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Against Self-Reflexive Confessions: Collective Dialogues to Progressively Transform Academic North–South Collaborations

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Abstract

This paper introduces an approach to transform academic North–South collaborations. Critiquing entrenched dynamics in inter-university collaborations, we propose a methodology for unlearning colonial modes of thinking and relating. The transformative dialogues proposed in this paper illustrate how researchers can jointly engage in generating collective reflexivity and mutual accountability to challenge established norms in academia. Using autoethnographic vignettes, we demonstrate how these dialogues bring to the fore our complicities in reproducing North–South imbalances as well as the difficulty of unsettling power dynamics and fostering collective co-existence across differences. By nurturing a safe space for tuning in with each other, transformative dialogues turn self-reflexivity into a relational and dialogical process. They help (1) to reflect on our past and present experiences, (2) to perceive failure as a learning stimulus rather than deficiency or shame, (3) to confront us with our complicity in reproducing neocolonial power dynamics in academic collaborations, and (4) to transform interpersonal dynamics within academic collaborations.

Keywords Dialogical Reflexivity · Decoloniality · North-South Collaborations · Autoethnography

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Résumé

Cet article présente une approche pour transformer les collaborations académiques Nord-Sud. Critiquant les dynamiques enracinées dans les collaborations inter-universitaires, nous proposons une méthodologie pour désapprendre les modes de pensée et de relation coloniaux. Les dialogues transformateurs proposés dans cet article illustrent comment les chercheurs peuvent s'engager conjointement dans la génération d'une réflexivité collective et d'une responsabilité mutuelle pour défier les normes établies dans le monde universitaire. En utilisant des vignettes auto-ethnographiques, nous démontrons comment ces dialogues mettent en évidence nos complicités dans la reproduction des déséquilibres Nord-Sud ainsi que la difficulté de perturber les dynamiques de pouvoir et de favoriser la coexistence collective à travers les différences. En cultivant un espace sûr pour s'accorder les uns avec les autres, les dialogues transformateurs transforment l'autoréflexivité en un processus relationnel et dialogique. Ils aident (1) à réfléchir sur nos expériences passées et présentes, (2) à percevoir l'échec comme un stimulus d'apprentissage plutôt que comme une insuffisance ou une honte, (3) à nous confronter à notre complicité dans la reproduction des dynamiques de pouvoir néocoloniales dans les collaborations académiques, et (4) à transformer les dynamiques interpersonnelles au sein des collaborations académiques.

Resumen

Este artículo introduce un enfoque para transformar las colaboraciones académicas Norte-Sur. Criticando las dinámicas arraigadas en las colaboraciones interuniversitarias, proponemos una metodología para desaprender los modos coloniales de pensar y relacionarse. Los diálogos transformadores propuestos en este artículo ilustran cómo los investigadores pueden participar conjuntamente en la generación de reflexividad colectiva y responsabilidad mutua para desafiar las normas establecidas en la academia. Utilizando viñetas auto-etnográficas, demostramos cómo estos diálogos sacan a la luz nuestras complicidades en la reproducción de desequilibrios Norte-Sur, así como la dificultad de alterar las dinámicas de poder y fomentar la coexistencia colectiva a través de las diferencias. Al nutrir un espacio seguro para sintonizar entre nosotros, los diálogos transformadores convierten la auto-reflexividad en un proceso relacional y dialógico. Ayudan (1) a reflexionar sobre nuestras experiencias pasadas y presentes, (2) a percibir el fracaso como un estímulo de aprendizaje en lugar de deficiencia o vergüenza, (3) a enfrentarnos a nuestra complicidad en la reproducción de dinámicas de poder neocoloniales en colaboraciones académicas, y (4) a transformar las dinámicas interpersonales dentro de las colaboraciones académicas.

Introduction

Kewan   "I' am struggling to understand all this. Why are we still meeting? Funding is over, we are all busy with different project, and the topic of our meetings, decoloniality, is at the same time vague and confronting, frustrating and painful. And yet, here we are, time and again. Why are we still making time for this?"

Adriana   "And happily moreover!"

Viola   "Yes, even though it is not always pleasant"

Adriana   "So, let's take your question seriously: how have our dialogues become valuable and transformative?"

This paper addresses people who are feeling uncomfortable with international university cooperation practices and are searching for transformation. You have likely experienced or (un)consciously participated in North–South academic relations infused with patriarchy, racism, and epistemic coloniality.[1] You might feel stuck and wonder how to transform academic research and university cooperation. We have been experimenting with a dialogical practice of encounter and reflexivity, which may provide you with valuable insights and the strength to continue your ongoing quest for transformation.

The complexities of North–South collaborations received much attention lately (Rutazibwa 2018; Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a). North–South collaborations continue to perpetuate (neo)colonial schemes in which the Northern partner holds the dominant role of donor, conceptualiser, and agenda-setter while the Southern remains a recipient, implementer, or data collector (Schmidt and Neuburger 2017; White 2020). Kontinen and Nguyahambi (2020a, b) investigate the changes in norms, rules, and practices that might be needed to transform North–South academic partnerships durably. Drawing on Bateson's three levels of learning (Bateson 1972), they argue that most endeavours to transform North–South partnerships in academia are currently limited to problem-solving within existing frames of thought or, at best, searching to explicitly address asymmetric power relations within the partnerships.[2] The authors narrate their incapacity to engage with the kind of learning that

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[1] While race is a social construct, it nevertheless radically and differentially shapes peoples' experiences and, therefore, functions as a valid analytical category (Delgado and Stefancic 2013). Epistemic coloniality indicates that ways of knowing in many parts of the world are imprinted with the long-term consequences of massive processes of colonisation and decolonisation (Maldonado-Torres 2016).

