

A DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE ON ONLINE MEDIA DISCOURSES IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

As one of the most violent and unequal societies globally, South Africa is still profoundly shaped by a legacy of segregation and oppression. While race, gender and socio-economic status receive much attention, (dis)ability is an important yet often neglected dimension of inequality. In this article, I adopt a decolonial perspective in discussing online media articles about violence against people with disabilities. By focusing on stories related to issues that received extensive media coverage (e.g. mental health, police brutality and gender-based violence), I problematise the Eurocentric human-rights discourse informing public and scholarly discussions. I also explore the link between current understandings of (dis)ability and the legacy of a violent colonial and apartheid past. As a result of the intersectional nature of (dis)ability, many of the stories involve multiple layers of inequality and different forms of oppression. An explicit focus on extreme forms of institutional and physical violence, while restricting the scope of enquiry, brings the brutality of western modernity and its effects on the people affected into sharp focus. Legal recourse appears to lead to incomplete reparation at best while its failures perpetuate a cycle of marginalisation and oppression. Rather than problematising these structural failures as a result of western modernity and neoliberalism, the media inadvertently obfuscates such links by performing its normative, that is, by identifying and exposing individual culprits or by blaming contextual factors.

KEYWORDS

disability, online discourses, violence, decolonial, South Africa

UMA PERSPETIVA DECOLONIAL SOBRE DISCURSOS DOS MÉDIA ONLINE NO CONTEXTO DA VIOLÊNCIA CONTRA PESSOAS COM DEFICIÊNCIA NA ÁFRICA DO SUL

RESUMO

Como uma das sociedades mais violentas e desiguais do mundo, a África do Sul ainda é profundamente moldada por um legado de segregação e opressão. Embora raça, gênero e status socioeconômico recebam muita atenção, a deficiência é uma dimensão importante, mas muitas vezes negligenciada, da desigualdade. Neste artigo, adoto uma perspectiva decolonial ao discutir artigos dos média online sobre violência contra pessoas com deficiência. Ao concentrar-me em histórias relacionadas com questões que receberam ampla cobertura dos média (por exemplo, saúde mental, brutalidade policial e violência baseada em gênero), problematizo o discurso eurocêntrico de direitos humanos que informa discussões públicas e acadêmicas. Também exploro a ligação entre os atuais entendimentos da deficiência e o legado de um violento passado

colonial e do apartheid. Como resultado da natureza interseccional da deficiência, muitas das histórias envolvem múltiplas camadas de desigualdade e diferentes formas de opressão. Um foco explícito em formas extremas de violência institucional e física, enquanto restringe o escopo de investigação, traz a brutalidade da modernidade ocidental e os seus efeitos sobre as pessoas afetadas. O recurso jurídico parece levar, na melhor das hipóteses, a uma reparação incompleta, enquanto as suas falhas perpetuam um ciclo de marginalização e opressão. Em vez de problematizar essas falhas estruturais como resultado da modernidade ocidental e do neoliberalismo, os média inadvertidamente ofuscam esses vínculos ao realizar o seu normativo, ou seja, identificando e expondo culpados individuais ou culpando fatores contextuais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

