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**The Entanglements of Knowledge: land and learning**

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**Introduction**

*“Memory recreates the past every time it is invoked”. Karen Barad.*

Liberation is forever a signifier, the meaning of which is deferred[[1]](#footnote-1), being made free of, or having the freedom to anticipate a possibility deferred. Meaning is attached to the signifiers and through their repeated recording or articulation, come into reality, though multiple and layered meanings remain forever attached as ghostly traces of alterity. Barad invites us to consider meaning not as ideality, but as material which matters; is made to matter (2014, p.175). How to read discourse in the context of material meaning, is more than simply reading history differently, or reading between disciplines. In this paper I offer some insights concerning the nature of discourse in the context of higher education, that speaks to the insularity of our disciplines, the distortions that arise from the absence of championing inter-textuality, interdisciplinarity. In gesturing towards the learning that needs to happen at the margins between disciplines and across fields, I point to the need for connection between ideas of self and knowledge, knowledge and community, and the knowledge society which we seek to create. The contribution made to the knowledge society, through the curriculum and scholarship should also enable as in the sector avoid inequity, address injustice and violence. I begin by answering the question: what is the nature of the relationship between how one reads and what one reads? And why does that relationship matter?

August is an auspicious month in South Africa in these terms. How reading discourse matters, can be demonstrated by overestimating the significance of historic markers of, for example, the Treaty of Fort Jackson on 9 August 1814[[2]](#footnote-2), or the Nagasaki bombing of 9 August 1945, or indeed the Women's March of 9 August 1956. These events relate to the land, access to it, ownership or annihilation of it, each narrative is belied by its others whether present in the footnotes or absolutely absent from the historical accounts. Understanding how language orders time is part of understanding the rationality of linear sequencing in a way that disrupts its seductive appearance of being the only way of understanding causality. If time is not linear as the narratives of history would have us believe, but rather diffracted, disrupted and distorted as the narratives of science suggest, then we understand why history approximates, rather than repeats itself, in an endless series of entanglements[[3]](#footnote-3). The layering of meaning over time is anticipated by Barad (2018) who notes: "Time isn't what it used to be; perhaps it never was"[[4]](#footnote-4). Even in Dali’s painting the **Persistence of Memory** (1931)**,** the representation of time is notably less than persistent, threatening to slide and melt into an inert perhaps dying animal and landscape of desolation. And, despite the persistence of memory, we are unable to learn from time, and unable to learn in time, perhaps because knowledge systems neither allow for, nor seek out the multiplicity of meaning over and between our disciplines. This is aIso not to seek to dwell on the superficiality of knowledge as a corpus of insight and understanding. When one invokes the very concept of knowledge one immediately needs to distinguish this from information and simultaneously acknowledge the scholarship on knowledge formation and construction. Foucault and Deleuze are considered particularly useful in their treatment of knowledge, and between them consider the relationship between language, discourse, knowledge and power. The scholarship of education one often reads about knowledge as a form of power, but for this paper it is more useful to distinguish between knowledge in the service of power, at its disposal as it were, and information, which is not useful to power until it becomes focused in the form of knowledge. Knowledge becomes powerful in two ways: first in the way it is constituted as fields (drawing from Foucault, 1979), and secondly in relation to it producing “truth, in so far as it makes us see and speak. It produces truth as a problem" (Deleuze, 1988, p.83).

Similarly, the synthesis of information required to understand knowledge, common in the scholarship on education (see Bloom’s taxonomy, for example: Anderson, Krathwohl et al, 2001) tends to be associated with the technique of close reading with a view to critique. These particular skills are often associated with claims made by disciplines within the humanities concerning critical reading and the creation of new knowledge. However, the teaching of composition skills needs more than simply critical or close reading, but requires the reader to traverse the limits and boundaries of the discipline itself; and how to read beyond the limits requires analytical skills beyond the convention level 4 analysis described by Bloom et al (1956). Of conventional approaches to text analysis, Barad similarly notes the following: “Critique is too easy, especially when a commitment to reading with care no longer seems to be a fundamental element of critique. So as I explain to my students, reading and writing are ethical practices, and critique misses the mark” (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2009). When considered in this light, the observation made by another celebrated feminist, Gloria Anzaldua (1987), on what ethical response means is apposite: “The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility” (p.20). Ethical reading is thus implicitly not linked only to text, but the materiality of world and text. Thus what one reads (with a view to that commitment to the interdisciplinary and cross-field activity described earlier) and how one reads, are related.