[2] Level 1 learning, or single-loop learning, involves the change of responses within an existing set of alternatives (Bateson 1972). In North–South partnerships, discussions may revolve around addressing the capacity deficit in the South without reflecting on taken-for-granted power relations (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020b). Learning 2 involves "not only learning to do things better but also learning to do

may lead to a profound redefinition of the self and which, in their opinion, could lead to "first, abandoning the notion of development; second, changing the Eurocentric epistemological principles of academic research; and third, changing the nature and role of the higher education institutions" (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020b).

Changing the nature and role of higher education may seem a daunting and discouraging task. It is far more demanding than the laudable but idiosyncratic initiatives to include southern scholars in the curriculum or increase staff and student diversity. Yet, if we take critique from feminist and decolonial researchers seriously, much of academic institutions' current work is violent, disempowering, and silencing for many people around the world (Spivak 1994; Haraway 2016; Rutazibwa 2018). A change in entrenched norms and habits is therefore needed. To do so, we have chosen to start from the smallest unit in academic institutions: the researchers themselves, as well as the interpersonal relations on which they draw in North–South collaborations. Our work is, therefore, complementary to initiatives at the institutional level (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020a) and the epistemological one (Gunasekara 2020).

Self-reflexivity is frequently recommended to improve research activities, and the underlying normative values that underpin and influence their research (Gibbons 1994; Boyce et al. 2022). Indeed, many researchers start their work without questioning possible impacts, taking for granted that their research promotes development and well-being in the Global South without realising their privileges and the reproduction of asymmetrical power relations, exclusion, and inequalities. Self-reflexivity is, therefore, undoubtedly important to unsettle these assumptions. Yet when practised alone, reflexivity might be insufficient to realise certain problems as they are experienced by the other members of the partnership. Moreover, self-reflexivity often leads to confessional tales on positionality and structural privilege (Pillow 2003; D'Arcangelis 2018; Lumsden et al. 2019). Added as disclaimers in the context of problematic research collaborations, such self-reflexive confessions may even exacerbate and further entrench existing power dynamics (Gani and Khan 2024).

The reflexivity we propose in this article concerns the research collaborations rather than the research activities themselves. We investigate how transformative dialogues can help to unsettle sedimented "conditions of knowledge-making [and] world-making" (Murphy 2015). Unsettling is "a politics of reckoning with a world already violated" (Murphy 2015). We aim to purposefully undo entrenched habits and norms and, in so doing, engage in nurturing possibilities for the plurality of knowledge and collective co-existence. We illustrate both the trouble and the pleasure of such transformative dialogues. By sharing and listening to personal experiences of pain, shame, and discomfort in the context of current and past North–South collaborations, we engage during these dialogues with the never-ending process of de-normalising acquired ways of thinking and doing in academic research. We thus attempt to disrupt colonial legacies

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Footnote 2 (Continued)

better things". It recognises that actors have different interests, values, and goals in the partnership. Conflicting agendas are recognised to occur within donor–recipient relationships that generate asymmetric power relationships (Ishengoma 2016; Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020b). Learning 3 involves a profound redefinition of the self.

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by recognising them in our actions. Simultaneously, our work is about the pleasure of being together and discovering that we are not alone in this attempt. It is about searching for possibilities for co-existence across differences and distances (Andreotti 2016). We believe this is necessary to sustain the uncomfortable process of reflexive[3] research and transformation (Rose 1997) and to confront our implications in the uneven global imaginary (Andreotti 2016).

Our contribution is twofold: methodological and testimonial. The aim is to contribute to unlearning colonial modes of thinking and relating (Stein 2022). First, we share our experience with a method, transformative dialogues, which we propose as a tool to unsettle North–South collaborations and desedimentation of entrenched ways of thinking in such collaborations. We hope that this methodology will benefit other researchers in their transformative work. Second, the stories that take the form of autoethnographic vignettes to illustrate our dialogues are also testimonial and may, therefore, be recognisable and touching to people engaged in North–South research collaborations. Frequently, situations experienced as awkward by an individual may not be seen as problematic and systematic unless words are found to name them, and testimonies are shared to identify with. Storytelling has proved useful for encountering others' experiences and generating situated knowledges (Delgado and Stefancic 2013; Haraway 2022).

The following sections provide a theoretical background of our collective dialogues. We expand the idea of "dialogical reflexivity" from Liwanag and Rhule (2021), who very briefly introduced this concept in the context of Global Health collaborations (Liwanag and Rhule 2021). Drawing on Judith Butler's work on recognition, we propose "transformative dialogues" as a process of generating a reflexivity that is amenable to challenge entrenched practices and norms (Butler 2005). We subsequently dive into the methodology of the paper. Autoethnographic approaches are mobilised to narrate our dialogues in a way that may be intelligible to readers from diverse backgrounds. Our results are meant to illustrate the strengths and difficulties of transformative dialogues, which are further examined in the discussion and conclusion.

