ABSTRACT This paper discusses Architectural History and Theory at the Graduate School of Architecture, University of Johannesburg in 2019. The curriculum is centered on a series of conversations as the means to generate forms of engagement for a plurality of voices, contested views and dialogic encounters, as a way of working toward an alternative institutional imaginary. The focus on conversation and dialogue aims to create a space for slow and shared scholarship, to become a manifestation of spatial resistance to the imperatives of the neoliberal university and global economies of higher education. This paper discusses some of the key conceptual and practical moves undertaken in the development of a new history and theory course through examples of student work. The paper points to inclusive and reflexive pedagogical methods and modes of collaboration as central to resistance, and as the means that enable generative and supportive networks across geographic and institutional boundaries.

Conversations in Architectural History and Theory
In a provocative opening performance on the 10th of September 2019, at 68 Juta Street, in Braamfontein, central Johannesburg, a Masters of
Architecture student at the Graduate School of Architecture (GSA), University of Johannesburg, Gugulethu Mthembu articulated: “you have been taught to grow up, I have been taught to grow in … I have been taught accommodation.” Mthembu’s comments on “growing up” and “growing in” questioned what it means to be a black female body within an architectural school with historically very little space for Black positionality, recognition and voice. Mthembu’s performance, which forms part of her architectural design thesis involves a series of installations, drawings and live recitals (Figure 1). Her provocation was the first in a day of conversations, bringing into direct question issues of gender, race and the limits and extents of architecture with regards to the location of the black body within space.

This performance took place at the 2019 Architectural History and Theory colloquium or Conversation Rooms, which marked the culmination of the first year of teaching a new architectural History and Theory course titled “Methods, Fields and Archives.” The course as a whole is centered on a series of conversations as the locus around generating forms of engagement for a plurality of voices, contested views and dialogic
encounters. The colloquium, therefore, marked the public endpoint of a series of engagements throughout the year. These conversations that take place through seminars, reading groups and the colloquium are seen as a way of talking and working through an alternative architectural history and ultimately an alternative institutional imaginary. The Architectural History and Theory course at the GSA, and the emphasis on conversation and dialogue, aimed to create a space for slow and shared scholarship, to make room for critical thought among tutors and students, and to become a manifestation of resistance to the imperatives of the neoliberal university and global economies of higher education. This article discusses some of the key conceptual and practical moves undertaken in the course to provoke discussion through examples of student work. The paper points to inclusive and reflexive pedagogical methods and modes of collaboration as central to resistance, and as the means that enable us to establish generative and supportive networks across geographic and institutional boundaries.

**Architectural History and Theory at the GSA**

In 2019 I joined the GSA as the programme convenor for History and Theory and found a welcoming space within the wider pedagogical agenda of *Transformative Pedagogies*. The GSA, and project of *Transformative Pedagogies*, was established by Prof. Lesley Lokko in 2016, in the aftermath of the Fees Must Fall protests in South Africa. From the outset, the intention was to create a space for an alternative architectural culture for the African continent. The school grew from 11 students in 2016 to 90 students in 2021. The success in student numbers reveals the popularity of this program among students from across the continent. This popularity has been built by student and alumni work, which found a space to respond to alternative spatial imaginaries which reverberate across scales, from the intimate present to the urban, national, continental and planetary. As Lokko explains, *Transformative Pedagogies* was established as a research and teaching program, that sought to transform “both the way we teach architecture and what we teach.” She notes that student activism in South African universities in 2015 was clearly fueled by two distinct yet related issues: of socio-economic difficulties for poor students, and the “cultural alienation of Black students at historically white universities.” In the manifesto which sets out the intentions and thinking behind the school, she states “At the GSA, we chose to address curriculum as both content and praxis: in other words, focusing not on individuals or the group in isolation, but rather through exploring how both individuals and groups create understandings and practices [...] We need to keep encouraging critique and problematization of what is considered to be knowledge and the processes involved in generating it.” For Lokko, the aim was not the creation of a new kind of regionalism for South Africa, but rather to construct a space for critical engagement with architectural knowledge.
from Johannesburg, an African city. Mthembu’s performative architecture, which talks to the problematic of architecture schools as historically spaces to stifle Black voices, or indeed their outright absence, is one example of a project which both critique’s existing frameworks, and questions what an embodied and performative architecture could be. Lokko’s Transformative Pedagogies agenda provided a space to further question what a history and theory curriculum might offer, beyond the existing canon.

