decolonising assessments as an aspect of social justice (Eizadirad, 2019). This article contributes to this literature with some new approaches towards ideas of decolonised assessment.

One of the most commonly used assessments in History (and many other areas of Higher Education) is the essay. Often this is a form requiring objectivity, an expectation steeped in coloniality (Crossouard & Oprandi, 2022). These essays reduce students to their ability to produce a certain type of academic writing or to remember certain decontextualised historic facts (Eizadirad, 2019) The focus is on reproduction of often Eurocentric information in a way that is recognised as ‘academic’ writing. This precludes students from incorporating other ways of knowing. Judging students by a false standard of objectivity, erases the humanity of previously colonised students, who are struggling to exist in an institution that still harbours expectations steeped in coloniality (Crossouard & Oprandi, 2022; Jansen, 2019). This false universalism results in their humanity being erased when they are judged by a false standard of objectivity. This also works against epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a).

Figure 1 suggests some aspects of assessment practices with colonial residues.

We argue for the decolonising and learning value of providing a multiplicity of creative and personal assessment modalities through a case study in a History course: ‘Unthinkable Freedoms’, a 7-week course on the French and Haitian Revolutions. Traditional forms of assessment in History at university are usually essays, required to be written in a very specific academic language, marshalling historical facts that are not typically linked in any way to the students’ everyday realities.

While these types of essays can be important for critical thinking (Wineburg, 2001), we also know that they are socially constructed (Read et al., 2005). The essay as a format, depending on the essay question, also has the potential to circumscribe epistemic access (Morrow, 2009), and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013), as the language of the academic essay can be specific and elite, not necessarily linked to students’ prior knowledge. In South Africa, the language of study is English (in some cases Afrikaans), a colonial language that still wields immense power, and in which coloniality abides. The coloniality of the assessment depends on the question asked in the essay: does the question allow for the student’s own knowledges to be included in meaningful ways? Is the knowledge contextualised and not operating in a false universal? In processes of decolonisation the kinds of knowledge which are contained in a course are important (Ajani, 2019; Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017)

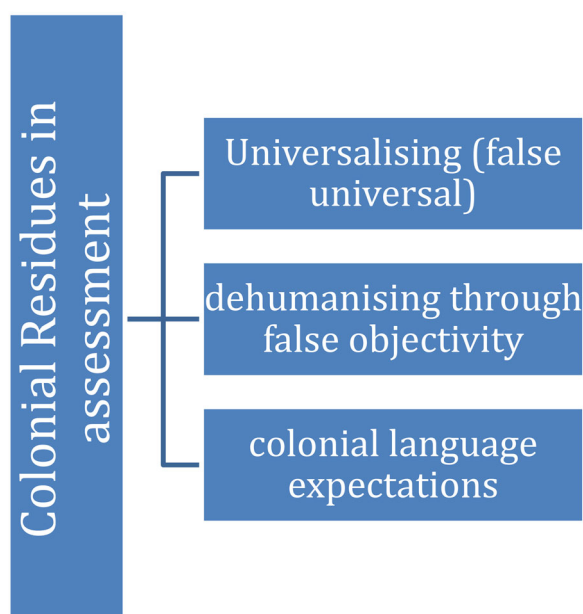


Figure 1. Illustration of aspects of colonised assessment.

We argue that practices with decolonising potential, such as assessment differentiation, assessment practices that foreground prior knowledge, humanisation, voice, and emotion, can be worked into assessment strategies without diluting the impact, validity, or reliability of an assessment (Godsell, 2021). An awareness of dynamics of coloniality in the university in South Africa demands that we rethink the ethos of assessment. There have been moves towards more inclusive and less punitive forms of assessment, where continuous assessment, for example, allows for moments of failure that do not define the entire course (University of the Witwatersrand, 2022) However, our underlying assumption is that the current ethos of assessment is still shaped and rooted in colonial practices.

One result of coloniality that we attempted to address in our course is dehumanisation which works off the colonial construction of who a human subject is (McKittrick, 2015; Wynter, 2003). We did this by engaging themes of colonisation, slavery, and race throughout the course, by including the Haitian revolution alongside the French, as well as differentiating our assessment strategy to invite students to bring their contexts, prior knowledge, and emotions into the assessments alongside the content knowledge.

We acknowledge the need for fair, reliable, and valid assessments. We argue that these can be better achieved through diversified types of assessment. When we speak of the universal expectation that is created by much traditional assessment we stress it is a false universal, a colonial universal that was created with the idea of the student drawn from the colonial origins of the university (Bhambra et al., 2018). We understand the current colonial ethos in our University to rely heavily on standardised and universalised practice, which is not sufficient to fairly assess the diverse student populace, although university policy is shifting.<sup>1</sup> It is colonial in that such an ethos of assessment does not consider that the student populace comes to Higher Education with different knowledge systems, languages, experiences, personalities, and learning abilities that cannot be justly universally assessed through standardised practices (Godsell, 2021).