Transformative Dialogues: Addressing One Another to Transform North–South Academic Collaborations

Self-reflexively giving an account of oneself in academic research frequently serves a range of different purposes. It is a way to explicitly reflect on the productive role of positionality and subjectivity in the process of doing research (Rose 1997). By making these reflections explicit in academic writings, the researching subjects test

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[3] The terms "reflective" and "reflexive" are frequently used interchangeably in research. Some scholars have made a distinction between the two terms (Gilbert and Sliep 2009). Reflectivity is a process in which a researcher pays attention to their positionality, considering their social context and its effect on their research. Reflexivity goes further than reflectivity as it incorporates thoughtful action. Our dialogues involve the other in the process: exchanging about the reflection of the other during our dialogues helped each of us to be reflexive about our own process. In our dialogues, reflective and reflexive are thus used in a complementary way.

the intelligibility of their own sensemaking to others and invite readers to think with their subjectivity to understand the studied case. These reflections are necessarily inscribed in existing norms, and, moreover, fail to provide a complete and transparent account. They simultaneously contribute to (i) the assertion and (re-)definition of the researcher's identity (Butler 2005) and (ii) the strengthening of particular positions or voices over others (Lumsden et al. 2019).[4]

Reflexivity is mainly understood as an individualistic process (Sultana 2017; Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). The researchers are the ones who, on their own and through the mere strength of their thought, give an account of their own subjectivity. Even though such accounts are necessarily addressed at someone, since the scientific writings are to be read by other researchers, they rarely leave space for dialogue. Self-reflexive accounts frequently respond to an imagined or virtual interpellation, and end without needing to further sustain any attachment or relationship with the reader. Accounting for oneself does not invite for a response and does not involve taking on further responsibilities. Self-reflexivity starts and ends with the self.

In transformative dialogues, the act of giving an account of oneself explicitly engages with the possibility of response and of enduring sustained ties after the interpellation. The question does not start with "Who am I?" or "What can I know about myself?" but rather "Who are you?" and "What can your accounts, addressed to me, tell me about myself?". Reflexivity, the process of reconstituting one's own norms and subjectivity, thus becomes a dialogical and relational process. It does not expect transparency or definite answers but involves the formation of relational subjects that take on a certain responsibility on the consequences of these relationships (Butler 2005). Therefore, researchers engaging in transformative dialogues consciously choose to address one another and engage with a form of listening that goes beyond hearing, interpreting, and judging. Such listening requires presence, awareness, and emptiness, and should embrace difference, misunderstanding, and uncertainty (Lipari 2010).

As such, our method provides a way to start recognising certain patterns in interpersonal relations across the North–South divide within academia, allowing partners engaging in a collaboration to take responsibility for the consequences of these patterns (Butler 2005). This is a way to start tinkering with social and moral norms that are entrenched in North–South collaborations, in our way of being in the world and with others.

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[4] It should be contrasted with other types of self-reflexive accounts. Sometimes, self-reflexivity is used to rationalise the knowledge production practice and to discursively neutralise researchers' positionality (Sultana 2017; Olmos-Vega et al. 2023). Self-reflexivity may also become a nearly confessional endeavour (Dean and Zamora 2023), occasionally drawing on a (positivist) promise of self-accomplished transparency.

Methodology

Data, Context, and Positionality

Our reflexive work of unsettling, entrenched conditions of knowledge-making has taken the form of monthly dialogues among the three authors of this paper between June 2021 and October 2022. Systematically recorded, transcribed, and summarised by the first author, these dialogues formed an ongoing and sustained conversation. A summary of the previous dialogue was presented and discussed at the start of each dialogue to start the new discussion through cognitive associations and emotional reactions.[5] Frequently, the discussions evolved, drawing on recent experiences or memories in the context of our work.

During these dialogues, we (1) shared our complex histories and vulnerability, (2) listened to each other's associative reactions, and (3) reflected on the origins and meanings of these reactions. They have been transformative to us. Not only have we learnt to encounter and listen to the other (Spivak 1985), but we have also been able to put into words feelings of unease that have been haunting our international collaborations ever since. Similar to the experience of Gibson-Graham (1994) doing feminist research in the nineties, contemporary research on postcoloniality is "situated within, shaped by and learning from" the fluxes of current post/decolonial and feminist debates (Gibson-Graham 1994; Idahosa and Bradbury, 2020; Kontinen and Nguyahambi, 2020b).

The dialogues have, first and foremost, been a process for us, an attempt to transform our own way of relating within North–South collaborations. We share many similarities: each of us has several years of experience with doing research in academic North–South collaborations, we have all been socialised into careful listening, and we are sensitive to issues of justice and inequality. We enjoy many privileges but also deal with varying struggles and vulnerabilities. We enter North–South collaborations from very different backgrounds, leading to different experiences. Kewan is a white male from Belgium who is based in France. He went to Ethiopia for his master's thesis in environmental sciences and to Uganda for his PhD in environmental economics and social geography. Viola is a black female sociologist at an Ugandan university involved in several collaborative projects, notably on adolescent health, funded by institutions in the Global North. Adriana is a woman of colour from Colombia and the first generation to attend university, currently affiliated as a postdoctoral researcher at a Belgian university. Her PhD dissertation focused on factors that affect North–South transdisciplinary research collaborations.

