14 Using transformative leadership to 'nibble at resilient colonialism': An autoethnographic account of student–faculty experiences

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Overview

This chapter puts the reflections and experiences of student and faculty into dialogue with theoretical literature around transformative leadership. Improvisation, conviviality, and collaboration between students and faculty is useful for 'nibbling' at the 'resilient colonialism' present in higher education in Africa. Exploring transformative leadership begins by examining what is being transformed, by whom and why. The question is how does one 'nibble' and who bears the burdens of nibbling? This chapter interrogates how actors can access or become alienated from the work of transformative leadership. The authors utilise autoethnography as an entry point for dialogue. This highlights the changes in the multiple axes upon which individual identity – and transformation – rests, given varying levels of privilege, power, and positionality, as individuals navigate leadership. Convivial politics, underpinned by improvisation, might mediate power and positionality in a way that enhances transformative leadership in higher education.

Introduction

This chapter is based on a dialogue that began in Mauritius in 2017, and is a cumulation of complex and reflective conversations of what it means to be a leader, an African leader, and a social scientist working from or within Africa in the context of higher education. The authors met under unusual circumstances, as student and faculty member, in an institution previously referred to as Institution Q (Auerbach, Dlamini, & Anonymous, 2019). Institution Q was self-consciously saturated in the discourses of entrepreneurial leadership emerging from Silicon Valley, and students and faculty in its founding years – including both authors – had been inspired by its promise of education geared towards transformation through leadership.

Over time, after difficult experiences within the institution, we reflected on the role of power, positionality, and the 'burdens' we aimed to address by acquiring and supporting African education. We suggest that while 'leadership' itself proved far too blunt a tool for systemic change, opening spaces to consciously debate a hegemonic narrative did prove powerful. As we examine the notion

of nibbling at resilient colonialism in higher education, in our positions that inform our dialogues, discoveries, and collaboration, we posit that improvisation plays a central role in higher education leadership. In his analysis of the South African #RhodesMustFall movement, Nyamnjoh (2016) argues that rather than attempting to overthrow or upend existing systems of power and control, actors in higher education have much to gain by 'nibbling' at resilient structures, transforming them through thousands of small actions that change their shape and form. We have found this notion personally helpful, and of ongoing value to leadership discussions in higher education more generally.

One of the central questions that sparked the authors' varied conversations was how students and faculty imagined the reinvention of Africa in a moment when the narrative of 'Africa Rising' was shaping the conceptualisation of leadership. Although the Africa Rising narrative (Bhorat & Tarp, 2016; Young, 2014) has been critically interrogated from different perspectives (Mkandawire, 2014; Taylor, 2014, 2015; Wengraf, 2018), it is still central to how different institutions conceptualise leadership. There is a necessity to question what the focus of leadership is in any specific instance, what makes it work, and who it works for (Olonisakin, 2017). In their work, Krystalli and Enloe (2020, p. 294) rightly ask, 'What is the work that we expect labels to do?' With this in mind, what is expected of the 'African leader' label and – in naming people leaders – what burdens, responsibilities, and legacies are being offered and received? When these discourses explicitly enter an undergraduate classroom, the epistemological histories (meaning how ideas have been internalised and were taught) of leadership discourses are important to consider for their potential impact on individual futures and pathways through higher education.

To tackle the question of 'reinventing' Africa in a neoliberal university, Auerbach et al., (2019) demonstrate how the interactions of private capital, the imaginations of what Africa is and ought to be, and homogenising narratives of Africa pave the way for potentially problematic 'solutions'. Such solutions are based on external imaginings of 'Africa' (Nuttall, 2008) that are not grounded in proper understandings of local realities or global systems of power. Subtlety, specificity, and nuance do not fit well in the one-dimensional representations of Africa that have soothed Western imaginations of the continent from *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 2008) through to *The Lion King* (Auerbach et al., 2019).

