



Acts of decolonial love in academic literacy: Practitioners' perspectives and transformative practices

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Abstract

The concept of decolonial love offers a transformative alternative lens for re-imagining and re-thinking the teaching and learning of academic literacy in South African higher education. Decolonial love challenges deficit-based, Eurocentric models and foregrounds students' sensibilities, bodies, cultural repertoires, knowledges and lived experiences by insisting on affirmation, recognition, and respect for humanity in its totality. This study examines how academic literacy practitioners enact non-violent epistemic practices to create cracks in colonial pedagogies and practices and affirm alternative epistemologies. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study draws on questionnaire data collected from 16 members of the Social Justice Interest Group (SIG) of the South African Association for Academic Literacy Practitioners (SAAALP). The questionnaire comprised open-ended questions on pedagogical strategies, material selection, technology use, and institutional challenges and support. Findings show that disobedient acts of decolonial love in academic literacy foster inclusive learning environments where students can be different together. Practitioners report that enhanced engagement and critical consciousness when teaching and learning validates students' identities and experiences, noting that exercises based on Ubuntu pedagogy of care and community engagement cultivate a sense of being and belonging.

Keywords: Academic literacy; decolonial love; decolonial cracks; ubuntu; coloniality; praxis

Introduction

Since the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, South African universities have expanded access to higher education in ways that would once have been unthinkable, especially for students from marginalised and peripheralised communities and races (Sibanda & Maseko, 2025). Yet, Eurocentric epistemic frameworks continue to shape curricula and pedagogical practices. Whereas universities were originally designed "for the education of the sons of the empire" (Mpofu, 2019), the post-1994 drive to increase enrolment of marginalised and disadvantaged students brought to the university 'unwanted intruders' and the deficit narrative that locates academic 'underpreparedness' within such students rather than within the institution itself. Ndimande (2013, p. 20) observes that "curricula remain unrepresentative of black ethnic groups' cultures and epistemologies." The mismatch between

students' knowledges and the Eurocentric knowledge privileged in academic literacy modules and programmes perpetuates alienation, forcing students to doubt their experiences, knowledges, languages and their cultures. Thus, Freire (1970) remarks that people without privilege learn to distrust their own lived and hard-won knowledges and feel that they have little valuable and official knowledge to share.

Angu, Boakye and Eybers (2020, p. 3) remind us that the apartheid government "applied curricula that use culture, including language, to reinforce class and power relations," constraining othered communities and sowing the seeds of ongoing epistemic darkness and injustice. Studies indicate that South African universities reflect a continuing underrepresentation of African epistemologies and knowledge systems within academic literacy frameworks (Makokotlela & Gumbo, 2025; Knowles, Babeli, Ntlokwana,

Ntombolwana, & Sobuza, 2023; Heleta, 2016). These studies advocate for an approach that embraces epistemic plurality, incorporating African ways of being and knowing in higher education to better serve the changed demographics of South African universities, which are increasingly diverse. Such an observation is reinforced by Olivier and Olivier (2013), who assert that societal and contextual factors significantly impact student attitudes and motivation towards academic literacy. The systemic barriers that othered students encounter undermine their capacity to engage meaningfully with predominantly White Eurocentric curricula.

The prevailing deficit model casts academic literacy as a remedial response to ‘fix’ students’ perceived cognitive failings through generic ‘skills’ courses that mask educational inequity’s historical and structural roots. Jansen (2009, p. 1) critiques this approach by defining epistemological access as “access to knowledge, its various forms, how it is organised, its value bases, its politics and its power,” insisting that we interrogate who defines what counts as knowledge and to whose benefit. Likewise, Boughey (2005) and Povey (2002) argue that effective foundational and developmental curricula must make the rules and conventions of disciplinary discourse explicit through constructivist teaching methods rather than relying on decontextualised and generic remediation. In this vein, Smit (2008) reframes academic literacy not as surface-level language correction, but as fostering “critical thinking and autonomy in learning,” empowering students to become active, reflective participants in knowledge production. By acknowledging literacy as a socially and historically situated practice, practitioners must shift from pathologising students to interrogating and transforming the discourses that render their knowledges and experiences invisible.