Methods: Evocative Autoethnography

The decision to translate this experience into an article to share our methodology with a broader audience is driven by our realisation that this experience may be valuable to other researchers in the field. To trigger cognitive and emotional processes

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[5] Before each dialogue, general themes were extracted from the previous dialogue through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). They are not presented here.

within the recipients, we have chosen to share our dialogues through an evocative autoethnography (Ploder and Stadlbauer 2016). The autoethnographic approach is a way to generate unfamiliarity towards one's own practices and beliefs (Müller 2016). Like Müller (2016), we use our own subjectivity as a specific scoping device, i.e. as an instrument for discovery, and not as a way to stand up as a spokesperson of a particular community (Müller 2016).

Yet, becoming unfamiliar is not enough to problematise unspoken habits and culture: one needs to bring something formerly unthought of into a thinkable space in order to turn it into a public and debatable issue (Stengers 2021). Therefore, the account of our transformative dialogues directly addresses the readers – challenging *you* to take on this project. We, therefore, aim to – somewhat artificially – take you along in our dialogues. You are invited to take an active role while reading the following lines and to relate them to your own experiences (Ellis and Bochner 2000). The testimonial excerpts and narrated comments presented below should be understood as a fragmentary and necessarily limited evocative autoethnography of the authors (Dodier and Baszanger 2010; Müller 2016). We hope this work will help the reader recognise their own experience and capacity to act and change the perpetuation of colonial academic partnerships in North–South academic collaborations.

Results

Our Story: From Initial Failure to Nurturing Dialogues

Our story starts in March 2021 when Kewan invites Adriana and Viola to join a short-term project on decolonising university North–South cooperation: six months to investigate and tackle deeply engrained power imbalances, unquestioned neo-colonial habits, and structural problems of effectiveness, relevance, legitimacy, ownership and accountability - all of it rooted in unilateral funding schemes (see also Rutazibwa (2018, 2020). The research project was designed in a top down manner, with predefined research methods and objectives. It was to evaluate existing inter-university North-South collaborations at the university, but without involving the researchers participating in these collaborations. As initially envisioned the outcomes would be limited to a scientific publication and a workshop at the end. therefore, the project resembled the extractivist research practices much criticised in the post and decolonial literature (Grosfoguel, 2016). Unsurprisingly, nothing significant had been achieved when the project funding ended six months later. Some paperwork was done, and ethical approvals were obtained, but actors engaging in North–South collaborations at the university refused to collaborate. Why would they participate in a short-term project that did not involve them in co-designing the objectives and methodologies from the start? Our newborn association could have ended there.

Covid-19 lockdowns and friendly interactions helped, but we nevertheless decided to continue our conversations (online) and transform our work into an autoethnographic reflection on our own experiences with North–South collaborations. Through online dialogues, we nurtured a reflexive process that helped us

to rethink and question our own practices and un/learn what North–South collaborations are and could be. Two years passed with regular meetings during which we listened to each other's stories and shared questions, doubts, and feelings of discomfort.

What motivated us to continue our meetings for years without an official research project? While we each had our reasons, we also had one thing in common: a feeling of discomfort, unease, or pain concerning our past and ongoing work in North–South collaborations. Y quickly pinpointed that the initial project was framed in a colonial mindset: it was predesigned, short-term, and aimed to study and transform others from a detached position. Initially, our conversations concerned the mistakes made in the project and general problems in academia. With time, we realised that it is easier to identify others' colonial complicities than our own. Our dialogues slowly became an exercise of listening to each other and ourselves concerning to each other's stories and experiences. The question that guided our meetings is: how can I, by listening to your stories, realise the ways in which I am also a perpetrator of coloniality myself, despite my good intentions and the fact that I am equally a victim of structural problems and academic dictates? The following vignette (Vignette 1) illustrates the first steps in this process.

Vignette 1: Kewan's doctoral experience

Kewan : "*As a product of the Belgian educational system, I finalised a PhD on the socio-economic consequences of landslides in Uganda without knowing much of the Belgian and African colonial past. At first, it did not occur to me that my approach could be problematic. Nobody, until now, questioned it in my surroundings. Or maybe I did not notice. The dialogues have helped me to understand what was problematic and why. I literally enjoyed a "Carte Blanche" for doing my research: I started from "research gaps" in literature, then easily obtained the necessary permits to conduct my work in Uganda, and when the time came for dissemination, local leaders seemed to readily accept the results and to be happy with my advice. My status as a PhD researcher from the North with a relatively large budget was an unquestioned source of authority.*"

The concept of "carte blanche" grasps the idea that a researcher from the Global North may sometimes enjoy full discretionary powers while conducting their research in the Global South. For many researchers, this privilege goes unnoticed. Hearing Viola and Adriana's experiences has helped Kewan realise some of his privileges.