Recent discourses pertaining to leadership have overwhelmingly emerged from corporate leadership spaces driven in part by the massification of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) qualification and the corporate 'self-help' industry. In the process, entrepreneurial leadership has come to permeate leadership narratives in subtle but significant ways whereby 'influence' has been closely linked with the ability to sell things (Carnegie, 2006). In the process of centring entrepreneurial leadership within institutions, individuals who do

not subscribe to this manifestation of leadership may be alienated from the process of contributing to the production and practice of internal leadership discourses pertaining to education. In a university environment explicitly framed by discourses of corporate leadership, there can be a lack of direct engagement with the very structures that have perpetuated and continue to perpetuate unequal world systems. Implicitly, at Institution Q, this reinforced and reinscribed the idea that challenges stemming from unequal world systems could be 'consulted away' through discourse and training in managerial 'habits' without addressing the underlying structures of global inequality (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).

In this chapter, we draw on the improvisational approach to theory and research practice described by Cerwonka and Malkki (2007). While ours was not a journey of research per se, the experience of our work and learning together initiated an ongoing dialogue on leadership and its discontents that has followed One Pusumane (OP) through her MA and PhD experiences at Cambridge and Edinburgh universities, and Jess Auerbach Jahajeeah (JAJ) in her subsequent teaching at other universities in both Mauritius and in South Africa.

In their book, Cerwonka and Malkki (2007, p. 25) write:

> An interpretive approach to knowledge production pushes critical discourse in the social sciences beyond the simple denial of the positivist ideal of objectivity and beyond suggestions for self-reflexive strategies. It articulates an alternative epistemology for research and offers a more accurate account of knowledge production.

We ask, what exactly is transformative leadership, and how does it manifest within and across education spaces? These are questions we have grappled with over the past five years. Considering our different trajectories, and acknowledging experiences of belonging, positionality, race, age, and class, we have continued what might be considered an intergenerational conversation that explores transformational leadership as an experience occurring in dialogue between those who would be transformed and those responsible, in some way, for student transformation. From this position, we suggest the need for a nuanced understanding of how we think about African leadership and the implications of the foundations that uphold that understanding.

Throughout this chapter, we engage in a conversation reflecting on the questions that we have grappled with through our different engagements, both in the classroom and beyond, and how they relate to transformative leadership in higher education and the idea of nuance. We suggest that there is a possibility for nuance if transformative leadership is used as a site of refiguration for how we construct new ways of thinking about leadership. Our conversations are recorded here in three parts.

The first section explores the role of co-creation and control in educational leadership by interrogating what co-creation looks, sounds, and feels like when there are varied central actors with distinctive interests, missions, and objectives. If the focus of transformative leadership is about identifying and executing a vision that brings about social and political change for various communities, it is important to interrogate the politics of collective interests and account for the power dynamics of the collective. In the second section, we discuss the nature and place of 'consulting culture', which is often tethered to the problem-solving approaches of issues on the African continent and influences how different experiences of resistance are incubated and negotiated. Finally, we examine the role of 'improvising' leadership as a means to nibble at resilient colonialism in a manner that is attentive to the complexities of everyday individuals.

Co-creation and control in educational leadership

OP: Co-creation is very messy. There are so many power dynamics to consider. There are costs, some personal, to individuals who want to actively contribute to the direction of the much-needed transformation. At times, it can feel like institutions turn to co-creating with a check-box approach so that in future there is some 'evidence' of including the others, in this case the student voice, in the decision-making processes. We need to actively seek out and cultivate a culture of co-creation that is meaningful, effective, and inclusive enough to centre student voices and leave room for critical engagement.

In his work, Weiner (2003, p. 89) argues that 'transformative leadership is an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy, and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility'. While these ideas are core to transformative leadership, I think there is a need to be critical of whose ideas are key in influencing the materiality of social justice and democracy within higher education, and this is why co-creation is an important aspect of transformative leadership. Co-creation is central to educational leadership because the learning process is not just about disseminating information to students and equipping them with the right skills. It requires attention to where those skills are learned and the kind of dialogue involved in conceptualising what leadership is or is not. There is this obsession of trying to 'fix' African leadership, as if that will solve all the continent's issues.