Emerging as an ethical pedagogical imperative within this transformed landscape is the concept of decolonial love, a term that Sandoval (2000, as cited in Hlatshwayo, Zondi & Mokoena, 2023, p. 107) defines as “the kind of love that looks at, and demands, affirmation/ recognition/ respect of humanity in its totality, despite all our differences”. Maluleka (2024, p. 5) expands this

notion to describe a pedagogical framework that responds to the “cognitive, epistemic, ontological and social harm” inflicted by coloniality and apartheid, calling on educators and students alike to work towards a transformative decolonial future that transcends the darkness of the colonial power matrices. Decolonial love thus becomes a lens through which academic literacy practitioners recognise the destructiveness and darkness of Western modernity and strive for non-violent epistemic practices, pedagogies and ways of re-existing that re-centre students’ lived experiences, integrate other knowledges, and foster critical self-reflection on their part. This liberatory ethic and philosophy refuses to accept the separation of epistemology from ontology inherent in the Cartesian dictum of ‘I think therefore I am’, instead affirming the interdependence of being and knowing in ways that valorise ways of being different together.

This study, grounded in qualitative surveys with practitioners who are members of the South African Association of Academic Literacy Practitioners (SAAALP) and also part of the Social Justice Interest Group (SIG), investigates how acts of decolonial love manifest in academic literacy pedagogies and offers actionable strategies for embedding this ethic. The need for individual practitioners to spearhead decolonial efforts becomes indispensable in this environment, as systemic institutional changes in the academic space are often slow to unfold. In this age of epistemic darkness, individual practitioners play a critical role in bringing light to the darkness by creating inclusive pedagogies and practices that recognise and validate students’ linguistic and epistemic diversity (Sibanda & Joubert, 2024; Olivier & Olivier, 2013). Thus, this study shares how academic literacy can move beyond its ‘white trait’ and deficit remediation to become an emancipatory practice by weaving together decolonial love and the resultant decolonial cracks. In doing so, it contributes to the broader project of decolonising higher education in the Global South, preparing students not merely to ‘crack the code’ of academic discourse, but to reshape that code in ways that privilege their identities, desilences knowledges, and re-imagines the critical agency needed to transform unjust structures. This can be done through identifying

and using the decolonial cracks to sow the seeds of transformation.

Decolonial cracks are critical in academic literacy

As an often misunderstood and marginalised discipline that serves at the pleasure of other 'so-called' mainstream disciplines, academic literacy has not received significant institutional attention and resources as part of decolonising efforts. As such, there is a need to find decolonial cracks as the site of launching decolonial resistance and practices. This article posits that despite the limitations imposed by higher education institutions and other contextual factors, practitioners can meaningfully contribute to critical decolonial efforts in their own spaces of influence. While moving the needle might appear insignificant in the larger social justice picture, it is an acknowledgement that decoloniality as a philosophy of resistance and liberation is a vocation and not an event. Further, incremental proactive resistance efforts through decolonial love are part of the intellectual stamina needed to reverse the effects of conquest and coloniality; these efforts are also a quest to create something new under restrictive institutional practices.

Through engagement with practitioners, the study seeks to bring to the surface the tools of subtle resistance that are being used to create decolonial ruptures. Academic literacy, often conceptualised within narrow parameters of technical proficiency and formalised academic conventions, urgently needs a radical reimagining. Within this imperative lies the concept of decolonial cracks, a term used to refer to the small yet profound ruptures within the hegemonic architectures of knowledge production and pedagogical interaction. These cracks are not mere fissures in an otherwise impenetrable system; instead, they are dynamic, affective, and epistemological openings through which marginalised knowledges, embodied experiences, and acts of resistance seep through, thus unsettling the colonial matrices (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Walsh, 2014, 2023) that underpin formal higher education.

The concept of cracks as generative spaces is undergirded by Glissant's (1997) notion

of opacity and the idea that not all that resists must be rendered transparent to be legitimate. Cracks, in this sense, affirm modes of knowing that do not seek validation through the universalising logics of the Western academy. They allow room for relational, communal, spiritual, ancestral, and affective epistemologies, embracing the unknown, the incomplete, the unfolding and the sowing of re-existences (Walsh, 2023). They represent both an epistemic and ontological stance that opposes the extractive rationalism of coloniality in higher education and in academic literacy.

Cracks become most visible in academic literacy when students and practitioners engage in what Sandoval (2000) calls differential consciousness, the capacity to navigate and resist dominant regimes of power through tactical subversions. This is evident in how multilingualism, non-violent epistemic pedagogies and decolonised expertise and resources are increasingly being marshalled to challenge the dominant academic conventions and literacies. These practices shift from the demand for neat, linear, and supposedly objective modes of literacies towards messier, layered, and affective engagements with knowledge. They are not stylistic choices; they are ideological interventions.