The meetings were transformative to us, not just eye-opening but liberating and empowering. The coming lines illustrate how our meetings evolved into a relational

space and how this space nurtured a collective process of un/learning about North-South research partnerships. We address these lines to readers from the North and South, hoping that our experiences would help you to engage in similar processes to reflect, rethink, and question your role, position, and actions in North-South collaborations.

Building a Relational Space

Our meetings initially created indeterminate moments to share our experiences and connect across differences. The space we created was safe: we did not have ties other than a wish to learn from each other by holding a mirror and listening with our whole body. This means that we listen to what the other sees and feels and to how it resonates with our own emotions and experiences. Sometimes, someone does not appear at a planned meeting. Is it because of a failing internet connection or because familial or other reasons? The indeterminacy of our online meetings allowed for flexibility and understanding of the intricacies of infrastructural, cultural or personal differences.

Our encounters offered the possibility of being heard without being judged and feeling accompanied in times of confinement during the Covid-19 lockdown. They became a space of support and solidarity during which we could count on each other for feedback on our work and a listening ear regarding personal issues (see Vignette 2).

Vignette 2: Silence is not always the best answer, but speaking out has risks.

Viola: "*I am supervising three PhD students from the South in a "sandwich program". In such a program,*

the students have a supervisor in the North and one in the South and spend some time in both countries.

During our dialogues, I have come to realise that communication with one of my co-supervisors in the

North is imbalanced: the supervisor from the North communicates with my student without informing

me. The student is progressing; she will soon have her first paper published, but I am not put in a copy

when decisions are made.

Adriana: "*Did you talk to the Northern supervisor about this?*"

Viola: "*No, I did not want to affect the progress of the student.*"

Scholars from the Global South frequently encounter such dilemmas when they feel bypassed and delegitimised by their partners in the Global North, who tend to impose their way of working. Viola is the main supervisor and leader of the project. Yet, she felt disregarded by her partner in the collaboration. She nevertheless kept silent, allowing the northern professor to push for research directions that she would not have chosen. While "nonaction would necessarily imply acceptance of the status quo" (Russo, 1991, p. 299), It is challenging to take action when one does not feel the capacity to change things. Sometimes, letting it roll off your back and accepting the status quo is easier.

While being indeterminate, our meetings did not, happen in a vacuum. We aimed for structural change and looked for mutual support in the process of personal and collective transformation. Most meetings were recorded, transcribed, and summarised with the explicit purpose of providing material for the following meeting. The confrontation with the other's interpretation of what had been shared frequently sparked a new round of dialogue and reflexivity. There are stark differences between us concerning gender, race, national origins, and language, as well as our understanding and interpretation of the process we were going through. The relevance of these differences became apparent during these dialogues and while writing this article[6]: our experiences in North-South

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[6] How can we be honest, touch the readers, and involve them in our process of transformation while at the same time providing a format that is easy to read for people in academia? Indeed, our dialogues were circular, moving and unfinished rather than linear. Since the rigid structure of scientific articles is constraining, we considered writing our story in a dialogue format, as others did (Aguiton et al. 2015; Idahosa and Bradbury 2020). Yet, since this article aims to open up our dialogues to others, we did not want to pen down a closed, finished dialogue. We, therefore, opted for a format that is easily accessible to readers in academia to involve them in our discussions.

collaborations are very different, and so is our way of narrating them. Regarding a first version of Vignette 2 and Vignette 3, for example, Viola considered the way Kewan had narrated her stories as being too victimizing and missing the relevant points: again, a white gaze had permeated through his writings. Seeing and challenging these differences without aiming for uniformisation is crucial to engaging in decolonial collaborations.

Nurturing Empathic Listening to Engage with Coloniality

The narratives we brought during each encounter did not follow a linear trajectory and were influenced by our feelings or emotions of the day. Listening to the other's stories, we connected them with our own past or present experiences and even with our aspirations for the future. Our dialogues were not only about work. Each time, we started our conversations by sharing about ourselves and our families. This act became an opening ritual that touched upon diverse topics, from health to politics. For example, one day, Adriana was worried about the socio-political situation in Colombia, where many youngsters were being killed or disappeared because they expressed disagreement with the government's reforms. In the following meetings, Kewan and Viola systematically asked about the situation in Colombia. Likewise, Viola shared her concerns regarding the difficulties adolescents in Uganda were going through due to the closure of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic: situations of sexual abuse, poverty, and unintended pregnancies have increased exponentially, affecting hundreds of young girls.

Talking about the problems that affect us not only allowed us to vent but also generated bonds of trust and empathy. Even though our conversations were carried out through a computer screen, affective bonds have been growing between us. By empathic listening to the stories of others, we make them into our own stories. Over time, we realised that we were not only listening to the other but that their stories act as a mirrors in which our own fears, mistakes, and loneliness appear. This allowed us to reflect on each other's experiences but also to be self-reflexive in our actions. We thus broke the loneliness that comes with academic research. At some point, we felt so comfortable together that we wanted to meet in person. After almost two years of regular online meetings, we met face-to-face once, taking advantage of Viola's visit to Belgium for a project meeting. It was an incredible moment because we realised that a real connection had been growing between us through our dialogues.

