

Let's shuffle: An epistemology of dance and decoloniality

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In my talk I will reflect on the idea of diversity, a concept that has been central to recent debates in sociolinguistics and language education. My conceptual starting point is ‘the shuffle’ – a polyrhythmic dance step of African origin. An important characteristic of the shuffle as a distinct rhythm is the musical feature of syncopation: metre changes, accented cross-rhythms, and in-between beats. Ralph Ellison described syncopation in his novel *The Invisible Man* (1952) as follows: *‘it gives one a slightly different sense of time, you are never quite on the beat. Sometimes you are ahead, sometimes behind’*. There is unpredictability in the shuffle, it is a move that surprises and that challenges the Western tendency to think in well-defined dichotomies (e.g. regular-rhythmic vs. irregular-disruptive, uniformity vs. diversity, monolingual vs. multilingual, and so forth).

In approaching the shuffle as an epistemology, I take my cue from Clyde Wood’s reflections on blues epistemology (*Development Arrested – The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, 1998). Wood proceeds from the idea that everyday ways of being, talking and creating, are not simply practices, but also epistemologies. The shuffle – as an epistemology and thinking tool – allows social scientists to conceptualize the idea of pluriversality as discussed, for example, by the decolonial thinker Buaventura de Sousa Santos (*The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 2018). For de Sousa Santos, pluriversality is not the same as diversity: while the latter stands in opposition to uniformity, the former stands in opposition to universality. I suggest that pluriversal thinking happens when we do the cognitive equivalent of a shuffle, when we skip a beat, add a beat, move swiftly and unexpectedly between experiences, ideas and concepts, and thus create moments of surprise as well as new forms of relating. The shuffle allows social scientists to occupy, and here I rephrase Josua Hall (*Syncopated Communities*, 2013), a corporeal and intellectual space in-between various dominant and dominating theories. It helps us to explore the interstices and the margins of theory, as well as the ordinary messiness of social life.

Additional readings

Deumert, A. 2018. Mimesis and Mimicry in Digital Writing. Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics. *Language Sciences*. 65: 9-17.

Deumert, A. 2018. On Participation and Resistance. In: *The Multilingual Citizen. Towards a Politics of Language for Agency and Change*, ed. by Lisa Lim et al. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Deumert, A. and Mabandla, N. 2017. A luta continua – Black Queer Visibilities and Philosophies of Hospitality in a South African Rural Town. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 21: 397-419.