

# The (De)Colonial Praxis: Confronting Present-Day Dilemmas of Transforming Knowledges and Societies in Kopano Matlwa's *Spilt Milk*

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## Abstract

Contemporary South African campus fiction has always been concerned with questions of power, being, and knowledge production. Kopano Matlwa's novel *Spilt Milk*, like most campus fiction, evokes and challenges the South African academy, and looks at ways of making the school and/or university a hospitable place. Unlike Matlwa's sister novels *Coconut* and *Period Pain*, *Spilt Milk* has received few scholarly reviews. I examine how the novel reveals and can be read as a starting point in exploring the intellectual dimensions of colonialism. I investigate the decolonial concept of the coloniality of knowledge and Matlwa's seeming quest for decolonial education by foregrounding the educational institution Sekolo sa Dithlora as the prime setting of the novel. The argument around the coloniality of knowledge I advance here is akin to current debates seeking to decolonise (or Africanise) education in South African schools and universities. Theoretically, this article draws from the decolonial ideas on the coloniality of knowledge whose foundations were laid by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, who suggested that, for global domination, colonisers imposed their own modes of knowing and methods of producing knowledge. The concept of the coloniality of knowledge in Matlwa's fiction is multifaceted since it speaks to the colonisation of space, education, languages, and the ways of life of the colonised people. Following the 2015 #RhodesMustFall protests at South African universities, I argue that the characterisation of Mohumagadi, and her foregrounding of Africa as an epistemic site from which she interprets the world, is an attempt at moving the centre.

**Keywords:** Kopano Matlwa; decoloniality; coloniality of knowledge; epistemic freedom; epistemic justice; #FeesMustFall



Journal of Literary Studies

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/jls>

Volume 38 | Number 3 | 2022 | #11455 | 15 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/11455>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

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## Introduction

*Spilt Milk* (2010) is a response to the colonial/Eurocentric curriculum of the empire, and it laments institutional racism in South African schools and universities. Kopano Matlwa defamiliarises her writing from campus fiction proper by deviating from the late-twentieth-century campus fiction of the Global North that is “usually satirical and light-hearted, featuring students who enter into relationships with their professors” (Gulick 2022, 18). My particular focus in this article is to investigate Matlwa’s (2010) representation of the coloniality of knowledge in *Spilt Milk*. Drawing from prominent decolonial thinkers such as Walter Dignolo (2000) and Ramón Grosfoguel (2002), I treat the coloniality of knowledge as the universalisation of Western knowledge and the rewriting, exclusion, and domination of indigenous ways of knowing. Nokuthula Hlabangane (2021, 167) proposes that logocentric Western science must not be thought outside the aspirations of modernity because they are two sides of the same coin. In my reading of the novel, an attempt to delink from Western knowledges, and relink with indigenous ways of knowing, is the decoloniality of knowledge. Decolonising knowledge is an attempt to “shift the geography of reason away from the fundamentals of Eurocentric thinking to include other knowledge systems” (Hlabangane 2021, 166). In enacting an alternative centre of knowledge in Sekolo sa Ditlhora, Matlwa points out the detriments of the coloniality of knowledge as a colonial residue, but advocates for an active response to transforming the curriculum through an African-centred perspective. I begin by considering Sekolo sa Ditlhora as a primary space for the decoloniality of knowledge, and a space that should be read as a “campus” where our angry protagonist Mohumagadi acts as an agent of change and challenges the curriculum of the empire. Thereafter, I discuss the representation of epistemicides and how Mohumagadi as the founder and principal of Sekolo sa Ditlhora attempts to transform the school curriculum and the campus into a hospitable place. I further problematise Mohumagadi’s Afrocentric curriculum by showing that her process of “overcoming” does not amount to “becoming.” Finally, I explore ways of unlearning and relearning as they are depicted in Matlwa’s novel, and suggest some ways of activist reading. In this way, the article contributes to the current debates on literary engagements with the coloniality of knowledge, particularly in campus fiction in South Africa.

Seemingly, while Matlwa (2010) responds to and possibly uses South African campus fiction such as Niq Mhlongo’s *Dog Eat Dog*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, among others, as urtexts, she chooses the primary school as her setting instead of the university campus proper. Even so, like *Spilt Milk*, Anne Gulick (2022) thinks that Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are rarely read as campus fiction. In a reading of Mhlongo’s *Dog Eat Dog*, Minesh Dass (2018) explores some reasons for the lack of scholarly attention given to the novel when it articulates important themes to the South African academy. Partly, what Dass (2018) proposes as one of the reasons for the novel’s poor scholarly reception is the literary “discipline’s predisposition to a hermeneutics of suspicion, a method of analysis that [he] show[s] is unsuited to Mhlongo’s text.” Unlike Dass (2018), who

proposes the praxis of a surface reading, I explore how *Spilt Milk*'s allegoric and poetic form suggests another transformative imaginary to ways of reading and inhabiting the world. The world being imagined is not universal, where knowledge produced is for everyone, but a suggestion for pluriversal knowledges tailored to serve the community needs of people who are traumatised, marginalised, and disappeared.