deficiência, discursos online, violência, decolonial, África do Sul

1. INTRODUCTION

More than 2 decades after the transition from apartheid to democracy, South Africa remains one of the world's most violent and unequal societies. Physical violence was widely employed as an instrument of racial oppression in the past, and the contribution of the armed struggle in bringing apartheid to an end is part of the collective national memory alongside its non-violent component (Hamber, 1998; Stevens, 2021). Such a troubled legacy persists in various forms in current South African society and public discourse, as evidenced by alarmingly high rates of murder, rape, farm raids, xenophobic attacks, police brutality, violent protests, and so forth (Langa & Kiguwa, 2013; Moffett, 2006; Pearce, 2016; Tevera, 2013; Zondi & Ukpere, 2014). While race remains a contentious issue, in recent years, incidents of violence against women, farmers and migrants from other African countries captured media attention (Brodie, 2021; Dalvit, 2021; Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2021). (Dis)ability is a relatively under-reported dimension of inequality, deeply intertwined with race, gender, age, socio-economic status, and so forth (Moodley & Graham, 2015). While an estimated 7.5% of the South African population lives with a disability (Statistics South Africa, 2014), media attention is limited to high-profile stories such as that of paralympian Oscar Pistorius' murder case (Ellis & Goggin, 2017; Langa et al., 2020). People with disabilities in South Africa are often represented according to established tropes (e.g., hero, villain or victim), and stories about (dis)ability fall within tried and tested narratives of either tragedy or transformation (Stadler, 2006). With one of the highest internet penetration rates in the Sub-Saharan region (Chinembiri, 2020), digital inclusion has the potential to enable South Africans with disabilities to shape their own narrative and make their voice heard. At the same time, the online space risks reproducing and entrenching old forms of discrimination and covert micro-aggressions and epistemic violence. In this article, I critically analyse the discourse in online news articles about incidents of violence against people with disabilities. By applying a decolonial theoretical lens, I explore how the attempts at reparation for such incidents reflect and reproduce rather than challenge deeply entrenched forms of coloniality concerning people with disabilities.

2. DISABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA: PAST AND PRESENT

(Dis)ability activism has a long history in South Africa. While acknowledging very different experiences across racial lines, Howell et al. (2006) note that “under apartheid, all disabled people, Black and White, were discriminated against and marginalised because of their disability” (p. 48). Discriminatory policies and practices were informed by a western theoretical understanding of disability as a condition of dependency and disempowerment, limiting one’s ability to express concerns and enforce rights. People with disabilities were marginalised in education, health care, and employment. Though radically different in many respects, the system of the Bantu Education Act and special education for people with disabilities share an infamous history of segregation (Nkabinde, 1993; Soudien & Baxen, 2006). For individuals classified as Blacks, disability was compounded by high rates of unemployment, which secured a valuable reservoir of cheap labour for the apartheid economy (Kelly, 2013). In addition, as noted by Dowdall (1991), many Black people were subjected to institutional violence and actually “disabled” by injuries poorly treated within a segregated and inferior health system, followed by the return to the same conditions that caused such injuries in the first place. Organisations such as Disabled People of South Africa were formed in the 1980s to catalyse the common struggle of South Africans of all colours against oppression and marginalisation during the state of emergency. Howell et al. (2006) noted that such a struggle had two components: a fight for equal rights and a fight to change understandings and perspectives around disability, discussed in the next two paragraphs.

The South African constitution (Welfare Laws Amendment Act, 1996), considered among the most progressive in the world, recognises the need to prevent unfair discrimination based on disability and a commitment to redressing inequalities experienced by people with disabilities in the past (Bhabha, 2009). The former aspect, enshrined in Section 9(3), is given effect by the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000). As an example of redressing, South Africa provides disability grants to low-income citizens, for many of whom this is their main source of income (Goldblatt, 2009; Macgregor, 2006). As another example, sign language is actively promoted through the Pan South African Language Board and is recognised as an official language for educational purposes (South Africa Schools Act, 1996). Other pieces of legislation enforce provisions in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), to which South Africa is a signatory. For example, the South African National Development Plan, which provides a framework for mid and long term policy formulation and implementation, explicitly acknowledges information and communication technology as an important tool for the social inclusion of people with disabilities. The gap between policy formulation and implementation is recognised as a challenge for South Africa, and the disability domain is no exception (Howell et al., 2006). For example, despite progressive legislation, the educational experience of people with disabilities is still characterised by marginalisation, exclusion and underfunding (Lyner-Cleophas, 2019; Van Niekerk et al., 2019). In the public arena, policy documents (Department of Communication South Africa, 2017) envisage that (self)representation

of people with disabilities requires informed consent and active participation in the media production processes. However, common media representations of disability as a pitiable condition frame interventions as merciful accommodations rather than lawful entitlements (McDougall, 2006).