Assessment inevitably influences how knowledge is created, accessed, and understood. McArthur argues 'if the engagement with knowledge is not simply a technical or procedural act then neither can be our assessment of that engagement' (2016, p. 976). Assessment is necessary for progressing or regressing students and for gauging their academic performance. However, we argue, practices of valid, and reliable assessment can and should be decolonised. There are multiple strands of assessment that can work towards decolonised assessment, and much important work in the assessment field lends itself towards use as decolonised assessment strategy. We propose the decolonisation of assessment as a praxis that disrupts coloniality of knowledge and being. It is concerned with ways of knowing, with positionality, the affective, and emotional dimensions, and it should consider the experiences, personalities, and knowledges of the student populace. Subsequently, we discuss some developments within assessment scholarship that we link to decolonial scholarship.

## Learning oriented assessment and decolonisation

Decolonial strategies in education is a wide and ever-emerging field. In this section, due to space limitations, we draw on a few key theorists to locate our work within the strand of assessment theory which supports this article.

Carless's (2007, 2015) learning-oriented assessment (LOA) is useful because the idea of assessments as 'learning tasks' significantly impacts the point of assessment, in ways that we argue are decolonial. The focus is on learning as an outcome of the assessment, rather than just the marks and the assessment as a measurement. The writing of plays,<sup>2</sup> for example, was intended as a learning mechanism for learners to engage the historical moment through discursive writing processes. This made listening to conversations taking place during the writing of the plays important, to provide immediate feedback, and where students' input/s to each other was materially important. Aspects of intertwined, learning-oriented, pedagogical, and assessment strategies tie in with decolonisation of pedagogy and assessment in those aspects centering epistemic access (Morrow, 2009), feedback as dialogue (Winstone & Carless, 2019) and knowledge production, where student knowledge production is foregrounded in some way. Shahjahan et al. (2022) argue that 'constraints were tied to whose ways of knowing are privileged in existing histories, policies, practices, methodologies and/or theories, and addressing them in the curriculum and pedagogy' (p. 83).

Shahjahan et al. (2022) in their investigation of research on decolonisation of curriculum and pedagogy, across different geographical spaces and different frameworks, important aspects of decolonisation are 'a) recognising constraints, b) disrupting, and c) making space for alternatives' (p.85). All these three things took place in our course, in different moments and ways, some planned for, some spontaneous. Mignolo writes (of Wynter, on whom we draw in this article): 'the decolonial option does not simply protest the contents of imperial coloniality; it demands a delinking of oneself from the knowledge systems we take for granted (and can profit from) and practice epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo in McKittrick, 2015, p. 106). Zavala (2016) writes that decolonial education practices include three elements: counter/storytelling, healing and reclaiming. These elements are located in the Latin American decolonial trajectory, within the realm of indigenous and place-based pedagogies (Zavala, 2016). For the assessment structure on this course, reclaiming is an important aspect, as students are invited to bring their own knowledges, identities, and emotions to the course, even though the content of the course is distant in space and time, Counter/storytelling is part of the content structure of the course, which foregrounds the Haitian revolution, and the indigenous peoples subjected to genocide on the island of Haiti before the sugar plantations were implemented. Decolonising the assessment is, therefore, done in conjunction with decolonising the curriculum and pedagogy, through addressing Eurocentric content, unseating modernity and its assumptions, and contesting coloniality in the curriculum (Bhambra et al., 2018; Luckett et al., 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018b).

In a recent special edition of the *London Review* examining decolonisation of the school curriculum, decolonisation is affirmed as a humanisation and social justice project (Race et al., 2022) However, we are also cautioned against the metaphorisation of decolonisation, and needing to keep in centred in decolonial movements. In South Africa, part of this means drawing from students' 2015 calls to decolonise university spaces. This has implications for all aspects of the university. As Luckett et al. write 'Decolonial theorists apply the concept of modernity/coloniality to the politics of knowledge production, and they see the same patterns of power working to determine who produces knowledge, who owns it and who legitimates it'. We are concerned with the process of the production and the legitimation of knowledge' (Luckett et al., 2019, p. 33) Thus, we locate our specific decolonial intervention in disrupting, imagining alternatives, counter/storytelling and reclaiming in an assessment space. Below, we explain the nature of the course in relation to previous assessment and link that with the need to diversify assessment, before we unpack decoloniality as our conceptual framework.

## Unpacking the course

This first year History content course is a module on the Haitian and French Revolutions offered in a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. The French Revolution is a moment in history lauded for being an important root of modern democracy, of rights discourses, and of fighting for individual freedoms. It forms a part of the South African national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for history; therefore, there is a need to teach it in BEd. Since the nature of the content is Eurocentric, students appeared to battle to connect<sup>3</sup> with the course, and so the attempt towards incorporating student knowledge production is stilted and difficult. Many of the students expressed that they felt distanced from the course in space and time and, therefore, questioned the importance of the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> We attempted to address the disconnect, as well as the relevance and accuracy of the course, by including the Haitian Revolution – currently, a case study in the high school history curriculum. This addresses issues of race and unqualified liberty – as well as the brand-new state of Haiti being punished by imperialist European states, in terms of reparations due to France (Casimir & Mignolo, 2020). The foregrounding of Haiti makes a statement about whose bodies and beings and histories are valued in the class, and an attempt toward human-as-praxis (see McKittrick, 2015) rather than disembodied knowledge, or indeed knowledge that actively disempowers.