Stephen Poggendorf (2013, 66) reads *Spilt Milk* as a novel that “inspects the ways in which supposedly old-fashioned ideas in educational and religious institutions still exist and exact influence on the country,” and he proposes Matlwa’s writing is a reminder that “all of us have not been well since 1994.” While Poggendorf goes further to explore the (in) “black and white” relationship in South Africa, nothing is mentioned of the idea of decolonising knowledges that *Spilt Milk* undeniably suggests. Percy Zvomuya’s (2010) writing in the *Mail & Guardian* interprets *Spilt Milk* as a political allegory that comments on the political state of contemporary South Africa, but more so he bemoans the lack of character development: “the characters have been pruned of so much personality that they only work allegorically.” I argue that this is Matlwa’s (2010) way of representing the debasement of her characters, and the need for these characters to start afresh. Undeniably, *Spilt Milk* problematises the curriculum as a source of knowledge by juxtaposing the Eurocentric curriculum with the Afrocentric indigenous systems of knowledge. The problematisation of a Christian-centred curriculum starts with the characterisation of Father Bill, and the establishment of Sekolo sa Ditlhora, a space where Tshokolo Mahumagadi believes that the God of the Bible should not feature in her school’s curriculum:

God was not there when we were chained, when we were raped, when we were cheated and beaten for all those centuries past, so why only now does God want to involve Himself when it appears that we are winning? (Matlwa 2010, 7)

The story of *Spilt Milk* is a futuristic rendition of Mohumagadi who seethes with anger and appears entangled in the colonial past.<sup>1</sup> The story revolves around the love lost between the angry Tshokolo Mohumagadi, who established Sekolo sa Ditlhora, and an error-prone priest, William Thomas (Father Bill, as he is called), who meet at the school, one as a principal and the other as a moral teacher/counsellor. Allegorically, since Father Bill was a priest and Mohumagadi his servant when they met in 1994, their story goes beyond highlighting the meeting of the disgraced past with the present and extends to the inverse of roles and order of thinking in the post-apartheid South Africa. Where Father Bill, through the church, offers education for salvation/civilisation, Mohumagadi struggles towards epistemic freedom as her decolonial way of moving the centre. Moving the centre is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s formulation that seeks to address the marginality and peripherality of African knowledges. The epistemic crisis, as a crisis of knowledge in *Spilt Milk*, does not emphasise the splitting apart of Western ideas of religion and science that emanated from David Hume and Immanuel Kant’s

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<sup>1</sup> “Futuristic” is my way of describing Kopano Matlwa’s imagined but not yet realised decolonial future for educational transformation in South Africa.

epistemologies, but is depicted as a clash of colonial knowledge with the epistemologies of the South. I further argue that Mohumagadi's establishment of a black school of excellence speaks of herself as an example of black excellence, and women's imagination of another world where "women"<sup>2</sup> are the architects of their destiny. Certainly, my analysis will be incomplete if I do not engage with Mohumagadi's militant decoloniality of knowledge as a kind of decolonial feminist activism—a way of recentring "women" activism in knowledge production and challenging the "traditional" male-centred/female-victim campus fiction in South Africa.

Indeed, I read *Spilt Milk* as part of a larger post-apartheid textual body concerned with questions of decolonial education and, like most campus fiction, as a "text that invokes and challenges the academy" (Dass 2018, 134). Reading *Spilt Milk* this way, I explore the novel's preoccupations, how it engages debates on decolonial education, the implications of this representation, and the ways in which it offers new perspectives on existing debates. I argue that to avoid an epistemic crisis in *Spilt Milk*, Matlwa (2010) reconstructs academic freedom in the institutional autonomy of Sekolo sa Dithlora, making it an epistemic site from which to interpret South Africa's education reality. In a quest for academic freedom where the curriculum is diverse and even critical of various knowledges (be it Christian and/or Eurocentric that are today presented as salvationist and civilisationist), Mohumagadi creates new thinking in the knowledge domain by introducing a pluriversal curriculum that pivots around Africa as the centre of reason, and attempts to eliminate what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 25) views as institutional nomadism (an intellectual dependence on Euro-American forms of knowledge). In my reading of *Spilt Milk*, I problematise Mohumagadi's debunking of Eurocentric ideas of knowing herself cultivated by the Judeo-Christian knowledges. I argue that Mohumagadi calls for the production of new knowledges and the abandonment of knowledge categories and institutions that belong to a vanished world. I argue that Mohumagadi's worldview does not only challenge today's "universal" ideas of democracy but also calls for decolonial ways of knowing oneself and the world.

