

# Nonsense, Play, and Liminality: Putting Postintentionality in Dialogue With De/colonizing Ontoepistemologies

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## Abstract

In this article, I put postintentionality in dialogue with de/colonizing ontoepistemologies to identify where these perspectives converge and diverge. Informed by Vagle's notion that a particular idea may have *virtue* in one discipline while considered a *given* in another, I explore the possibilities of hybridized, interdisciplinary work that crosses various borders. By placing these fluid disciplinary discourses in dialogue, I identify a shift in my thinking that situates nonsense and play as de/colonial moves by highlighting the subversive and lasting effects of a children's text written in India during British rule. Certain poststructural ideas have become so well established in my discipline (and others) that they have become a *given*, which has prompted me to immerse myself in exploring the role of nonsense and play in de/coloniality.

## Keywords

nonsense, play, liminality, Hijibijbij, de/colonizing, postintentionality

While reflecting on a discussion with a colleague, Vagle asked himself, "Why is intentionality a virtue in phenomenology and a given elsewhere? And if this is the case, then how do phenomenologists make a convincing case regarding the value of making a 'given' a 'virtue'?" (Freeman & Vagle, 2013, p. 728). As a de/colonizing, interdisciplinary scholar, I often find this inconsistency, in value, in several disciplinary spaces in which I work. In one space, a concept is considered provocative, even radical. In another, the same concept is a given that has informed its discourse for decades.

Such variation can be mitigated by more interdisciplinary work, as Vagle (2015) and colleagues have done (Vagle & Hofsess, 2015), by placing traditional, humanist understandings of phenomenology in dialogue with poststructural sensibilities. In this article, I put postintentionality in dialogue with some de/colonizing concepts to see what might be produced. In doing so, I share a recent shift in my thinking about de/coloniality and describe the project this shift has produced.

## Framing and Being Framed

As a methodologist identifying with material and discursive conditions of a transnational Global South, my qualitative approach is informed by de/colonizing ontoepistemologies. As explained elsewhere (Bhattacharya, 2009, 2016, 2017), I write *de/colonizing* with a slash to retain the permanent sense of movement and entanglement between colonizing

oppression and decolonizing desires. One shuttles between resistance/accommodation to colonizing forces and imagination of a utopian future devoid of such forces.

Such notions of entanglement, movement, and occupation of middle spaces resonate with Vagle's (2015) arrival at postintentionality from traditional understanding of intentionality. Vagle explains that intentionality is conceptualized as "a way of *finding-oneself-in* relation to the world (Heidegger, 1953/1996), *bursting forth toward* the world (Sartre, 1939/2002), and *being connected through intentional meaning threads* (Merleau-Ponty, 1947/1964)" (Freeman & Vagle, 2013, p. 729). Furthermore, phenomenological researchers "make the intentional relation under investigation the *unit of analysis* in phenomenological research" (Freeman & Vagle, 2013, p. 729).

Postintentionality, a term coined by Vagle (2015), is a decentered, messy reconceptualization of intentionality, which extends and bridges this understanding with Deleuzoguattarian concepts of *lines of flight* to "loosen up some phenomenological ideas" (Vagle, 2015, p. 600). Vagle demonstrates this intersection between traditional

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understanding and Deleuzoguattarian concepts with an amorphous figuration containing lines and shapes:

the lines can be read as flexible and malleable, and although not visible here, permeable. The points of overlap (gray) are multiple and more temporary. If the image were set in motion, the malleable lines would move and shift, as would the points of overlap. (in Freeman & Vagle, 2013, p. 730)

