

# Toward Decolonizing the Black and White A'nger Cloth: Culture, Praxis and Hyphenated Spaces

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## Voyager

I, native traveller on Exile Road.  
Home behind. Abroad in view.  
Children in hand.  
Visions in pockets full of flowers.  
In transit from our roots, we arrive,  
The extreme weather at the airport lets us know  
The journey is far from over.  
We walk North. Alone we walk.  
The cold rips through our brown melanin skin.  
Ripped from fear of what lolls ahead.  
Our dreams are plentiful, but  
The bubbling visions of what lies on the other side of  
The tracks distort the journey as  
The dazzling eyes of travelling children lookup  
For assurance that this time the journey will be different.  
Reassurance that this time disorder and chaos  
Will be displaced, and replaced by stability and sanctity.  
At the taxi rack, we queue up.  
The taxi driver beckons us.  
Boxes, overload.  
Dislocation.  
An avalanche of expectations greets us.  
The burden of uprooting overshadowed  
By visions of home.

## Prelude

The a'nger is a traditional cloth that is woven with narrow stripes of black and white lines, stitched together to form a piece of cloth. The a'nger cloth is woven using an Indigenous machine (Figure 1). It usually takes a few days to create a piece of cloth large enough to form a four-yard wrapper. The finished woven fabric is pigmented with camwood and forms the foundation of the Tiv culture and identity. The Tiv people have over fifty types



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of traditional clothes. They are the predominant ethnolinguistic group in Benue State, Nigeria, West Africa. The tribe has a population of over seven million people (Waapela, 2014; Pulse, 2019).



Figure 1. The a'nger cloth being handwoven



Figure 2. Tiv traditional clothes displayed for sale

Using the a'nger as a metaphor for place, I situate my journey in topographies that encourage conversations about migration and home. When do we know when we are home? In searching for home, I linger in a hyphenated space that Chinua Achebe describes as a “crossroad” a “no man’s land,” a space unabating where one feels like a “bat in the folk tales – neither bird nor mammal” where “one can get lost, not being one or the other” (Cott, 1981, n.p). As a first-generation immigrant, and like many immigrants, I sometimes see myself as a “hyphenated, split self” (Trihn, 1991, p. 16); as someone living in “double exile” far from my native land, and far from my mother tongue (Trinh, 1991, p.10). Yet, I feel like I am halfway in and halfway out. Cuninghame (2008) describes a hybrid place of being “both/neither” here nor there (p. 22); a place where culture and experience are blended to form identity. In untangling my identity, I trace it back to the a'nger cloth, which has an underlying symbolism that is attached to the Tiv community. The Tiv people assign significance to the a'nger cloth, and this enables them to understand their history, culture, society, and the world around them.

In this paper, I use the black and white stripes of the a'nger cloth as a metaphor for writing and weaving through pedagogical elements for teaching and learning. The intersections between the warp and weft of the a'nger cloth embody and represent “Other” kinds of knowledge that emerge when generational stories are told. Making a case for the interrelatedness of the a'nger cloth and identity, I draw on Woolf (1956) who tells us that clothes “change our view of the world and the world’s view of us... There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them” (p.187-188). In Salman Rushdie’s (2010) *Midnight’s Children*, he metaphorically describes the process of “chutnification,” where Hindi and Urdu words are blended with English words to reflect India’s hybrid culture. Likewise, metaphorically, I use the a'nger to create a blended space to reflect on my hybridity. In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabba (1994), writes about colliding

cultures and explores themes of alienation, diaspora, exile, hybridity, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Drawing from Bhabha's (1994) idea of third space and his description of a space that gives rise to something different and new, I am in search of a "terrain for elaborating strategies – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (p.2). Living in diaspora, I find I am continually working at navigating the changing and uncertain spaces of belonging. These precarious spaces of belonging can sometimes become entangled and take on a life of their own.