The foundational theme of the course was 'freedom', and we encouraged the students to relate the ideas of freedom to their own lives. This, in 'post-apartheid' South Africa, immediately relates to issues of coloniality. The course is a writing intensive (WI) course, a project run by the Wits Writing Program (WWP). This means that writing-as-thinking and reading-as-thinking are central to every aspect of the course. Writing appears in different forms, and formats in the course (low stakes such as free writes,

high stakes such as essays) to facilitate this writing-as-thinking. The students are given prompts for free writing exercises in lectures as well as tutorials.<sup>5</sup> Writing understood as thinking, means that writing includes reading, talking, generating ideas, and that writing is used as a tool for learning and for measuring learning. Together with the more formalised writing exercises this collection of writing was brought together in portfolios. In this, there is a lot of formative writing that happens before the students are expected to write their summative essay. In order to allow for continuous responses to student work, the WWP allocates Writing Fellow (WF) tutors to each WI course. These writing fellows provided detailed feedback on each piece of writing, thus offering developmental support (Nichols, 2017). We used several different strategies to get the students involved and excited about the course, from the most popular song of the moment (Sho Madjozi: John Cena) to switching the format of the assignments due from academic essays only, into plays, letters, and portfolios. This assessment differentiation is what we used to decolonise the course.

Previously, this course had been assessed through a formalised history essay, in which the students would have to make an argument in response to a question and substantiate that argument. An intention of the assessment strategy of the course was to disrupt (Shahjahan et al., 2022) the previous approach of the course, which had been traditional historical essay, where students would argue a point through sources and the material they had studied in the course. We wanted to disrupt this assessment strategy, which we do recognise as an important and legitimate approach. However, we found this approach distanced the history, and so the learning, from the students, and we also found it in line with the universalising ethos of higher assessment that often does not focus on the student as person and does not allow for learning as process. This has the potential to leave unanswered questions of epistemic access to knowledge, and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013).

To explain the assessment structure of the course, the university practices bound us to an exam that counted 50% of the course. The 50% remaining we split. the play script was marked out of 10, the play presentation was out of 10, the portfolio was out of 10, and the reflective essay was out of 20. This did mean that the course was assessment heavy, but we were designing around a continuous assessment format to heighten engagement, with more low stakes assessments rather than one high stakes essay to complement the exam (Holmes, 2018). All the assessments were designed to be accessible, to be open to different kinds of language and writing, and to be deeply reflexive and contextual. In this way, even though the course was assessment heavy, the assessments were built into the course where time was allocated to completing them, and they were designed to be more epistemically inclusive and less stressful than the standard essay. The plays, created in 20 groups of around 15 students each, offered both potential risks and rewards. On the one hand, plays developed communally over 5-hour long tutorials could be stressful. What the teaching team observed during tutorials was a playful engagement with the history, with students debating historical points and characters while developing the scripts. The plays were only 5 to 7 min long, which lessened the stress. Play marks were group marks. This meant there was a balance between relational and individual marks. There was some of the standard groupwork concern with some people not being involved in the plays, and yet still getting marks. We tried to manage this through tutor monitoring, but this is something we need to pay more attention to moving forward. We supported each type of writing with rubrics and exemplars, as we were aware that students come into first year with dramatically different exposure to and experience with writing.

## Methodology

The article is underpinned by qualitative research methodology, with a case-study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Ethics protocol H18/10/10 was awarded by the University of the Witwatersrand for this research. We use the case-study model, as it allows for qualitative in-depth data collection and analysis from one specific course, to draw more generalised conclusions about decolonising assessment. We used assessments from one 7-week History module (Unthinkable Freedoms), run at the end of the year of a first-year Bachelor of Education Social Science course.<sup>6</sup> In the course, we pursued a path of continuous assessment, intended to increase student engagement.(Cole & Spence, 2012; Holmes, 2018) This means that we had three assessments across a 7 week course, which were written/compiled in lectures, in tutorials and at home. We analysed each data set separately, through either content or thematic

| Dataset Number | Name              | Description                                                                                                                                                       | Type of Analysis | Number analysed  |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Dataset one    | Playscript        | Play scripts for specific “historical moments” from the relevant revolutions, written in groups in tutorials.                                                     | Thematic         | 15 (from groups) |
| Dataset two    | Reflective Essay  | Students asked to reflect on the question “What is freedom”, tying it into their personal experience and knowledge from the course                                | Thematic         | 30               |
| Dataset three  | Writing portfolio | Students were asked to choose two pieces of work from their writing exercises they had done in lectures and tutorials throughout the course, to submit for marks. | Content          | 30               |

**Figure 2.** Table describing datasets and analysis.

analysis. Themes observed were informed by our decolonial conceptual framework, outlined below. The datasets were assessments submitted: plays, reflective essays, and portfolios (Figure 2).