### What Now That the Milk Is Spilt?

The question of spilt milk, which Poggendorf (2013) reads as the failure of reconciliation between the South African past and present, is an intellectual challenge that asks us to unpack the negative aspects of Western modernity. Amidst epistemic injustice, the question of the milk that has been spilt is a frustrating one with no easy answers and evokes emotions of anger in Mohumagadi. I read the spilt milk with the idea that Mohumagadi finds education in some schools inadequate, and some spaces inhospitable for the South African youth. In his reading of *Spilt Milk*, Montle (2018,

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<sup>2</sup> Following María Lugones's (2007, 2010) theorisation of the coloniality of gender, I use quotation marks with "women" and "men" to problematise these categories from a decolonial point of view. As Xhercis Méndez (2015, 42) reminds us, the continued use of the "categories of 'man' and 'woman' function[s] to obscure the histories and bodies of those who bear the historical mark of slavery and colonisation."

83–4) views “spilt milk” as a proverb that could “refer to crying or being angry over something that is done and cannot be undone or the reluctance to move on from the past and something [that] cannot be changed.” With this in mind, and as a useful starting point, Matlwa (2010) depicts spilt milk as metonymical in nature and this is portrayed in Mohumagadi as anger arising out of a psychosociological violation.<sup>3</sup> Mohumagadi’s anger is historical: it is anger dating back to slavery, anger against colonialism, anger against apartheid, and anger against today’s coloniality. Mohumagadi is characterised as being a “tormented, angry woman [... and] appeared to have to try hard to be politically correct [...] and everybody, even the white newspapers, agreed that it was a good thing. At least she was not Mugabe-angry” (Matlwa 2010, 6). It is a kind of anger calling everyone into action to do something as a country. The question of anger or that which cannot be undone is allegorically represented as the milk that has already been spilt in a country that aspires to be a rainbow nation. Speaking of *Spilt Milk*, Matlwa notes in a conversation with Michel Martin (2012):

The conversation I would have in a room with black friends would change if a white person walked into the room. [...] We live apart, we live around each other, and we have learnt to be tolerant. We have learnt words we are no longer allowed to use. [...] We have got affirmative action in place, but [...] I think there is a lot of anger in the country.

In her depiction of the angry Mohumagadi, Matlwa is not troubling the trope of the angry black “woman” in terms of the representations of “women” in African fiction. Mohumagadi’s manifestation of anger can be traced to the external stressors and historical factors of apartheid and post-apartheid disillusionment. Her “anger” foregrounds the frustrations and the unique experiences of black “women,” and their frustrations at the betrayal of freedom dreams. Matlwa highlights that the “anger in the country” has also taken the form of racial anger and, as she foregrounds in her portrayal of Mohumagadi and Mlilo, anger has become a way of life. In a conversation between Vuyo Mkhize (a sports teacher at Sekolo sa Dithlora and the captain of the under-19 national basketball team) and Father Bill, Vuyo, in agreement with Father Bill, says, “there will never be a time when there is no suffering and misery. The west has done too much damage and the rest of us are too damaged, too angry, too fed up to be interested in any kind of hippy happiness” (Matlwa 2010, 89). Anger, to Mohumagadi, is resultant of the continued colonialities, including the imposition of the curriculum of the empire, and like Audre Lorde (1981, 178) says, her anger becomes a “response to racist attitudes, to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes.”

For Mohumagadi, her anger manifests due to disparities and the realisation that “after” everything has been done, the colonised still exist under the Western epistemic frameworks. It is the kind of anger that foundationally extends to the psychological nature of the classroom where “education refuses to recognise and build on the

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, I refer to the psychosociological violation or the socio-psychological violation of “black” people as the social and psychological trauma arising from the dehumanising experiences of apartheid in South Africa.

knowledges that the children from non-western systems of thought have” (Hoppers and Richards 2012, 45). Her desire is to start a school to counter the curriculum of the empire and recentre Africa as a source of knowledge. True to the complex and serious nature of the subject matter in *Spilt Milk*, the narrator adopts a poetic tone to interrogate if the dream of freedom is a lie:

After all the excitement, after the jubilation, after the celebrations, after they had finished with the laughing, the sweet tears of joy, after they had sobbed in pure gladness, after they had yelped in ecstasy, after they had snivelled at the beauty of it all, after they had lit candles in reverence of the time, after they had knelt down on their knees and kissed the ground, after they had exclaimed to all and sundry the victory they had won, after [...]. (Matlwa 2010, 1)

Repetitions in narration and the poetic structure the narrative sometimes assumes vindicate the seriousness with which readers have to approach the theme of “anger.” That is, the question of spilt milk that arises after the end of apartheid, and after so many commissions of justice, is a question that speaks of something that has gone wrong post-1994. Matlwa’s (2010) writing of hopelessness on the epistemic front and her futuristic imagination of knowledge alternatives seem to follow the tradition of literature of disillusionment in South Africa.

The repetition of “After” suggests that after the post-1994 euphoria, and after so many prospects that came with freedom—of South Africans thinking of themselves as the “Rainbow Nation” and as the “golden children of Africa”—no transformation has been realised. Indeed, the question of the milk that has been spilt is a question of deceit rooted yet again in black people’s failure to transform the curriculum. In the face of worsening conditions in post-apartheid South Africa, Matlwa reckons, “it’s always been easy to be the victims of apartheid, to blame everything on apartheid, but now we have to ask ourselves hard questions on what we are doing as a country” (quoted in Martin 2012). Mohumagadi’s anger is tied to the penury of the majority of her people, and her choice in starting with epistemic freedom and justice underlines the untapped solutions that come with shifting the geography of reason. The opening poetic paragraphs suggest a need for a fresh start, an epistemic break that is also suggested in the narrative technique. Matlwa writes in the third-person narrative voice, where focalisation changes and constantly shifts between Father Bill and Mohumagadi, and a neutral narrator dressed as the author herself in some sections in the last part of the novel. Towards the end, Matlwa (2010, 184–5) writes, “at this point the author must take over and speak for those for whom this is more than just a story, for both [Mohumagadi and Father Bill] do not know how to share the rest of it.” When the assumed author takes over the narration, readers do not only learn of the anger and sadness engulfing Mohumagadi and Father Bill, but also the four children in detention who all wake up in tears, with Mlilo wishing to meet his maker. While the narration and focalisation seem to follow the solutions to the dilemma of a new society, they explicate the extent of anger, which at the end of the novel ends Mlilo’s life. In the end, Mlilo self-diagnoses himself as

afflicted with “anhedonia”—psychiatric symptoms that denote one’s inability to feel pleasure from activities usually found enjoyable.

While the narrative perspective in the epigraph warns us of a “church-campus” love story, it also implies the sadness of Father Bill and the anger of Mohumagadi—particularly the “historical” guilt that Father Bill wears (guilt that may be attributed to the introduction, manipulation, and indoctrination of Judeo-Christian colonial curricula). Indeed, the introduction of colonial curricula was pioneered by Euro-American merchants and Christian missionaries who were central in providing colonial masters with a sense of justice and moral authority. His guilt emanates not only from his abusive sexual behaviour, but conceivably the hangover of contravening apartheid laws that criminalised interracial sex and his manipulation of the situation after the laws were lifted in 1994. This is brought forward by the ominous atmosphere surrounding the two characters, the “darkness [that] was about to fall” (Matlwa 2010, viii). This monstrosity, narrated in overly long sentences, surrounding Mohumagadi and Father Bill, does not lie in the “sinful” act of their lovemaking, but a lack of consensual sex that amounts to rape, and abuse of power. The pretence of innocence thereafter, his false feelings towards Mohumagadi, and the guilt that he leaves “lying on the dirt road for large truck tyres to crush” (viii) all suggest a bitter love/hate story—an allegorical story that acts as a background not only to the South African political story but the cultural and epistemic story of the Global South.

The novel’s incipit—“Every book is a prayer”—from an unknown author, suggests a prayer for epistemic freedom—a supplication that *Spilt Milk* as a “black letter” may influence a change in the production of knowledge. While in her interviews Matlwa talks about her strong belief in God, which is an element that makes Carli Coetzee (2019) read her novels as self-help texts, the Bible verses that punctuate her novels suggest that such kinds of prayers are aimed at social change and transformation. In fact, the long chain of unbroken, anaphoric “*After*” sentences that characterise the beginning of the novel—sentences that fill whole pages and are occasionally punctuated by commas, mirror the narrator’s thoughts which stream and flow uninterrupted. They resemble the anger of her characters, particularly Mohumagadi’s, and the impossibility of backing down from speaking and from the epistemic decolonial attempts. Yet, the chain of sentences may also show the continuities of colonialism, and the prolonged suffering of poor people in the new sets of hands of politicians.