As Mignolo (2018) articulates, decoloniality is not a project of inclusion but of delinking. The seemingly insignificant cracks in academic literacy can be harnessed as sites where such delinking happens, not through grand gestures and seismic ruptures, but through small, persistent refusals to conform by both individual lecturers and students. Grand gestures have not produced the desired results, as Mopfu (2019, n.p.) observes:

Nelson Maldonado-Torres has warned us about benevolent neglect, where in the westernised university, beneficiaries of coloniality and some of its victims will get so busy decolonising so fast, meetings, conferences, seminars and colloquia on decolonisation at high speed. Soon enough, everybody gets tired and everything continues the way it used to be. You can, I am warning you, derail decolonisation and liberation by paying fast

and furious attention to it and then exhausting it after ticking quick boxes and circles.

Thus, cracks as acts of refusal seemingly insist on speaking and writing in indigenous languages in academic spaces (Mgqwashu, 2011) or embedding praise poetry and rituals in writing practices (Gough & Bock, 2001). Gough and Bock (2001) illustrate how the rich, structured features of traditional South African isiXhosa oral discourse are effectively harnessed to teach academic literacy. Genres such as *ukukhulula umhlokokazi*, which employs formulaic openings and closings, distinct stanzaic organisation, and clear discursive moves, and *intsomi* narratives, characterised by extensive clause chaining and rhythmic flow, offer practical, relatable and indigenous models of coherence and organisation that inform academic writing as part of academic literacy. Such acts are not errors or digressions; they are political and epistemic moves that challenge the coloniality of knowledge and being. De Sousa Santos (2014) illuminates that these cracks are sites of the “epistemologies of the South,” where knowledge is not a commodity but a shared practice of liberation. The dominance of academic literacy as framed by global North epistemologies rests on silencing these southern ways of knowing; through the cracks, these silences are incrementally de/unsilenced.

In higher education contexts where transformation tends to be cosmetic, the cracks become acts of insurgency. Jansen (2009) warned against institutional transformation that lacks depth and direction, and leaves epistemic violence untouched. In these contexts, decolonial cracks become urgent, however subtle. They are critical precisely because they are not institutionalised, they evade institutional scrutiny and capture, and refuse to be standardised and domesticated into the lexicon of transformation agendas.

Evading scrutiny and possible censure is important in academic literacy if one takes cognisance of one of the roles of academic literacy modules as service modules within higher education. These modules operate within the constraints of the disciplines they serve, and this curtails the tangible transformative changes necessary for decolonisation (Sibanda, Joubert &

Angu, 2024). This relationship creates a tension where academic literacy practitioners find their ability to implement significant curricular changes constrained by the expectations and requirements of various academic disciplines. Academic literacy practitioners must creatively navigate the expectations and requirements of the disciplines they serve, and these disciplines have largely remained entangled with coloniality itself. Mpofo (2019) observes that there are no academic or intellectual disciplines that were not consciously built and structured for purposes of power. Hence, there is a need to deform and reform the disciplines and eradicate in them the coloniality and uses by the Empire.

Mpofo (2019, n.p.) further highlights that “Academic disciplines are not innocent and neutral methods of making knowledge; they have a dirty birth. Most of them were born for our conquest and domination; hence we need to decolonise them”. Without such a radical transformation of the disciplines served by academic literacy as service modules, it becomes almost impossible to radically transform the academic literacy modules. This raises critical questions about the efficacy of academic literacy modules in fostering genuine decolonisation and inclusivity within higher education. While academic literacy modules are primarily designed to serve the needs of specific disciplines, they risk perpetuating existing power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies. Thus, academic literacy must be re-thought in a way that genuinely reflects diverse epistemologies and contexts, particularly in the context of curriculum decolonisation in South Africa (Angu et al., 2020), without necessarily unsettling the disciplines they serve. In this regard, practitioners of academic literacy who seek to shed light where modernity has cast darkness must see these cracks not as gaps to be filled, but as sites of emergence and re-existence.

Makhubu and Mbongwa (2019, as cited in Maluleka, 2023) speak of the curatorial cracks within institutional structures that allow alternative forms of knowledge and pedagogies to surface. They argue that the possibility of the otherwise emerges in these subtle interruptions, these seemingly minor acts. In academic literacy, these curatorial cracks may be found in the

seemingly mundane, such as in peer feedback sessions where solidarity trumps competition, in the practice of translanguaging, in writing workshops that also tap into literacies and conventions found in the students' communities (Gough & Bock, 2001), and in pedagogic spaces where students are invited to bring their whole selves. These are the moments where academic literacy ceases to be a colonial or neutral project and becomes a relational, co-created, and liberatory practice.