Jallow (2014, p. 2) states that from an external perspective, 'leadership in postcolonial Africa generally seems negative and failed', and because of the realities of state failure and political instability in some contexts

(Bah, 2012; Herbst, 1996), there is often a major focus on leadership development, and trying not to repeat the 'mistakes' of past leaders. Adjacent to this narrative is the aspiration to adopt the best leadership models, and learning and leading from the 'best institutions'; however, the critical questions are what is adopted, by whom, and for what purposes? These were the kind of questions I was asking myself as I realised the need to be critically curious about leadership as a concept and a practice before rushing to judge individuals who are deemed to either fail or succeed. Where do the models of leadership that are being experienced and presented come from? On what grounds does the evaluation take place? I would argue that collaboration is not only about collective interests, but differences as well. However, if everyone is a leader, who follows and how does 'control' materialise in these different collaborations? The idea of 'training' everyone to be a leader always leaves me with more questions than answers. When we say we are training African leaders, whose Africa is at the core of the discussion, and who is to be led? By 'we', I mean the scholars, activists, donors, students, management, etc. Who leads whom and how do we move and work together in a transformative and disruptive way that can dismantle injustices and inequality? For me, the term 'African leaders' has a sweeping effect that I find very problematic. The fixes it suggests are far too easy.

JAJ: What does it mean to 'lead leaders' when the 'leaders' are 19 years old and usually late for class? At Institution Q, I experienced a great tension in myself between wanting to empower students, support their emerging leadership capabilities, and incorporate their often insightful suggestions, while also feeling frustrated because sometimes they did not know what they did not know. Both institutionally and from students themselves, co-creation was frequently approached through the repetition of tropes not grounded in reality. The most common manifestation of this was the use of the epithet for Institution Q, 'The Harvard of Africa'. First used by a susceptible journalist who bought into the marketing, the label stuck, and my students would regularly inform me that they were attending a Harvard-equivalent institution. Institution Q was many things, but Harvard was not one of them, primarily because there was no existing culture of research and scholarship, never mind the infrastructure to accompany it.

When I walked into the classroom for the first time, I saw a group of late teens from around Africa who had opted into social science because they had questions that the entrepreneurial training underpinning their degree at Institution Q wasn't answering. These

were mostly about the underlying systems at play on the continent and in the world. As a then 32-year-old staff member whose PhD had not even dried on the proverbial press, I had no doubt I could work with the spark in each of these individuals, but I was dubious about the framing in leadership. At what point in a biography does leadership become apparent? Might there be risks in naming it too soon? If everyone in my class was a leader already, how would teamwork happen? Could I assume the basic life skills, which undergraduate training is supposed to teach, had already been mastered, and we could plunge straight into the content? What about maturity, emotional development, intellectual exploration, learning from being wrong? What might be the potential consequences of losing the opportunity to spend one's formative years 'not knowing'? Having been exposed to similar discourses in the international community of Rhodes Scholars, I was particularly aware of the weight that some individuals carried from the constant invocation to lead (for others, of course, it was a joy). 'A Rhodes Scholar is someone with a great future behind them' was a frequently made quip within the community around Oxford – was it wise to frame futures in leadership so explicitly?

Consider first that negative tropes of failed African leadership foreground the 'heroes' that are hyper-politicised as the poster figures of leadership. As such, these prominent figures, or heroes' ideologies influence the conceptualisation of African leadership. Weiner (2011) argues that an alternative version of leadership imagination is desirable, and gives the example of the Brazilian educator and social theorist Paulo Freire 'as a transformative leader'. Weiner (2003, p. 92) writes, 'Freire had to make sure he was not simply imposing his ideological agenda on the community, but rather was instigating an alternative democratic project that was rooted in the ideals of liberty and freedom'. Moreover, Freire ensured that he worked with different people such as teachers, students, administrators, businesses, and political leaders (Weiner, 2011) and was flexible and adaptable in his thinking. He never suggested a one-size-fits-all approach to problem solving.