Media reflects a society's understanding of disability while at the same time contributing to shaping such understanding. Absence, invisibility or under-representation of people with disabilities in public discussions and forums denote the relatively minor role accorded to such people. When disability is portrayed, relegation to specialised programmes outside prime time slots or dedicated publications with a small readership contributes to "ghettoisation" (Davis, 2017). Goggin and Newell (2005) draw on the concept of apartheid to capture the exclusionary and oppressive role played by the media concerning disability. South African media reflects established discourses, that is, how language is employed to construct people with disabilities in particular manners (Stadler, 2006). Such representations often indicate a specific ideological position that points towards possible remedial strategies. The medical and charity models focus on deficits and represent people with disabilities as helpless, dependent and vulnerable beings who need to be assisted and protected. By contrast, the social model (Barnes, 2019) critiques how disability is constructed through social norms and advocates for change by raising awareness of the distinction between disability and impairment. The affirmative model proposed by Swain and French (2000) foregrounds the abilities, contributions and achievements of people with disabilities and seeks to give them a voice by providing media exposure. As further elaborated below, some scholars (e.g., Grech, 2009) warn that such models may inadvertently reproduce forms of oppression if taken out of context. Alongside countering stigma, propagating progressive ideas and enabling alternative voices, digital technology provides opportunities to extend one's social network, work/study remotely and access relevant information, for example, about health (Goggin & Newell, 2005). At the same time, digital inclusion risks replicating or even exacerbating existing inequalities among people with disabilities (e.g., along racial, gender and socio-economic lines) and with abled bodies (Tsatsou, 2021).

3. A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DISABILITY

Dominant public and scholarly understandings of disability fail to account for the historical root and emergence of discrimination and oppression and alternative Global South perspectives, thus falling short of providing a clear avenue for remediation. By drawing on decolonial scholarship, I espouse an understanding of people with disabilities as formerly colonised subjects. Within this perspective, reparation is not one ever incomplete emancipation but rather a full-fledged liberation. Mignolo (2007, 2011) noted that liberation entails a moment of delinking from dominant Eurocentric ways of thinking through epistemic disobedience and a subsequent programmatic moment of (re)construction. Decolonial critiques of the concept of human rights (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Santos, 2007b), which inform interventions at international and local levels, represent

an example of such disobedience. In calling for the decolonisation of disability studies, Grech (2015) argues that the dominance of a neo-liberal individualistic understanding of personhood and the resulting emphasis on human rights is the product of the violent colonialism associated with Euro-American modernity. In a perverse paradox, individual victories (e.g., as a result of legal action) validate a discriminatory legal system by which many in the Global South are betrayed. The heteronormative nature of human rights, formulated around western concerns, does not account for the possibility of alternative priorities (e.g., ability to contribute to a group's well-being rather than pursuing economic independence). Modern juridical and cultural understandings of disability are premised on a distinction between abled and disabled bodies. In his argument favouring southern epistemologies, Santos (2012) identifies such categorisations, for example, along racial or gender lines, as a quintessential instrument of colonial oppression. As with race or gender, the persistence of hierarchically organised categories separated by an "abyssal line" (Santos, 2007a) entrenches perpetual subordination. Owing to a history of representation as victims in tragic narratives, Fanon's (1963) label of "damnes" is readily applicable to persons with disabilities, whose only option is a hopeless attempt at assimilating and "filling the gap".

The concept of coloniality of ability proposed by Dirth and Adams (2019) captures the need to reconceptualise people with disabilities as a historically oppressed minority possessing a potentially disruptive epistemic and analytical viewpoint (Linton, 1998, 2005). The historical perspective is important in two respects. First, a collective identity based on common experiences of oppression is essential to overcome hegemonic constructions of disability as a purely individual condition of suffering and abnormality that characterises western models. Secondly, the link between past and present is central to the definition of coloniality as the persistent legacy of colonial violence. Regarding the colonial matrix of power proposed by Quijano (2007), violence can be exerted through the coloniality of power, knowledge and being. In terms of the former, people with disabilities are required to occupy dedicated spaces (e.g., special schools) and subject themselves to evaluation as a bureaucratic requirement to access benefits (Dirth & Adams, 2019; Soudien & Baxen, 2006). The epistemicide that results from the coloniality of knowledge manifests itself in pathologisation supported by the powerful (western) scientific discourse that so often justified racial and gender discrimination in the past (Belkhir, 1994). The ensuing coloniality of being results in internalised inferiority and the normalisation of Eurocentric and modern abled bodies as a universal ideal to aspire to and be evaluated against.

4. METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES AND CONSIDERATIONS

A decolonial perspective on discourses around disability requires a critical stance at the theoretical and methodological levels. The relationship between the two is widely recognised as complex and potentially problematic (Resende, 2021; Santos, 2012). Seminal work by Smith (2021) cogently argues for the decolonisation of research methodologies that are deeply rooted in western conceptions of the academy and of what constitutes

proper scholarly enquiry. Such decolonisation entails grappling with the “dirty history” of research methodology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019) and recognising power differentials in research (Katsui & Swartz, 2021). As pointed out by Maniglio and Silva (2021), “the subaltern in order to survive material and epistemic violence, not only have had to accept the western world but also have had to build their own discourses in that fashion” (p. 160). Techniques for researching discourse have their origins in French or British traditions. With specific reference to a Global South context, Resende (2021) notes that “decolonising critical discourse studies (...) implies recognising that our colonial history and the violence imbued in it cannot be ignored” (p. 34). The author proposes it situated collective analyses as an alternative, emphasising the need for simplified and accessible language to programmatically bridge scientific and common knowledge. Language use and choices are brought into sharp critical focus in analysing discourse. From the linguistic point of view, the term “disability” itself poses particular problems. Unlike race or gender, which encompass both dominant and subaltern categories such as Black or White and male or female, reference to people with disabilities almost inevitably marks their difference from “the rest”. For this reason, terms like “(dis)ability” or “dis/ability” are often employed (Goodley, 2014; Schalk, 2019). The use of person-first rather than disability-first language (Blaska, 1993; Mkhize, 2015), that is, “people with disabilities” rather than “disabled people”, is a way of redressing past linguistic inequalities alongside avoiding othering or derogatory terms in public discussions and journalistic practice (Green & Tanner, 2009). Such linguistic considerations require critical and decolonial scholars to be attentive and constantly reflect on their own biases while writing. Furthermore, terms referring to different disabilities, many of which have commonly used figurative meanings, such as blind or deaf, pose particular challenges when searching for literature and texts using a search engine.

The present work focuses on online news articles about three crises (i.e., mental health, police brutality and gender-based violence) that received extensive media coverage in South Africa. While other types of crises (e.g., state capture, unemployment, access to water, etc.) were considered, the selected ones pertain to intersections between (dis)ability and socio-economic status, race and gender, three recognised and well-understood dimensions of inequality. Within a qualitative multiple case study, such focus provides the most suitable examples of media coverage of violence against people with disabilities and subsequent reparation (or lack thereof). News articles were purposely selected among those published in 2020 and 2021 on major national news portals such as the *Daily Maverick*, *News24*, *The Sowetan*, among others (see Appendix, Table A1). Individual articles were identified through an exploratory web search (Hoerber et al., 2017) and selected based on their relevance to the topic of violence and (dis)ability in South Africa and/or mental health, police brutality or gender-based violence. There were considered 15 texts in English from different South African publications. It should be borne in mind that online content in English reflects the viewpoints of the relatively small but culturally dominant portion of the population who consumes news online and who is proficient in the language (Bosch, 2020; Salawu, 2018). With specific reference to the

African context, Bosch (2018) challenges the false binary between the empirical and the interpretive components of media studies research and calls for “a political approach, which illuminates imperial or colonial power relations” (p. 420). In a qualitative study such as the present one, data analysis is a “function of (the) researcher’s observations, intuitions and impressions” (Kothari, 2004, p. 5). It introduces a measure of subjectivity in the sampling and interpretation processes. Data is analysed deductively through codes based on the theoretical framework outlined in the previous section (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Since the texts under analysis are cultural products of western modernity, an inductive process (e.g., as part of a preliminary thematic analysis) was avoided as it risked reflecting such Eurocentric orientation. The thematic analysis would not have been suitable as it does not allow for making claims about language use (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were also discarded because the people directly affected are either dead or severely traumatised. In the latter case, requiring interviewees to relive the experience to “extract” data would have been inconsistent with the decolonial orientation of the present study.

