Religious and political narratives in the tension between Islam and Christianity: A study of the Wajir region in Northern Kenya

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Negotiating the academy: Black bodies ‘out of place’

How have we come so late and lonely to this place?
(Angelou 2009: 125)

The ‘here’ of academia is also an historical space.
(Simmonds 1999: 60)

What I would describe as ‘critical moments’ of the racialised encounter is that they are often characterised by struggles in naming moments of racialisation as racialised. Part of the struggle concerns ambivalent feelings of knowing and unknowing: second-guessing personal experiences of racial subjectification. Of course, this is made even more challenging given the common accusations of being ‘oversensitive’ and, sometimes, ‘paranoid’ whenever race and racism is named and called out by black bodies. Black academics in postapartheid South Africa and elsewhere struggle with myriad moments of racialisation, including naming these moments for what they are – practices of exclusion from the academy. I would argue that part of the dilemma has to do with the almost invisible nature of informal institutional cultures within departments; these function to reinforce and sustain hegemonic practices, spaces and traditions of the academy that are exclusive to already marginalised bodies. These cultures and communities of practice are so invisible as to render any challenge and resistance almost impossible, precisely because one would first have to undertake the work of making the invisible visible. In such a context, where formal and informal communities of practice characterise how different bodies navigate the field, the question becomes: ‘How do black bodies navigate spaces that, on the surface, seem to be open and yet may be functionally immutable because of this openness?’ Second: ‘How do we engage denigrating moments of representation of our bodies by others – in a context that does not allow us to be individuals, or understood outside of racialised tropes?’ I want to argue that some of the important spaces of such navigation and representation occur at different levels. The informal social networks that exist within different departments can function to reinstate hegemonic ways of being in and doing the academy as well as in the curriculum and the classroom, where our black bodies may be deployed – both by ourselves and by others – in ways that either challenge or insult our dignity.
Locating myself: Insider–outsider complexities

I inhabit my body as a black, lesbian, and gender nonconforming academic at a historically white institution of higher learning – amongst other social descriptors. My early formative years were nurtured in different geographic spaces that I have called home. I have often had to confront the different moments of privilege and exclusion that such a lived experience accords to me – both within and outside of the academy. I have experienced my occupation of social space in the academy in ways that valorise my embodied cultural capital – whether it is my students’ (in all of their diversity) differential interaction with my embodied self in sharp contrast to the embodied presentation of other black colleagues, or white colleagues’ interaction with me as ‘different’ from other blacks, and so on. I have also experienced this occupation of space in ways that evoke what Nirmal Puwar (2001, 2004) refers to as being a body ‘out-of-place’ – whether it is the infantilisation, dismissal, disregard of my competence and capacity as an academic and researcher, or an awareness that decisions and conversations are happening on my behalf or about me but without my permission or invitation to be part thereof. It goes on. This is not a unique story. I have interacted with many black academic staff who narrated similar stories of alienation and dismissal. My multiple and intersectional positioning has meant occupying ambiguous and complex status as both insider and outsider in this space – occupying privileges of visibility and invisibility in ways that attest to the influence of valorised forms of cultural capital in the academy. Shirley Tate (2014) observes that such processes of racialisation do not necessarily mean freedom from broader negative stereotypical constructs that come with being a body out of place (Puwar 2004). Both positive and negative constructs of the visible black body in social space attest to two opposite yet functional racialising practices: the individual as either an exception or a representative of one’s race (Tate 2014). What is interesting about both these constructs is that the larger narrative trope of the black academic as an anomaly remains unchallenged.

But I am also aware of our bodies’ capacity to do other things – to proactively engage the (mis)representations, (mis)recognitions and (in)visibilities that are configured in the maintenance of white habitus in the academy. My hope is that more black academics proactively engage in this project of speaking back, challenging and resisting our co-option into a structuring field that pits black bodies against each other and denigrates and humiliates black presence as fundamentally alien to the academy. At the recent 2015 Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) summit in Durban, I had the pleasure to be part of a robust discussion with Professors Kopano Ratele (University of South Africa, Unisa; Medical Research Council, MRC), Grace Khunou (University of Johannesburg, UJ), Andre Keet (University of the Free State, UFS), Crain Soudien (University of cape Town, UCT; Human Sciences Research Council, HSRC) and Ms Nazeema Mohammed (Higher Education South Africa, HESA) on the meaning and importance of ‘home’ for black academics and students at institutions of higher learning. In the midst of the anguish and desire to
engage the institution as our home, black academics must finally acknowledge and recognize our capacity for, and onus to, create our own home. We must accomplish this via peer mentorship – both within and outside of our home institutions. This can be made possible through research collaborations across institutions amongst black academic staff. Through this, we will be able to produce black counter-knowledges in the academy and the curriculum. We must challenge a curriculum that insults our dignities and presence as black bodies – ours and our students'. We must confront the moments of racialisation (both ours and our students') that attempt to erode our different contributions to, and presence in, the academy.