The GSA has made its mark in terms of design teaching and design research in and from South Africa. History and theory has however been a difficult terrain to negotiate, for various reasons. Much of the existing research on modern and post-independence architecture on the African continent focuses on the role of expatriate or settler colonial architects.7 “Africa” is often reduced to a level of ornamentation or “traditional references,” an essentializing and reductive approach that epistemologically, tends to mirror colonial frameworks. As a survey of anglophone schools across the continent by Ikem Okoye points out, “Architectural historians, whether African, American, or European, are used to the moniker “African” standing for something essential – something traditional or indigenous, a locally invented product uncontaminated by more globalized histories.”8 As Okoye notes in his 2002 published study, it remains unclear what an African architectural history is, or indeed where it might be positioned in schools that are generally professionally oriented.9 With no courses specifically producing architectural historians on the African continent, what little discursive culture exists largely remains firmly tied to the object building often within a global developmentalist framework that demarcates the African continent as a space of lack or poverty. In South African universities, where architectural survey courses have been updated, this is often with sociological surveys on the African city, which treat “Africa” as a generic category. Although these courses often shift the focus to the African continent, their focus on “urgent” and “present” questions of informality, poverty and infrastructure rarely understand “Africa” as a space of design, visual cultures or associated critical commentary. These often well-intended efforts, therefore, reinforce the suggested “absence” of architecture, or indeed a history of architecture, on the continent. Yet, as Christina Sharpe prompts, history is always in the room with us and “the past that is not the past, reappears, always, to rupture the present.”10 How do we, therefore, speak from this position of the absence of “history”? And what might this mean for how “architecture” is understood?

As a discipline, architectural history is rooted in the nineteenth century construction of the distinction between the “west” and its “other,” where the “west” was considered a site of knowledge production, and the “other,” at best, the site of vernacular and non-historical styles. This is exemplified in the Bannister Fletcher Tree of History.11 Architectures of the so-called “non-west,” considered “native,” were understood as spaces
associated with the tribal and primitive body rather than sites produced through discourse, following Itohan Osayimwese. Indeed, in many cases, these “other” architectures were relegated to anthropological and archaeological studies rather than considered as architecture. The work of architectural scholars drawing on postcolonial theory has played an important role in questioning the power-relations within the archive and its association with colonialism. More recent efforts in global, worldly, and planetary histories have widened the sites of research in an effort to provincialize the “western” canon. This growing effort to reveal the untold histories of architecture in peripheral and underrepresented sites has led to a plethora of significant work on trans-national movements and networks, and global relationships of production and construction. Yet, in many cases, the place of theory and knowledge production remain in the “west” while the “other” is considered the “field” for gathering data. The historiographical and epistemological underpinnings are rarely questioned. This is played out in the growing interest in fieldwork and ethnographic methods, seen as key to “de-centring” architectural history. While this approach expands the sites of studies, in many cases the architectural truths defined, produced and constructed in the “west” as “center” remain largely in place. Following Sara Ahmed, I argue for the importance of recognising that the absence and associated violence and coloniality of knowledge are produced and reproduced in institutions. This is a context where the post-Apartheid institution in South Africa is located within wider neoliberal global economies and hierarchies of higher education, and associated practices of hostility which particularly disenfranchise Black and brown bodies.

**Methods, Fields and Archives**

In developing a history and theory course at the GSA, the impetus was to question both what architectural history might be in terms of content, and also how it might enable us to think and theorize architecture differently. Contesting the prefiguration of distinctions between methods, fields and archives, the course suggested bringing these into conversation to understand their entangled nature. While the field remains a site for gathering data on the “other,” the archive is often treated as a siloed, sacred and western source of knowledge. In foregrounding the decolonial focus on both praxis and content, the course questions the existing canon of the architect-architecture-architectural, by looking to the margins and edges of architecture as a discipline. The limitations of the architectural canon are not seen as disabling, but rather, following Anooradha Siddiqi, seen as an opportunity to “shift the historiographical gaze toward alternate forms of intellectual and material productivity.” As Lokko has noted in the framing of the GSA, the wider interest in the school at the time, was not only in a change of curricula, but as a set of practices, in order to question what we do and how we do it.
This emphasis on praxis and content is related to how institutionality gets produced and reproduced. Ahmed reminds that while institutions have become associated with an established order and assumed stability, what is often overlooked is the “instituting” aspect of that which is “instituted.” She asks us to think of institutions as both verbs and nouns, to recognize the processes, labor and work which go into institutionality, “to attend to how institutional realities become given, without assuming what is given by this given.” Institutions produce and reproduce certain forms of knowledge through content. Within architecture, these range from the academic institution, to the various professional bodies and accreditation boards which validate and decide who can practice and how. Institutions are the site of the production and reproduction of architectural knowledge, and what is deemed as architecture. They are collective endeavors, involving all those who do the work to establish, maintain, and actively produce the physical and intellectual space on a daily basis. While in the global north institutions are often critiqued as being resistant to change, in the global south they tend to be discussed in relation to their failures and absence. Yet, I would argue that this supposed “absence” itself, allows and enables for a continuation of inherited coloniality.