5. LIFE ESIDIMENI

The psychiatric component of the colonial condition has attracted the attention of decolonial scholars ranging from Fanon (2008) to Dirth and Adams (2019). In South Africa, an estimated 30% of the population suffers from a mental health condition, which was aggravated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Heyns et al., 2021). People whose case is considered severe are often subjected to controversial practices such as institutionalisation (Freeman, 2018; Ornellas & Engelbrecht, 2018). During the second half of 2016, some 1,500 State patients were moved from the Life Esidimeni contracted private facility to over 100 between non-governmental organizations, psychiatric hospitals and community health care facilities (<https://www.lifeesidimeni.org.za/>). Such a move, allegedly part of a cost-saving and deinstitutionalisation strategy, resulted in the death of 144 people, likely due to starvation, abuse and/or neglect (*Daily Maverick*, November 24, 2021). It later transpired that many of the facilities were ill-equipped and underfunded (News24, November 23, 2021). Legal action by family members of patients and civil society organisations 5 years after the transfer, led to no convictions (*Daily Maverick*, November 25, 2021). The most negatively affected socio-economic status plays a key role as privately-funded health care is not an option for the poor. The scholarly enquiry highlighted the failures of the legal system to prevent the movement of patients or ensure accountability and justice (Ferlito & Dhali, 2018; Kabagambe, 2019; Thobejane, 2018). Ornellas and Engelbrecht’s (2018) observation that “the subsequent public arbitration hearings cast blame upon certain individuals, but left the deinstitutionalisation process untouched” (p. 296) captures the failure of modern neoliberal approaches (i.e., deinstitutionalisation in this instance) to provide closure or bring about meaningful change. Media and academic texts seem to point toward “the prescriptive standard against which they find traditional societies of the majority world to be the epitome of disability oppression”

(Dirth & Adams, 2019, p. 272). At the same time, the disappointing track record of legal enquiries can be understood as evidence of what Maldonado-Torres (2007) terms “incomplete death”. Institutional arrangements inherited from the Eurocentric colonial past maintain survivors and their families in a state of perpetual suffering with no possibility of redemption, meaningful reparation, or actually reaching an end.

Media representations reflect western perspectives and concerns. Reference to this story as the “Life Esidimeni tragedy” in both newspaper and academic journal publications taps into an established tradition of framing narratives around disability discussed above. Consistent with such a narrative, the people with disabilities who died are considered helpless and nameless victims. Two dehumanising strategies are at play when naming such people. First of all, they are often referred to as patients or, at times, users rather than people (see News24, November 23, 2021). Maldonado-Torres (2007) notes the controversy about recognising the humanity of colonised subjects as part of the colonial legacy. Avoiding words like “people” or “person” could be seen as, at best, sidestepping the issue and, at worst, deliberately negating such humanity. The use of “handed over” in the article mentioned above further objectifies the people involved and is reminiscent of forced removals and resettlements under apartheid (Evans, 2019). The second strategy, also identified by Maldonado-Torres (2007) as evidence of coloniality, is aggregating deaths as a way of invisibilising individual personal suffering. People whose death is documented in the Life Esidimeni story are often referred to in figures representing the number of deaths, rendering them “unmournable bodies” in Cole’s (2015) terms. When named (*Daily Maverick*, November 24, 2021), individual stories are told by “abled bodies” (often family members). Such form of proxy suffering risks foregrounding the pain and grief of caregivers and making the experience of the people most directly affected invisible. Such invisibilisation reflects what Santos (2012) calls “constructive absence”, that is, the colonial practice of erasure deriving from ignoring, downplaying or misreading the subaltern’s perspective. People with mental disabilities epitomise the construction of the subaltern as someone irrational, dependent and unproductive, whose voice cannot find meaningful representation in the media.