Working with Freire, Weiner (2011) suggests that the lynchpin of transformative leadership is democratic thought. From this perspective of decentring ideological agendas of the poster figures of leadership, how then do the processes of co-creation around the ideas of liberty, freedom, and social experience take place? In the context of emerging higher education institutions across the African continent, what are the insights of all stakeholders, from the kitchen staff, through first-year undergraduate students, to those who are about to graduate? From an administrative perspective, the challenge is, like Freire, to explore opportunities

for co-creation that are inclusive in a context where there are different objectives and interests, in addition to brand-management concerns.

In an education landscape where the networks and charisma of new-university founders are often central to the financial viability of the institution, how does higher education avoid 'leader-as-hero' models that are then embodied by the students themselves (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006)? Building on this idea, Montuori and Donnelly (2018, p. 321) argue that at its core, transformative leadership is a creative, collaborative process that ensures mutual benefit and is not delineated to 'heroic individuals making large dramatic actions and gestures'. How does one both collaborate and teach – constantly iterate the curriculum, but also enable students to flourish in exams?

OP: In mapping out what alternative models of leadership exist or could exist, we can work with different aspects of co-creation and control that need to be highlighted here, all of which were highly contested in our experiences at Institution Q. On the first level, if the underpinnings and conceptualisations of leadership, particularly where the African continent is concerned, are primarily informed by often unconscious expectations of 'bad' leadership, there is a risk of analysis not fit for purpose (O'Niel, 2018). Here, there is a likelihood that models will be adopted from established institutions based largely in the Global North without conscious engagement with what is working locally and why (Jansen, 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Essentially this paves the way to (re)produce essentialising and homogenising narratives (Auerbach et al., 2019).

As a student, one example of co-creation came out of critical and hard conversations about how we were learning and the kind of scholarship we were being exposed to as a cohort. Although there were opportunities to add to the reading list to make it more diverse and inclusive, because of higher education accreditation requirements in Mauritius, much of this had to take place outside the formal curriculum at the urging of staff – who themselves had little control of the actual syllabus. This process created a double burden for both students and staff: students had to learn both the mainstream and the critique in a way that was consciously saturated with the discourse of entrepreneurialism. Staff – who were all deeply committed to preparing students for success across Africa itself – had to teach exams out of one side of the mouth, and also to the heart, with completely different materials, from the other. In order to receive a 'balanced' education, everyone had to work double time, which was not sustainable at the level of mental and physical health.

In response to co-creating knowledge and being intentional about how we think about the African continent, one of the core modules of the institution that was trialled and quickly scrapped was an African Studies course that all first-year students were supposed to take, alongside the United Kingdom-designed curriculum. This course was designed to help all students grapple with and interrogate the kind of Africa they understood and envisioned as 'future leaders'. The course created space to acknowledge African history and probe beneath the stereotypes. It required and rewarded reflexivity and nuance. However, that proved short-lived because these dialogues took place in an institutional context where the course was seen as optional by both management and students, and student success was celebrated only when it was specifically in the domain of entrepreneurialism. A small group of committed staff worked hard to support African Studies, but ultimately, its significance faded in the face of students facing exams set by an external partner, and staff facing key performance indicators that did not require awareness of context and specificity.

JAJ: Yes, the African Studies course is one example that can highlight the tension of collaboration and control, which is central in interrogating the conceptualisation of leadership. As Weiner (2005, p. 93) rightly notes, 'transformative leadership must always make problematic the institutional power it wields'. From this perspective, it is important to question what the driving forces of expectations and demand are for different types of leadership(s) within educational institutions. As a student, there is usually limited room for critical engagement, because one is bound into the institution for resources and social mobility. To a certain extent, the same applies to faculty. How do students critique without 'biting the hand that feeds them'? How might students be supported as they identify the thin line or perhaps balance of (de)constructing how they/we think about leadership and challenging what they/we think they/we know?