We drew on the play scripts as dataset one, where students were given a historical moment from one of the revolutions, and had to create a script to portray the moment dramatically. Dataset two was the reflective essay, where students were asked to reflect on the question ‘What is Freedom’, linking it to their own understanding of freedom, and grounding it in the historical events taught in the course. Datasets one and two were thematically analysed. Dataset three was a writing portfolio, where the students were asked to choose two pieces of work from the writing exercises they had done in lectures and tutorials throughout the course, to submit for marks. We analysed which specific pieces (which writing prompt responses) the students submitted, rather than what they wrote in those pieces.

Three hundred and nine registered students of varied socio-economic backgrounds attended this course. We received informed consent from 30 students, meaning we worked with data from around 10% of the class. This sample allows for meaningful qualitative research, as each submission was analysed in depth. Our theorising was at a micro level in an inductive direction (i.e. theorising from the specific out to the more general; Djamba & Neuman, 2006) allowing us to look at each student’s response in each of the datasets we collected. We drew out general themes from across the data, informed by our conceptual framework (so were especially sensitive to themes emerging around affect, expression, connection, and emotion) and supported this with some examples from the texts themselves. Our reliance on quotations from texts is limited by space limitations of this article.

### Conceptual framework: decolonisation

Our conceptual framework is embedded in decolonisation and involves several spheres of this theoretical area. We draw particularly on Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a), Mignolo and Walsh (2018), and Maldonado-Torres’ (2007) theorisation of coloniality. Maldonado-Torres writes:

coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

Coloniality determines the ways in which the colonised were seen, conceptualised, and imagined as 'non-human'. The legacies of this live in current education structures. In this study, we focus on the way coloniality is maintained through assessment.

Wynter (2003) argues that undoing the category Human/Man<sup>7</sup> offers a possibility for those on the outside of that category (anyone not white and male) to rebuild the category of human based on connection and locality, rather than domination and a false and exclusionary universalisation. The core of decolonisation<sup>8</sup> is to destroy the tendrils of coloniality that infiltrate the daily lives of millions of people worldwide. Decolonising education is an important part of this (Christie, 2020; Le Grange, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). There is a need to challenge the colonial practices of assessment that erase students through assessment practices that do not allow for their knowledge or their humanity to thrive. We use decolonisation to challenge assessment practices, which hold colonial residues, and to show how multiple ways of assessing can be used without losing the validity and reliability of the assessment. Our conceptual framework informed coding and themes emerging, while we were careful not to let the framework dictate the emergent themes.

## Data analysis

This data analysis section will firstly unpack the attempt made in the construction of the assessment to decolonise, and then examine the data from the three data sets in detail, in order to make arguments about what aspects of assessments could be considered useful towards decolonisation. In the analysis below, we draw out themes that occur across the datasets. Due to space limitations, we give only a few examples from each dataset.

## The play: the past and the present alive together

A historical moment (one historical event or happening) from either the French or the Haitian revolution was assigned to each of the 20 groups by the course coordinator. The groups were then required to write a play script from that moment, displaying some engagement on what that moment meant for, or in relation to, freedom. They would then act this script out for the class in the last lecture of the module. The students were placed in groups of about 15. These are relatively big groups. This was unavoidable because of the size of the class, which had 309 students in it, and so we could not practically make smaller groups and have more plays, as this was also a 7-week course, and we had limited staging time. However, the size of the groups meant that there were a lot of people to be on stage, and this seemed to decrease individual embarrassment somewhat.

It was important that the group work was discursive and relational, to deepen a dialogic element in the course. We supported this as much as possible. Groups were given time to do this assessment in their tutorials, with the idea that their Writing Fellow (WF) tutor would give them real time feedback and that they would not have to find time to meet outside of class time. They had five 1-hour tutorials where they had support on the development of the plays from their tutor. They found their own roles in the plays: as script writers, as actors, as researchers. The students were expected to research the moments by themselves, and then turn them into a 5- to 7-min amateur play, with characters, dialogue, and staging.

Allowing the students to infuse their own personalities and creativity – be it in the form of a song, language, performance, or poetry – into the play was a decolonial strategy. While this runs the risk of presentism (Wineburg, 2001), we judged the potential understanding of the humanity of history to outweigh this risk.

This process of using historical fiction generated by the students was intended to ensure that the students gained a deeper understanding of their moment while resonating with the human element of history, with an understanding of narrative and historiography. Students benefited from watching performances by other students to engage with each of the historical moments. Through the plays, students were allowed to bring in their knowledges, personalities, experiences, and emotions to their characters and scenes when re-constructing their historical moments in an embodied way that is different from the act of writing, no matter how reflexive and personal. This became a learning-oriented

assessment where the focus was on embodied learning as an outcome of the assessment (Carless, 2015). Lecturers watched as young South Africans became Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Charlotte Corday, and the stormers of the Bastille. History came alive, through their own voices and in their own words. In that way, we introduced a different, oral and embodied assessment as the students were literally using their bodies in the assessment. This form of assessment is not traditionally used in History assessment (although plays are used in assessment around the world, there is very little literature available on this). It allowed for creativity, emotion, and contextualised knowledge and in this way, we argue is a move towards a decolonised assessment.