Media discourses contribute to the construction of people with mental illnesses as disabled or abnormal regardless of recognising traditional healing practices in South Africa, offering different understandings (Booi, 2004). The limited horizon of the possible that Santos (2012) captures in the idea of a sociology of emergence makes it difficult to imagine arrangements alternative to institutionalisation, reparation outside the formal legal process and non-pathologising conceptions of psychiatric conditions. In some indigenous South African cultures, conditions medically diagnosed as depression or schizophrenia can be interpreted as a calling to do ancestral work and become a traditional healer (Lambrecht & Taitimu, 2013). Failure to accept such a call and undergo appropriate training may worsen symptoms. However, traditional healers recognise the possibility and danger of confusing genuine ancestral calling with actual pathological conditions which require proper medical care (*Sowetan*, June 4, 2021). At the same time, people with severe mental disorders may be accused of witchcraft and, in extreme cases, killed (TimesLive,

April 12, 2021). In socio-economically marginalised communities, stigmatisation of traditional beliefs in the media often combines with material degradation and underlying tensions, resulting in symbolic and physical violence against people with disabilities.

6. POLICE BRUTALITY

The police force has a long history of brutality in South Africa, rooted in apartheid violent repression. As is the case in other parts of the world, physical violence is heavily racialised (Bruce, 2002; Hadebe & Gopal, 2021; Zondi & Ukpere, 2014). On August 26, 2020, a 16 year old boy with Down syndrome was shot by a police officer, allegedly for failing to answer questioning (TimesLive, September 3, 2020). The murder sparked violent protests by members of the Coloured community in Johannesburg, to which the boy belonged and which has a history of tensions with police enforcement agents. The term “coloured” inherited from apartheid’s racial classification refers to people of mixed ancestry who share a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity due to discrimination and forced relocation. The senseless murder sparked violent protests by community members, followed by a petition with 120,000 signatures to call for the prosecution of the three police officers. Court proceedings revealed that the accused attempted a cover-up by claiming the boy got caught in the crossfire with gang members (Eye Witness News, October 23, 2021), tapping into a common stereotype of coloured youth as gangsters (Adhikari, 2004). More than 2 decades since the end of institutionalised segregation, race remains a contentious issue in South Africa, and an opposition political party attempted to capitalise on the community’s grief. The story also gained international resonance when musician Solange Knowles tweeted about it in the context of racially motivated police killings in the United States. Foregrounding the racial dimension (Independent Online, November 20, 2021; Bedasse et al., 2020), though important in its own right, seems oblivious to the historical tensions between individuals classified as coloured and those classified as Blacks which, as a result of apartheid divide-and-rule policies, to some extent still persist today. Furthermore, an emphasis on the racial aspect and its media resonance comes at the expense of a sharp focus on disability. Media reports fail to acknowledge that the boy in question was killed because he could not conform to ableist expectations in a situation where extreme physical violence and mutual distrust are endemic.

In an unrelated story, on November 19, 2020, an older man was deliberately pushed off his wheelchair by two police officers in Cape Town. The man had gone to the police station to enquire about arrested fellow leaders of a peaceful community protest. He was with another activist who captured his mistreatment in a mobile video and later acted as a proxy with the media. In fact, the person directly affected was traumatised and not in a good space to speak, and as an older man within the Xhosa culture, public humiliation was a particularly demeaning and dehumanising experience for him (News24, November 21, 2020). This is his third time being physically assaulted by the police in his activism for better housing, but no action was taken concerning the past incidents (*Daily Maverick*, November 22, 2020). As a result of the public uproar following the latest story, the two

police officers were suspended, but no apologies or any other form of direct reparation were offered. The activist understood this silence to mean that his mistreatment was considered normal, and he felt that his right to protest was being invalidated.

In both stories discussed in this section, reliance on legal processes resulted in frustration and further dehumanisation. Police brutality needs to be understood within the context of a history of violent protest and tense relationships with marginalised communities, which exemplifies what Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls a “permanent state of war”. Under such conditions, ethical behaviour is suspended, and subalterns can be treated as enemies against whom unrestricted use of force is acceptable. Duncan (2016) notes how media representations of protest foreground acts of violence as a justification for the police’s brutal response. It is important to note that such a focus distracts from the underlying causes of both the protests and the recourse to violence on either side, restricting opportunities for public understanding and deliberation about meaningful solutions and/or reparation.

7. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is recognised as a particularly severe problem in South Africa, prompting President Cyril Ramaphosa to label it as “the other pandemic” alongside COVID-19 (AllAfrica, November 25, 2021). South African women played an important yet often forgotten role in the struggle against apartheid (Sideris, 1998). The link between violence against women and coloniality is amply recognised in the literature (Fanon, 2008; Icaza, 2018; Mack et al., 2018). For example, rape is often used as a weapon to defeat and humiliate the enemy (Siddique, 2019). It is important to associate rape with violence and oppression rather than sexual intercourse within the logic of the permanent state of war discussed above. For women with disabilities in South Africa, rape often fits within an intersectional matrix of poverty and violence (Humphrey, 2016; van der Heijden et al., 2019). Women with disabilities must also contend with a patriarchal culture that assumes nonreciprocal and purely sexual relationships are all they can aspire to.

As reported in the news, Independent Online on October 22, 2021, a woman in Bodibe in the North West province accepted the offer of a man she met at a tavern to accompany her home by pushing her wheelchair. The man instead took her to his home and raped her. A police spokesperson advised women to be vigilant and not accept help from strangers, no matter how kind they may appear. Such a statement is problematic at three levels. First of all, as a common example of victim-blaming, it shifts the responsibility from the rapist to the survivor (Orth et al., 2021). Secondly, it fails to recognise that dependency on others is often not a choice for a person with disabilities, but a necessity brought about by living in an ableist world. Thirdly, the reference to strangers taps into current media imageries (Brodie, 2021) but contradicts evidence that most incidents of sexual violence take place between people who know each other. While this story does not specify the level of acquaintance, the two incidents discussed below involved neighbours and family members.

A 23 years old woman with a mental disability resulting from childhood tuberculosis meningitis and living in Riebeek Kasteel in the Western Cape province was raped by an unknown person as a child and then by her uncle as a young woman (Independent Online, November 27, 2021). The uncle offered R10, an insignificant amount even in a poor and marginalised context, as reparation. While traditional practices inspired by the principle of restorative justice (Burns & Sinko, 2021; Greyvenstein, 2017) may contemplate monetary compensation (including in cases of sexual assault), the necessary community involvement, ensuring mutual recognition and negotiation was absent in this case. The young woman's mother remarked that failure to secure a conviction in the first incident of rape led to disillusion and reticence in reporting the second. Only intervention by local authorities convinced the family to lay charges, despite the very low rate of conviction for this type of crime (Greyvenstein, 2017; Vetten, 2011). A counsellor in the ward who supported the family remarked that:

there are no structures in this community. That is why these incidents happen. We are on a journey to the 16 days of activism, and for me, the 16 days is a myth to what we witness today, a disabled child that was repeatedly raped. "The system failed her because the police did not take the first case seriously". (Independent Online, November 27, 2021)

The 16 days of activism being referred to are an initiative by the South African government to raise awareness around gender-based violence. Consistent with the Eurocentric perspective informing media discourses, the quote advocates for strengthening modern legal processes and accountability mechanisms rather than recognising their failure. The lack of "structures" representing western modernity is thus identified as the problem, hiding the contribution of the very same western modernity to the patriarchal oppression and marginalisation of women in general and Black women with disabilities in particular, which makes them targets of violence in the first place.

In all news articles discussed up to this point, the relative silence of the persons directly affected calls to mind Spivak's (2003) question, "can the subaltern speak?". The people with disabilities themselves are silent, either because they are no longer because they are too ashamed or are considered incapable of doing so. The only voices represented in direct quotes are from family members, caregivers, or the institutions' representatives. The last story provides a counterexample. On February 14, 2020, a woman with visual impairment in Mokopane in the Limpopo province was sexually assaulted by her neighbour, who had sent her children on an errand (*Sowetan*, February 14, 2020). This incident occurred in the survivor's home between people who knew each other well. As a direct result of such closeness, the woman and her children were repeatedly threatened and pressured to withdraw the case by the perpetrator's family. In the only story among those considered in the present study where the person directly concerned spoke to the media, she did it deliberately to ensure that the culprits would be identified if anything happened to her or her family. In contrast with western notions of speaking out for oneself or raising awareness, her action can be best understood as a defensive strategy and

