# Reimagining writing centre practices: A South African perspective

## Foreword

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John Trimbur, in ***Multiliteracies, Social Futures, and Writing Centers*** (2000: 89), writes that 'social justice and the democratization of higher education have always been parts of the mission of writing centers', part of a struggle addressing 'long-standing questions of subjectivity, cognitive justice and epistemic freedom' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 895). This struggle can be defined as 'a sympathy for mass politics rather than elite politics, widening political participation, and the promotion of socio-economic equality' (Harrison 2001: 387). It is a struggle of establishing and maintaining writing centres as centres of social justice and democratisation, and decolonisation is a process of becoming and transformation, often described as the ***writing centre movement***.



Stephen North, one of the earliest to describe this movement, writes in 1982,

> Maybe we [writing centre practitioners] are a really diverse group of people with all sorts of spoken and unspoken interests, axes to grind, and hidden agendas, drawn together partly by our commitment to literacy, but more driven together by adversity, by a society and a profession neither of which seems to want to listen to us. Probably we sense that banded together despite significant internal differences we'll have a more powerful voice, and that whatever we can't agree on can be sorted out after the revolution. (1982: 44–45)

The revolutionary aspect of the movement is continuous, as all political spaces, including those in higher education, are always unjust and unequal (Soja 2009: 2). It is within this revolution that the struggle for justice and democracy continues, carried by writing centres in higher education. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes,

> universities across the world have become the sites of struggles for decolonisation. Students and the youth are spearheading the decolonisation of the twenty-first century. Racism, patriarchy, sexism, Eurocentrism, and capitalist logics of exploitation are once more put in the public space for critique. The advent of the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) and the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movements in South Africa in 2015 and 2016 symbolises this resurgence and insurgence of decolonisation in a country that is still struggling to emerge from neo-apartheid colonialism. (2021: 895)

It is a struggle that is foundational, a struggle for 'epistemic freedom as "intellectual sovereignty" ... articulated ... as involving a process of "domestication of knowledge production"' (2021: 887).

This revolution is evident in this volume, which describes a South African writing centre movement's deepening struggles to counter the vestiges of the Dutch, British, and apartheid regimes – as well as the ongoing forces of Global North neocolonialism – and their destructive cognitive empires (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021, quoting Thiong'o), cognitive injustices (Santos 2007), and epistemological genocides (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). In the chapter, 'Being and Becoming: Decolonising the Fundani Writing Centre Cosmos', Mtonjeni, Sefalane-Nkohla, George and Duke set a foundational call for a South African writing centre movement to 'decolonisation and decoloniality in respect of university curriculum, knowledge systems and institutional culture' (see Chapter Two). In South African writing centres, this 'has been a motivating force for a serious rethink of writing centre practices.' (see Chapter Two). The continued 'Englishification' in monocultural institutions is no longer acceptable to a multilingual student body whose third or fourth language may be English.



What is apparent here is that a South African writing centre movement works to counter this hegemony of the Global North, a hegemony that Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes as the 'detonation of a cultural bomb at the centre of victim societies, causing various dissonances and alienations' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021: 886). The consequences of which, writes Ndlovu-Gatsheni,

> have been epistemicides (killing of existing endogenous knowledges), linguicides (killing of existing indigenous languages and the imposition of colonial languages)...and alienation (exiling of indigenous people from their languages, histories and cultures, and even from themselves). (2021: 886)

The linguistic and epistemological colonisation of South Africa by the Dutch, British, and the

apartheid governments, including the imposition of the colonial languages of Afrikaans, and British and American English on education institutions at all levels, continues: as Alberts writes in 'Bridging the Multilingual Divide: Enhancing Academic Literacy through Metaphors in South African Writing', '[i]n South Africa, the different languages are not currencies of the same value, and that must be rectified' (see Chapter Three). Alberts reinforces this: in a country with 11 official languages, where '[l]anguage, even more than race, is ... considered the primary identity marker,' (see Chapter Three), the revolutionary struggle of South African writing centres is a daily reality.

A tenant of the writing centre movement, 'regardless of the work actually done in writing centers,' write Gardner and Ramsey (2005: 26), is that 'writing specialists do their best work when opposing the practices of mainstream education, creating an anti-space'. This anti-space, sometimes called liminal space, is transformed again in the South African writing centre movement, as a global village. Taken up in this volume, the South African writing centre movement's ***global village*** – re-examining and challenging concepts of 'safe space,' challenging internalised Anglocentric academic writing practices, employing ***Ubuntu*** pedagogies, and Rambiritich and Drennan's re-imaging tutor training as an empowering, mentorly action – provides all writing centre practitioners a view of the global movement as a movement of community. As Rambiritch and Drennan write in the introduction, what is done here in this volume is a reimagining of the writing centre, 'from one that prioritised the institution, to one that prioritises the student, and ... the uniqueness that each student brings to our space' (see Introduction: viii), a pluricultural and plurilingual uniqueness. Throughout are transformative pedagogies, practices, and rhetorical foundations that '[enable] students' critical engagement with regard to academic literacies' (see Chapter Eleven).



North writes, 'I have come with experience to take a harder, less conciliatory position' on the writing centre – 'only writers need it, only writers can use it' (1984: 440). As writing centre practitioners, our work is an oscillating shift from writing to writers, always ending back with writers. When a student leaves the writing centre critically engaged and on a path of cognitive and personal transformation, we can then consider the struggle of the writing centre's revolution in action. These are the great gifts of this volume and its contribution to South Africa's writing centre movement.

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