**My reading of race in this chapter**

I draw on two of Caroline Knowles's (2003) three thematic analyses of race: race all around us, race as mundane, and race as shaping the global order. The notion of race as all around us and as, simultaneously, mundane is crucial to understanding the recalcitrance of racist practice (Hook 2006). By engaging race as ‘lived relation’ (Alcoff 1999), the everyday moments take on a significance that acknowledges the power of the mundane, the ordinariness of racism and exclusionary practice. Four analytic engagements with race as lived experience that inform my current analysis, therefore, include awareness of the following:

**Our identifications and operations in the world are informed through our movement in space as interpellated subjects**

We occupy already socially constructed spaces that further construct us within tropes that pre-exist us. Our bodies take up meaning in these spaces and we navigate our presence in relation to these narrative tropes.

**Racialised subjectivity must therefore be approached through this recognition of intersectionality**

Our interpellation as black bodies is intertwined with other intersecting categories of social formation that make race matter differently for each of us. This means our moments of privilege and exclusion may be both similar and different in form, relative to our different positions and embodiments of subjectivity. Our engagements with relations of power will thus also share differential vantage points of access and resistance. Blackness – as an interpellated identity – therefore, is not universal. We are differentially and similarly dis/empowered. Intersectionality also enables us to identify areas of similarity that allow solidarities across some of the differences. This enables us to see how racism operates to denigrate all black people including national citizens and scholars from across the continent.
Race exits in the everyday mundane interactions and activities we participate in

We produce and engage race in both the structural and inconsequential everyday practices that we are involved in. Part of the recalcitrance of race lies in its capacity to exist as ordinary – as common sense.

Race is about space

As Puwar (2004) contends, spaces are far from neutral fields but, rather, are discursively produced and discursively produce subjects. How we take up space, how certain spaces come to be significant sites for the construction and legitimation of particular identities is interfaced with the mundane character of race. Felly Simmonds (1999), for example, discusses her body’s entry into the classroom space as specifically a black woman’s body. Such a self-locating is an attempt to bring into critical consciousness the role and place of the material body that teaches. Race’s intersection with gender, amongst other categories, is important to consider for the pedagogic space. Elsewhere (Kiguwa 2017, 2018), I document some of the nuances of my navigation of the academy and the classroom as a black queer woman. This centring of my multiple positionalities matter for how I navigate material space, how my body may be read by my students and the implications for how I may authoritatively speak on some subject matters and not others. I say ‘authoritatively’ not as recognition of my role as expert on these matters but, rather, as recognition that this is a status that others may inadvertently confer on me because of their reading of my body.

Theorising bodies out of place: How do black bodies become problems?

Puwar (2004) engages the intricacies of being a body-out-of-place: the sense of feeling alien and being made to feel alien in relational spaces. Puwar’s (2004) contention is that space is far from neutral but exists in already assigned meaning systems that are defined through relations of power. These relations of power and the spaces they create and sustain allow for particular communities of practice, and bodies, to feel either alien or have a sense of belonging in that space. To enter space therefore is to engage the symbolic, discursive and material forms of power. This material–discursive dimension of power is recognised in Fanon’s proclamation that ‘it is not I who make a meaning for myself, but it is the meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me’ (1986: 134). Bodies become in/visible, in/competent, rational/emotional, loud/abrasive and so on, relative to the discursive composition of a place. Some bodies even become more prone to violence than others. Bodies are dismissed as being paranoid, being overly sensitive, relative to the socio-discursive moment of interaction and occupation of space. Reading the body in a given moment requires a reading of the discursive–affective transactions that occur within the field. I want to argue here that Puwar’s (2004) insightful
analysis of the body’s occupation and navigation of social space can benefit from Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron’s (1990) concept of habitus and field – the subject’s entry into structural spaces that are already imbued with different and entrenched meaning codes of interaction and communities of practice that are inclusionary for some bodies and not others.