evidence of faith in community justice as revenge is often the only form of reparation for women with disabilities living in marginalised communities (see TimesLive, May 6, 2021). Media representations limit themselves to condemning physical violence and fail to recognise and challenge the patriarchal structures that make Black female bodies undesirable and, therefore, inherently “unrapeable” (Annamma & Handy, 2021).

8. CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, three different South African crises (mental health, police brutality and gender-based violence) received extensive media coverage and provided examples of violence against people with disabilities. The analysis of online media texts in this article suggests that dominant approaches to disability, focusing on legal processes, ensuring accountability or promoting awareness, fail to effectively provide closure and reparation in the case of violence against people with disabilities. Enforcement of individual rights is premised on a Eurocentric perspective and only seems to lead to incomplete reparation. None of the perpetrators in the stories considered in this article was sentenced according to their crime. Furthermore, in two instances, it appears that a previous experience of failed reparation led the protagonists to lose hope in obtaining justice. Awareness campaigns and outrage over violent incidents fit within a western emancipatory script but do not fundamentally challenge coloniality of disability. Some of the stories discussed in this article received extensive and prolonged media coverage, but this appeared to satisfy public curiosity and need for catharsis rather than bring about genuine redress or substantial change. A cross-study overview reveals that media discourses (re)construct people with disabilities as subaltern subjects whose experience is almost exclusively conveyed by proxy. Through familiar narratives of victimisation in a quest to expose injustice, the media actually further normalises the condition of suffering for people with disabilities, implying that coverage is an acceptable form of reparation.

Furthermore, by performing the watchdog role assigned to it by western normative frameworks, the media shifts attention to individual acts of physical or structural violence away from its systemic roots in western modernity. Concerning the three crises under consideration, what remains safe from criticism is the neoliberal order making disability an individual economic responsibility, the State monopoly on violence to ensure conformity and the patriarchal ranking of the Black female body with a disability as worthless. The intersectionality of disability makes it difficult to decouple it from other vectors of inequality and oppression such as poverty, race or gender. At the same time, advances in decolonial scholarship focusing on these other dimensions of inequality can, and should, contribute to a better understanding of (dis)ability in the global south. While a specific focus on extreme forms of institutional and physical violence brings the brutality of western modernity sharply into focus, an investigation of other forms of violence (e.g., symbolic violence, micro-aggressions, etc.) may yield interesting results. As a further suggestion for future research, an enquiry into social media, including posts in African languages, may provide insights into different constructions and alternative discourses. These may contribute to more fluid understandings of disability as an integral part of the human condition.

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APPENDIX

PUBLICATION NAME	TYPE	YEARS	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
AllAfrica	Online	2021	1
Daily Maverick	Online	2020, 2021	3
Eye Witness News	Online	2021	1
Independent Online	Online	2021	3
News24	Online	2020, 2021	2
Sowetan	Online	2021	2
TimesLive	Online	2021	3

Table A1 News articles selection

BIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Lorenzo Dalvit is an associate professor of digital media and cultural studies at Rhodes University in Makhanda (South Africa). His current areas of academic interest include digital inequalities, online discourses and mobile media from critical and

decolonial perspectives. Dalvit (co)authored approximately 150 publications and supervised more than 30 students across various disciplines (media and cultural studies, education, African languages, computer science, etc.). He developed/coordinated/taught 15 courses at all levels and for diverse groups of students and presented on curriculum development, teaching innovations and synergies between teaching, research and community engagement at local and international conferences. He is the 2017 recipient of the Rhodes University Internationalisation Award and spearheaded five international mobility projects with Italy, Germany, the United States and New Zealand. He is a rated National Research Foundation researcher and has attracted research and bursary funding from the National Research Foundation and the South African Departments of Basic Education and of Communication, International Research & Exchanges Board and the European Commission.

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