The key theme emerging from the analysis of the plays is the overlaying of past and present in order to convey a historical understanding. If the interpretations were sometimes anachronistic, this was how the students made sense of the themes in their own time. The analysis across the plays' content shows the students' dexterity in marshaling their own understanding of how concepts unfold and are languaged in the present, to convey a contextualised understanding of happenings in their given historical moment. This speaks to a relationship to knowledge in which students are accessing, researching, and debating history in order to display their understandings of the moment, showing the assessment to be effective in getting an understanding of the historical moment. Their relationship to knowledge shifts in this process. An example of this is evident in the following extract from a play:

*(at Champs de Mars when they gathered to sign a petition - in July 1791)*

*Protestor 1: Comrades! Louis XVI has to step down. We no longer want him as our king. Because he is useless, he does not deserve the throne. He has to be the last king of France.*

*Comrades: (Applause)*

*Protestor 1: We cannot tolerate it anymore. No more powers for the National Assembly to make decisions for us. He doesn't know his responsibilities, but the National Assembly still protects him and retains his throne.*

*Comrades: (Applause)*

*Protestor 1: We demand the end of Louis XVI as a king and the monarchy, and that France should forever be a republic.*

*Comrades: (Applause)*

*Protestor 1: I, Jacques Pierre Brissot as your leader, present a petition that all France Citizens have to sign, it is outside Hotel de la Nation.*

*Comrades: Viva! (hitting the tables) Viva! (applause)' Group 13, Historical Moment: Champs du March Massacre*

In the above extract, we see engagement with the emotionality and intensity of the moment through students using their own struggle and protest vocabulary. 'Viva' and 'comrades' are common vocabulary in South Africa and internationally for protest, solidarity, struggle, and change. They would not be the language used in France at the time, but their inclusion in the play shows a recognition of important aspects of resistance and protest in the process. This use of 'viva' and South African political rhetoric was mirrored across five of the 15 play scripts. While Wineburg (2001) might critique this for presentism, we argue that using tools of conceptual language of the present to convey histories is a part of decolonisation, as it seeks to make the content more relatable and easily expressed when assessed. In another play, on the moment of the War in the Vendee, South African struggle music was utilised to convey the meaning and emotion of the moment:

*Woman 1: but France will gain freedom at the expense of our own. This revolution might be liberating but [in] other states in France, but it is an oppression in the Vendee.*

*Woman 2: indeed! Land taxes have risen, our church has been attacked.*

*Woman 3: they have killed our kind, chased away our priests, sold the good from our church, eaten everything we have, and now they want to take away our sons.*

*Playing the song Senseni nah [sic]*

'Senzenina' is a South Africa struggle song, whose first line translates to 'What have we done?' with the connotation 'What have we done, as Black people, to deserve such terrible oppression'. It was used during apartheid to protest the atrocities of the minority white regime against the majority Black

population, so the song has a special weight in South Africa, and conveys in an indigenous language, the desperation of the people of the Vendee. The generation of students in the class who did not fight against apartheid themselves still treasure these struggle songs and their meanings. Using the song also made the content more relatable to students' own contexts as it questioned the living conditions of the people of Vendee in the same way that the song questioned the living conditions of Black people during the apartheid period, and continues to question the social, economic, and political oppressions of democratic South Africa. This kind of expression was observed across the majority of the plays, through language, song, or performance. Students drew on their own contextualised knowledges, languages, histories, and social, cultural, and political repertoires. To be able to draw on these in an assessment is a step towards decolonisation as it challenges Western knowledges with indigenous ones. The themes showing contextualisation, knowledge production (rather than reproduction) and the space for emotion suggest this, as an effective move towards decolonising assessment.

## The portfolio

The portfolio submission was a collection of pieces of writing from the course, from both lectures and tutorials. As part of a WI course, we often paused in lectures to allow students to record their thoughts in written form for a few minutes (Elbow, 2000). We would give the students' prompts to respond to in these free writing exercises. Sometimes the prompts asked the students to relate the historical moment to their own lives – (what does freedom look like in your life?). Sometimes they asked conceptual questions (what does freedom mean?). Sometimes they simply required reflection on historical meaning (what did the Terror do to freedom?) In many of the prompts we invoked the theme of the course: 'freedom'. These writings were not for marks or immediate submission.

The intention with these writing exercises was to transform students from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers, that is, to move them to a level of thinking and writing appropriate for Higher Education in a way which reinforces the importance of their own thoughts and knowledges. This is capturing a decolonial element valuing the knowledge of the previously colonised where that knowledge had been negated and ignored (Fataar, 2018). Transforming students from being knowledge consumers was an important aspect of decolonisation, as it allowed students – particularly the marginalised – to have a voice that has usually been erased in Higher Education assessment.