Indubitably, Matlwa’s prepositional use of “*After*” is used to signify two things: it is indicative of what *subsequently* followed the end of apartheid, and it is a *result* of what happened thereafter. Indeed, the repetition of “*After*” needs to be read symptomatically, at least with the suspicion that something has gone wrong in the politically liberated South Africa. Such writing-as-thinking denotes the urgency of the situation. This also points to the urgent questions on epistemic injustice that the novel seems to ask: Who, after the milk has been spilt, has the duty of cleaning it up? In asking who will clean up,

Matlwa confronts South Africa's weakened reality and seems to ask for other ways of decolonising knowledge.

### Epistemicides and the Power of (Re-)Naming<sup>4</sup>

Matlwa's depiction of "After" euphoria is not only the jubilation of an end to political injustice but epistemic injustice as well. However, the endless dreams of rebuilding South Africa around the African dream are not only negated in the political arena but, as Matlwa shows, in the epistemic arena as well. The elected politicians, who before 2010 were mostly men, degenerate into corrupt leaders who loot the coffers of the state to buy "German cars" and "new wardrobes," or "change neighbours and neighbourhoods," and leave the rebuilding of South Africa (epistemic or otherwise) or the cleaning of spilt milk to "women" like Mohumagadi (Matlwa 2010, 1–2). The characterisation of Mohumagadi as somebody who came "out of nowhere, with no struggle, no prison, no party, no nothing" (2) suggests that *subsequent* to South Africa's freedom, and as a *result* of corruption, careless expenditure, and neglect of struggle aspirations, South Africa needs an ideological shift to tackle its problems. Matlwa presents this shift as needing "new" people whose roots are neither underpinned by Western concepts of rationality nor Western concepts of capitalism in the rush to amass wealth. Rather, the novel calls for hands-on people who defy the Eurocentric modes of rationality, people in former colonies who are prepared to produce creative knowledges centred on their experiential existence. Matlwa foregrounds creative knowledges from angry people as that which may fall outside the Eurocentric concept of rationality.

The social and epistemic change that is relegated to Mohumagadi as a "madwoman" who appears "tormented" and "angry," and sometimes wets herself, seeks to portray people who are committed to pragmatic changes in their societies despite the frustrations. The portrayal of Mohumagadi as peeing herself because of anxiety but taking solace in smelling the hot milk suggests her maternal purity and consciousness, since "milk" symbolises one's awareness of the source of life (43). Firstly, Mohumagadi is conscious of the imperfections of the country's transition to democracy, with political and capitalist individuals amassing the country's wealth. Secondly, Mohumagadi challenges us to re-examine the myth of reconciliatory love between oppressor and oppressed. The negations and concessions made in the drafting of the South African Constitution are represented in the uncertainty of Father Bill and Mohumagadi's relationship. After 16 years of epistemic and political dithering, Mohumagadi suggests:

There [should] be no more speaking, no more arguing, no more planning, no more deliberating, no more theorising, no more hypothesising, no more complaining, no more

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<sup>4</sup> Epistemicides refer to the genocide or war against alternative knowledges, especially those arising from the colonised people. The Western knowledge system is against knowledge democracy since non-Western knowledges (or even people) are erased, dominated, or categorised as irrational knowledges.



moaning, no more shouting, no more screaming, no more words, no more. There had been enough talk. It was now time to work. (Matlwa 2010, 2–3)

Besides advocating for hands-on people, Mohumagadi suggests that the drivers of social change are those not assimilated into the capitalist system rather than the “little round men and women in sparkly suits with quick speech and magic tricks, saying this and that, [...] buying this and that, [...] caught for this and caught for that; round men and women in sparkly suits who kept letting us down” (Matlwa 2010, 3). Matlwa implies that the oppressed have gone to bed with the oppressor, and the oppressed have forgotten the reasons for the struggle such that “deceit [is] found in the pockets of heroes, rot in the rucksacks of warriors, treachery in the notepads of leaders” (3). The comfort of the few “round men and women” who are presented as having sold out the struggle to appease the “*Pale people* [who have since] realised that they need not ever use the just-in-case packed bags [...] or apartments they kept in New Zealand” is a difficult concept that Matlwa tackles in *Spilt Milk* (3). The assimilation of leaders into the colonial realm makes them collaborators who participate in their own coloniality.