In response to this wider context, the history and theory course is structured as a series of thematic seminars, each of which focuses on a different form of architectural dissemination. These range from manifestos, fiction and film to exhibitions and oral histories. These forms are understood as central to how architecture is recorded, remembered, conceptualized and understood. Each week, in addition to completing a set of readings, students are asked to engage directly with the form. For example, the assignment prompts include the production of a short fictional text, a study of an actual exhibition in the city, or the writing of a manifesto. The seminar is therefore both the space of conversation and dialogue around the thematic and set of media that have been assigned, as well as a space for engaging with the material students have themselves produced in response. While the structure of thinking through forms of architectural dissemination is widely used globally and not unique in itself, what is particularly important here is that works considered more canonical are combined with those that are not usually considered “architecture.” The students are therefore actively engaging with a “stretching” out of architecture as a discipline in the Fanonian sense, an act they are encouraged to continue in how they produce their own responses. For example, while Italo Calvino’s, Invisible Cities or Georges Perec’s “The Apartment” are commonly used text in architectural courses around the world, very seldom are Black or brown fictional voices represented. In contrast, as an example, included in this curriculum, in different stages of this course have been Jamaica Kincaid’s, A Small Place, Miriam Tlali’s Soweto Stories, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs M Archive. These deliberate additions of black female
voices from the African continent and diaspora ask a student to engage with black female positionality directly rather than lament their absence. In these examples fiction becomes a tool for postcolonial critique, and speculative science fiction, as a way of imagining other possible futures. These texts ask students to engage with the lived reality of those often not included in the architectural archive proper.

This inclusion of widely marginalized voices in the course handbooks, in turn sets a precedent for how students respond to the tasks, inviting them to bring in additional literature, a wide variety of resources, and experiences of the city. For many South African students of color, their experiences of post-Apartheid cities is often also excluded from institutional spaces and how architecture has historically been taught. The seminar, and this ground for additional material, becomes a space for “speaking to one another,” following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak asserts the importance of “speaking to” instead “speaking for” the subaltern subject, where “speaking to” is an active gesture that involves a transaction between a speaker and a listener. The change in curriculum content creates the ground for the basis of the conversation, asserting the validity of voices not usually accommodated and thereby inviting in a variety of perspectives. This is an acknowledgment of the unequal grounds of “speaking,” and a gesture toward a radical inclusion, whether considered architectural or not.

As one example, the student Gloria Pavita responded to the week on manifestos, by producing a manifesto for herself, focused on questions on the positionality of Black women studying Architecture. Pavita’s response as seen in Figure 2 was in some ways framed by a long history of manifesto writing by architects. As David Roberts has suggested manifesto writing in architecture can be understood “as relational and reflexive acts [which] correspond to approaches of ethical deliberation and imaginative identification.” The manifesto in architecture is a way of working between the existing context, and a possible future. Yet as Roberts also articulates, the “manifesto is a reminder of the privilege of who has been able to speak in spheres of public exchange and who has been excluded,” because they have not been able to speak on the public domain. He points to a survey of 110 architectural declarations from around the world, which included only 5 from the Global South. In Pavita’s writing, we see a deliberation on what it means to be a Black woman in architecture. She borrows the form of this manifesto from her work in student activism outside of the department, deliberately unsettling and actively politicizing how architectural education is understood. In particular, Pavita questions the potential of language and ways of writing for how we might expand architecture to consider the Black subject. She suggests as part of her objectives, “to produce writing that can be read and felt as space, the development of a common language for what is written and what is spatial is useful for this objective.” Although unreferenced, Pavita is pointing to a longer debate
around the power and potential of language. As Hortense Spiller articulates, our language and grammar are an inherited form of “capture” that enables the violence of anti-blackness. While Spiller’s work is framed around the afterlife of slavery in the United States, the implications are wide-reaching. In a different context, this argument is extended by Kathryn Yusoff in her articulation of the deeply embedded anti-blackness and coloniality of geology as a discipline and the language it employs. Drawing on these theorists, the absence of black bodies in architectural curricular, for example, is not incidental but an inherent part of the coloniality of inherited western knowledge systems, and their continued implementation. This manifesto is one example of bringing these questions to the seminar room, as a central and starting point of conversation.