The students were required to choose two pieces of their own writing which they found particularly interesting, or where they thought their thinking was compelling, and submit this to us for a mark out of 10. We had these as requirements because we wanted to focus on the thinking, knowledge production, and expression, through writing, rather than 'good' writing. We also wanted to give them a choice in what would be marked to get them to engage with their own process and their own work throughout the course, for them to have the agency to say, 'I like my thinking here, I think what I said here was interesting'.

In analysing the portfolio, we completed a content analysis rather than a thematic analysis, and looked at what pieces they had included, where these overlapped, and what this might mean. Many students (24 out of 30) included their first free writing, their reflection on 'What is freedom' in their portfolio. This is interesting not so much for the content of their reflections, but that they found these reflections valuable. They gave value to their own thoughts at the beginning of the course, which pushes back against a lot of first year feeling<sup>9</sup> that their opinion is not valued and is unwarranted, unacademic, and unscientific, as part of the construction of coloniality in the university. Another two common pieces included were free writes entitled 'what is freedom in relation to slavery?' and 'is history relevant to learn?'. The first speaks to their ideas of freedom transforming during the course, or their engagement with the course. The second is them thinking about the actual discipline and its relevance. This brings them into conversation with ideas of History as a discipline. The decolonial aspect of this assessment involves both humanising, in asking the students to value their own thinking, and knowledge production, allowing the students to produce knowledge through the writing prompts.

## Freedom and consciousness: the reflective essay

The reflective essay was the major formative assessment on the course, although both portfolio and play counted towards the term mark. It also served as a trial run for the exam, the feedback helping students to revise and prepare. The topic of the reflective essay was 'What is Freedom?'. Students were directed to reflect on what they had learned about freedom during the course, and to offer accurate historical examples from the French and Haitian revolutions to illustrate their moments of learning, understanding, thinking, or growth. The purpose of this essay was to bring students into contact with their own growth during the course, while rooting their learning in these historical periods. It was a move away from a standard historical essay, a move into acknowledging students' own learning processes, acknowledging, and allowing the students as humans to enter the essay.

We analysed 30 reflective essays through thematic analysis. Key themes that arose were ideas of freedom in the present, individual versus collective freedom 'but how will a country be governed if the public have different needs and the idea of freedom is being reinforced at the same time?' (S6). There were varying levels of historical understanding of the events taught in the course. Freedom was discussed as a concept across all essays, and all essays had some level of relating historical struggles for freedom to a current understanding, and possession, of freedom. There was also a consistent (across all submissions) grappling with what freedom meant. Another theme that emerged was freedom among different communities, and what this might mean;

Different people have different ideas of what freedom is. This is largely based on their context, for example, people from the LGBT+ community would lobby for an idea of freedom that removes discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, whereas people living in poverty would advocate for financial equality. (S8)

This contextual understanding of freedom is important for decolonisation, as the students are relating it to their own, and their peers or communities, lives, rather than keeping it locked into a removed Eurocentric historical consciousness. In the reflective essays students showed a developing historical consciousness, as they tested their own ideas of freedom against what they had learned in the course (Seixas, 2006). While many connections were made in the present, the reflective essays were grounded in historical narratives of the French and Haitian revolutions. This grounding gave them concrete historical context and a context different from their own. This facilitated the reflection on freedom in terms of their own knowledge, and in terms of historical knowledge, in terms of the past, and in terms of the present. The connections students made between South Africa and the French and Haitian revolutions (both historical and present) are notable. There was an awareness and reflexivity about a shift in position and understanding of freedom throughout the course, which points to a shift in relationship to their own and the conceptual knowledge engaged on the course. This was displayed through discussions of historical knowledge and reflections on their process with the idea of freedom. One student wrote:

... I aimed to show how my understanding of what freedom is changed and extended while attending history classes. My understanding of freedom was limited to restrictions. It was without equality, independence, and privileges or opportunities. Attending these history classes taught me a lot about freedom and the events that portray what freedom is. It also made me look at freedom in a completely different view and away from my immediate view which was based on the understanding of freedom in the context of South African history. (S16)

The process of reflexivity and engaging with their own knowledge took student knowledge production seriously, giving student voice an important part in the assessment. This humanises students, in a move towards decolonising the assessment. While there were some issues of lack of linking to historical content, the majority of these essays connected students' lives to the idea of freedom, as well as to the historical content of the course. In this, they directly link themselves, their knowledges, and their bodies, into the historical knowledge that we teach in the course. When there was no change in views this was also defended, and related to the student's own context:

My understanding of what is freedom has not changed much from this course, I still think about freedom in the same way as I had learnt about the apartheid system of Southern Africa before democracy'. (S23)

This push for students to contextualise their knowledge was a move toward decolonising the format of the assessment and the knowledge asked for and valued in the assessment. In this, the assessment was humanising (valued the students' learning process) contextualised (as it valued the students' lives and contexts) and knowledge producing – as the students enmeshed their present understanding with the historical understanding of the course.