Bourdieu’s analysis of individual bodies as pre-existent social subjects is useful in thinking about these critical moments of interaction and navigation within institutions and organisations. This is because his emphasis on the socially constitutive nature of subjectivity – what he refers to as ‘socialized subjectivity’ (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990: 56) – configures individual bodies as already social. Through his notion of ‘habitus,’ Bourdieu engages social subjectivity as embodied such that the entirety of practice and agency – via material bodies, dispositions, cognitive thought processes, actions and so on – is seen to be constitutive of the social but also, simultaneously, constituted by the social (Jenkins 1992). Habitus is therefore more than just individual identities, it is the social incorporated into the body such that we come to wear habitus (Kiguwa 2014). It is reflected in our manner of entry into and occupation of space. John Thompson describes this embodied constitution succinctly: ‘The body is literally moulded into certain forms, so that the habitus is reflected in the whole way that one carries oneself in the world, the way that one walks, speaks, acts, eats’ (1984: 54).

The embodied practices of academics bodies within departments and the institution at large become especially significant in relation to this notion of a socialised subjectivity. Simply put, the embodied practices of different academic staff bodies within institutions of higher learning cannot be discussed separately from the racialised and racialising sociohistories that constitute their subjectivities. Whiteness as deeply entrenched hegemonic practice thus becomes significant to how white and black academics navigate the current field and even interact with each other in ways that reinforce or resist these sociohistories. This is reiterated in Melissa Steyn’s work on the role and significance of white ignorance in reinforcing how white bodies are attentive to the privileging the hegemonic status of their whiteness and white habitus to sustaining privilege (McEwen & Steyn 2013; Steyn 2001, 2012). The social origins of bodies matter.

In his study of racial segregation practices, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) makes the argument that ‘white habitus’ as a socialisation process is fundamental to understanding how white bodies justify and maintain practices and attitudes of racial difference and segregation. I would argue, similarly, that it is white habitus that sustains exclusionary practices by white bodies of black staff members within higher learning institutions. Bourdieu’s use of the concept, it is important to note here, does not imply any inherent moral character to subjectivity – whether dominant or marginalised. Rather, the functional character of habitus in structuring and conditioning how subjects engage their world is the fundamental focus. Through socialised habitus, we read our social world, and the different bodies in it, in
particular ways that effectively serve to maintain social formations. Steyn (2012), for example, has shown how epistemologies of ignorance as part of the racial contract enable hegemonic formations of white privilege and social formations that deny continued relations of racialised power in society. Sara Ahmed similarly makes the argument that whiteness in essence sustains itself as ‘a habit,’ one involving a ‘form of orientation’ (2007: 149).

My interest in understanding the lived experiences, the experiential processes of what it means to be a body-out-place, to be constituted as a problem necessitates my engagement with theories of affect and emotion. Such theories are able to encapsulate the emotive content of exclusion within institutions. This has included attempting to engage the more psychosocial aspects of Bourdieu’s habitus as well as intersecting this reading with the phenomenological readings of the body found in Frantz Fanon’s and Du Bois’s WEB (1997) classic analyses of black subjectivity. These two theorists engage both the phenomenological and psychosocial dimensions of lived experience, with particular focus on racialised subjectivity. Du Bois’s starting premise: ‘What does it mean to be constructed as a problem?’ is essential to understanding how habitus conditions and influences racialised spaces in the academy, including the configuration of white habitus within these spaces. For Du Bois, this problematic of blackness may be understood via the analytic lens of the veil – the colour line separating socially constructed raced bodies.

The veil’s conscious emergence occurs through encounter with whiteness (Kiguwa 2014) and resembles Fanon’s moment of insight when he argues: ‘A normal black child who has grown up in the bosom of a normal family will be made abnormal by the slightest contact with the white world’ (1986: 117). Like Du Bois, I am interested in the dual dimensions for engaging the veil – either as embodying states of double consciousness or as second sight (Du Bois 1997; Kiguwa 2014). In this chapter, I am especially interested in the potential of the latter to facilitate self-insights into how black bodies are positioned in the academy as well as how these bodies may begin to speak back to their marginalisation and misrecognition. Du Bois’s early concern with the psychosocial problematic of blackness is revived in Fanon’s (1986) Black Skin White Masks, presenting us with a deeper understanding of the lived materiality of race and racism as experienced by the black subject. Part of Fanon’s contribution to this problematic is to engage the ‘facticity’ of blackness (Hook 2004), that is, blackness as fact, as material body. Fanon’s analysis of the phenomenology of race draws attention to the process of embodiment that is part of racialisation. The body mediates the subject’s movement and navigation in space in a specific moment in time. Through his concept of ‘epidermalisation,’ Fanon cogently argues for a grappling with race via the bodily habitus.
Narrative moments