As we engaged in feeling the pain and discomfort of the other, we learnt to listen to ourselves. With time, this trust and empathy generated space for new stories: moments we might have forgotten or situations imbued with shame because we might have lacked the power or the courage to fight injustice (see Vignette 3).

Vignette 3: Turning a blind eye to Inequalities.

Viola: *Our research teams (in the South) implement contextually sensitive research projects on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health. I am very committed to this work. Yet, I recently stepped out of a large international North-South collaboration, which could have lifted our work to the next level. When a funding agency in the North announced the project call, I put a team together, started to work on ideas, and was at the forefront of the proposal writing process. As the likelihood of obtaining the research grant increased, a senior male and head of my institution took over the leadership of submitting the bid for funding. As I was asked to step aside, my partners in the North decided to close their eyes.*

I know there was a level of avoidance from my side when I stepped aside, and I let the project go with pain in my heart, but I could no longer bear the push and pull. It is a matter of gender, power, and control over money. I am in a privileged position because I can say no; I can choose to avoid the struggle. Some women in similar situations do not have alternatives and would have had to engage into the power struggle. I could decide to quit. But, I am disappointed with our northern partners who promote gender equality on paper but are not accountable in practice. They seem to be ticking boxes for compliance, but when there is a risk of losing a project and the money that goes with it, then they rather cover up.

As gender-based violence and gender inequalities are an issue many women face daily worldwide, our dialogues naturally drew us to this topic. This story illustrates that even North-South collaborations that explicitly work on these topics face such problems. As illustrated for a South-South collaboration by Roy (2023), this is not merely due to people paying lip service while looking the other way: frequently, good intentions may fail because of unacknowledged asymmetries (Roy, 2023).

Without our dialogues, we would have kept many of our stories for ourselves. They would have remained where they were, and we would not even have realised that they were itching to us to do something about it. The transformative dialogues are a painful and discomforting process-because they uproot buried issues-, but they are one of the kinds that also brings relief and healing through the process of sharing. This collective reflexive exercise helped us to recognise, name, and pinpoint patterns of coloniality. It allowed us to discuss similarities and differences in our trajectories and to remember that what we consider normal is shaped by our previous

experiences, implicit norms, and standards of practice in academia. It made visible and audible those things that generally disappear behind the cowardice of daily routine. As such, the transformative dialogues are empowering (see Vignette 4).

Vignette 4: Publish or Perish

Adriana: *During my PhD, I attempted to implement a participatory and decolonial process with my partners in Bolivia. We decided to write a scientific article about this process. I proposed publishing the article in English rather than Spanish, arguing that their stories would more easily travel outside Bolivia and have a higher impact (based on Western standards of journal ranking). My co-authors agreed. Now, I realise that this was not just a means to make their work visible but mostly an extractive process driven by my interest in promoting my career. And over time, I also realised during discussions with my colleagues in Bolivia that the paper had lost interest to them. Even though I tried to keep them updated in Spanish on the many changes I made during the review process, they lost sight of it. Nowadays, none of them is using the paper in their teaching activities. So, even though the paper was published in an open access format, it has mainly benefited me. But since I am a junior researcher, I wonder what else I can do: how can I publish to not perish in academia while avoiding time sustaining an elitist and exclusionary publishing system?*

This story illustrates that engaging in transforming the way academia works is a challenging exercise. Sharing about our attempts and struggles has allowed us to continue to question certain dynamics and patterns, even when we fail to provide concrete solutions. Indeed, the current article is still written in English, and we have chosen to publish it in a European journal to reach a broad academic audience, including European scholars. The preprint of this manuscript is freely available in many repositories (such as hal.science).

Coloniality in academia has many facets. It is embedded in a long history of colonialism and the hegemony of one (positivist) way of producing and sharing knowledge about the world (Maldonado-Torres 2016). Our dialogues allowed us to identify various ways in which we reproduce colonial imaginaries in our daily work. We shared our work at a conference and in a podcast and exchanged with students engaging with problems of racism and coloniality at the university.[7] A hard-won outcome of our dialogues is that we now acknowledge our complicity and admit that

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[7] See the third episode of the "Living decoloniality" podcast, accessible on most streaming platforms (https://deezer.page.link/6VvC7TyS9nd8Xg9n6).

we have been perpetrators of coloniality (see Vignette 5). Each of us acts within an academic system in which we have chosen to stay. While we could step out of it, our choice to stay subjects us, at least to some extent, to the current requirements and injunctions of our research environment.

Vignette 5: Granting *Carte Blanche* to Northern scholars.

Viola: *On several occasions, as a head of department or later as a dean, I have accepted to be a contact person for partners ranging from students to professors to other professionals from the Global North interested in working and learning about this part of the world. I have, on several occasions, accepted being the contact person of these people, sometimes without questioning or even checking their interests and the values they were promoting or pursuing. I might have been biased to believe that all people who seek collaboration with universities in the Global South mean well and will not be exploitative. For example, I was contacted by someone just a few months ago, saying: "I liked your work, and I have been referred to you by someone you previously helped to do their research in your country. I want to travel to your country to learn more about some subject". Without asking any questions, I linked this person up with colleagues to set up a collaboration.*

As we acquire privileges, so are we increasingly responsible for maintaining certain structurally problematic patterns in North-South collaborations. Northern scholars can only enjoy a *Carte Blanche* as long as people in the South give them unconditional access. As we diligently want to help other scholars, we may reproduce colonial practices by helping Northern scholars bypass the local rules.

