Book Review

# Ausi Told Me: (Re)inventing Action Research from South African Tradition

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> This work argues that everyday decolonial-knowledge ecologies on the Cape Flats provide important pointers for reimagining the hybridised, precolonial pasts. Ausidi (first-born daughters; female knowledge-keepers) were and continue to be profound intergenerational knowledge-holders of those pasts. (Bam, 2021, p. XI).

With these words, June Bam opens the preface of her book, posing a challenge to our understanding and reflection. We intend to do justice to the author, who intensely lives the reality of the indigenous peoples of the Cape Region in South Africa and reflects this throughout her work. Likewise, we aim to immerse ourselves in the ways of producing and reproducing knowledge and life as depicted in the stories of women. We acknowledge that we will fall short of our promises and intentions to both the author and the culture of these peoples, who have privileged us with the learnings we share in this review, but we also understand that this is part of the experience and learning in intercultural contexts.

*Ausi Told Me* is of special interest to the investigative community that is anchored in the principles and strategies of action research. June Bam helps us understand how people's actions, thoughts and feelings are based on life stories that are renewed and recreated from generation to generation, revealing the leading role of women in producing knowledge of resistance and transformation. That is why the methodological aspects are highlighted in this review, such as the notion of *lalela*, translated as deep listening.

In the preface, the author outlines four assumptions that will guide her arguments: a critique of the "discourse of extinction," meaning that indigenous peoples disappeared along with their knowledge; a critique of an essentialist view of the San and Khoi peoples, who inhabited the Cape region, overlooking their cultural hybridity; a critique of the postmodernist discourse that land claims are based on an identity politics constructed during apartheid and are therefore false; a critique of the historical-materialist Marxist discourse that the assertion of "indigeneity" is confined to tribal and racial thinking. These are critical assumptions of broad scope that serve as reference points for dialogue with other realities. It is in the specificity of the Khoi-San peoples that lies the originality that invites us to disclose new perspectives on who we are and how we view others.

After this brief introduction, we situate the author and her context. It is important to note that this is a region of South Africa which, among many others, contributes to the country's cultural richness. A brief presentation of the book's structure follows, highlighting certain aspects in each part and chapter to provide a panoramic view of the content and the author's line of argument. In a third section, the review focuses on some concepts that in our reading emerged as particularly relevant to the methodological discussion, without claiming to present

them as the main or central ones: the role of women in the intergenerational production and reproduction of knowledge; *lalela*, deep listening, as a research methodology; Herstory as a critique of patriarchal historiography; and positionality as a political strategy and a critical stance for action research. Finally, we emphasize the methodological contributions of *Ausi Told Me* to action research. We highlight how the historical, cultural, and political richness of South Africa offer new dimensions of participatory engagement and critical reflection to research, revealing the full potential of (re)invention and re-signification that Bam's work offers to action research.

## The Author and Her Context

One of the lessons the book imparts is that it is the forgotten biographies, those overlooked by "official" history, that enable us to reconstruct a herstorical knowledge of Southern Africa. Telling the story of June Bam is to narrate an intergenerational tale, a story that is not hers alone. Therefore, we choose to begin with May, her Ausi. June's mother. May lived and died in the Cape Flats, a poor region southwest of Cape Town. This area became the relocation site for black and indigenous populations post-apartheid. May attended school only once, for on her first day, the teacher declared she was "too indigenous" to be there. Subsequently, her classroom became the savannah. There, alongside her mother, grandmother, and great-aunts, she learned about medicine, biology, history, language, astronomy… She learned to read, write, and to listen – to seriously heed the wind, the past, the dreams. To listen to a world different from that taught in the "traditional" school she was expelled from.

May learned Khoekhoegowab, the click language considered primitive and wild. Through this language, the knowledge of the Ausidi (plural of Ausi) is passed down generations. But for many years May denied her past, concealing this tradition from her daughters, fearing apartheid and the fate of the "nothing-people" – as the indigenous Khoi and San were called. Her fear translated into silence. It was only at the age of 70 that May revealed to her daughters that she could speak Khoekhoegowab and the symbolic universe it represents. According to June, Ausi May felt a political and historical necessity to keep the tradition alive in the present and assert that Khoi-San culture is not about an extinct people, a memory of the past. Thus, as an adult, June discovered her mother's indigenous identity.