The layering of narrative, both from the perspective of its reading as well as its making, entails making its entanglements clear and these point to the holism of knowledge across disciplines, time and spaces. Trin Min-ha posits that “Each story is at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole” (1989, p.123). It is for these reasons that interdisciplinary, intradisciplinary and multidisciplinary conferences can be very worthwhile, because they allow for insights and comparisons that we do not typically allow for in our narrowly defined areas of specialisation and curricula. That noted, difficulty with interdisciplinary work is that it requires that the reader or practitioner needs to move beyond comfort zones of disciplinary knowledge and often this requires collaboration: to move from simply the cohabitation of presentations on a programme, or disciplines in a building, to new learning yielding new insights. An approach to opening up the possibilities of an inter-reading of disciplines, is through diffraction as proposed by Karen Barad (2007). In this regard, Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2009) note that by “…proposing diffraction, the relational nature of difference, as a methodology for treating theories and texts not as pre-existing entities, but as intra-action, as forces from which other texts come into existence”[[5]](#footnote-5). Diffraction becomes a methodology that compels us to re-think the relationship between knowledge and the world, between the apparatus of research and its objects and the entanglement of both. Entanglement disturbs the linearity of history, and by so doing disturbs any sense of narrative control, and the invocation of causality (or indeed its seeming absence).

Despite us knowing about the contemporary crises of global warming, increased unemployment in an age of technological advancement and the rise of right wing politics globally, our approaches suggest we have little collective control, let alone understanding of either purpose or impact. Neo-liberalism’s claim to the rationality of markets is revealed as its own fake news. Men still remain imprisoned by heteronormativity; women are still imprisoned by patriarchy. Class, race, and gender might modify how such prisons work, making some seem like palaces of entitlement or uncritical indifference. Every privilege simultaneously imprisons. We have agency yes, but the conceptualisation of such, is severely limited, and often self-destructive because of ideas about dualities and binaries seduce one into believing that otherness can be exteriorised and separated from self. Too often in postcolonial, and indeed feminist discourse, the temptation not to see the alterity of matter leads to a (mis)understanding of materiality in relation to agency.

This conference considers the nuances pertaining to pedagogy and higher education in relation to insights from queer theory and gender studies, both of which draw from and contribute to feminist theory. It is evident just from a reading of the abstracts that discourse is critical as a means of seeing, or changing our understanding of agency in the action of conceptualising teaching, for example, or the experience describing migration. And, it is this relationship between the diffraction of perception, discourse and materiality, that I would like to explore a little more with you in the closing paper of this event. And having begun this paper already I find myself still at its start.

**Unlearning Land**

So, standing still at the start of this paper, I consider diffraction in the context of discourse patterns and with reference to two particular material-discursive patterns. The first of these concerns the land. Discourse affects how we perceive material reality and reality itself: how we see things and how we see things. As an applied linguist one understands this through the comparison between the uses of discourse and phrases, the material relations between words (sometimes referred to as transitivity analysis, see Halliday, 2002) and contexts. Discourse speaks volumes about its knowing, and unknowing of the subject and its objects, volumes that paradoxically entrap us. Deleuze (1991) notes that “the subject and its object are produced in the politics of truth” (Deleuze, p.107), and suggests that that which is seen, and considered, is unavoidably a reflection of interiority externalised: we are not what we cannot see, or put in another way, we are not what we cannot communicate. Thus when one considers colonial discourse about the land, there too we find similarly this notion of filling the land; impressing meaning on it through material change, often in the form of extraction, or the imposition of cultivation on a void, waiting to be filled and waiting to be possessed (see for example three very different colonial, and post-colonial novels: **Heart of Darkness** (1899) by Joseph Conrad, **Voss** (1957) by Patrick White, and **A Bend in the River** (1979), by V.S. Naipaul. But even in these texts colonial settlement is unsettled by its rationalisation for violence, possession and extraction because to be sure, even as colonists insisted that the land was empty (of other people) they knew that: “The void is not absence, indeed nothingness is an infinite plenitude...that cannot be disentangled from what matters”. In colonial settler and missionary terms, the void was also imbued with Christian overtones concerning death as separation from God (Verster, 2016). The waning of the body was seen as a precursor to spiritual union with the divine, without considering that the void contains the conditions for creation, dust is not to dust, but rather to matter, as noted by Henderson-Espinoza (2016): “but this does not translate into a lack of existence; death or decomposition is also a becoming process that matter must undergo” (p.69).