Discussion and Conclusions

From Confessional Tales to Acknowledging Responsibility

"It is only when we listen otherwise to the unknown and unrecognisable face of alterity that we can hear the voice of ethics whispering, drawing us beyond the limitations of our subjective understandings of the world so that we may shed, like a snakeskin, our old views and certainties about the world."
(Lipari 2009, p. 57)

Perhaps one or several of the testimonies included in this paper resonate with your experience, while others may not. We are aware that these testimonies are contingent and particular examples in a myriad of possibilities. Our testimonies are intended to prompt an ongoing conversation on the added value of a collective rather

than individual reflexivity to deal with the complexities of academic North–South collaborations.

Remarkably, none of us is exempt from experiencing this confrontation with our own complicity. While academic literature is progressively enriched by testimonies from social scientists who reflect upon and acknowledge their complicity in perpetuating detrimental power dynamics, testimonies from scholars in positivist sciences and from diverse backgrounds are still rare (Boyce et al. 2022). Transformative dialogues equip us with a means to recognise our role in creating and sustaining oppression over others. Kewan did initially not have the necessary background to perceive his privileges and complicities in reproducing North–South imbalances. Viola and Adriana, both women of colour from the Global South and both frequently affected by discrimination and precarity in academia, did not realise that they were equally perpetuating dynamics of exploitation. We now realise that we can be both oppressors and oppressed simultaneously (Potts and Brown 2005) and that omissions and silence contribute to perpetuating neocolonial patterns in academia.

Transformative dialogues provide an opportunity to transform interpersonal relations and individual's subjectivities by creating and nurturing a space for tuning in with each other and empathically listening to each other's experiences. This is a necessary step to support each other towards recognising one's own contradictions and complicities with structural problems in academic collaborations. Transformative dialogues are a way to make structural problems in North–South research collaborations visible and debatable. Their aim is to change interpersonal dynamics by pushing reflexivity beyond confessional tales about positionality (Pillow 2003; D'Arcangelis 2018; Dean and Zamora 2023). Transformative dialogues are thus foundational to engaged activist scholarship rather than just a "corrective measure in the research process" (Sultana 2017).

What made these Transformative Dialogues Work for Us?

A few scholars have proposed methods to go beyond individual self-reflexivity towards a dialogical and collective process. Norton and Sliep (2018) propose a critical reflexive model to help students in health studies to develop a critical consciousness and learn to listen to their patients (Norton and Sliep 2018). Liwanag and Rhule (2021) have coined "dialogical reflexivity" as a means to decolonise global health, arguing that reflexivity in isolation or without action will not contribute to transformations. They recommend looking back at personal histories, identifying both injustice and privilege patterns and sharing them with peers who can offer alternative perspectives and help translate new insights and actions to dismantle power asymmetries (Liwanag and Rhule 2021). Our work builds upon and expands these early contributions by experimenting with a long-lasting transformation process through a series of dialogues, including moments of writing and empathic listening to individual experiences.

Both Norton and Sliep (2018) and Liwanag and Rhule (2021) use storytelling to acknowledge subjectivity and difference and to recognise patterns of injustice, privilege, and complicity (Norton and Sliep 2018; Liwanag and Rhule 2021). Drawing on

Judith Butler's work on recognition, we also use storytelling to challenge entrenched practices and norms and to reconstitute participants' subjectivities (Butler 2005). Transformative dialogues help to recognise the complexity and entanglement of power dynamics in North–South collaborations by confronting one's subjectivity with the experience of others. As highlighted by Norton and Sliep (2018), dialogical interaction critically draws on a particular form of listening. Listening with benevolence and a non-judgmental attitude to each other's stories is crucial to building a safe space, safe enough at least to acknowledge complicities in the pervasive reproduction of privileges and exclusion in North–South collaborations.

Our transformative dialogues have been shaped by the specificities of our encounters, which may have contributed to their effectiveness in generating transformation. First, diversity: our different origins, positionalities, and diverse academic backgrounds brought multiple perspectives and understandings to the shared stories. We, therefore, had to go through a sometimes complex process of recognising, accepting, and embracing alterity. Being strangers at the start of the process, from different departments or universities and with different academic and cultural backgrounds, likely contributed to our capacity to progressively recognise coloniality in our actions and engage in a transformational process.

The second feature is failure: having to deal with a failed project opened the possibility of seeing failure as a learning stimulus rather than a lack of success, deficiency, or shame. Failure was present throughout our transformative dialogues and helped us to recognise our complicities in reproducing power imbalances and inequities. Third, emotions: showing and sharing emotions in an academic context is often viewed as irrelevant, disruptive, or even unacceptable, as it could compromise the validity of research outcomes (Lumsden et al. 2019). This influences how we interact with peers, as we tend to remove our hearts and bodies from our work (Mandel et al. 2022). Our dialogues were not only about our experiences of North–South collaboration; we also talked about our families and activities outside of academia and realised that we had much more in common than we initially believed. We shared a passion for research and our commitment to social and environmental justice. A shared need to reflect with someone else about the problems of North–South partnerships explains why we continued with our meetings after failing with the project and not having any contractual responsibility.