In this way, *Spilt Milk* becomes an epistemological critique of knowledge production that explores the praxis of decolonial knowledges, and the dilemmas associated with uncomfortable decolonial debates in South Africa. Matlwa’s creation of Mohumagadi’s “other” world starts with her writing of the “other” novel in *Spilt Milk*. Her characters, like Mohumagadi, give a sense that her name is “unreal,” but a preferred name because “that is how she was to be addressed” (Matlwa 2010, 4). Mohumagadi is a Tswana name that denotes the queen in the African sense, and it is a title that was bestowed on Semane Setlhoko Khama after marrying King Khama III of the BamaNgwato chieftaincy in Botswana. Therefore, like all the BamaNgwato queens, Tshokolo Mohumagadi becomes the *mohumagadi* of epistemic justice. As the founding member of Sekolo sa Dithlora, Headmistress Mahumagadi strives to decolonise the curriculum so that, in the true decolonial sense, “Mathematics would not simply be a tool taught to tally mortality rates, to compare debts and to add zeros to failing economies, but a means to add something to nothingness, to create change [...] to] organise thinking and multiply results” (Matlwa 2010, 4). If there is an epistemic departure in the teaching of school subjects, where History, Geography, and Art are taught as a means to locate oneself, where we are reminded “of where we have been and where we no longer want to be,” or where we are encouraged to “find meaning and place,” and to “connect with our ancestors and those to come,” then it means that Sekolo sa Dithlora becomes a space and a place of reckoning, a place to “be,” and a place of “being” (Matlwa 2010, 4–5).

The renaming of the curriculum, where learners are exposed to subjects such as Public Health and Epidemiology taught by Dr Tshivhase, or Dr Zungu’s Indigenous Belief Systems, or Dr Liyema’s Music History, and where children attend Nkosi Johnson’s Inaugural Lectures (Nkosi Jonson, today a forgotten child who was born with HIV and died at the age of 12 in 2001, and who, during his brief life, served as an inspiration to people living with HIV in South Africa), debunks curriculum nomadism. Mohumagadi

counters epistemic injustice by creating spaces in which she re-exists again, by centring local knowledges, an emancipatory curricular practice that delinks from Euro-American knowledge systems. The new subjects, and new ways of teaching, suggest that in centring local knowledges South Africa's and Africa's financial dependence on the West through bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will be a thing of the past. Indeed, other forms of knowing are accentuated by envisioning Sekolo sa Dithlora as a place of black consciousness, a place where "poverty would be left outside the gates. A place where the elders listened to the young and the young took the podium and led. A place of pride. A place of truth [...] where *umuntu omnyama* could be something great" (Matlwa 2010, 5). Sekolo sa Dithlora cannot be conceived as an experiment when it seeks to rehumanise the dehumanised, de-Westernise the Westernised, and when it seeks to delearn and re-educate the miseducated.

### Unlearning/Delearning/Relearning

Matlwa's (2010) unlearning presents being black for black as "being." That is to say, for Mohumagadi to "be," she has to capture her self-defiance and affirm her solidarity with her people for them to create their humanity. It is not a new humanity of different colours like Mlilo Graham, a green-eyed student at Sekolo sa Dithlora, or of the rainbow and golden children of Africa who are black and yet have green eyes and who are destined to die premature deaths. The new humanity is not the creation of a rainbow nation of people, but a rainbow nation of knowledges, as Mohumagadi's Afrocentric curriculum envisages. In this way, the novel demands activist ways of reading and challenges us to find ways of transforming education in South African institutions of learning. The characterisation of Father Bill as an ageing white male, as a multiple transgressor of the principles of the Bible that he preaches, and as someone who appears lost, represents his end to the contribution of knowledge production in Matlwa's futuristic South Africa. However, his presence at Sekolo sa Dithlora where this change is taking place is a way of making him experience and witness the possibilities of transformed knowledges.

The process of unlearning also includes questions of how to maintain the balance between pluriversality, perhaps one aspect that Sekolo sa Dithlora and Mohumagadi find challenging. By portraying the disgraced Father Bill and the punishment of four students after a failed school project which Mohumagadi describes as pornographic, Matlwa highlights the challenges of decolonial education in contemporary South Africa. The challenges of education are the challenges facing educational planners such as Mohumagadi and religious leaders like Father Bill alike, who are caught in the coloniality of knowledge of the past that they cannot live without or that they cannot leave outside. In fact, the sexual story of four children is Matlwa's way of opening a debate into unspoken hauntings of sexual education, especially in "black" communities. Indeed, the punishment of the students, the re-appearance of Father Bill as a fallen priest, and the death of Mlilo Graham, who in the end speaks to God, each serves as a reminder of the challenges and demands of a decolonised curriculum in a world riddled

