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SUR-SUR SOUTHERN KNOWLEDGES: EDUCATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

CONTENTS

1.

FRONTIER DIASPORAS, ONTOLOGIES OF INCOMPLETENESS, UNFINISHABLE POSSIBILITIES: DECOLONISING MIGRANT IDENTITY NARRATIVES

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In this chapter, I trouble and unsettle those colonial theoretical frameworks that underpin most approaches to language, diasporas, and immigrants. I draw attention to alternative approaches inspired by insights from decolonial politics and Southern perspectives. What would a decolonised view of migrant and diaspora identities look like in theory and in practice? In addressing this and related questions, I propose a project of decolonising that rests on three concepts: “frontier diasporas”, “ontologies of incompleteness” and “unfinishable possibilities of existence otherwise”. Using examples from my previous ethnographic work with African diasporas in metropolitan Victoria and regional NSW (Australia), I suggest that identities of migrants must be understood as open-ended interconnections (frontiers) that expand and contract – in equal measure – reflecting group and individual biographies, ways of being, complex migration histories and (re)imaginings of present and future life trajectories and aspirations.

Keywords

diaspora, migrant languages, frontier diasporas, decolonising, politics of knowledge, ontologies of incompleteness, unfinishable possibilities, linguistic encirclement, imperial science

Troubling the Normativity in Diaspora Discourse

While diaspora cultures, identities, and language practices have been widely theorised, several issues require another look from different conceptual angles that hold the promise of decolonial futures. A major problem with current theoretical frameworks is their tendency to privilege and impose a colonial and imperial scientific view of linguistic, immigrant, and diaspora identities, often masked behind discourses of multiculturalism, multilingualism, universalism, modernity, globalisation and other similar high-sounding terminologies. The dominance of these discourses has meant that the promises of other ways of knowing, reading and interpreting the world of immigrant and diaspora communities have been consigned to the fringes of mainstream conversations about past and present understandings of the world and humanity in general.

Taking after the foundational work of people like Safran (1991), Cohen, and Shuval (2000) , the scholarship tends to uncritically reproduce narratives that describe the identities, cul-

curing conceptualisation links diasporas to experiences of forced displacement, dispersal and migrancy, with nation-state and ethnic affiliation as common units of social analysis. This is particularly evident in Safran's (1991) four-point typology, which considers diasporas as having a somewhat primordial identity traceable to a perceived homeland that they will return to at some point. Subjective perceptions and anxieties about the prospect of never being accepted by their host societies are said to be the reason diaspora communities develop cultural and social lifeways that are nostalgic about imaginary homelands (at best) and no longer existent (at worst).

However, Safran's typology, which most mainstream scholars of migration have adopted, is problematic insofar as it ignores the complex lived experiences of diasporas and how such experiences mediate the cultural sensibilities and identity imaginations of groups and individuals alike (Ndhlovu, 2014). Safran's framework places undue emphasis on the relationship of the diaspora group with its homeland while overlooking cultural complexities arising from transnational solidarities and other forms of sociality and networking with other diaspora communities elsewhere, who share similar experiences. This old, imperialising and homogenising view was earlier criticised by Stuart Hall for referring 'to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which one must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea' (Hall, 1990, p. 235). Ndhlovu and Masuku (2025) have recently elaborated further on Hall's (1990) argument, which had earlier been refined by Roza Tsagarousianou (2004). In the words of Ndhlovu and Masuku (2025, p. 55), the continued emphasis on typologies runs the risk of 'undermining the 'potentialities' and 'capabilities' of diasporas – that is, it might lead to a lack of attention to the various creative possibilities opened by the activities of diasporas at both local and translocal levels of interaction'. The shared migration histories, dreams and visions for common futures among disparate diaspora groups are equally as important as the supposed yearnings for return to homelands that are probably only distant memories.

The case of African migration to Australia – historically quite low compared to immigration from regions such as Europe and the Asia-Pacific – is informative. There has, however, been a significant increase in the number of people of African background settling in Australia in the last 20 to 30 years. The 2022 Australian Bureau of Statistics census shows that over 400,000 people living in Australia are of African origin, thus representing 1.6% of the Australian population and 5.1% of Australia's overseas-born population. Most (58%) are white South Africans, but 42% are black Africans from sub-Saharan African countries (Abur, 2020: 1). The other major countries of birth are Egypt, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Mauritius, Kenya,

Eritrea (Abur, 2022; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Jakubowicz, 2010; Ndhlovu, 2014; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021).

The data from my previous ethnographic studies in Victoria and regional New South Wales (see Ndhlovu, 2013, 2014, 2017) shows that African diasporas in Australia come from multilingual communities and have a rich repertoire of languages from their countries of origin and additional ones acquired in transit during their migration journeys. This means people of African descent living in Australia are an extremely diverse group, reflecting the linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and political diversity of their continent of origin, as well as their varied immigration trajectories, histories, and life journeys as migrants and refugees.