Identifying as Khoi-San was dangerous and shameful, considered "non-human," "primitive," the indigenous were systematically annihilated. Women, deemed "excessive in the Cape" and "too dangerous" by the colonial regime for their knowledge and formative role, were tortured, incarcerated, and mass-executed (BAM, 2014). Khoi-San, therefore, is an "umbrella" term, encompassing various indigenous populations of Southern Africa sharing cultural and linguistic roots. Over the centuries, these populations suffered genocide and epistemicide, and were often labeled as "extinct" by historiography and anthropology – a notion contributing to the generic and racist classification of coloureds by apartheid policy.

In one of her many works on the subject, June Bam (2014) analyzes the implications of this epistemicide on 21st-century indigenous activism, arguing that two decades post-apartheid, the "coloured" classification continues as a standard for population categorization,

making Khoi-San activism centrally about identity and belonging – a process that, as seen in the reviewed work, directly depends on the knowledge shared by the Ausidi.

But contextualizing this erasure policy doesn't mean June Bam grew up detached from her Khoi and San heritage. Since birth, she was tasked with "preserving indigenous history and dignity," a responsibility she took very seriously. Throughout her childhood, she and her sisters were taken by their mother to the savannah, where they learned to read time from the earth, about survival, herbology, history, and biology. She was born and raised learning about the knowledge accumulated by her foremothers, about preserving it, and about women's responsibility in this process. It is they who narrate the Khoi-San story. All sacred, ancestral knowledge is feminine. In this effort to preserve the past, June learned the power of dreams and visions. She recounts that on Sundays, the girls would gather with the matriarchs, the Ausidi, to discuss the meaning of dreams, their predictive power, and connection to the departed. From her mother, June learned an important lesson: the role of an Ausi is to listen and listen, to hear deeply, then speak.

Over the years, June has listened to and recorded many stories from the Cape, challenging traditional historiography and integrating intergenerational knowledge (dreams, visions, rituals, …) into academic knowledge not just as a source, but as a theoretical-methodological basis for research. In the last three decades, she has held management positions in various public bodies in South Africa and the United Kingdom, besides teaching at several universities, including Stanford University, Kingston University, York University, University of Cape Town, and currently, University of Johannesburg. As a recognition of her work, it's worth noting that in 2008, a research-intervention project she led won the UNESCO Peace Education Award; in 2020, the book "Whose History Counts: Decolonising precolonial historiography," she was lead conceptual editor of, in partnership with Lungisile Ntsebeza and Allan Zinn, was a finalist in the HSS Awards, and in 2023, this honour was bestowed upon the author's own work, "Ausi Told Me: Why Cape Herstoriographies Matter".

## What We Find in the Book

The book is structured in four parts, comprising a total of ten chapters, in addition to an Introduction and an Appendix where short life stories of the interviewed women are shared. In the Introduction, the author deeply identifies with the people whose memories she seeks to bring to light as indicators of alternative paths for academia and life on the planet, among humans and with nature. She introduces readers to the concept of Ausi, which in the language of the San and Khoi peoples means "older sister" and is derived from Aus, referring to water, denoting "source," "blood," and "serpent." From the study of terminology – in a section preceding the Introduction – June argues that "the source represents the flow of knowledge, the blood symbolizes immortality, and the serpent suggests wisdom" (p. xxvii). She emphasizes in the Introduction her methodological concern stemming from the need for radical changes to understand the past and present. Deep listening, a profound attentiveness, emerges as an alternative to herstoriography, the historiography of and by women.

Part I is dedicated to outlining the methodological panorama in three chapters. The first chapter illustrates how the historiography of colonization aimed not only to render invisible

but to erase the history of the region's indigenous peoples, casting doubt on the archives of the time. The pressing question for historiography, therefore, is how to deconstruct these narratives within a decolonial framework. The second chapter argues that there are possibilities for decolonizing Eurocentric historiography by considering the San and Khoi not just in terms of knowledge, but especially in ways of knowing. This is followed by a critical reflection on how to provide the indigenous people access to their own historiography, disclosing complex layers of epistemicide and "linguicide."

The two chapters in Part 2 inform about the selection criteria for the women and men participating in the research, including: a) having a reputation in their communities for possessing such knowledge; b) having a close relationship with the Ausidi; c) having the means to demonstrate their knowledge of plants, cures, and rituals in their environment. The fragments of stories lead us to another world and way of conceiving the world. For instance, the daily life was full of visions and predictions, readings of signs from swamps, insects, animals, and the mountain. From listening to the wind to the colour of the sun, everything spoke and taught. In summary, these are stories that encapsulate the results of deep listening in the construction and transfer of intergenerational knowledge through the Ausidi.