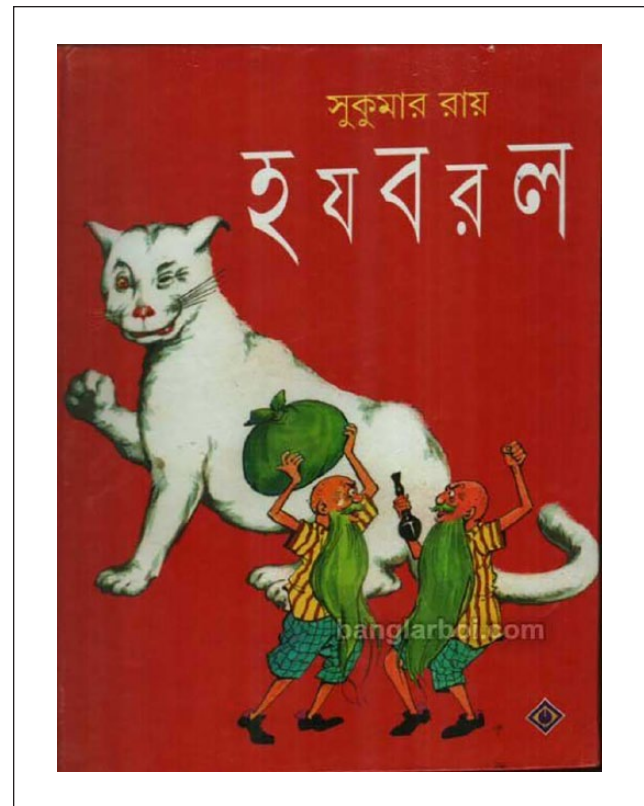
If we understand postintentionality as not just *intentional meaning threads* through which we relate with the world, but as an entangled, messy, fluid, and permanently deferred concept, then tracing the threads' *lines of flight* will be equally messy, producing "a leak or flow toward a new connection" (Vagle, 2015, p. 607).

This postintentional framing of phenomenology produces a *loosening* (Vagle & Hofsess, 2015) of the restrictive bordering of lived experience and knowledge, creating unexpected, unanticipated liminal spaces. Hofsess (2013) explains this liminality as an *afterglow* that holds ideas together in tension, as we reflexively complicate our understanding of self and its relation to the world. Thus, "meanings run through relations and are constantly being constructed, deconstructed, blurred, and disrupted. Intentionalities, then, run all over the place, all the time—at times with clarity, but most often in the gnarliness of life" (Vagle & Hofsess, 2015, p. 343). These postintentional moves incorporating meanings in messiness are also present in de/colonizing discourses, but understood as given, as *always already*. In the following section, I place these notions of meaning and postintentionality in dialogue with my recent movements in de/colonizing ontoepistemic and methodological spaces.

## Meanings, Sensemaking, and Nonsensical Methodological Moves

At the start of the 1919 harvest season (Baisakhi<sup>1</sup>) in British-occupied India, thousands of Sikh visitors made a pilgrimage to offer prayers in Jallianwala Bagh, a public garden in Amritsar with a walled exterior and five exits. The visiting villagers were unaware that General Dyer of the British Indian Army, attempting to prevent organized resistance, had banned all assemblies. Dyer ordered Indian soldiers, under his command, to shoot their own people, who were unarmed and unable to escape, as all exits were blocked. Thousands were murdered that day (Tharoor, 2017). Two years later, in 1921, Bangali<sup>2</sup> author Sukumar Ray published a children's book entitled *HaJaBaRaLa* (Figure 1).

The title, comprised of random letters of the Bengali alphabet, created a meaningless word. The closest English equivalent would be *HJBRL*. *HaJaBaRaLa* is a plotless, nonsensical story in which a 10-year-old boy falls asleep,



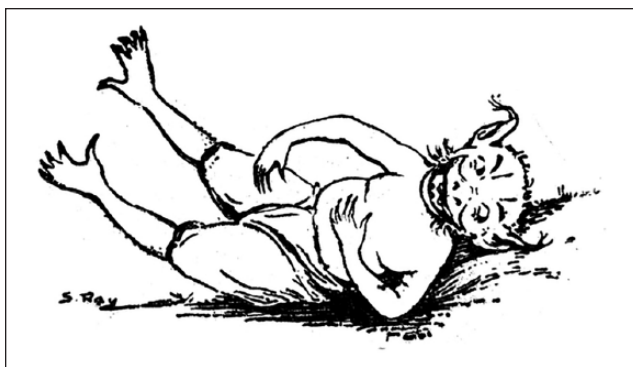
**Figure 1.** *HaJaBaRaLa* book cover with original art by Sukumar Ray.