Notwithstanding their differing migration trajectories and histories, the African diasporas in Australia are unified by their shared identity narratives that defy fatalistic nation-state-centric imaginings of people's identities. The stories that African diasporas share constitute a rallying point in forging pan-ethnic diaspora networks and solidarities. A major empirical observation about the migration histories and life stories of the sampled African migrants is the nested language repertoires that crisscross in complex ways, defying putative associations between language and nationality/country of origin (see Ndhlovu's 2013 and 2014 discussion on the 'language nesting model'). The African diasporas that participated in my ethnographic studies reported that they use bits and pieces of multiple languages to (re)define and (re)constitute their identities to achieve the best social outcomes for themselves and their communities across a range of interactional contexts – with their fellow African diasporas in Australia, and diasporas in other places such as the United Kingdom, the United States and in Africa. What all this means is that the cultures, identities and linguistic repertoires of African diasporas are too complex to be adequately captured by reductionist logics that I have elsewhere characterised as the 'big battalions of groupism', namely multilingualism, multiculturalism and nation-state-centric ideologies (see Ndhlovu, 2017). But why does this kind of reductionist thinking about diasporas and diaspora identities persist in both scholarly and popular discourses? I address this question in the next section that spotlights the overbearing influence of imperial science on conversations about migration and diaspora.

Critique of Imperial Science

Mainstream social-scientific theorisations about diasporas proceed from the logics of what some scholars have called imperial science (Collyer et al., 2019; Connell, 2007, 2014, 2018, 2019; Harding, 2000; Hountefort, 1997; Ndhlovu, 2022; Ndhlovu, 2020; Daiter, 2010). The

character traits of an imperial science are numerous. At least three are worth discussing here. The first is about grand erasures, grand narratives, and the universalising posture of the imperial knowledge tradition. This is about imperialist claims whereby the very idea of mainstream social theory involves talking about universals and generalisations as if the whole world were a homogenous continuum. The fallacy of this claim rests on the fatalistic assumption that all societies know and are knowable in the same way and from the same point of view (Connell, 2007, p. 44). An undesirable consequence is the denial and pushing into the shadows (Reiter, 2019) of other traditions of knowing such as those of Southern and Indigenous communities. An imperial science excludes knowledge systems of the colonised from mainstream discourses and conversations about what constitutes valid scientific thought—what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) call a “worldwide epistemicide”.

The second contour of imperial science is related to the first. It is about the foundation of imperial science on Aristotelian logics of rationality, linearity, development, and disembodiment of science (Ndlovu, 2023; Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Following this logic that searches for neat patterns, regularities and predictions, imperial science imposes a concrete and binary categorical view of the world. Such imposition is often extended to those societies whose cultural and contextual conditions do not fit into the grand narrative.

Epistemicide (the killing of other ways of knowing) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019) is the inevitable consequence of forcing reality into the template of imperial science. These hallmarks of imperial science are evident in much of mainstream diaspora studies project designs, research agendas, and research reports: the tendency to search for regular features and patterns from data to confirm correlations (or, rarely, a lack of correlations) between linguistic usages and such things as identity, race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, education, and so on. Most mainstream diaspora studies project designs (both quantitative and qualitative) rest on these colonial habits and practices of matching linguistic and social phenomena as if they were self-evident correlates of a natural kind.

The third characteristic of imperial science is about the tendency to classify and categorise not just subject populations but also knowledge systems as part of the broader global colonial project of controlling and exercising power. Imperial science categorises populations through the fallacy of absences: “literate” versus “oral/illiterate”; “civilised” versus “primitive”; “savage” versus “progressive”; “pre-modern” versus “modern”; “black” versus “white”; and so on (Ndlovu, 2019). Categorisation is, therefore, used as a method of inventing perceived differences to justify all manner of discrimination, exclusions and epistemicide

global politics of knowledge. The point is that there is a reciprocal relationship among knowledge, power and the legitimization of social inequality—what has long been described as the global politics of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Weiler, 2009) that is implicated in perpetuating epistemic and cognitive injustices.