Moment 1

We are gathered for our regular team meeting. It is a lunch hour and we are all anxious to disperse soon. The course coordinator quickly runs through the agenda. It is all typical issues to be clarified and, for a moment, it looks like we might actually leave early. He gets to the last item on the agenda: conference attendance. This is somewhat out of step with what typically gets discussed in these meetings. Nonetheless, we wait for some clarity. It comes. He has been accepted for and hopes to present at a conference soon that would obviously mean a leave of absence for a few days. We are still puzzled. Conference attendance is standard fare in the department and should not ordinarily present as a problem. But it would seem there is a problem: his research leave request has been denied by the head of department (HoD) – unless he successfully finds a replacement staff to conduct his coordination duties for the time that he is away. Moreover, he is to motivate that his absence will not adversely affect members of his team. This is an unusual stipulation and the first that most of us have heard of it. He asks for a volunteer from the team to stand in for him as coordinator during this time. But this is an impossible request. However much we may sympathise, we are all of us inundated with our own administrative and teaching tasks. Instead, we offer suggestions for what he may say in his response to the HoD’s request. The meeting is adjourned. I never did follow up on the outcome of this surreal situation, although I presume he was able to attend the conference in the end.

Moment 2

It is that time of the academic semester – examination reporting and meetings. As exams coordinator at the time, I am frantic. Cajoling and sometimes laying down ultimatums with one’s peers is never an easy or pleasant task. I have just had such a conversation with a colleague on submission of her year-level report as course coordinator, which is several days late. Later in the day I bump into my beaming colleague and HoD, making their way from the balcony – this is where smoke breaks tend to happen. She gleefully informs me that her vacation leave request has been approved by the HoD, and she will be absent for a week. I ask about her report. She informs me that her report will only be submitted upon her return.

How do I read these two moments? Phrased differently: Is it possible to read these two moments without insertion of a race narrative? Without an understanding of who the players are, that is, their raced bodies? Does my reading change when I recognise the different raced bodies interacting in these moments? In both
accounts, two course coordinators (one black man and one white woman) are presented with different codes of conduct, different extensions of collegiality and recognition of dignity by a white man (the HoD). In both the accounts, two black bodies are dismissed. In the second account, two white bodies are engaged in an interaction characterised by mutual recognition and legitimation of their presence in the institution. In the second account, an informal space – the balcony – becomes the site for reinforcing and maintaining whiteness as hegemonic practice. These normalised, everyday, interactions in spaces that sustain exclusion are especially functional in making the hegemonic character of whiteness invisible.

These spaces are especially functional in creating an illusion of openness – in a very literal sense given that it occurs in full view of everyone in the field – and yet effectively sustaining a closed network of who is allowed in and how decisions are made. It may be argued that both these white colleagues did not intend to produce feelings of alienation or even be exclusionary and discriminatory in their interactions. This is irrelevant. For, the state of ‘not seeing how one’s racial, class and other positioning is interwoven with differential points of access to power is precisely what constitutes privileged subjectivities in networks of power’ (Kiguwa 2014: 158). Writing on the notion of intention in engaging practices of misogyny or racism, Eusebius McKaiser (2015) notes that the emphasis on intent or evidence seeks to dismiss the experiences of sexism, gender violence and racism that bodies on the receiving end undergo almost daily. Being attentive to the habitual practice of whiteness allows us to interrogate the informal, mundane institutional practices that provide the backdrop to white hegemony within these spaces.