Source. Adapted from [http://books.shishukishor.org/2016/04/blog-post\\_28.html](http://books.shishukishor.org/2016/04/blog-post_28.html), reprinted using Fair Use Copyright.

and in a lucid dreamspace meets a talking crow who makes illogical math calculations; a cat who shape-shifts from a handkerchief; hybridized, unrecognizable creatures; a goat who is a Bangla grammar expert but offers bizarre grammatical advice; and an owl who is a judge but sleeps through entire court proceedings, among other creatures.

Ray's nonsensical words, phrases, and sentences disrupt how we make sense of language. My favorite character, Hijibijbij, is a hybrid of a monkey, human, owl, and alien, has ghostlike characteristics and lacks identifiable gender, tells nonsensical jokes, and laughs incessantly (Figure 2). I use Hijibij as a framing device in this article and in my current work as possibilities for nonsense, whimsy, and play.

The book, which was untranslatable, became instantly popular among Bangalis, without the British understanding why. Had the British known how subversive *HaJaBaRaLa* would become, they likely would have killed Ray and anyone possessing his book. *HaJaBaRaLa*'s nonsensical nature provided laughter and joy for adults and children in the midst of a traumatic world. Parents read it to their children to preserve a sense of play and whimsy, in stark contrast to the British enforcement of a proper, disciplined, regimented society.



**Figure 2.** Ray's drawing of Hijibij, rolling in laughter at his own nonsensical jokes.

Source. Adapted from <http://shabdakalpadruma.blogspot.com/2011/11/hijibij.html>, reprinted using Fair Use Copyright.

Over generations, Ray's meaningless words and phrases became idiomatically meaningful and joined the Bangla lexicon. For example, "Hijibijbij" came to denote anything illogical or incomprehensible, while conveying a hint of joy and amusement. Understanding the connotation requires shuttling between various (present and remembered) lines of flight. Reading *HaJaBaRaLa* connected Bangali families to ancestral memories long after parents or grandparents passed away, preserving language across generations and distance even as colonization and anglicization minimized or erased heritage languages of the Global South.

Remarkably, *HaJaBaRaLa* makes no recognizable reference to the British or colonization. Ray transcended an oppressor/oppressed binary relationship by placing his characters in a liminal, lucid dreamspace with its own *after-glow*. The narrative simultaneously creates playfulness and pause (Hofsess & Thiel, 2017), offering moments of joy, lightheartedness, and curiosity while pausing trauma. It is as if by engaging with its words, phrases, and sensibilities, Bangalis have secretly passed on de/colonial sensibilities for nearly a century, not always with explicit awareness.

Ray's book is de/colonial in several ways. First, it playfully, joyfully, and effortlessly preserves the heritage language. Second, its whimsy, absurdity, and messiness resists the disciplinary gaze of the rigidly rule-bound British, who sought to "civilize the jungle<sup>3</sup> natives." In the face of ongoing, spirit-draining torture, the story uplifted spirits and nurtured souls, providing the strength to persevere.

Third, Ray's book replaces the absurd normalization of invasion, dehumanization, and murder with an alternate absurd landscape of nonsensical stories that never acknowledge the oppressor. This allows the culture, collectively, to create their own entanglements, meaning threads, and relationships, bursting forth into the dreamspace world with their own liminalities, messiness, and lived material realities. If postintentionality can reside within and beyond

words or texts in an entangled manner, then the engagement with *HaJaBaRaLa* resides within and beyond this world in its own entanglements. Thus, inspired by Vagle (Freeman & Vagle, 2013; Vagle, 2015), I created a figuration<sup>4</sup> informed by Ray's sensibilities, imagining the entanglements between ourselves and our worlds.

A note about the figuration: Creating a fluid, multidimensional understanding visually in a two-dimensional space is challenging. I invite the reader to imagine boundless morphing and movement, each world turning on its axis while moving in unpredictable ways, relating to other worlds in proximity and from a distance. Similarly, the lines between them move in every possible direction.