What matters in colonial discourse is that plenitude is an invitation to extraction, and the absence of possession, is the invitation of ownership. Having written many years ago (Balfour, 1998) about the relationship between the idealities of agency, terrain and landscaping, the evident Cartesian splits necessary to objectify difference, can be seen as the basis to make a series of value-judgments justifying race gender and labour exploitation. About these Cartesian fantasies, Barad has the following refusal: “Colonial entanglements...tracing the multiple histories with one's body. Woundedness is not reserved for human beings, landscapes are not containers for human and non-human actors; it is the skin of the earth. For whom is the land empty? The poisoned soil of human exceptionalism” (Barad, 2018). Human exceptionalism takes the form of a reification of human agency in which the landscape becomes merely the scene in which actors stage their play, instead of the origins from which their matter comes to matter. Agency for Barad is matter diffracted, where purpose or intention are redefined and redirected: “Matter is a congealing of agency. And thus physical matters, matters of fact are not unrelated to matters of concern, justice” or care, or indifference and violence: the integration of value with object and subject in which she terms the “transmateriality; a genitive association and function in its ongoing materialisation of time” (Barad, 2014). In this landscape the agency of actors needs similarly to be re-interpreted. Though Barad is aware of the literature on agency, her understanding of it is novel: “First of all, agency is about response-ability, about the possibilities of mutual response, which is not to deny, but to attend to power imbalances. Agency is about possibilities for worldly re-configurings. So agency is not something possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter. It is an enactment” (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2009). There are implications for revisiting the significance of the linguistic turn, and to acknowledging the impact a material-turn might have, considering how one reads ‘crisis’, for example (see Klein, 2007). Having considered the agential materiality of the land in contrast to the discourse of colonialism and imperialism, one reads a little further into another discipline, ostensibly not concerned with extraction and possession, but ennoblement and empowerment: the discourse concerning learning in education. The point of reading further is not a nicety but rather an essential diffraction that up-turns the how one reads in relation to the what one reads, to create new insights and understanding.

**Learning-Land**

The second form of patterning concerns the learner: At the outset I want to state that there are chilling similarities in education discourse concerning the learner as vessel, to be emptied out, or as empty awaiting the decanting of language and information (see Cook, 2010), and colonial discourse concerning land; similarities which run parallel to and intersect with imperial dispositions past and present. In education discourse there other conceptualisations of the learner, learning and the teacher which have been theorised (see Balfour et al, 2008) in close relationship to landscape, humans and non-humans all of which express agency implicitly (and often problematic relations of ignorance). Connecting land to learner is something I anticipated when developing the generative theory of rurality, and by so doing contemporary with Barad, and somehow recalling Anzaldua's work on identity, it was possible to recognise, even if retrospectively, a material entanglement (see Henderson-Espinoza, p.81) without understanding that it was also a material cartography (Henderson-Espinoza, p.82) in terms of the links between the theory of generative rurality to the new materialist philosophers and feminists. Thgis is as much about knowing as it is about not knowing, and the not know, much like the void, is an area of richly potential because there are many things in the void that bear returning to the light and vice versa forming a compolex matrix about knowledge, the material and the world. According to Henderson-Espinoza (2016) "Anzaldúa’s vibrancy locates materiality along the matrix of becoming..." (p.151), and in doing so the land, learning and the learning are integrally coterminous; the boundaries are shared, the light of scholarship diffracts at these boundaries and for this reason the study of the liminal, the marginal, and the limits of knowledge is singularly important.

Integral to this work is the idea that everything participates in matter; and that even notions of entropy or decay have within them the very possibilities of regeneration, even if not in the same form. In the context of rural education (in other words, the activities associated with education in rural contexts and communities) and theory developed to describe the complex inter-dependencies, relationships and configurations of agencies, forces and resources (Balfour et al, 2008 and Balfour, 2012) is described as generative precisely in recognition of the diffraction characteristic of agential realism in these (and indeed other) learning ecologies. Given the recentering of land featured in that work, it is linked explicitly here to debates concerning new materialism and post-humanism[[6]](#footnote-6).

The connection between materiality, gender and agency, in the context of migration on the borderlands or the urban and the rural, the in-betweenness of sexuality, and identity, is explored by Anzaldua whose famous quote “I change myself, I change the world” encapsulates several themes touched on in the conference. Anzaldua’s work has always resonated with me since her book **La Frontera/ Borderlands** (1987) appeared in the 1980s because she challenges received notions of agency, identity and realism by pointing to the relationship between interiority and alterity: between thought, perception and change: “Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn comes before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads”. Reading Anzaldua’s in the context of Karen Barad’s work, on agential realism and material entanglement, seems almost as though participating in a dialogue about time and agency, identity and new materialism in ways are both surprising and intriguing. According to Henderson-Espinoza (2016) what "…Gloria Anzaldúa envisions [is] a new, perhaps queer, way of producing knowledge by inventing new ways of being and becoming in the world and queer ways of materializing one’s agency" (p.8).

It was Barad who argued that the history of materiality is one of entanglement and whose argument concerning the links between ethics and theory, between facts and theory, has contributed important nuances to the scholarship of identity and materiality. Henderson-Espinoza (2016) suggests that “...two concepts that are intimately connected and cohere to be a singular reality: that bodies are material and material bodies are always becoming" (Henderson-Espinoza, 2016, p.51).