A second example from the seminar room is the manifesto by Azraa Gabru, seen in Figure 3. Gabru offers a statement on questions of gender and safety in Johannesburg. Unlike Pavita’s, Gabru borrows certain linguistic tactics from more established architectural manifestos. There is an indirect reference here to Le Corbusier’s Toward an Architecture in the syntax and structure of the initial sentences and a direct reference to Leslie Kanes Weisman’s “Women’s Environmental Rights: A Manifesto.” This is no doubt deliberate, and perhaps, points to
01/
03
Johannesburg, 2019
We are at risk.
Our city is in a state of flux.
We are constantly under attack.
We have a choice: mitigation or complacency.

02/
03
Argument
We can choose to hide behind our fortresses, our
electric fences and guard dogs...
We can choose to have limited choices in the places
we walk, the places in which we socialise and the
places in which lead our daily lives;
We can choose to become victims in our own spaces.

03/
03
Mitigation
Out of the mess, the uncertain and post-traumatic
we can choose to hack our surroundings, starting with
the scale of the body and venturing out into our
ecosystems, we can transform the risks, the flux and
threats into more favourable odds.
We need to become our own architects.
We must trust in our abilities to exercise
environmental judgement and make our own
decisions about the nature of our ecosystems and
“hustle” accordingly.
Design needs to be sensitive and unobtrusive while
allowing possible passive surveillance.
We need to trace defensive design back to its origins
in the animal kingdom and employ, appropriate
transformations and tactics such as camouflage to
enable safety within our own ecosystem. Just like our
animal counterparts, survival is the ultimate goal.

Figure 3
Manifesto, Architectural History and Theory at the GSA, 2019, Azraa Gabru.

MANIFESTO
"The kinds of spaces we have, don't have, or are
denied access to can empower us or render us powerless. Spaces
can enhance or restrict, nurture or
empower us."
(Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto 1981)
a critical move in terms of citations. Yet, this manifesto makes certain playful and direct moves which ask us to rethink what and how we see the world. The set of drawings alongside the manifesto, clearly articulate the position of a Muslim woman in full niqab, and the seemingly analytical diagrams point to an engagement with the dialectic between what she might see looking out, and how she might be seen. The result is an ambivalent response which questions understandings of safety, gender, scientific analysis and clarity, with a suggestion that the hijab is understood as the construction of a micro-environment and understood as a means of engaging with the urban street. Gabru indicated the missing ends of sentences was deliberate. For the reader, the result is that the text begins to undo itself, and in turn the manifesto, asks questions of authorship, positionality and of how choice operates in the world. Gabru’s manifesto asks us to consider from whose perspective or position we view and construct the center and margin, and through a playful misplacement reveals the recentering of “man.”

These are two examples from one seminar, illustrative of the kinds of questions many other students are interested in and engage with. These weekly assignments and associated seminar discussions provided a space for students to test out and enact positionalities through discussion and dialogue with each other and a seminar tutor. Importantly, these were not reductive engagements based on the static limits of identity politics, but rather expansive engagements with the basis of how we might see the world through the lens of difference, in order to learn how to look differently. Thinking with bell hooks, they ask how choosing the margin as a space of radical openness, might enable us to extend, break open and critique existing canonical frameworks. While the seminars formed one platform and space for speaking within a classroom setting, optional bi-weekly reading groups led by design teaching staff added an additional platform, with an alternative set of material curated by the facilitator. The colloquium in turn, opened these conversations to the wider public, which included students and staff from neighboring architectural schools.

The final platform for the course was created and curated by the students themselves, through the design and publication of a zine. Figure 4 is the base mapping which was later reworked and rescaled in order to produce the zine that was distributed at the end of year exhibition. This mapping was produced by seven students, namely Azraa Gabru, Jana Cloete, Sarah Harding, Jackson Change, Karabo Moumakwe, Thelma Ndebele, Gloria Pavita and Izak Potgieter, who volunteered to curate the work of the remainder of the cohort. The mapping is an engagement with the wider work produced by all 48 students in the Honors year. This mapping is therefore both a collective product, curated and produced by indexing key concerns across the year in the work of students. In producing an atlas of student work over the course of 2019, the zine itself starts to question the boundary between that deemed