Part 3, with four chapters, is titled "Epistemicide." June Bam identifies seven types of concurrent erasures: genocide, the attempt to kill the indigenous peoples; epistemicide, the attempt to erase knowledge; culturicide, the attempt to erase culture; linguicide, the attempt to erase language; botanicide, the loss of plants; floricide, the loss of flower richness; and faunacide, the loss of the animal kingdom. According to her, this compulsive process of extinction was never fully achieved, largely due to the generational chain established by women. We will take a more detailed look at this process of erasure in the next topic. Or, as June Bam argues, attempts at erasure because there is some survival in all the strategies of silencing or death.

The fourth part consists of a brief but dense eleven-page chapter, which the author titles "How Listening to These Stories Can Help Us Rethink the Curriculum and Research Methods on the Ancient Historiography of the Cape." She revisits the concept of *lalela*, deep listening, as a reference for both teaching and research methodology. Next, we select some concepts that seem central to understanding the reach of the work.

## Key Concepts: Thinking with the Author

The book *Ausi Told Me* explores various key concepts for understanding how indigenous knowledge and its forgotten past are central to comprehending the historiography of the Cape and its implications for the present. Moreover, the work allows for thinking beyond the local context. In addressing colonialism and its consequences, culminating in apartheid, June Bam presents essential theoretical-methodological tools for understanding equity and social justice. We highlight four interconnected topics from the book that provide a profound reflection on history and intergenerational knowledge in the Cape region. The first topic explores the importance of deep listening as a method of reassessing official history, confronting colonial records with Khoi and San voices. The second topic highlights the role of Ausi in intergenerational transmission. The third topic discusses the concept of herstoriography, aiming to

include female voices and address the omissions of dominant history. Finally, the fourth topic considers the spaces of original knowledge in the Cape region and their potential for resistance and recreation.

## Lalela: Deep Listening as a Methodological Reference

"Listen, listen, and listen. Then, deeply listen" – These were May's instructions to June for preserving intergenerational knowledge. Deep listening, as a method, allowed the author a "total reassessment of official history" (p. 201), reorienting critical research agendas towards "traditional" historiography through sources other than colonial archives. To confront these records (largely produced by white men) and suspend these "sources" of South African history, deep listening proposes triangulating the historical archive (a product of colonial logic) with past voices ignored by this "official source" and current Khoi and San stories.

Listen, listen, and listen (*Lalela*) is thus a political and pedagogical process that keeps alive cultural heritages, traditions, spiritual beliefs, and sociopolitical organization of the Cape region since pre-colonial South Africa. Furthermore, it places into perspective the indigenous knowledge accumulated and shared by the Ausidi. This process, as June Bam shows in her book, requires sensitivity and rigor. Over five years (2015–2020), the author conducted interviews with sources of intergenerational knowledge (Ausi) in Cape Flats and other regions of the Cape. In these interviews, she listened to the past and its effects on the present. Listening to the past, as a research movement, challenges the researcher to attentively distinguish between memory and history. Deep listening is not about hearing memory, the individual perception that transforms over time; it is about hearing history and, in the storyteller's voice, other voices. This requires sensitivity, as it is not merely passive listening, but a vigilant exercise to set aside "truth" notions or prejudices; to suspend judgment and create a deep connection between the storyteller and the listener. It demands sensitivity, as it deals with a history of lives and distinct times, a collective history.

Rigor is required because *Lalela*, the Nguni word for "listen," entails a holistic process. It's an invitation to reflect on one's own position and the power dynamics at play in historical narratives, through a set of movements that include meditation, walking in nature, writing… It is listening with the whole body, feeling the environment as a whole. In methodological terms, this demands rigor because these movements are ritualistic and transformative, requiring from the listener a (self-)reflective and active stance. Rigor is also needed because there's an ethical dimension of respect and recognition in the co-production of knowledge that "involves not only deeply listening to the often-repressed indigenous voices in post-apartheid South Africa but also allowing them to reconfigure the past through their stories" (p. 239–240).