The imperial scientific discourse that proceeds through classifying and categorising people, languages, language practices, and things suffers from at least three major deficits: (a) not taking a sufficiently critical view of what “knowledge” means; (b) failure to address the political-economic conditions and consequences of the production and use of knowledge—the “politics of knowledge”; and (c) failure to adequately address what kinds of structural changes would follow from acknowledging the need to transform the epistemic basis of our contemporary knowledge culture (Chilisa, 2011; Smith, 2012; Weiler, 2009). And for Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o (1981), imperial science operates and manifests through the cognitive empire: “that form of imperialism which invades the mental universe of its victims, in the process imposing particular knowledge systems, displacing others, and consequently shaping the intellectual consciousness of its victims” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019, p. 1). So, although the formal occupation of territorial spaces by colonial forces has ceased, the empire has not gone away (Wa Thiong’o, 2009). Empire is still firmly resident in the minds, cultures, education systems and research agendas that obtain in postcolonial societies. It is for this reason that Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s (1981) book written four decades ago, *Decolonizing the Mind*, remains instructive. Ngũgĩ says that the empire of the mind was enforced through the imposition of languages and linguistic ideologies, or what he calls “linguistic encirclement.” With specific reference to the African context, Ngũgĩ shines the laser light on the “encircling” effect of identity labels and nomenclature such as Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, Lusophone Africa, and so on. The history of these labels is colonial: they are traced to the carving of Africa into spheres of influence (colonies) by Western European colonisers at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885.

Ndhlovu and Odhiambo (2024) extend and repurpose Ngũgĩ’s linguistic encirclement thesis to shed new light on how theorisations that are informed by the logics of imperial science culminated in the invention and imposition of linguistic identities that alienate African peoples from their cultures and traditions of knowing. Encirclement that is actuated by logics of imperial science affects people’s praxes, their agency, their thinking, their independence, their autonomy, their creativity and their ontology (Ndhlovu & Odhiambo, 2024). There is no action that they take that is on their own terms unless, of course, they manage to subvert the system through exercising epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2011). Epistemic

normative (colonial) traditions of knowing and de-linking from them; and (b) embracing other ways of knowing and being that (re)introduce alternative languages, grammars, vocabularies, memories, economies, and social organisations that accord with diverse ontological subjectivities (Mignolo, 2011, p. 63). Citing the work of Lane (2023), Ndhlovu and Odhiambo (2024) conclude that the posture of epistemic disobedience is necessary because linguistic encirclement paves the path to domination. The exercising of power on Africans and other formerly colonised peoples around the world, including migrants and diasporas, was achieved through changing and controlling the colonial subjects' languages, cultures, mental and cognitive capacities and sense of self-definition—a form of linguistic encirclement by stealth.

To summarise, the logics of imperial science serve the singular purpose of reinforcing—directly or indirectly—the Cartesian/colonial model of knowledge-making that thrives on categorising and classifying beings, ideas, identities, languages, cultures, and things, as if they were totally disconnected from one another. Decolonising diaspora studies is, therefore, a necessary part of efforts to rehabilitate a field that is largely built on those colonial habits and practices of separation while overlooking interconnections.

Frontier Perspective—Decolonising Diaspora Identity Narratives

In this section, I consider what diaspora identities might look like when seen through the lens of 'frontier' and decolonial perspectives. I leverage decolonising as a methodology to posit the idea of 'frontier diasporas' as a pathway to a more fruitful discourse on the cultural complexities, language practices and identity narratives of migrant communities.

Decolonial and Southern theorists are critical of hegemonic knowledge traditions (de Sousa Santos, 2007, 2014; Makoni et al., 2023; Mignolo, 2011; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndhlovu, 2022; Ndhlovu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012), underpinning the proposal for an alternative approach to our understanding of diaspora identities. These scholars argue for the need to recognise the importance of different knowledge systems by 'looking at different beings who are capable of being knowledge producers' (Makoni et al., 2023, p. 8). This is about promoting ecology of knowledges, which is 'founded on the idea that knowledge is interknowledge' (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 66). As part of the broader decolonial and Southern intellectual tradition, Indigenous scholars such as Chilisa (2011), Smith (2012), and Yunkaporta (2019) advise that we need new ways of know-

of addressing societal challenges through drawing on a wider and more sophisticated battery of explanatory frames. This is because ‘the world is complex, and knowledge endures because everybody carries a part of it, no matter how fragmentary; you must talk to everybody and listen carefully’ (Yunkaporta, 2019, p. 14).

Two contours of decolonial and Southern theories inform the analysis: ontologies of incompleteness and unfinishable possibilities of existence otherwise. The concept of incompleteness as a state of being is about the importance of interconnections, with a focus on why, in a world peopled by infinite possibilities, tastes and value systems – we are much better off working together because nothing is complete on its own without others (Nyamnjoh, 2020). That is, incompleteness is effectively the default state of things, beings, identities, cultures, languages and traditions of knowing. In other words, human beings complete one another through interconnections, and sharing cultures, knowledges, traditions and experiences. They are only complete when they interact and relate as an epistemic community: a community of common practice, interests and visions. Therefore, when seen through the lens of incompleteness, diaspora identities would be better understood as being about common bonds that derive from a more universal conception of humankind couched in a language of ‘interdependency’, ‘incompleteness’, ‘conviviality’, ‘interconnectedness’, ‘co-operation’ and ‘collaboration’ (Cantle, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2020). The thesis of incompleteness thus holds the promise of recognising the cultural complexities of diasporas as an inherent part of their identities – what constitutes them ontologically, socially and politically.