As Butler (2023) observes, racialised students often experience pedagogic spaces as sites of profound alienation. Cracks allow them to rewrite themselves back into the story, to find belonging through subtle epistemic disobedience. Walsh (2018) contends that decoloniality is about "re-existence," the practice of living and knowing otherwise despite the pressures to self-edit and conform. When approached through the decolonial crack lens, academic literacy becomes a potential site not of compliance but of contestation and re-existence enabled by decolonial love. These cracks are cumulative and incremental, as Maluleka (2024) reiterates, "through small acts," which may appear trivial, constitute a slow undoing of the colonial order, a re-worlding from the fragments that dominant narratives discard. Sandoval (2000) describes the cracks as oppositional consciousness, a mode of seeing and acting that reclaims agency from the margins. This study thus brings to light, through the decolonial love lens, the fragments that practitioners work with to move the decolonial needle in academic literacies without necessarily inviting the detrimental wrath of the institution and the disciplines they serve.

Decolonial love as praxis

Decolonial love is not a mere affective sentimentality but a deliberate praxis that disrupts the entrenched logic of colonial modernity by re-embodying radical love, care, resistance, and relationality. It is a mode of engagement in which radical love becomes the fuel for radical transformation, a way to contest, to nurture, and ultimately to reimagine academic and social spaces from the margins and within the tensions. As Walsh (2014, n.p.) reminds us, "the decolonial comes not from above but below," insisting that

the struggle for an 'otherwise' is grounded in the margins, tensions and borders where human connection is most authentically lived. Decolonial love thus emerges as a practice that brings light into the tiny dark spaces, the continuous intimate, negligible moments of care, and contributes to building a colossal alternative to oppressive, colonial structures (Maluleka, 2024; Godsell, 2024).

At its essence, decolonial love insists on recognising the humanness of every individual, particularly those whose voices have been systematically silenced by dominant Eurocentric academic and social racist ways of existing. It is a deliberate ethical commitment to see, hear, and valorise the experiences and knowledges rendered invisible by the modern/colonial canon. Further, decolonial love is a commitment that transforms isolated acts of care into collective re-imaginings of community and higher education (Butler, 2023; Maluleka, 2023, 2024). Such a transformative power is not merely abstract; it manifests in acts as simple as listening deeply to a student's narratives of dislocation (desilencing) and positionality or as profound as reconfiguring curricula to foreground othered epistemologies.

Decolonial love challenges the conventional academic separation of affect and intellect. Traditional pedagogies have often relegated emotions to the realm of the subjective and personal, distancing them from the rigorous work of knowledge production and sharing. However, Freire (1970/1974, as cited in Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) argued that education is inherently political and must engage both heart and mind. In the context of decolonial praxis, radical love becomes a revolutionary act because it insists on integrating care into every aspect of learning. Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p. 239) assert that "representation became a key word of the rhetoric of modernity to free the known from the knower." Yet, decolonial love reclaims this process by insisting on fully including the knower's affective and lived experience. It is an embodied practice that can breathe life into academic literacy, allowing practitioners to create spaces where emotions are as valued as intellectual insights.

This praxis is vividly apparent in how decolonial love transforms the everyday practices of academic engagement. It is visible in classroom interactions where the teacher's role is re-envisioned as a facilitator of dialogue rather than a transmitter of fixed knowledge and official truth. Students can share personal narratives, cultural memories, and embodied experiences in such spaces. Walsh (2014, n.p.) emphasises that the cracks in the colonial order are "the place and space from which action, militancy, resistance, insurgence, and transgression are advanced." Decolonial love takes this idea further by suggesting that every act of care, every supportive word and every moment of attentive listening, is an act of resistance that contributes to the construction of an alternative educational paradigm. When guided by genuine human connection, these tiny spaces become the starting points for broader social transformation.

De Sousa Santos (2014) posits that epistemologies of the South are not simply alternative ways of knowing but are rooted in relationality and shared communal practices. Decolonial love embodies this ethos by fostering environments where learning is co-created and diverse cultural logics are celebrated, rather than suppressed. Furthermore, Butler (2023) also contends that educational practices must account for the affective dimensions of knowledge, as ignoring these dimensions only reinforces the marginalisation of those who do not fit the dominant mould. In a decolonial framework, love is not an extraneous add-on but a central pillar that enables the gentle persistence required to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures.