Transforming Collaborations

North–South academic collaborations face structural problems. Frequently embedded in a development paradigm, the imbalanced power dynamics and neocolonial narratives of these collaborations tend to reinforce rather than reduce structural inequalities and deficit views of the South (Rutazibwa 2018). In this context, one may wonder how reflexive processes can instil change. As argued by Kontinen and Nguyahambi (2020a, b), profound institutional transformations necessitate changes in the foundations of academic North–South collaborations (Kontinen and Nguyahambi 2020b). Critically scrutinising these relational foundations collectively, the participants in transformative dialogues engage in a chosen process of

subject-transformation (Butler 2005). By their collective nature, the dialogues proposed here thus provide a way to initiate change at the personal and relational levels.

Transformative dialogues are an opportunity to question entrenched academic practices, norms, and values, as well as the complexities, uncertainties, and complicities associated with our own actions. They help us (1) to reflect on our past and present experiences, recognising certain patterns in interpersonal relations across the North–South divide within academia, (2) to change the way we perceive some of our work relations and our way of being in the world and how we relate with others, and (3) to confront us with our complicity in reproducing neocolonial power dynamics in academia. This recognition is a way to unpack power relations in academia and to start taking responsibility for the consequences of these relationships (Butler 2005).

One should note that reflexive accounts of research may result in surveillance and domination of senior colleagues over junior colleagues (Sultana 2017). In particular, for early-career researchers, women, scholars of colour and ethnic minorities, precarious conditions can make it risky or impossible to publicly reflect on research experiences (Sultana 2017; Lumsden et al. 2019). The emotional labour and the embodied nature of reflexivity can, moreover, be discouraging to some (Sultana 2017; Lumsden et al. 2019). In a context of precarity and inequality, committing time and care to transformative dialogues is not accessible to everybody. This needs to be acknowledged, as biases in who participates in such dialogues risk reproducing existing inequalities. Transformative dialogues can thus not be imposed on anyone but should be nurtured through relations of care. Safe spaces and personal motivation to engage in a transformation process are crucial to. opening up the possibility of sharing feelings and emotions, as well as of learning from alterity (Lipari 2009). Thus, it is vital to search for partners who struggle with the system but dare to commit time, energy, and work to changing it despite the emotional burden this might bring. Listening with the aim of tuning in with each other can also make this process rewarding individually. This is particularly transformative within a university model that privileges exceptionality, individualism, and fast scholarly work.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we point to the limits of self-reflexivity and explore the possibilities of collective dialogues to deal with structural imbalances in North–South academic collaborations. We engage in a reflexive process that goes further than the inner dialogues and confessional tales frequently found in self-reflexive endeavours (Gani and Khan, 2024). We opened this article with a question: why would we, researchers from different backgrounds and institutions, meet one another regularly to discuss our respective work experiences? The answer is clear to us now: we need spaces to share concerns arising from our experiences in academic North–South collaborations and to reflect on them across different perspectives. The transformative dialogues are a space of care, nourished by empathic listening, to speak up and share uncomfortable or challenging stories without being judged (Vignette 6). Over time,

these dialogues turn a self-centric understanding of subject-formation into a relational and dialogic process of connection and transformation.

Vignette 6: Setting up a transformative dialogue

- Kewan: What would be our advice if someone wants to take on this adventure, such dialogue? Is there a standard way?

- Adriana: Some girls from Latin America involved in North-South collaborations within academia recently reached out to me. They said they were facing so much violence and abuse in their projects. The way they cope with this violence is by joking a lot about it. So we decided to make a comic strip.

- Viola: Last year, one of my classmates was diagnosed with breast cancer. We had not met in 20 years, but this was the reason we met, together with two other women our age. Now, we have a Whatsapp group, and we talk about life priorities and the challenges we encounter. This is a safe space for talking, which gives us the strength to move on.

There is no readymade recipe for transformative dialogues. However, they should be founded on listening, caring and willingness to share the discomfort of unearthing entrenched violences and injustices. This kind of dialogue generates a safe space for hope and transformation.

Transformative dialogues help us to deal with our contradictory and shifting subjectivities (Rose 1997). This is especially useful when we find ourselves in precarious positions or liminal roles that push us to hide parts of our experience. Few of us in academia have the space and time to reflect on our work and the potential negative consequences of our actions. While it is uncomfortable and sometimes painful to be confronted with our complicities in reproducing harmful power structures, such dialogues are inspiring and transformative. They thereby illustrate that it is possible to build ways of relating in academia that generate care and trust rather than extraction and exploitation. Conscious of the specificity of our transformative dialogues, we invite our readers to explore further the possibilities this collective reflexivity can offer within and outside academic partnerships. Our last words are therefore addressed to you, reader: Dear reader, we know it is not easy to commit ourselves to this type of action, even more so when precariousness, unpaid work, individualism and competitiveness distance us from one another. But for these same reasons, we invite you to reach out to each other. This work is unfinished, and we would love to continue our dialogue with you. Let us collectively experiment with new ways of relating within academic North-South collaborations!

Declarations

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