This is where issues of control and agenda-setting arise, highlighting the challenges of co-creation. Where should student voices be located in the determination of what leadership is and ought to be? How do we reconcile the time it takes for students to graduate and be trained with the urgency of systematic reform (Albertus, 2019; Davids, 2021; Gillespie & Naidoo, 2019; Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016; Mpondwana, 2016; White, 2019)? This is particularly acute when donor funding relies on perceptions of students – often the case in emerging universities, where 'protest' does not easily sit alongside emerging 'brands'. If we follow the money, where does it lead us and why?

> Beyond the money, there is room to think about the social and futures capital that is afforded to those who comply with expectations and the narrative of leadership being advanced, as well as the potential consequences of not complying. One of my students was told the institutional network would ensure she could 'never get a job in Africa' if she did not 'get in line' with 'supporting the branding', and students and staff alike were often threatened in similar ways. While staff could rely on their own qualifications and networks, students felt much more vulnerable.

At Institution Q, public events aimed at the community and would-be donors took place on a regular basis. These were imagined as spaces for students to showcase the projects that they were working on, to inspire, and to consolidate the brand. At one of these events, Pusumane decided to share an incident that she had experienced in the form of an impromptu poem. She chose to reflect on this experience – an attack on the way home from the gym – because she felt it was important to share the sense of not being safe on and around the campus. At the time, there were no existing reporting mechanisms at Institution Q for negative experiences. She hoped to spark dialogue and 'engage…others in an ethical manner to generate positive and lasting change' (Mastercard Foundation, 2014), with the goal being the implementation of new policies and reporting mechanisms. As Amanchukwu, Stanley, and Ololube (2015) posit, leadership primarily focuses on the ability to charter a course, influence, and direct others towards that collective mission. However, this result did not occur. Instead, after Pusumane's presentation, two students approached her separately to express their concern that she was damaging both the institutional and her personal brand – concerns over the brand had apparently surpassed concerns over student well-being.

These reactions and remarks were typical of a brand awareness that saturated Institution Q. They also highlighted a significant aspect of institutional control that was operationalised via students. In this instance, 'we' referred to students of multiple nationalities, who were imagined to be African and concerned about 'Africa', but whose immediate focus was usually on their own success and career trajectories. It is our privilege and immediate concerns that usually shape how we engage with what aspects we think require transformation. Caldwell et al., (2012, p. 177), building on the work of Bass (1985), suggest that the four dimensions of transformative leadership include 'idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration'. They argue that the interaction of these four aspects shapes the different experiences of students and how, at Institution Q in particular, and arguably beyond it, they might 'drink' the leadership 'Kool-Aid' (Moore, 2003).

Consulting the issue away

OP: For me the consulting and audit culture became a problem. Numbers of this and that, while the change we seek sometimes materialises differently. As we unpack the dynamics and politics of co-creation and control, there should be space to examine how the culture and challenges of consulting in higher education (Institution Q) reinforced a narrative of 'consulting' solutions to complex challenges. At Institution Q, 'entrepreneurialism' was valued far more than a more widespread university culture that placed emphasis on publications and scholarly outputs (Grimes, Bauch, & Ioannidis, 2018). In fact, these were actively discouraged and disparaged. As elsewhere, at Institution Q there was social capital and currency assigned to particular institutional and academic backgrounds (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2017), but, interestingly, where staff training at elite institutions such as Stanford and Harvard were exalted because of the credibility it supposedly brought, the work of those institutions in terms of research culture was never emulated. In this instance, the ability of Institution Q to attract and retain experts in co-creation was curtailed by branding centred on entrepreneurialism.