with the colonality of knowledge. Grosfoguel (2002, 208) writes of knowledges that are situated within colonial difference and bemoans the “Western/masculinist idea that we can produce knowledges that are unpoisoned, unlocated, neutral, and universalistic [as] one of the most pervasive mythologies in the modern/colonial world.” That is, the image of Father Bill, which is a constant reminder to Mohumagadi of the tormenting past, also reminds her of the need for inclusivity and pluriversal knowledges in her institution. His presence reminds her to create subaltern knowledges, which Grosfoguel (2002, 221) describes as “knowledges at the intersection of the traditional and the modern.” Such knowledges, symbolically depicted by the presence of Father Bill, remind us that the colonised cannot erase, overwrite or avoid the past.

While Matlwa recreates a post-apartheid South Africa from the point of view of protest by centring Mohumagadi, she appears to be foregrounding the reality of “women” in knowledge production. As Rozena Maart (2014, 80) asks of higher institutions of learning, “Can the black women scholar survive, thrive and produce knowledge in a militant world?” How do we maintain the balance? The novel ponders possible solutions to intellectual and philosophical problems facing South Africa. By bringing Mohumagadi and Father Bill together, and by portraying their story as that of a sad love story that depicts masculine violence, Matlwa (2010) warns of the ever-present violent colonial past, and the need for educationists to confront such knowledges. It is interesting but sad that, after Mlilo’s death, Mohumagadi (like the dismissed William Thomas) declares that “she will leave the school. [...] She had failed the children, fed them the bitter milk from her withered breasts” (Matlwa 2010, 193). Besides the exclusionist and faulty premise of the establishment of Sekolo sa Ditlhora as a school for black *nouveau riche*, Mohumagadi’s knowledge generation remains illusory if the knowledge of self and “Other” is constructed separately. That is, by characterising “extremists” like Mohumagadi shaking Father Bill’s hand, or Mlilo praying to God, or by redeeming the fallen priests, Matlwa sees diverse knowledges as a tool of social change.

The programme of unlearning has been reflected in the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement of 2015, which also sparked the 2016 #FeesMustFall (#FMF) protests in South African universities. The Fallist movement, whose genesis is traced to the University of Cape Town (UCT), was a way for students to speak out against “physical and existential exclusion that manifested itself through the culture of the university, which creates comfort for white, middle-class, heterosexual students and causes great discomfort for students who do not fit the mould” (Ramaru 2017, 90). One may argue that students’ protests in South Africa that today trend as #RMF, #FMF or *Asinamali* date back to the Soweto Uprising of 1976. The beginning of the decolonial curriculum embodied in the #RMF movement was aimed at decolonising colonial university spaces. As Kealeboga Ramaru (2017, 90) notes, the “names of buildings and symbols were also an aspect of exclusion.” The #RMF’s call focused much on the neglected African knowledges, which Mohumagadi in *Spilt Milk* prioritises. Sekolo sa Ditlhora, being a space to “breath, to think, to create,” is also a space to remember “great emperors, kings

and queens who were left out of the history books” (Matlwa 2010, 5). True to Mohumagadi’s relearning vision, many of the buildings in the school are named after African heroes and heroines, for example the Shamba Reading Room, the Khama Place of Study, the Nandi and Nehanda classrooms that house Grade 1 A and B, the Makeba Music Room, the Timbuktu History Centre, the Kilimanjaro Climbing Walls, the Taharqa Lego Room, the Tenkamenin Model Court, the Plaatje Fountains, the Mphahlele Library, the Khoikhoi Gardens, the Shaka the Great Gymnasium, and the Pyramids of Gaza, among many other Afrocentric names (Matlwa 2010, 3, 14, 39, 51, 85, 192). This follows the very idea of naming institutions of higher education in South Africa. Renaming is indicative of naming as power, since the colonial naming of people and spaces acted as forms of debasing them and acted as ways of detaching the colonised from herself/himself/itself, and their identities. However, while naming and names are a starting place to remember, naming in itself can be a cosmetic affair if not accompanied by action parallel to it.