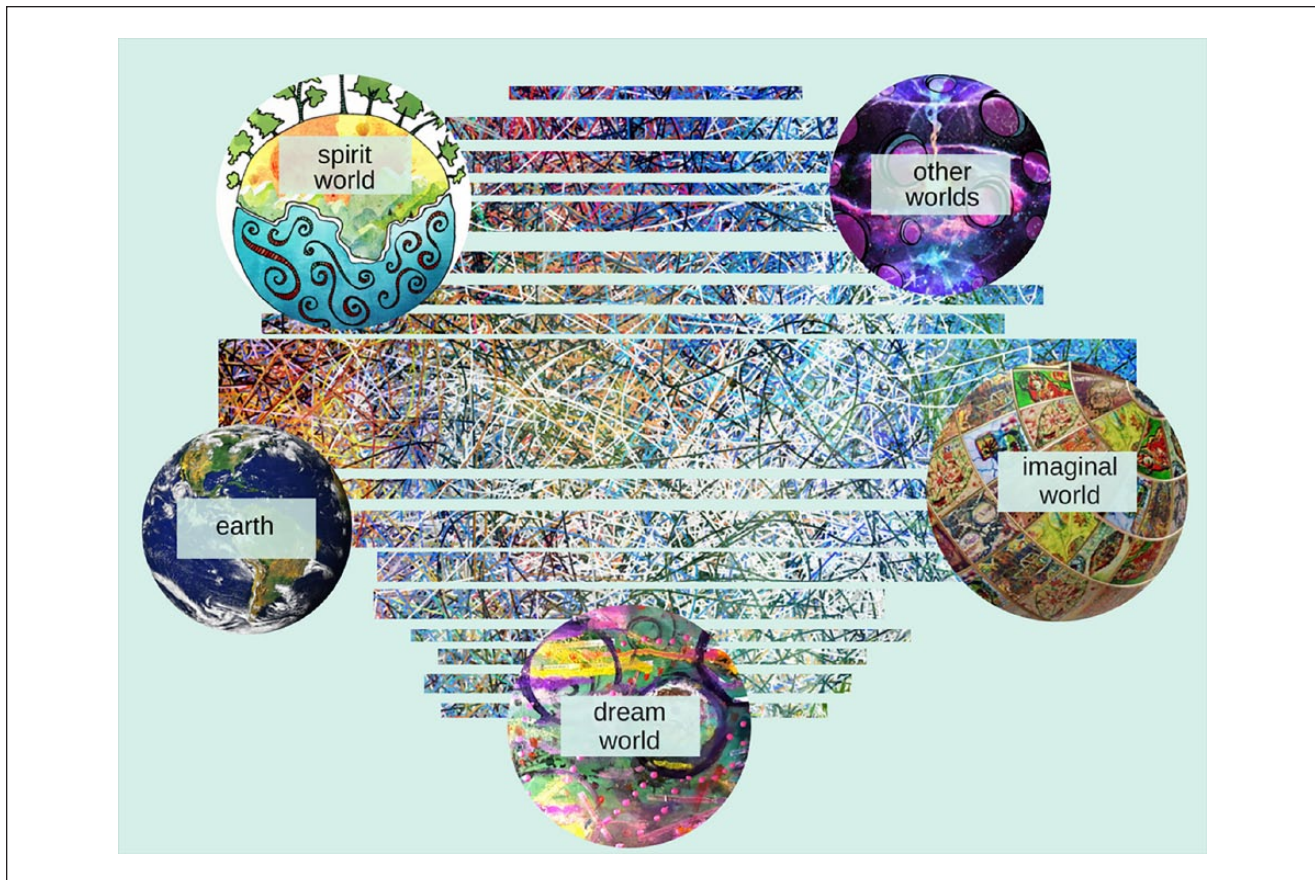
Figure 3 represents my imagination of de/colonial entanglements with multiple worlds, connections, relations, movement, tensions, nonlinearity, and messiness, informed by a sense of play.

The middle is my visual representation of Hijibijbij, signifying nonsense, whimsy, illogic, and play. Within this terrain, disruptive lines and gaps denote liminal spaces. These multiply entangled lines also connect to worlds we have experienced through dreams, imagination, spirituality, and materiality, and to worlds we have not yet experienced or imagined.