As a decolonial response to studies developed on Khoi and San (and the narratives built from them), the method of deep listening does not seek to erase or invalidate the knowledge produced so far. On the contrary, it is through dialogue with traditional historiography that listening and hearing are possible. Through rigorous dialogue, which often opposes and sometimes breaks with knowledge built by colonial logic, critical and georeferenced knowledge is produced. Thus, this listening does not translate into recovering the past, but rather, projecting a new future from it. Deep listening represents, in this dialogue, an epistemic

shift in the way science is produced, starting from an ecosystem, an "invisible archive," and an "intangible data" not only as a source but also as an ethos of research. Throughout the work, June Bam argues and reiterates that *Lalela* is a pedagogical alternative to decolonize the curriculum and promote historical reparation in South African universities by ensuring access to their own history as a source of teaching and research.

## Ausi and Intergenerational Knowledge

Education involves the relationship between people situated within generations, which in turn develop certain knowledge and ways of knowing. Although technological advancements have changed the predominantly unidirectional relationship from the older to the younger generations, older generations are not exempt from transmitting their values and knowledge to the new generations, which they do in various implicit or explicit ways. June Bam analyzes how this transmission in the Cape region, among the Khoi and San, is carried out by women, playing a role of resistance throughout colonization.

Usually, it is the firstborn who is tasked with learning from the Ausi how to preserve the intergenerational memory of the family and all the knowledge contained within it. This memory includes the pains and traumas, the strategies of survival and preservation, the language (the learning process is done only in the Khoi-San language), and all the knowledge of geography, herbology, medicine, history, architecture, arts, among many other areas, acquired over the centuries and kept alive since the pre-colonial period. Intergenerational knowledge is thus the understanding and maintenance of history from the female perspective and agency – hence, in the work, the author uses the expression herstory. In English, the first syllable of the word "history" (his-to-ry) corresponds to the possessive pronoun "his"; replacing the masculine pronoun with the feminine one both opposes a patriarchal colonial logic, where knowledge is produced, interpreted, and recorded by men, and signals that the practice of "their history" predates the arrival of "his history".

Maintaining this intergenerational knowledge is, besides a respect for one's own culture, the past and the future, a form of activism that has been gaining space in the academic context. From a methodological perspective, it is possible to find in positionality the principles of constructing intergenerational knowledge. In the dynamics of research, positionality implies constructing a shared identity among those involved in the process that is historically, theoretically, and epistemologically located. Part of the process of situating this knowledge in time and space involves deeply listening to intergenerational knowledge. Therefore, positionality in the context of South African methodologies and epistemologies comprises the dimension of the present and past both on the physical and spiritual plane.

## Herstoriography: Producing Positional Knowledge

In proposing to rescue the history of the Cape from "their" narrative, Bam seeks to compose a more inclusive, realistic, and coherent scenario of the past and present South African. Their

history (herstory) adds to the movement of deep listening to include these voices in History and to discuss their omissions. Writing about what Ausi told means opposing the dominant history through the stories of her family, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs, providing valuable information about the experiences lived by indigenous communities and deepening the senses of knowledge (in its artistic, linguistic, scientific, spiritual dimensions…) produced about and in the region.

As the book shows us, in Khoi-San culture, knowledge is feminine; that is, women are the bearers of ancestral knowledge and are responsible for keeping alive the traditions, stories, and cultural practices for future generations, whether through rituals, songs, dances, books, or narratives. Starting from this assumption, it can be said that the history of the Cape is (and always has been) "their history". With the process of colonization, there was an attempt to systematically erase the knowledge, perspectives, and voices of these women, resulting in the weakening of the cultural and historical identity of Khoi-San women and the stereotyping/objectification of their bodies.

Herstoriography seeks to recognize this role and value the feminine contributions to the social, political, economic, and cultural construction of the Cape region. Telling their story is a movement that extends to promoting social justice and gender equity. By recovering the role of the Ausidi, June Bam brings to the forefront a figure that, through historiography, was erased from collective memory. Challenging epistemicide and rescuing the voices of indigenous women, *Ausi Told Me* confronts historical inequalities and stimulates critical reflection on the patriarchal structures that still persist in society by including in the "official history" these knowledge and perspectives, (re)turning these women into protagonists in/from the historical narrative.

It is worth noting that in the work, "their historiography" is made from a specific place: the Ausi. This means that it is not a historiography from the female point of view, but rather a historiography of indigenous women, of the Khoi-San tradition. By doing this, Bam brings herstoriography closer to the concept and practice of positionality. This approach recognizes that our identities, experiences, and perspectives are affected by gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religion, among other factors, intersectionally; emphasizing that we are not neutral spectators, that we do not produce knowledge detached from a particular political and social position.