Situating the a'nger cloth as a third space provides an opportunity for people displaced and living in diaspora to write from historical understandings of culture, race, gender, and class, and in so doing, produce knowledge (Brunsmas & Delgado, 2008). Such perceptions enable me to find new possibilities, even as I seek to make sense of my experiences and my environment. In using life writing as a praxis for understanding, adopting, connecting and questioning, the a'nger cloth represents an entry point and metaphor for opening doors. This doorway opens, allowing me to enter, and affords me curricular opportunities to enter into conversations about what forms of knowledge count, and which ones are relegated to the sidelines and margins (Little & Threatt, 1994).

My inclination to write autoethnographically emerges from moving in and through various geographical locations. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo (2009) tell us that an "autobiographic work invites a recognition from others, not of who we are, and who we have always been, but of who we are becoming in the encounter with the other (p. 33). In encountering others, Russel (1998) reminds us that "autobiography becomes autoethnographic," at the point where personal history becomes "implicated in larger social formations and historical process" (p. 1). These social developments and historical practices are interwoven and shape our identity. In response to such macro and micro interconnections, I draw on Chambers (1999) to find ways to understand the issues surrounding my sense of belonging and non-belonging in Canadian topography. Further, I am interested in the curriculum questions that Chambers (1999) asks us to think with, "Who am I?" "How do I find my way around here? Can I survive here? How can I survive here?" (p. 137). In finding answers to curriculum questions, I am drawn to poetize. Scholars have advocated for poems to be used as a methodology in autoethnographic research because of its power to create something new which is universal, personal and capable of capturing our deepest thoughts, feelings and fears (Carr, 2003; Denzin, 1999; Faulkner, 2016). The use of poetry in this paper ties in with my desire to use metaphorical generalities to reinforce the role of the a'nger cloth as part of my narrative. Furman et al. (2007) describe the use of poetry in qualitative research as communicating through a special language. By threading poetry through my narrative, I invite and welcome readers into "another world" (Neilson, 2008, p.96), where I share my experiences.

### **Enter the a'nger**

A'nger is spinning her web from home,  
 Stories conjoined, mixed up  
 From here and there,  
 Producing and reproducing  
 New life.

A'nger, not anger guides our path,  
 Travelling we shift, the seeds are sown  
 Tales to be told and retold



From our heart, the depth as deep as a well.  
A re-birth

The white and black a'nger is watching over the  
children.

To her, she sings, do not be afraid,  
You will overcome the silence  
Your voice is returning  
You will sing again

Her, the leading choir soloist  
Be brave.

This journey will make you stronger.  
You will rise to uncover the  
Mysteries of the ancestors

The a'nger cloth is guiding you through the storm,  
Shaking the shackles,  
reassuring you with a soothing voice.  
It tells you.  
You will know when you arrive.

### **Decolonising through the a'nger cloth**

Through the a'nger cloth, different forms of knowledge emerge from customs, rituals, practices, and landscape of communities. Scholars have written about the importance of consciously taking on the task of decolonization to recognize Indigenous pedagogies and "other" knowledge systems that include African and Asian ways of knowing (Battiste, 2013; Wilson, 2004). Wilson (2004) writes:

The recovery of Indigenous knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization because for many of us it is only through a consciously critical assessment of how the historical process of colonization has systematically devalued our Indigenous ways that we can begin to reverse the damage wrought from those assaults. (p. 72)

Settler colonization of Africa, Americas, and Asia by Western European countries have had developmental, economic, political, and psychological impacts on both the colonized and their colonizers (Chow, 2002; Fanon, 1967). Centuries of racially discriminatory colonial rule and oppression has had an impact on traditional, cultural, and educational practices and thoughts; this has led to eurocentric and exclusionary educational structures and practices in a postcolonial world. Schubert (2008) encourages us to "keep alive basic curriculum questions," such as:

What has shaped us? How did we become what we are? ... Who do we want to become and how can we shape the journey to go there? How can we live together without continuing to destroy this planetary environment?". (p. 412)



As a non-Western feminist academic living in Ottawa, Canada, on unceded Algonquin territory, it is tenable to present my cultural heritage as knowledge that is important in the process of decolonization (Asher, 2009). Fellow postcolonial scholars working at the margins towards decolonization inform us that our task as dislocated scholars in Western academia “includes resisting reimplication in the colonizing forces of being othered and participating in othering,” (Asher, 2009, p.74). Thus, we are always consciously and unconsciously at work unlearning repression, informing curriculum, and interrogating possibilities and limitations.