Previously, I conceptualized de/colonizing ontoepistemologies as shuttling between pursuing decolonial desires and navigating colonial oppression, with their own messiness, fluidity, and liminality. While I have not completely abandoned that framing, my understanding has expanded to incorporate absurdity as a legitimate form of imagination, freedom, resistance, and flight. Following Vagle and Hofsess (2015), I conceptualize *flight* not as flying, but as aligned with fleeing, eluding, flowing, leaking.

For me, inquiry involves tracing lines of flight, while striving to abandon meaning wherever possible. Counterintuitively, inquiry requires surrendering the will to know (Bhattacharya, 2009) and privileging a playful relationship with nonsense. Shuttling, liminality, and messiness have then become *a given* for me in exploring how de/colonial and other scholars navigate and make sense of multiple social structures (Anzaldúa, 2015; Mohanty, 2004).

What excites me is the possibility of reprieve: from the daily trauma of colonizing forces and the drain on inner resources required to navigate and negotiate that trauma. I write about opening a dialogic space of de/colonizing ontoepistemologies from Global South perspectives in an upcoming special issue of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (QSE) I am editing in Fall 2019. There, I begin to trace the consequences of playfully abandoning meaning and sensemaking in favor of absurdity, whimsy, and flight. Such actions provide me with the wisdom, capacity, and sustenance I need to return to navigating and negotiating colonizing forces.



**Figure 3.** Imagination of entanglements with Hijibij sensibilities.

In *QSE*, I identify six tenets/provocations guiding community-based, de/colonizing work.<sup>5</sup> I then reframe autoethnographic and ethnographic data collected over the last decade exploring transnational Indian students' experiences in U.S. higher education. The reframing puts the sensibilities of the worlds depicted in Figure 3 in dialogue with each other and with the auto/ethnographic data collected. This process involves connection and disruption through the messiness of Hijibijbij. I do not identify precise theoretical moves or map them across some ontoepistemic terrain in any overt way, although they remain embedded in the work. I want the readers to enter the work in any way, from any side, to take any flight through the connective and disruptive fibers of Hijibijbij in the middle.

### Hijibijbij Moves

Putting postintentionality in dialogue with de/colonizing ontoepistemologies illuminates overlapping and divergent spaces of inquiry, demonstrating how *a given* in one disciplinary space may represent a *loosening* in another. Through this juxtaposition, I established that nonsense became a

phenomenon for Bangali people when they related to it through their own messiness, trauma, need for escapism, and desire for sensemaking, especially when they were brutally oppressed. Oppression and its agents normalize a bizarre, unjust, unethical, dehumanizing existence, in which we internalize oppressive structures with only scattered possibilities of fleeting relief.

Nonsense, in contrast, carries no expectation of sense- or meaning-making, rationality, logic, or achieving a philosophical turning point. Nonsense exists for no reason, has no meaning other than that which we ascribe to it. For me, being in nonsense and play generates soul nourishment and sustenance, without any expectation of these ends. For the next few years, I plan to commit to as much nonsense as I can. I will make unlimited Hijibijbij moves without holding myself to any expectation of wisdom, meaning, or sense-making. And I will cultivate curiosity and wonder in these moves to see what happens.

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## Notes

1. Inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa, I do not italicize non-English words, to disrupt anglocentric ways of reading.
2. Bangali refers to a person from West Bengal, India or Bangladesh. I use Bangali, instead of Bengali, because it is how the author would identify himself. *Note:* Bangla is the language spoken by those who identify as Bangali.
3. In this phrase, often used in the British Raj, “jungle” refers to those living in the jungles, who are considered uncivilized and undeserving of human dignity.
4. The figuration incorporates my own paintings, commissioned art from Dr. Sara Scott Shields, a royalty-free image, and an image purchased with standard licensing limit.
5. I recognize that we are condemned to meaning no matter what we try. But we should try anyway, because it is fun.

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## Author Biography

**Kakali Bhattacharya**, is an award winning scholar and mentor. For the past 13 years, she has been unlearning everything she has been taught to de/colonize her mind, body, and spirit. Currently she plays with humor and absurdity to open up imaginal and critically conscious creative spaces to see what else can be learned and understood in ways that she did not before.