A crucial aspect of decolonial love is its insistence on the importance of small, cumulative acts. Though individually modest and seemingly insignificant, these cumulative acts collectively undermine the rigid and institutionalised binaries and hierarchies that have long defined academic discourse. They are expressions of resistance that disrupt "the colossal through the tiny" (Maluleke, 2024), thus encapsulating the idea that transformation is both incremental and expansive. Ultimately, decolonial love finds its most potent expression in these micro-practices, each moment

of shared empathy and every instance of reclaiming one's being.

Moreover, decolonial love is inherently political because it reconfigures the relationship between the individual and the collective. According to West (1993) and Jansen (2009), even the smallest gestures of solidarity can have far-reaching implications for challenging systemic marginalisations. These gestures of solidarity potentially allow practitioners to create spaces where students are encouraged to bring their whole selves, their hopes, struggles, and identities as part of enacting a form of radical love that defies the dehumanising tendencies of coloniality in higher education. This mode of praxis is not simply about creating a safe space for vulnerability; it is about asserting that every student has the right to be heard and to shape the discourse of knowledge in their own image.

Decolonial love also plays a critical role in resisting the replicative nature of institutional power. Makhubu and Mbongwa (2019, as cited in Maluleka, 2023) have shown how educational institutions often absorb dissent by converting it into a form of controlled resistance. Decolonial love, however, resists such co-option and appropriation by remaining fluid, unpredictable, and relentlessly humane. It challenges the idea that transformative change must be grandiose and seismic, but it champions the power of everyday interactions. Maluleke (2023, 2024) and Sandoval (2013) opine that the structures that uphold oppressive regimes are vulnerable to the subtle and tiny yet persistent force of oppositional consciousness. In this light, decolonial love is not an abstract ideal, but a living, breathing praxis that transforms the minute and the mundane into a site of political and epistemic engagement.

Lastly, Walsh (2014, n.p) emphasises the need, urgency and beauty of this approach and thus states, "the decolonial cracks become the place and space from which action, militancy, resistance, insurgence, and transgression are advanced." Likewise, these cracks, when infused with decolonial love, are turned into spaces of hope where the energy of collective care disrupts and reclaims the pedagogic space. Such sentiments echo throughout the works of Freire, Mignolo, and

others who have long argued that the act of loving, of truly caring for one another, is a radical, transformative, political and epistemic act. Ultimately, decolonial love as praxis has the potential to redefine academic literacy not as an impersonal, standardised measure of competency and acculturation into disciplines, but as a living, breathing dialogue between the self and the collective, and within the collective. It nurtures the idea that every classroom, pedagogic space, interaction, and piece of writing is a potential site of resistance against the oppressive forces of colonial modernity. By breathing light into the tiny spaces, those moments of tenderness, empathy, and shared struggle, decolonial love contributes incrementally to the construction of a colossal alternative where knowledge is not merely transmitted but co-created. The practitioners who participated in the study share individual practices that demonstrate how decolonial cracks, together with decolonial love, allow for the tiny incremental acts of resistance in academic literacy.

Methods

The study explores decolonial love as a transformative framework in the teaching and learning of academic literacies in South African higher education institutions. It seeks to understand how decolonial love, through curatorial cracks, can reshape academic literacy curricula and pedagogy to be more inclusive, culturally relevant, and responsive to the socio-political contexts of students. In so doing, the study employed a qualitative research methodology, focusing on the experiences, practices and reflections of academic literacy practitioners. The design is exploratory, aiming to uncover new fragments in the application of decolonial love in academic literacy teaching and learning. The study adopted purposive sampling to target participants with expertise, experience, and perspectives critical to the research aims. The selection criteria ensured relevance and depth by focusing specifically on practitioners engaged in social justice and decolonial pedagogy. The final sample comprised 16 academic literacy practitioners from six South African universities: the University of the Free State, University of Johannesburg, University of Pretoria, Tshwane University of Technology, the University of the

Western Cape, and the University of the Witwatersrand. All participants were members of the Social Justice Interest Group (SIG) of the South African Association for Academic Literacy Practitioners (SAAALP), aligning with the SIG's social justice focus and ensuring a shared professional commitment to rethinking academic literacies. At least one practitioner from each of these institutions was included in the study, and all were actively involved in designing, teaching, or researching academic literacy programmes at their respective universities.

Ethical clearance (REC-01-934-2025) was granted by a South African university, allowing for ethical data collection, analysis, and secure storage. Participants were fully briefed about the aims and methodology of the research project, and participation was voluntary with no incentive. All participants provided informed consent.