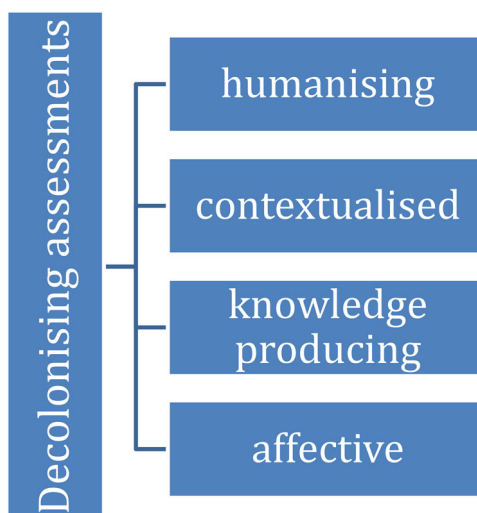
## Discussion

We argue, through the above data, that creative and multiple assessments which contextualise and humanise, and invite the students to bring more of themselves into the assessments, can do decolonial work. (Zembylas, 2018). The three datasets show a triple engagement: with the self, with history, and with the present. This engagement with the self and the present moves away from more traditional history assessments, but the data above shows the students also historicised effectively. They show that students were able to contextualise the history to show their understanding of the concepts and occurrences. This suggests that students were able to bring themselves to their assessments in terms of their own lives and to understand how their thinking had changed, a valuable display of meta-cognition. The assessments also valued students' prior knowledge and allowed them to bring this into knowledge production, giving them agency in their assessment in different ways. Our findings lead us to suggest tentatively the following elements when decolonising assessment (Figure 3).

The above diagram suggests that strategies that humanise (invite the student to bring themselves and their lives into the assessment), contextualise (engage with the students lived context), produce knowledge (rather than just interacting with or regurgitating knowledge, students are actively producing knowledge from their own spaces and contexts) and they involve the affective dimension involving students emotional domain, valuing the students beyond their intellectual input.<sup>10</sup> We suggest that these aspects can be worked into assessments in different Higher Education spaces to work towards decolonisation.

Zembylas argues that 'there is a political and pragmatic need to reflect critically on what it means to decolonise Higher Education pedagogies in South Africa by means of transformative education discourses and practices that reclaim humanity in knowing and knowledge-making' (Zembylas, 2018, p. 3). Zembylas further shows how humanising pedagogies are part of that reflection. We argue that this needs to be taken into decolonising Higher Education assessment strategies and that our data show possible strategies for humanisation in assessment.

These contextual engagements, through assessment, embed the students in this history in a way that it makes sense from their own lives. They are thus more deeply engaged with the history, through the personal and the affective. Students become contextual, affective knowledge producers through the



**Figure 3.** Potential elements of decolonised assessments.

reflective, creative engaged, and processual assignments explored above. Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes: 'epistemic freedom is fundamentally about the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism' (2018, p. 17). Assessments that involve humanisation, knowledge production, and the affective domain respond to the demands laid out by Ndlovu-Gatsheni, above.

In designing the assessments, we considered the three aspects of decolonisation raised by Shahjahan et al. (2022). First, we must recognise constraints on shifting towards decoloniality. The constraints we recognised were the course structures and progression and mark requirements common in Higher Education. We also recognised that an assessment structure that does not consider students' lives and contexts, as well as students as knowledge producers would not enhance epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a). Second, there is a need to disrupt the constraints. To do that, the assessments provided a space for emotion, engagement, and making content contextually relatable. Finally, there is a need to create a space for alternatives and the alternatives we created were contextually relatable, emotionally engaged, humanising, historically grounded, and reflexive assessments

We argue that a decolonised curriculum is only one part of a course, and a decolonised curriculum can still be heavy with coloniality in pedagogy and assessment. Decolonised assessment can bring decoloniality to even a course based on Eurocentric material, as part of a decolonial pedagogy and assessment strategy. We argue that without decolonised assessment, the process of decolonising higher education will be incomplete.

The assessments explored above have important affective elements: all made space for the students to bring their humanity into the assessment space. In the portfolio and the reflective essay, the focus was on valuing students' own thinking process and knowledge production, but emotion was also welcomed. In the plays, emotions played an important role in conveying the historical argument. Emotions were triggered through song, through costume, or through humour. This shows a key aspect of a possible decolonial history teaching method: the importance and relevance of emotions, both of the historians, and those in the historical moment (Casimir & Mignolo, 2020).

The multiplicity in assessment, and continuous assessment, allowed for various forms of knowledge expression and exploration throughout the course, and for high student engagement. (Cole & Spence, 2012; Holmes, 2018) It also made space for multiple ways of giving and hearing feedback, (Carless, 2015). The three different forms of assessment allowed for individual as well as communal participation in thinking through aspects of the course, introducing a relational aspect into the assessment structure. The differences over time meant the assessment was a process rather than a single interrogatory moment. This allowed students to participate in developing their thinking over the course and engaging with that thought in different ways in different moments, allowing themselves to circle back, or draw non-linear connections. The students' journey through the assessments made them engage with their own thoughts, with time, and with historical thinking. Disciplinary aspects will also mean that decolonising assessment will look different in different courses. We made efforts to bring the knowledge closer to the students in ways that were relevant for them and included different tactics in assessment to soften the dread and fear that assessment often brings, which detracts from the actual engagement with knowledge.