As we work toward decolonizing education, I theorize about the pedagogy of the a’nger cloth as a self-reflexive process that commits to social and educational transformation. In reflecting on my lived experiences for understanding and acknowledging differences as reconciliatory spaces, I am conscious of stories handed down to me from my grandmothers and great grandmothers. The Tiv people have their unique practices and ways of being that date back centuries. Like many Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, people have practised body decoration, including the colouring of feet, palms, nails and skin with henna, and chalks. Traditionally, the Tiv people had tattoos and scarification on their bodies for a variety of reasons including for self-expression, artistic freedom, personal stories, spiritual protection and identification with a particular clan. Some of the popular Tiv tattoos and scarification include *ikpur*, *ivev*, *kusa*, *shondo*, *tema adzongo* and *gufulu* (Waapela, 2014). These body decorations adorned my grandmothers and great grandmothers’ bodies. I grew up memorizing the tattoos on their faces, hands, back, and feet. My paternal grandmother, Alukpam, had two deep scar marks beneath her cheekbones, and several other symbols sketched across her face (Figure 4). The tattoos made her face light up like *Gazania rigens* opening up to the sky. Whenever she laughed, the sound of her laughter filled the air like a song sparrow travelling through the seasons. Her tattoos decorated the flesh of her body, while the traditional native wax, lace, and jewellery made of local beads adorned her outer being. On my mother’s side of the family, my great maternal grandmother, Mama Lydia, had tattoos that decorated her busty, full-figured body. Whenever she entered a room, you could tell from the atmosphere that she was a force of nature. These are my recollections of my grandmothers’ expressions and ways of being.



Figure 3. My great grandmother, Lydia Mngunengen Magen

Decolonization of education encourages societies weighted down by Eurocentric cultures to engage in restorative practices. Such restorative practices are crucial for looking within cultures to restore what has been lost, and rescue what can be rescued. Restorative practices involve acknowledging that Indigenous and organic societies have valuable knowledge that matter and are worth preserving. How then, might we work together to bring indigenous ways of knowing into our classrooms in ways that encourage minority and dominant groups to “see” each other? Smith (1999) writes that decolonization is about “centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and

research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (p.39). In understanding theory and research in alternative and inclusive ways, the a’nger cloth acts as a metaphor for validating identity and cultural knowledge through history, language, and stories.



Figure 4. Tiv wearing the a’nger cloth and performing the traditional dance

Weeks (1990) asks us to think about how migrants who leave their homelands discover that they are marked by their experiences and a sense of being “dislocated and disoriented” (p. 94). Elsewhere, she writes “each of us lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battles within us for allegiances” (Weeks, 1990, p.88). Understanding contradictory identities through the a’nger cloth helps us acknowledge autoethnographic undertakings that validate cultural, social, and gender differences as alternative paradigms of education. These paradigms are manifested in concepts such as globalization and digitization that continue to draw nations closer, minimizing differences in culture, history, race, and religion.

Undertaking to position oneself at the intersections of cultural experiences, disciplines, locations, speech, and silence become an integral part of autoethnographic commitments. Having grown up in a culture that encourages women to be silent, and speak less in the presence of men, I am reminded that if one partakes in the unnatural for long, it can have a profound power to encircle and consume the partaker. Conceptualizing gender empowerment is a site that performs equality and power-sharing with women; it speaks through the silences that have subjected people living at the margins for centuries. In decolonizing what it means to “know”, I use storytelling, autoethnographic undertakings, culture, praxis, and the a’nger cloth to encourage lingering and dwelling in organic sites. A dwelling that is important in a postcolonial world where polarisation seeks to divide and destabilize.

### **The silence that grew.**

“Hush”, I was told.

Women do not speak when men are speaking.

“Quiet”, don’t ask questions, just do as you are told.

Lay still.

Do not move a muscle.

That’s a good girl.

That’s how to show respect.

Act shy in their midst.

Cover your teeth when you laugh.

You must not appear too bold,

Otherwise, you will become a stain,

Marked for ridicule.

Men do not like loud women.