Barad notes that the facts of materiality are not value-free and that values are made together with facts. Time and matter are marked by race, gender, colonialism. In her work on agential realism (2007) Barad provokes us to rethink notions of subjectivity, objectivity, and agency; terms which have either been problematised (objectivity) or originated (subjectivity) arisen from the work of feminist and postcolonial theorists: “In my agential realist account, matter is a dynamic expression/articulation of the world in its intra-active becoming” (Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2009). Agential realism offers the possibility of agency beyond its humanist premises and this, in turn, makes for possibilities for re-thinking pedagogy, culture, spaces, and the environment in the complex interaction, inter-reactions and what she refers to as entanglements the tracing of which suggest that our ideas of rape, care, pedagogy and curriculum, come to be opened up to new possibilities beyond simply the linear-trajectories leading to intersectionality. There is some nascent research on the applicability of Barad’s work for the classroom also. For example, Plauborg (2018) undertook a study concerning a primary school English language acquisition classroom in Denmark and argued that “What we learn is connected across temporality and spatiality. This means that we encounter something that we have learned in one situation or context in another” (Plauborg, 2018, p.9). Informing Plauborg’s analysis is that offered also of the classroom environment by Lenz Taguchi in which “[…] learning does not simply take place inside the child but is the phenomena that are produced in the intra-activity taking place in between the child, its body, its discursive inscriptions, the discursive conditions in the space of learning, the materials available, the time–space relations in a specific room of situated organisms, where people are only one such material organism among others” (Taguchi 2010, p. 36). And then there are other studies which in turn draw on post-human conceptualisations of learning that do not take the human as the only point of reference, for example, with respect to technology (Sørensen 2009), animals (Taylor et al., 2013), and nature (Quinn 2013). Having considered briefly learning-land and unlearning land the section to follow offers closing remarks without offering near closure.

**Diffraction and Difference**

Returning to diffraction as a matter of being attuned to differences in new ways, Barad asks: “What if we were to recognize that differentiating is a material act that is not about radical separation, but on the contrary, about making connections and commitments?” (Barad, 2007, p.266). On the nature of difference Trin Min-ha has the following insight: “Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, but as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences” (1988, p.8). The many opportunities universities create to explore the nature of difference whether from the scientific or the social scientific perspectives, come together for us in August in the form of engagements and reflections in a creative and scholarly manner for delegates, visitors, students and staff of the University with both time, place and space for reflection and action. Together we have located the SAAGS conference, together with Gender Awareness Week appropriately within this time of August (which is Women’s Month), in this complex place of Potchefstroom with its diffracted histories which are not quite past, or actually never past, but always present. Barad (2007) argues that “The past is not present. ‘Past’ and ‘future’ are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through the world’s ongoing intra-activity. [...] Phenomena are not located in space and time; rather, phenomena are material entanglements enfolded and threaded through the spacetimemattering of the universe” (Barad, 2007, p.264). These complexities stimulate our thinking when considering the many topics of this conference which I hope have provoked us to see the entanglements of material realism, agency, and the coterminality of discourses on land and learning.

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1. "Signifier" and "signified" are terms used in one branch of linguistics and literary criticism to describe the components of a sign: the signifier, to put it simply, is the word, and the signified is the thing or idea it represents. Signifiers needn't be confined to words; they can include any system of representation, including drawings, traffic lights, body language, and so on. Much of the literary criticism of the last twenty-five years has focused on the relationship between the signifier and signified, and therefore on the very nature of meaning. https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Terms/signifier.html accessed on 10 August, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On August 9, 1814, Andrew Jackson and the Creek Indians signed the Treaty of Fort Jackson, ceding the white settlers 23 million acres of Creek Territory. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Entanglements are not unities. They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiatings, differentiatings entail entanglings. One move –cutting together-apart (Barad, 2014, p.176). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Time can’t be fixed. The past is never closed, never finished once and for all, but there is no taking it back, setting time aright, putting the world back on its axis. There is no erasure finally. The trace of all reconfigurings is written into the enfolded materialisations of what was/ is/ to-come (Barad, 2007 p.264). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Diffraction is not a singular event that happens in space and time; rather, it is a dynamism that is integral to spacetimemattering. Diffractions are untimely. Time is out of joint; it is diffracted, broken apart in different directions, non-contemporaneous with itself. Each moment is an infinite multiplicity. ‘Now’ is not an infinitesimal slice but an infinitely rich condensed node in a changing field diffracted across spacetime in its ongoing iterative repatterning (Barad, 2014, p.169). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The posthuman is "not a denial of the human, but an intentional decentering of the human (the Man) and a consideration that matter is vitally alive and enchanted" (Henderson-Espinoza, 2016, p.128). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)