It is important to acknowledge a limitation related to data trustworthiness. All participants were members of the same professional interest group and taught similar academic literacy modules, so their perspectives may exhibit a degree of homogeneity. This common affiliation could limit the diversity of views and thus affect the credibility and transferability of the findings. Analytical rigour was maintained through systematic thematic coding procedures. Nonetheless, readers should consider this sample characteristic when interpreting the results.

Data were collected through questionnaires that focused on the practitioners' experiences of integrating decolonial love into their teaching practices, including challenges and successes. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns in the gathered data. The questionnaire data reveal multifaceted insights into how decolonial love is realised by individual practitioners in academic literacy contexts in some South African universities. Four major themes emerged from practitioners' responses: the centrality of Ubuntu and communal pedagogies; the integration of indigenous knowledges and Afrocentric content; the paradoxical role of

technology; and the institutional barriers that practitioners must navigate, alongside expressions of practitioner agency. The subsequent sections examine each theme in depth, drawing extensively on participants' words, followed by targeted recommendations grounded in the survey data and relevant scholarship.

Findings and Discussion

Ubuntu and communal pedagogies

A thread across most of the responses is that decolonial love in academic literacy often begins with *Ubuntu*, the African ethic of collective humanity and mutual care. One practitioner described how, "students seem to respond well to knowing from the very first lesson that our class follows the philosophy of Ubuntu. From this, they seem to understand that they will work together as teams and that everyone learns together (even the teacher)." The practitioner further stated that the facilitators of the academic literacy classes at his/her institution are also inducted into a community of practice:

... facilitators are trained to combine social constructivist principles that align with the philosophy of Ubuntu. Facilitators operate according to this with each other too, so that we have ideas sharing and knowledge-building from a team and from each other. We all learn together and try to approach our classes this way.

Such practices underscore that humanness and a communitarian learning ethic is not an incidental by-product, but an explicit, yet subtle, pedagogical strategy aimed at dissolving hierarchical divides between "knower" and "learner." Such an approach challenges a particular subjectivity, a particular identity, and a particular spirituality of the 'I' in the dictum, "I think, therefore I am". The knowledge produced by the 'I' is of particular Eurocentric identity and positionality, while the Ubuntu perspective, as pedagogical love (Duvenage, 2025), allows for students' and practitioners' voices and experiences to emerge from the curatorial cracks. Dissolving hierarchical divides between "knower" and "learner" allows for the decolonisation of expertise as part of the unsilencing of diverse voices in the pedagogic space. Trisos, Auerbach and Katti

(2021, p. 8) observe that "...those of us who work from positions of privilege must ask ourselves honestly: how can we open up our power to others? ... we need to understand that expertise comes in many forms and from many different journeys through knowledge systems". Opening our perceived power to others is crucial for fostering inclusivity and epistemic justice in higher education, particularly in academic literacy modules as part of radical love.

Such communal approaches further resonate with Namakula's (2024) observation of writing centres as "familial spaces" where emotional and academic support coexist, allowing students to "expose their uncertainties without fear of judgment". The safe, collective classroom environment directly counters the colonial inheritance of individualistic and competitive schooling. Respondents emphasised that engagement deepens when students view one another and their practitioners/facilitators as fellow travellers rather than arbiters of right and wrong. One practitioner reported initial student reluctance when he/she observed that "many of our students are used to only teacher talk and learning to memorise content". The practitioner further observed that fear gives way to enthusiasm as soon as students experience the relational ethos, "once they overcome their fear, they embrace the more vocal assessments and the results with activities such as videos, discussion boards and presentations have worked well". Moreover, by foregrounding mutual care, Ubuntu pedagogies create space for critical dialogue and reflection, which are key components of decolonial love. Practitioners note that this relational love enables them to invite students into conversations about power, language and identity in ways that feel supportive rather than punitive. Ubuntu does not simply soften pedagogy; it strategically restructures the learning environment to model non-violent epistemic relations, inviting all key stakeholders to co-create and co-construct knowledge and identity.

Indigenous knowledge systems and Afrocentric content

A second central theme is the intentional centring of *othered* perspectives by integrating

indigenous knowledges and Afrocentric content to validate students' experiences, bodies, knowledges, sensibilities and cultures to dismantle epistemic hierarchies. In an academic literacy module for a Natural and Agricultural Sciences faculty, one practitioner stated that:

... students have to work with the scientific names of indigenous plants and animals. ... we ask students to consider the local Sesotho, Zulu and Afrikaans names of each of the identified indigenous plants and how they relate to the scientific (Latin or Greek) versions; for example, the Latin for dog is *Canis lupus familiaris*.