Do not laugh too loud,  
 Or burp too loud.  
 Cross your legs when you are seated,  
 So, the silence began to grow.  
 It followed me around.  
 It filled the cupboards.  
 It filled the drawers.  
 It filled the fridge.  
 It filled the pots.  
 It cooked.  
 It cleaned.  
 It grew until it became a  
 Zombie.  
 It developed legs, hands, and feet.  
 It could see, hear and smell.  
 It said 'hi' to the neighbours in the morning,  
 And goodnight to the security at night.  
 It became my companion.  
 One day I woke, weary of my companion,  
 I put a bread knife into its back.  
 I woke up, and there was no blood, no knife, no me,  
 Only silence filled the room.

### **Hanging Together**

The conceptual framework of this paper is narrative and metaphoric; both hang together. This alliance allows me to express and share my experiences and suppositions as marginal knowledge in Western academies. Conceptualizing the a'nger cloth as a metaphor for moving beyond time and discipline, Penwarden (2019) tells us that a "metaphor offers a picture which speaks, but remains static. Through talk and play, a metaphor can be extended into a narrative; into a story with a beginning, middle, and end, which unfolds over time" (p. 255). By sharing my stories and using the a'nger cloth as a metaphor for passing on generational histories, I chronicle events to narrate, describe, connect, and disrupt. Disch (1994) encourages us to adopt a conceptual framework that disrupts and challenges. He writes that "if one should not tell stories to fellow scholars it is not because stories are beneath them, rather it is because to do so is to make one's argument vulnerable to challenge" (p. 3). In drawing from my stories and those of my ancestors, I lean on Carvareo's and Cixious's rationale for writing:

I write in order to go further, further than what I say, and that is not impossible. I can go further than myself because there is further-than-myself in myself - as there is in all beings. This further-than myself in myself can be a mixture of others and myself. (as cited in Cixous and Calle-Gruber, 2012, p. 5)

Carvarero (2000) writes:

Each of us knows that who we meet always has a unique story. And this is true even if we meet them for the first time without knowing their story at all, we are all familiar with the narrative work of memory, which, in a totally involuntary way, continues to tell us our personal story. (p. 33)



Drawing from Cixious (2012) and Cavarero (2000), I feel the need to tell my family's stories, as I imagine the a'nger cloth as a point of contact for going further than telling a story. Aitken and Radford (2019) remind us that "metaphor carries conceptual meaning; it can shape thinking, and its use can illuminate underlying assumptions and reveal emotions and attitudes" (p. 179). A metaphor goes further than a story to inform the audience about the perspective of the one who tells the story. Allusions to the a'nger cloth conjure up semantic representations that form the bases of other types of interpretations that connect to histories, difference, and ways of knowing. Through the a'nger cloth, I connect African Indigenous ways of knowing to Western scholarship, thereby pushing the boundaries, embracing difference, and welcoming the reader into a cultural encounter.

Societal inequalities often mark differences in linguistic, gender, racial, sexual, ethnic, and class. In overcoming biases in academic institutions that consciously and subconsciously prevent Indigenous knowledge from being shared with students, I use the a'nger cloth as a space for inviting inclusivity and acceptance of "other" ways of knowing. Weeks (1990) writes that "the freedom to live your life in the way you choose must imply acceptance of other ways of life" (p. 98). Weaving a pedagogy of the a'nger cloth into life writing, acknowledges engagement in African Indigenous ways of being. People have valuable lessons to learn from other peoples cultures. Thus, having lived in different countries and communities, I am continuously opening up to learn and unlearning about different ways of being and living hospitably. The willingness to learn about different cultures helps us to open ourselves to each other and encourage diversity in schooling and society. It enables communities to build stronger bonds where we can acknowledge that we are part of one interconnected eco-system. Within stories, learning takes place as sites that recognize diversity and embraces the tensions that come from living on the margins. Aoki (1986/1991) understood this "indwelling in tensionality" as part of being a teacher. He reminded us that "to be alive is to live in tension; it is in fact the tensionality that allows good thoughts and actions to arise when properly tensioned chords are struck" (p. 162). Here, Aoki is referring to the tensionality between curriculum as plan and curriculum as lived, while at the same time inviting us not to become preoccupied with either extreme. By dwelling between two curriculum worlds, educators can learn to engage in what Britzman (1998) terms "difficult knowledge" in the classroom. How might a teacher engage in teaching difficult knowledge about race and racism, prejudices and privileges? Can restorative and decolonizing practices help teachers overcome their fear of a difficult conversation? If marginalized and minority students were able to bring into the classroom their stories, artefacts and experiences, might this help in creating transformative sites that allow school communities to encounter new ways of thinking, as well as understanding the "other"?