Like the #RMF protest of 2015, Sekolo sa Ditlhora faces a tall order of deracialising knowledges in polarised university spaces and challenging what Ramaru (2017, 91) captured as the “inner Cecil John Rhodes.” Following this line of reasoning, Maart (2014, 58) asks the question, “how will the production of knowledge—Black Consciousness knowledge—take place within conditions that have previously stifled its emergence? And what will this knowledge look like?” In contrast to the South African reality of university teaching staff, true to its quest towards decolonial knowledge, Sekolo sa Ditlhora appoints highly qualified “black” teachers. Concerned with South African university realities, Neo Ramoupi (2014) asks why white professors are silent on the lack of black scholars in South African universities. In line with Maart’s (2014, 58) assertion of Africans and African scholarship being kept out of university institutions in South Africa, Kopano Matlwa, who is possibly aware of this problem as a UCT alumnus, extends this question, specifically centring Mohumagadi, to point out the absence of black women’s scholarship in South African and African institutions of learning.

Another way of doing “something decolonial” at Sekolo sa Ditlhora is remembering the characters’ indigenous languages, without compelling their interlocutors to speak in the same language as theirs. I regard such acts of writing in-between languages as languaging. Early on in the novel, the head girl Ndudumo Pooi greets Mohumagadi and Father Bill with *Molweni*, a Xhosa common greeting. In fact, Matlwa writes in Sepedi and Zulu, without necessarily translating this into English. She writes in Zulu of Sekolo sa Ditlhora as a school “where *umuntu omnyama* could be great” and she uses Xhosa phrases such as “*Molweni*” or Pedi phrases like “*Sa re kgoo! Selepe se remile lentsu la Kgosi la kwagala Bokgalaka!*” (Matlwa 2010, 5, 50, 60). I read such undertakings as calls to make African languages granaries that store knowledge and make it possible for people to exist in their languages. For Matlwa, languages become a mode of thinking/writing and thinking in-between them. Languaging transcends the actual interlocution—it becomes a shared way of “inhabiting the border,” and of living

between languages (Mignolo 2000, 226). Linguaging is more pronounced in *Spilt Milk* as a mode of inter-knowledges. Mignolo (2000, 226) defines linguaging as a form of “thinking and writing between languages [... that] allow [each of] us to move away from the idea that language is a fact (e.g., a system of syntactic, semantic and phonetic rules) and [move] towards the idea that speech and writing are strategies for orienting and manipulating social domains of interaction.” That is, an other tongue, Mignolo (2000) argues, is a necessary condition for an other thinking, for the possibility of transcending national languages and ideologies. Equally, Mohumagadi’s struggles towards self and the use of African languages serve as a search for dignity and a quest for epistemological justice. Mohumagadi is conscious of the purpose of her existence. Indeed, Sekolo sa Dithlora as the relearning hub is a school-for-itself. I submit that in *Spilt Milk*, Matlwa suggests that the expansion of knowledge horizons in South Africa, of producing situated knowledges (or subaltern knowledges as it were) that will allow the colonised to exist, must involve some modes of unthinking, of unlearning, of delearning, of relearning, and must centre the sensibilities of Africa and its indigenous languages.

## Conclusion

My decolonial reading of *Spilt Milk* has provided a framework for thinking about the foundations of knowledge that impact the characters’ being-in-the-world. Sekolo sa Dithlora as the Mecca of learning does not only represent the production of knowledge that is set to transform “black” middle-class societies, but it should be read as an imagination of a different world—an evolving world, as suggested by Stafford Beer (1980), where knowledges must be rewritten to contextually serve that particular world. The world being imagined in *Spilt Milk* is not universal, where knowledge produced is for everyone, but a world of pluriversal knowledges tailored to serve the community needs of people who are traumatised, marginalised, and disappeared at a particular place and time. Sekolo sa Dithlora, with its black staff complement that has discarded the Bible as the point of arrival, is set to rehumanise the dehumanised, who, according to Mlilo and Mohumagadi, are people in the background who are reduced to cleaners and servants (Matlwa 2010, 117, 179). Indeed, by foregrounding Sekolo sa Dithlora, Matlwa (2010) does not only suggest the production of local knowledges that fit into the “newer and still evolving world,” but the abandonment of what Stanford Beer (1980) describes as old “categories and institutions that belong to the vanished world.” The suggestion of rewriting knowledges and the production of a new knowledge-oriented world speak against epistemicides committed in the quest for universal knowledge. I have also shown that Matlwa’s enactment of her protagonists and their ways of being go beyond the domains of knowledge production to illustrate multiple, intersecting ways of oppression and how technologies of subjection and domination influence the characters’ perspectives, visions, and interrelationships. The protagonists’ pursuit of truth and search for meaning highlight the displacement of blackness and uneven power structures that perpetuate the coloniality of gender/being. Indeed, while the coloniality of knowledge appropriates meaning and informs one’s existence in the world, I have

highlighted how the portrayal of the coloniality of knowledge affects one's relations with oneself, with others, and with one's world.

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