In an academic literacy module for Theology and Religion, one practitioner uses parallel translational exercises to prompt students, "... to consider the Sesotho, Zulu and Afrikaans versions of the English Bible translations and debate the meaning of the word". This is to debate the nuances between English Bible translations and their vernacular counterparts, highlighting how language is an epistemic site of contestation and co-creation.

Additionally, another practitioner stated that:

In most of my lessons, I make a deliberate effort to incorporate local South African contexts and real-world examples that resonate with students' lived experiences. By doing so, I aim to make the content more relevant and relatable while fostering a sense of pride and ownership in local knowledge. For instance, when discussing biodiversity and conservation, I draw on South African research and case studies that highlight the country's unique ecosystems, such as the Fynbos biome, the Kruger National Park's conservation efforts, or community-driven projects aimed at protecting endangered species. These examples not only showcase the rich biodiversity within South Africa but also emphasise the role of local communities and indigenous knowledge in conservation practices. Additionally, I encourage students to critically examine how global conservation models might not always align with local realities. By analysing South African research alongside international studies, students develop a deeper understanding of how context shapes conservation strategies.

This practitioner's approach makes use of cracks by focusing on what Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Sibanda, 2024) refers to as the "here and the there". One of the subtle yet meaningful demonstrations of decolonial love is to think and act from where one is located first, geographically, ontologically and epistemologically. The students are encouraged to approach the content from the 'here' first and then approach the 'there'. The integration of indigenous and Afrocentric knowledges is not about 'villagising' academic literacy or a futile project of seeking to return to an imaginary pristine African past or an exclusion of non-Afrocentric perspectives. Decolonial love mandates that in validating the 'here', one also needs to dialogue with the 'there', for decoloniality is not a project and philosophy of exclusion or erasure. It is a pluriversal and mosaic project that allows for humanity, knowledges and cultures to be different together.

Practitioners also curate extensive reading lists that foreground Black African womanist and Afrocentric authors. One practitioner reported, "We are developing an extensive reading programme that focuses on African authors (male and female). In the classroom, we use articles by South African and African authors as well as international authors. When it's the latter, we try to make this applicable to the South African context". A decolonial and gendered component of this reading list includes Maya Angelou, Ingrid Jonker, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Can Themba, Es'kia Mphahlele and Toni Morrison. These are writers whose work explicitly critiques colonisation and elevates marginalised perspectives. Sparks (2024) confirms that such Afrocentric, gender-inclusive texts "empower" students by reflecting their lived realities and boosting critical thinking.

Significantly, indigenous integration also extends to genre awareness. Practitioners guide students to recognise "the power of genres and their need to master them to transform and Africanise knowledge." By making the conventions of Western academic discourse visible, while simultaneously asserting the legitimacy of African modes of knowing, these practitioners enact "non-violent epistemic practices" that refuse the erasure of indigenous

systems and invite students to become co-creators of a pluralistic academic canon.

Technology as an enabler and constraint

A particularly complex theme that emerged from this study is the dual role of technology in decolonial love praxis. On the enabling side, respondents highlight how digital platforms like the Blackboard Learning Management System facilitate “extensive and intensive decolonial reading quizzes,” “uploading of videos and interacting as groups,” and “online assessments [that] allow more class engagement and implementation of teaching strategies which draw away from Western practices and hierarchies”. Reliable Wi-Fi in classrooms “provides awareness of content students might not otherwise access,” freeing up face-to-face time for dialogic pedagogies aligned with the Ubuntu ethos. Such modalities afforded students multimodal literacies and flexible engagement, supporting a broader concept of academic literacy that includes visual, oral and digital competencies.

However, practitioners also voiced concerns about technology’s capacity to reproduce inequities and colonise student voices. Frequent loadshedding, limited computer access, and network instability create “problems to mention a few” that disproportionately burden marginalised students. Practitioners note that reliable electricity and connectivity are not guaranteed; frequent loadshedding, limited device access and unstable Wi-Fi further disproportionately burden marginalised students. This highlights how technology can also reproduce existing inequities.

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) tools introduces further tensions as one practitioner observed that “AI generation may pose a threat to students’ acquiring academic literacy skills, authentic voice... it can widen the income, class, culture... gaps”. Another facilitator lamented, “In the second year, I see that they completely depend on AI/plagiarising... Will AI colonise our minds? Will our students be able to have their voices if they rely too much on AI?... it is valid if we become too dependent on technology and AI”. Such anxieties resonate with Snyder and Prinsloo’s (2007) call to reconceive digital literacy beyond access and use of devices, emphasising the

need for pedagogical interventions that teach students to critically engage with and appropriate technology as epistemic tools. In line with this, practitioners urge the development of localised AI models that are not colonial echo chambers (Coetzer & Van Aardt, 2024) and translation tools that valorise indigenous knowledges and languages, countering the dominance of Eurocentric algorithms.