As Rinehart (2016, p. 31) argues, 'what an audit culture actually does is to produce human beings in the system who are more malleable and efficient', and the level of efficiency and malleability will be linked to how these individuals are able to solve the issues that arise. If, as Herzfeld (2010; 2017) argues, theory making is both a political and cultural practice, transformative leadership must attend to its potential blind spots in proactive and inclusive ways. At Institution Q, the focus on entrepreneurialism meant almost all voices that were not amplifying the brand narrative were muted. Of course, in other institutions, transformative leadership might need to consider completely different silences: the point is to attend to those on the margins and work with the insights that their silencing paradoxically provides.

Given the constantly shifting field of inclusion and exclusion, what would it take to imagine transformative leadership discourses that are inclusive of marginalised bodies and voices? How might these manifest in emergent institutional contexts such as that of Institution Q, where there was limited space and time invested in critical engagement? With the expansion of the higher education landscape to institutions beyond the traditional brick-and-mortar institutions of the late industrial era (Davidson, 2017), what are the 'transformations' that higher

education 'leadership' will need to enable? Can – or should – this process attend to those at both established and emerging margins (Shields, 2010)?

JAJ: The conversation of what happens to those left at the margins really needs to be encouraged in university environments. What happens to the individuals who refuse to engage in leadership discourses because they lose faith in institutional systems? Here, the notion of 'transformative leadership' is much more helpful than 'leadership' itself. The former can play a role in disrupting, dismantling, and problematising power structures that mediate hierarchies of privilege that are detrimental to social justice, reform, and systemic change (Odora Hoppers, 2014; Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003), whereas the latter is so vague as to usually mean nothing at all. When presented with a broad notion of leadership pertaining to Africa, both authors of this chapter were drawn to the idea of ensuring that those who would experience leadership in Africa – particularly the youth – were capacitated to participate in it. Yet, as James Ferguson observes in *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (2015), participation usually requires a host of reforms at policy, civil, and social levels. It is a historical inevitability that 'the youth of today' will be 'the leaders of tomorrow', but existing structures of power, domination, and opportunity should be carefully analysed before too much leadership optimism takes place.

Improvising leadership in higher education: Nibbling at domination

OP: There is space for improvisation in leadership in the sense that there is a possibility to weave in different approaches of leading and account for everyday lived experiences. The idea of 'nibbling' at the resilient colonialism (Nyamnjoh, 2016) is a reminder that 'transformative leadership [can be or] is exhausting and complex' (Bieneman, 2011, p. 226). We then have to improvise with a level of care, openness, and a willingness to listen to each other. Improvisation becomes difficult if there is a particular leadership style or leader(s) we heroise or put on a pedestal.

The type of leadership given visibility in higher education will play a role in nibbling at the 'resilient colonial and colonising epistemology' of education in Africa (Nyamnjoh, 2016, p. 50). In social sciences at Institution Q, we as students often had to actively highlight the work of students and staff in social sciences, because senior management often did not want to see it – they saw institutional 'leaders' as those

who could bring in clicks by highlighting the institutional brand, not critically examining them. We turned our classroom into a lab, and one wall (the Wall of African Languages) had idioms from across the continent. Another wall had a powerful art-piece the students co-created. Both got painted over and no longer exist.

There is a need to explore the role and potential of transformative leadership in either helping maintain or disrupt the resilient colonialism that is prevalent in the conceptualisation of leadership. In attending the intersections of transformative leadership, diversity, and education, Jun (2011, p. 238), following on from Sergiovanni (2006) and Shields (2004), suggests that transformative leadership aberrates from traditional leadership notions as it is 'a philosophy of leadership that can be filtered through and with other forms of leadership theory'. This process of 'filtering through' becomes central to how we can frame resilient colonialism. The reason why I argue for nuance and improvisation in leadership in higher education is that I think that nuance can open up alternative leadership styles. In that way, there is no one grand style of leadership; as such, there is a process of filtering through that is flexible and leaves room for improvisation. If we are intentional about recognising these different leadership styles and experiences, there is room to nibble in various ways and students and staff have much more freedom to learn authentically.