## Sharing Stories

Young and Saver (2001) believe that "to be without stories means ...to be without memories, which means something like being without a self" (p. 24). I understand this to mean stories are what we live for; our lives are all narratives. Starved of stories, there would be no past, present or future. As human beings, we create memories to refer to in the future and as signposts of where we have been, where we hope to go and who we want to be. Without using stories to sketch our journey through geographical locations and encounters, it would be difficult to pass on intergenerational knowledge to future generations. Chambers writes that "part of the power of words – of telling and listening to stories – is that lives can be changed by what is told and heard, what is written and read" (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009, p. 78).



Storytelling is central to educational research. Scholars have used stories as a vehicle to convey critical theories (Arendt, 1977; Benhabib, 1990). Arendt's (1977) work questions the idea that the only assurance of "objective science" is that it is free from subjectivity. In our daily interactions, stories are equally as important in how we see the world to form opinions and make decisions. Hanne and Kaal (2019) write:

We exchange stories with others in almost every social interaction: introducing ourselves, listening to and passing on news, recounting our symptoms to the doctor, puzzling over political events, justifying our actions... We may accept the story someone tells us, but equally we may disbelieve or not be convinced by it (p.5).

Passing on stories is a crucial part of knowledge systems, including African and Indigenous cultures. First Nations, Inuit and Metis people have always passed on knowledge from one generation to another through oral traditions using storytelling (Hanna & Henry, 1995). Similarly, the a'nger cloth is a channel for passing on generational stories, poems, and songs. African storytelling is a reliable pedagogical tool for passing on knowledge about culture and the insight of ancestors; this is particularly important in a postcolonial era of "othering" non-Western knowledge and perceptions in academics. Telling and sharing stories are crucial to survival. In a conversation with Moyer (1988), Achebe said, "The storyteller creates the memory that survivors must have - otherwise surviving would have no meaning... this is very, very important... memory is necessary if surviving is going to be more than just a technical thing" (n.p). Passing on histories and cultures to new generations is about survival, it has the effect of refining and defining people's identity, creativity, beliefs, imagination, as well as shaping their understanding and actions. It is through storytelling that I too continue in the traditions of passing on stories as gifts and tools of healing and survival to future generations.



Figure 5. My mother, Mercy (nee Yuwa) Iyortyer wearing the Tiv A'nger

### Gifting stories

To whom the gift of story is given, she must pass on the gift to the new generation to pass on.

Stories are not material gifts to be stored on shelves for decoration. Stories are told at borderlands and frontiers, as we journey through migration paths.

When stories are told, the light flows through the twilight  
of uncertainty and judgment. Stories fluctuate and shift, as  
they are reproduced and replicated time and time again.

We, the dislocated and displaced move across borders  
and boundaries, moving frenziedly, seeking healing,  
searching for sprouting plains.

Fleeing homes that have become  
dwellings of ghosts, we discover that  
once you walk through the mysterious doors of leaving home

You can never go back.  
Never look back, never return.

### **Entering stories, entering poetry**

My first memories of going to Vandiekya was to visit my grandmother, Mama Alukpam. I was seven or eight years old, and it was the summer holidays. I returned to visit Mama Alukpam until she died. Some of the fondest memories I have of visiting my grandmother were planting rice in the shallow, lazy flowing stream behind her house.