## Between Erasure, Resistance, and Recreation

The author identifies three major platforms or spaces of original knowledge in the Cape Region (p. 31). The first is linked to a revivalist movement around rituals, occupation movements, and the recovery of languages lost with the imposition of the colonizers' language. The second is a hybrid knowledge space that relates pre-colonial knowledge with that brought by Muslims and Indians connected to the Indian Ocean slave trade. A third type of knowledge among the San and Khoi is hidden in invisible or rendered-invisible networks, and therefore, rarely available in the canons of historiography. It is in this space of knowledge production and reproduction, considered by her the most authentic, that lies June Bam's interest, and for this reason, it carries the greatest potential for knowledge recreation.

We have already mentioned the seven types of erasure that the author identifies. To the more known erasures or extermination of peoples, knowledge, culture, language, and fauna, June includes plants (botanicide) and particularly flowers (floracide) for what they represented to the peoples of the region. The book presents images of flowers that, along with their beauty, also represented sources of healing and nourishment. The understanding of "empty land," with the concomitant arbitrary renaming of places, was also accompanied by the non-recognition of the region's animal life and plants.

This erasure occurs in various ways, of which we highlight a few. The human, plant, and animal trafficking and the transplanting of exotic species. The colonizers were not satisfied with collecting plants and animals, but also took "human specimens" for exhibition. This ties in with colonial cartography that separated and classified indigenous peoples without considering their history and relations. This corroborated the narrative of empty land with the understanding that the inhabitants did not offer resistance beyond sporadic retaliations, lacking agency.

The classification included a racial pyramid in which whites and Indians corresponded, respectively, to the first and second caste, and the coloured – a mix of European, Oriental, and African attributes – to the third caste. African blacks occupied the lowest scale of this pyramid. Given the disputes around who is what in the time of apartheid, June questions, without denying the existence of superficial human differences such as physical features, how relevant is the discourse of "physical type" to overcome discrimination based on physiological essentialism, labeling, and classifications. The book especially highlights the colonial and Apartheid racist classification of Khoena women as overly sexual and carriers of contagious diseases.

This erasure is also found in "modern" theories with a progressive tone. For instance, June criticizes the Marxist paradigm of historical materialism that studied the San and Khoi within the framework of "modes of production" as resistant to modernity, disregarding the potential for validation of new knowledge through tradition and oral history.

## Final Considerations

"Ausi Told Me" is a book rooted in the South African region of the Cape. At the same time, the region's own history is woven with threads that extend to the world. There are the Portuguese in their conquest expeditions, the Indians and Muslims brought from the East, and the European conquerors who with apartheid staged one of the saddest chapters of colonization. In these final considerations we highlight some challenges and opportunities posed to action research as a worldwide and diverse community. It needs to be acknowledged that June Bam does not announce her book as an action research project. However, it is our understanding that much can be learned for action research theory and practice when the book is read from this perspective.

June Bam reveals how the seeds for transformative action are deeply rooted in cultural traditions that survived colonization and exploitation. Action research involves *lalela*, deep listening that is part and parcel of lasting and meaningful transformative acting. When pronouncing the words that survived linguicide or when naming and cultivating the flowers that

survived floricide the community's world is no longer the same. It is a world that recovers its richness generated through countless generations. *Lalela* involves the commitment and risk to dive with mind and body in the other's culture.

A second remark is the role of women as producers and reproducers of knowledge. The narratives bring the protagonism of women in the preservation of memory as a bearer of hope. We are not presented with a generalized denunciation of patriarchy, but with the marks of sexist and racist domination on the very bodies of women who, nonetheless are the carriers of knowledge that preserves the community's survival and that in a patriarchally driven market are suppressed. The book challenges action researchers to have a closer look at gender both in terms of particular knowledges, and as other ways of coproducing knowledge.

Lastly, June Bam invites us to broaden the scope of action research traditions. We are glad to see this review being published in a special issue of Action Research in what can be regarded as the embryo of a Turkish tradition. It is a beautiful landscape where, in every corner of the world, communities are engaged in pronouncing their world through collective critical action, from Scandinavia with democratic dialogue, to Spain with action research for territorial development, to North America with community based action research, to Latin America with systematization of experience.

## References

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