We need to ask, what are the idealised influences that might shape the viewpoint of students when leadership discourses permeate higher education? For example, in our experience, when branding is made central not only to managerial, but also to pedagogical discourse, students are likely to focus more on their 'personal brand' than a systematic understanding of the world, which has serious consequences for long-term impact on others. Moreover, if social responsibility is central to transformative leadership (Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003), it is essential to interrogate how institutions reconcile and conceptualise collective social responsibility where there are divergent needs and priorities. At universities, numerous objectives and needs are at play at any one moment. Students attend to 'learn', but also to be socialised, build networks, gain life experience, and beyond. Staff – teaching, non-teaching, and management – are likely to be motivated by far more than just pedagogy, for example by salary or career scaffolding. What is the space for reflexive co-creation in these environments, and how do higher education institutions enable that in an authentic way?

In the case of 'Africa', we observe the paradox that, on the one hand, Africa as a geographical space may evoke a sense of belonging to the continent (Anderson, 1991), or one where 'being' or being perceived to be African can be deployed for social capital. As such, as a territorial space, it is a site for collective identity.

Who are the 'leaders' of this imagined Africa, though, and who is left out of the discussion? In an era of so much leadership, what is the fate of the unled or of educated 'not-leaders'? In this sense, what are the relationships between leadership accounting and social, political, economic, and educational praxis? The exploration of these questions suggests that those who get invited to the table of leadership discussions tend to be people trained in the art of that narrative. They emerge more from business schools and international non-government entities than the grassroots, everyday practitioners who remain largely outside the referential frameworks of 'leadership'. Such entities often have epistemic roots and financial relationships with the Global North. Yet, the truism that Africa is not a country must be remembered. There is risk in homogenising experiences and perceptions, which curtails the visibility of nuanced styles and processes deployed in different spaces to address the very real challenges that individuals and collectives face. Even if a management consultant does not know about it, surely this is leadership?

When putting into dialogue the above framings of transformative leadership, the notion of filtering through begs the question of where transformation is happening within education institutions and what, then, the processes involved in the filtering are. Here, the idea of filtering through points to the idea of assigning importance to a specific type of leadership style, which in turn shapes the areas where individuals and institutions think transformation is needed. In this regard, the filtering process is then underpinned by certain parameters and the conceptualisation of leadership. Since transformative leadership is outward-looking, inclusive, and intentional about social justice (Shields, 2010), we suggest that a level of improvisation and flexibility that resists the tendency to heroise certain individuals or leadership styles within leadership discourse(s) opens up the possibility of 'nibbling' that can have a greater reach and impact in higher education. The idea of resilient colonialism is central to this work because it highlights the resilience of the deeply entrenched systemic issues of inequality that must be addressed in order to pave the way for long-lasting social change – should that be desired.

JAJ: The higher education sector is one that provides ample space for improvisation in leadership, and it is perhaps this which makes it so exciting. Most institutions have some structural framework in which various players operate, but beyond that, latitude for experimentation is often very broad. Teaching is arguably one of the most fundamental forms of leadership that most people experience, and in the everyday improvisations required by pedagogy, good teachers demonstrate flexibility, responsiveness, and care (Jansen & Blank, 2014). What has struck me about Institution Q, in the years since leaving it, has been the impact of the many 'improvisations' that my colleagues and I

undertook together in responding to a somewhat chaotic and rapidly changing environment. Some of these are long forgotten, but many others have remained in students' consciousness, and I now routinely hear from them about the after-effects of teaching interventions we developed. For example, *Awake Engage* was a daily newspaper of media reportage on Africa, which instilled in many students a long-standing commitment to reading about the rest of the continent and has been replicated by students in their professional and personal domains. Other examples include ensuring students knew how to edit Wikipedia as an important part of their writing training that counters dominance from authorial voices in the Global North, non-traditional assessments such as YouTube videos, and allocating marks for the learning of new African languages.