Institutional barriers and practitioner agency

Finally, the data foregrounded systemic obstacles that limit decolonial love alongside narratives of practitioner resilience and resistance. Besides the obvious mentions of limitations beleaguering the teaching and learning of academic literacy, several respondents noted peer resistance. For example, one respondent pointed out native coloniality:

The main challenge ... is collegial agency. I do not allow institutional constraints to prevent me from achieving decolonial love. My greatest concern is not white racism but the Black bourgeoisie ideology that is prevalent among many African scholars. We have, I argue, divorced our teaching, learning and research from tangible interactions with local communities, rendering them exposed to a violent neo apartheid economy.

Another practitioner pointed out the fear and inertia among colleagues, especially within “Afrikaner-dominant institutional cultures”, that inhibit curricular innovation and perpetuate colonial norms. While another practitioner pointed to the restrictive institutional policies, the inertia of peers remains a challenge in academic literacy:

African scholars with fear or underdevelopment in the technologies may be a greater threat to their implication toward purposes of “love” than our former oppressors. The egos of African scholar[s] may prevent us from adopting new technologies that can transform the curriculum, decolonise relationships with local communities, while centering students’ identities in the curriculum. This is the challenge. Then there is racism and institutional policies that do not full leverage digital tech to emancipate Black African colonial love.

Despite the fear and inertia of peers, practitioners still exercise agency through incremental reforms. One practitioner recounted how, despite precarious funding and high staff turnover, they “gradually retrained facilitators,” aligned new content with existing study guides, and established internal funds to cover national student funding (NSFAS) shortfalls. Joubert’s (2023) social realist analysis further illuminates the tension between structural and cultural positioning of academic literacy practitioners. While many practitioners hold academic contracts (structural centre), they remain epistemically marginalised, perceived as “remedial” rather than integral to knowledge production, thus undermining their authority to enact transformative pedagogies.

Recommendations and the way forward

This study demonstrates that acts of decolonial love, grounded in the ethical imperative to “affirmation/recognition/respect of humanity in its totality” (Sandoval, 2000, as cited in Hlatshwayo, Zondi & Mokoena, 2023, p. 107), are most powerfully enacted through everyday pedagogical practices that open lasting cracks in colonial power structures. These findings reveal that decolonial love is not a once-off intervention but an ongoing praxis in which micro-acts aggregate into systemic transformation. To undo epistemic violence is a vocation; and, to decolonise and liberate is an intellectual and political mission that demands courage and determination. One needs to surmount love and care in order to rebuild what has been destroyed or silenced. The decolonial practitioner needs emotional and intellectual stamina to avoid the easy temptation to hate and to carry out revenge. Through these cracks, students reclaim epistemic agency, practitioners model radical care, and the academy acknowledges alternative epistemologies as equally valid. However, for these cracks to widen rather than close, pedagogical innovations must be anchored in institutional and faculty structures, formal recognition of academic literacy practitioners’ expertise, and policy environments that prioritise access and diversity over cost-recovery imperatives.

The way forward entails a multipronged strategy. Institutions should institutionalise decolonial love training and continuous professional development, embedding communal, non-violent epistemic practices into all academic literacy modules. Curricula must be enriched with indigenous knowledges and Afrocentric, gender-inclusive texts, scaffolded through extensive reading and translanguaging assignments that validate students’ ways of being. Equitable technology frameworks and critical digital literacy workshops are essential to prevent new forms of epistemic exclusion. Formalised communities of practice, such as that of the SAAALP SIG, can sustain practitioner agency and ensure that decolonial research informs policy and resourcing. This aligns with practitioners, who in this study, advocate building communities of practice and seeking formal recognition for academic literacy as ways to professionalise the discipline and move the decolonial needle.

Conclusion

This study underscores that decolonial love, manifested through Ubuntu pedagogies, integrating Indigenous knowledges, critically mediated technological practices, and sustained practitioner agency, constitutes the most potent mechanism for creating and widening cracks in colonial academic structures. The study contributes that academic literacy practitioners’ daily acts of care and epistemic affirmation not only dismantle hierarchical relations but also legitimise diverse modes of knowing and being, resonating with Sandoval’s (2000) call for affirmation and recognition of humanity and Mbembe’s (2016) vision of decolonial fissures that unsettle monolithic power.

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