Figure 6. My paternal grandmother, Sarah Alukpam Iyortyer



Figure 7. My grandmother's rice farm

## Passage to Vandiekya

Travelling to Vandiekya is always a spectacular event.  
 Mother announces the news of the impending journey.  
 I go into the room where the suitcases are stored.  
 On the wall of the room hangs a tray I gave to my mother.  
 It reads “Lord, help me to accept the things, I cannot change,  
 Change the things that I can, and wisdom to know the difference”.  
 I take a suitcase to my room and begin to pack for the journey ahead.  
 The sunsets, the moon stays, the day breaks, morning comes.  
 Outside, the cars are parked, washed, fueled, waiting.  
 The journey begins.

The car drives through red solid metal gates.  
 It drives through the traffic at A-Y-A junction.  
 It will take seven hours to drive on pothole infested roads crawling with police checkpoints.  
 Tired looking policemen in black uniforms ask us, “show me your particulars!”  
 The driver speeds through Akwanga and Lafia.  
 We stop by the roadside to buy roasted corn, boiled groundnuts and bananas.  
 We enter Benue, pass by Makurdi, pass by Benue Cement, pass by Gboko.  
 Eventually, we arrive in Vandiekya.  
 Mud houses scattered around the village, lazily hanging in between brick houses.  
 There is a church by the roadside my grandmother attends called  
 NKST (Nongu u Kristu u i Ser u sha Tar) Universal Reformed Christian Church

Once I saw a dead man lying defeated on this road. No one came to claim him.  
 It was a hot, sunny day, 37 (°F). The locals say he was “mad”.  
 The man foamed at the mouth, white foam, the colour of candy floss sugar.  
 On the left, there is a primary health care (PHC) facility.  
 It looks abandoned. It is the only PHC for miles.  
 We drive over a shaky old bridge.  
 There is a corn farm on the left. A yam farm on the right.  
 A naked little boy runs after the car waving a banana leaf.  
 We drive past a school.  
 We turn right into the street that leads to my father's country home.

Mama waits, anxiously, excitedly  
 We meet, we hug, we stay, we merry.  
 We plant, we sow, we dance, we wake, we cook.  
 We tell and listen to stories around the mango trees.  
 Minutes pass, days pass, weeks pass.  
 The journey ends.  
 We leave

This visit always is full of seamless recollections.  
 I pack them up in tidy wicker baskets.  
 The memories like seeds are  
 Planted in my mind.



### **Safeguarding stories**

*Travelling, the content of my box is my secrets*  
*Still, nostalgia fills the air in the airport lounge*  
*I wait*  
*The take-off*  
*In excitement*  
*I move closer*  
*Energy in my hips,*  
*Swagger in my walk*  
*Lips parted suggestively*  
*I whisper*  
*Tell no one*

### **Postscript: concluding stories**

Intermingled generational stories light the way to decolonize classroom spaces and communities. This work is urgent, and it can be done through commitment and grit. Mitchell (2009) reminds us:

Sometimes, to discern the present, you have to be able to see both the future and the past. Time has to be compressed into a single dimension, akin to folding a strip of indistinct photographic film into an accordion so that you can see many exposures layered on top of each other all at once and thus get a clear picture. If you lose the past, the present and the future cannot really be understood. (p.122)

How then might we think about our experiences and cultures as open spaces for understanding that “difference” is not something to be afraid of; it can welcome and satisfy you, me, and the “other”. The fulfilment comes from saying “Come in and be my guest, listen to my stories and I will listen to yours.” In telling and listening, perhaps we might find more things that bind us together than keep us apart. In thinking with “difference”, I am reminded of my positionality living at the fringes of academia and the legal profession. While I am eager to learn how one might know when the self has been found, there remains much work to be done in the restorative practice of decolonizing spaces and overcoming the legacies of injustices in institutions and society in general. Through the pedagogy of the black and white Tiv a’nger, we might find common ground to overcome anxieties that make us close-minded about “Other” cultures, and ways of being in the world? How then might we move away from unhealthy preoccupations with technicalities about what constitutes knowledge and what does not? How might we move with Vick (2004) away from impoverishing the questioning spirit of students and teachers as we engage with difficult conversations in the classroom? How might we move from seeking objectivity and distancing ourselves from our lived experiences to dancing freely with subjectivity and other researchers who use their personal experience as primary materials for research? Still, we are at a crossroad. This road we must cross.

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## Notes

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