It must be remembered that in the 'everyday' context of business schools – and spaces such as Institution Q – leadership usually seeks to continue, not disrupt, processes of profit that rely on not having systemic change. By contrast, transformative leadership offers a powerful opening for interrogating existing barriers of inequality that often overlap in complicated ways (Crenshaw, 2015). Transformative leadership is defined by an outward-looking approach that can, or at least might be able to, account for the voices, experiences, and contributions of those whom 'leadership' might fail to see or hear. In ongoing conversations of leaders and leadership, we suggest that the 'where to' of transformative leadership should embed a level of improvisation in higher education. What are the explicit objectives at play, and what (or who) is being 'transformed'? Importantly, why is this happening and whose agenda is driving the change?

In their book, which draws from the insights of ongoing research experience, Cerwonka and Malkki (2007, p. 4) suggest that 'theory is challenged and reshaped by the complexities and richness of everyday experiences'. It is within that premise of reshaping complexities that we can find room for improvising leadership. Through improvisation, there are opportunities to consider multiple ways of thinking about transformative leadership, who it is for, and what heuristic entry points exist to think about discourse while being attentive to modes of power, technological tools, and implementation. How do these facilitate re-inscribing mechanisms that might unwittingly contribute to oppressive structures? In our work together, one of the core questions the authors have explored is what the impact is of imagining oneself as powerful, or not. What are the risks of failure for people who are trained in the discursive frameworks of 'leadership', but then fail to assume roles of externally defined 'leadership' in the course of careers and personal life? The intersections of class, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, neurodiversity, and more make it imperative to contextualise experiences, solutions, and recognition. It is important then to

examine how the meanings inscribed by identities, biographies, networks, and opportunities influence the ethics of transformative leadership and the issues that individuals aim – or are trained – to transform. It is within this premise that we argue for the necessity of improvisation and, to return to Nyamnjoh (2016), the potential value of 'nibbling' instead of the ego-infused Silicon Valley-inspired rhetoric of disruption that accompanies so many contemporary educational interventions, and was rife at Institution Q.

Conclusion

The reflections of this chapter demonstrate that there is a need to be critical of the conceptualisation of leadership that is often devoid of subtlety and nuance. Despite the many contributions of the 'decolonial turn' (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Morreira, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020, 2021; Vorster & Quinn, 2017), a colonial epistemology is still prevalent in much of higher education in Africa. In continuing to discuss the need for leaders and training leaders, we underscore the need to interrogate the 'Africa' at the centre of global and local imaginations, and the sweeping or homogenising effects of labels such as 'African leaders'. Although such categories have the potential to evoke a collective sense of belonging and perhaps commitment, there is a risk of curtailing the specificities of individual experiences, trajectories, and contexts. After all, Africa is a continent, not a village or country or terrain in a virtual computer game.

While the chapter acknowledges that there are varied leadership styles that can be woven into the process of improvising leadership in higher education, the process of improvising should make space for learning from being wrong – for the 'leaders' to question what they know and do not know (yet). Although coherence in leadership discussions can be important, how it is deployed or evoked is often accepted uncritically within leadership debates, both within and outside the continent. From this perspective, the space for co-creation and control should become flexible enough to allow experimentation and provide infrastructures that allow for questioning cultures of leadership. These need to critically question the ideologies that underpin the type(s) of leadership styles being advanced and make room for nuance in a manner that allows no single narrative of leadership, entrepreneurial or otherwise, to dominate. Finally, the politics of co-creation and control must be acknowledged, and attention must be given to the diverse needs and objectives of central actors in higher education. These include students, staff, parents, and donors, and a diversity of national contexts and knowledge histories. These are the conversations we believe are needed going forward.

#ColonialismDissolvingDialogues

'Leading' before learning? Exploring the impact of leadership dialogue at an experimental pan-African university.

Questions for discussion

1. How have recipients of leadership scholarships and bursaries experienced the pressures, contradictions, and opportunities that have come with them?

2. How do we change the systems that shape the contemporary world?

3. Is it realistic to brand people in their early 20s as leaders? When and how should leaders be trained and prepared for diverse career trajectories?

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