The second decolonial contour, that of unfinishable possibilities, speaks to the open-ended nature of cultures, identities and languages. With its emphasis on the ongoing rootedness, possibilities of existing otherwise, and thinking and acting with/across territories, the concept of unfinishable possibilities speaks to the endless prospects for being and becoming that should frame our struggle for new futures. The concept of unfinishable possibilities is a fitting summary term that captures the kind of posture, attitude and action we need in pushing forward the agenda of resistance, refusal, resurgence and a re-existence in transformative, counter-hegemonic and anti-conventional ways (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Ndhlovu, 2022; The New Polis, 2022). Thinking in terms of unfinishable possibilities could help us appreciate that diaspora identities are constituted by imperatives of human sociality that tend to expand and contract – in equal measure – reflecting group and individual biographies, cosmologies, complex histories of mobilities of people, things, objects, and (re)imaginings of present and future life trajectories and aspirations.

Building on the two decolonial concepts of ontologies of incompleteness and unfinishable

conversations about migrant identities to emerge. The idea of frontier diaspora rests on the related concept of frontier diaspora languages. For example, the Bantu linguistic and cultural identity is one common narrative of origin that could bind together most African people from across the entire continent and those in the diaspora. Historical accounts and philological studies are replete with evidence that supports the claim that following their migration from southern West Africa, people who speak the genetically related Bantu languages spread throughout much of the African continent: from east of the Great Lakes region all the way through central Africa to modern-day South Africa and Namibia (Bresnan & Moshi, 1990; Hiernaux, 1968; Nurse & Philippson, 2003; Vansina, 1995). African diasporas in Australia and from elsewhere around the world can leverage these well-known linguistic interconnections to craft new identity narratives that rest on a rethought language of ‘frontier diaspora’.

The [Bantal-Pulaar community of Australia](#) is one model for how this could be achieved.^[1] This is a community of African diasporas who migrated from more than 14 countries across 3 regions in Africa: East Africa, Central Africa and West Africa. Although the African languages they speak are known by different names (Fula, Pulaar, Peul, Tuculor, Fulful, Fulbe and Fulani), they are all mutually intelligible and genetically related (Barro, 2010; Ndhlovu, 2011, 2013; Prah, 2009). Through leveraging these cross-linguistic commonalities, the Bantal-Pulaar community in Australia has forged a transnational frontier diaspora identity narrative that has enabled them to build the much-needed critical mass to sustain community language schools and other pan-ethnic social, economic and cultural activities here in Australia. There are other similar projects by African diasporas in Australia, such as the [Lang Dentity Project](#),^[2] an African heritage language learning initiative pioneered by Dr Sithembinkosi Dube, and the Wagga African Association’s intercultural summer schools. An observable driver of the activities of all three African community organisations is the desire to delink from the logics of imperial science that privilege nation-state and standard languages as units of analysis in diaspora identity narratives.

Conclusion

What we learn from the above is that a frontier diaspora perspective is ‘a serious effort to capture current language practices [of African diasporas and those of Africans on the continent], which are generally pan-ethnic in nature – hence, which cut across conceptualisations about language/society/ethnicity affiliation implicit’ (Makoni, 2003, p. 145). It is essentially a proposal to envision diaspora through centring the real language practices and experiences

of our communities (Ndhlovu, 2015; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021) or, as Sinfree Makoni suggested two decades ago, a frontier diaspora perspective entails imagining people's language practices as 'multilayered interconnected chains' (Makoni, 2003, p. 141). This is about looking at linguistic usages through a decolonial prism that challenges and unsettles the putative notion of languages as self-enclosed entities. Through working with interconnectedness, the metaphor of frontiers enables us to talk about speakers' language repertoires rather than the 'number' of discrete language-things that a speaker supposedly moves in and out of (Fardon & Furniss, 1994; Makoni, 2003; Ridge, 2000). Finally, as Ndhlovu and Masuku (2025) recently advised, conceptions of language as interconnected patterns, frontiers and scrambled systems hold the promise for delinking discourses on diasporas from the overbearing hold of Euro-modernist imperial scientific models that are top-down and that sustain global inequalities and hierarchies of humanity, languages, cultures, ontologies, epistemologies and traditions of knowing.

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Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities

Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions

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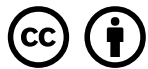
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