The evidence in this study is from one case study, and the conclusions we draw are complex. We hope they invite an engagement in thinking around the potentialities of decolonising assessment, as well as presenting practical possible examples. Decolonisation is a constantly evolving set of interactions and processes. Through this data, we hope to bring to the fore the need to focus decolonial attention on assessment and to think about what kinds of assessment might make decolonisation possible.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the combination of assessments used in this course allowed the students to access and produce knowledge through tools that are relevant in their contexts, and so humanising on multiple levels, pushing back against a solely Eurocentric knowledge. This allowed the important concepts of the history to be approached, thought through and experimented with. Because of the combination of the creative, embodied, and reflexive aspects of the assessments that foregrounded voice, emotion,

physical presence, and historically grounded creativity, these assessments allowed students to bring their whole selves into the assessment process, instead of isolating knowledge linked to the course. We have presented these as moves towards decolonisation. We argue that it is crucial that assessment be addressed in decolonisation discourses, along with knowledge areas such as curriculum, and with pedagogy. We also argue for viewing assessment as an important way of promoting and improving learning (Carless, 2015). Walsh (2007) contends that 'Western thinking must be confronted and a different thought constructed and positioned from 'Other' histories and subjectivities' (Walsh, 2007, p. 226). While we present possible decolonial assessment practices in just one course, and do not pretend to provide a roadmap towards decolonisation (which would also be disingenuous towards decolonial methodology), we argue that this is significant in teaching in what Walsh calls the 'cracks' in coloniality, where we can find spaces to insert and practice decoloniality (Walsh, 2020). Providing diverse forms of assessment in one course allowed students to access knowledges (their own and those presented in the course) in multiple ways and spaces that facilitated both epistemic access and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013; Morrow, 2009).

The assessments discussed in this article offer the potential to open pathways to thinking about decolonising assessments towards growth of critical engagement, of different kinds of knowledges and knowledge production, and emotive and humanising elements. This is in line with assessment literature focusing on deep learning, and learning oriented assessment.(Carless, 2015). This article suggests that a decolonial reading on assessment opens different possibilities for approaching assessment. Assessment is a space in Higher Education which holds significant power. If decolonisation continues to be a priority that is actioned in Higher Education spaces, we need to include assessment in it, and confront our own thinking around assessment, which power structures we unconsciously uphold, and why, and how assessment facilitates or inhibits learning.

## Notes

1. University of Witwatersrand Standing Orders for Assessment released in 2022 show significant movement away from traditional assessment policies.
2. It is important to note that plays in and of themselves are not decolonial and can in fact be seen as a more colonial institution. However, we argue in this piece that the way in which plays were used, centering around collaboration, voice, interaction and emotion, constitute a decolonial impulse in terms of assessment, not in terms of plays themselves. Even in this impulse, plays could constitute a colonial mechanism – again it is in the use of this mechanism, explained below, that we offer a decolonial impulse.
3. This was observed by the lecturer and the tutors and was directly asked about in class as part of the lecture although answers were not collected for this research.
4. This becomes evident from questions that arise from students while teaching the course about why they are learning about events so removed from South Africa and South African contexts.
5. Free writing is a writing exercise in which students are encouraged to write whatever comes to mind about a topic, without stopping or judging their thoughts. The only two rules of free writing are: don't stop writing for the allotted time and don't cross anything out.
6. We had intended to include a second round of study which involved students' thoughts on the assessment process, but we did not collect these in the first year. When we had wanted to collect these, Covid-19 happened and disrupted the course so dramatically we could not continue these assessment methods or the research. We acknowledge student perspective on the process is a gap in this research.
7. The category Wynter works with is specifically that of Human and Man, because Man (as a gendered and racialised category) fulfilled the requirements of the category Human. This excludes women, excludes those categorised as 'less than' human by colonialism.
8. Decolonisation and decoloniality are distinct concepts, and decoloniality is more readily used to talk about the current work of undoing coloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Decolonisation, in the American literature, is more used to talk about this historic process of undoing active colonisation, and so it more associated with undoing land colonisation processes. However, Zembylas (2018) argues that decolonisation also carries with it the historical weight of the struggles against colonisation and speaks to some of the active work that is happening. Decolonisation is also more often used in the African literature and was used in the history #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/2016, where decolonisation in South African education got much of its impetus. For this reason, we generally use 'decolonisation' rather than 'decoloniality'.
9. This has been observed over 11 years experience of lecturing and tutoring at University.

10. Some of these aspects closely align with authentic assessment theory (Maniram & Maistry, 2018), and this theory can be invoked to bolster the impact of decolonising assessment.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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