**Moment 3**

It is the start of the teaching semester. The usual bustle and mad rush to finalise courses and teaching material is evident everywhere. My colleagues are caught up in the chaos, working to submit their draft materials to me for review as the course coordinator. I receive a text from my colleague with draft ideas of what she hopes the course reader will look like. It is a topic on teenage sexuality, with particular focus on teen pregnancy. My epistemological lens as critical social psychologist causes me some discomfort with the dominant discursive trope of framing teenage sexuality, and pregnancy for that matter, as ‘problems.’ But this is not a conversation I want to get into. We move on. The next ping on my phone offers me some sample images that are meant to accompany the overall framing of the course and topic: black bare-breasted women. Some men feature too. Black male bodies – also bare skins from the neck down to the waist – from another time. Images bearing strong similarity to what I can only equate to those old colonial imageries of black bodies we are, most of us, familiar with. These bodies are lined up, silent yet loud in their misrepresentation, appropriation and denigration by the photographer and the colonial system that reinforced...
that photographer’s representation. What is this image doing here, on this cover? Why these naked black female and male bodies? I am stunned, unsure of what my next actions will be. And, because this is not only my colleague but my friend, I do something that I have, as a matter of principle, refrained from doing more generally – I decide to educate my friend on racism and humanity of the black body. I explain why the images are offensive. I explain the sociopolitical and colonial history that informs the depiction of these images. I explain the gender, race and class politics in the depiction and equation of black women’s bodies as naturalised problem sites. I explain the problem with the representation of black bodies in general on this cover page. It was not a once-off explanation. This is because I, simultaneously, have to speak back to my friend’s responses expressing her outrage and shock that she is being called racist and her disappointment in my personal attack. She ‘explains’ to me what the meaning and intention behind the images ‘actually’ represent. And, still, I explain. Our conversation carries on for a long while. In the end, she gets it. She genuinely gets it. Not only does she acknowledge her dismissal of my feelings but she also understands how she has been complicit in reproducing the same deeply racist and racialising and gendered representations that she is hoping to challenge in the course. We find closure. I switch off my phone. I am tired.

Writing and reflecting on this moment recalls to mind my emotional state as I went about my other duties after that telephonic exchange. I do not know what word describes that heightened state of emotion and the simultaneous feeling of being bone-tired. But that was my frame of mind and soul in the immediate aftermath. I could very easily describe my heightened emotions as anger – but an anger I did not know what to do with. I know now that we are most of us more amenable to tolerating, excusing and reeducating the racial faux pas of our intimate relationships. When we are caught off guard by those we trust, we may experience anger but are reluctant to direct it at the offending source. And so, we do not acknowledge that we have been hurt, that we are reeling with pain from a trusted and sometimes beloved body. I can name my emotion as anger now. I can also name my state of being tired. Explaining race and racism is tiring work. The work of reminding and explaining our humanity to others, and racism’s effects on our bodies is bone-tiring work. It is also distracting. Toni Morrison has eloquently argued:

The very serious function of racism…is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing. (1975, n.p.)
Morrison’s words remind us that racism and racialising practices become even more functional and effective when we abandon the real work of anti-racist activism in favour of changing the mindsets as part of that activism. I have struggled with the latter strategy for a long time. I think many black academic staff struggle with this. Entering and participating in spaces not constructed with our bodies in mind often means that we attempt some form of justification for our presence. And so we engage in self-surveillance practices that cause us further anxiety and distract us from the real work of getting on with our development in both professional and personal capacities.

**Moment 4**

It is the height of the student protests on my campus. Armed, private security personnel have become the order of the day. On this day, there is some semblance of quiet and calm. There is almost no presence on campus as I walk from the Graduate Centre to my office. It is late evening and already quite dark. I walk briskly as I am anxious to leave the campus – the silence is eerie. I walk past a group of armed security also making their home, it would seem, to be replaced by the evening shift – or perhaps they are the evening shift come to resume their duties. One of them looks me over and asks where I am headed. I give him the name of my building. As invariably happens, a look of surprise washes over his face. I am used to this look. That moment I speak and my, often androgynous, body is only then recognised as ‘female.’ It is soon replaced with a direct question: ‘Are you a woman?’ and something of a sneer. I ignore this and carry on walking. As I near my destination, I think it prudent to turn back my head and measure the distance between us. I notice that while his peers have carried on walking he has slowly lagged behind. We acknowledge each other in our mutual turning of heads. It dawns on me that there is no one about. I am suddenly scared to enter my lonely and dark building with these eyes watching. And so, instead, I change direction and make my way to the female residence just nearby. Later that evening, I am home and feeling safe. I reach out to one of my female students and research assistant imploring her to be safe. She tends to work very late hours. I narrate my experience to her. She responds with a gasp and proceeds to inform me of a similar encounter that she had with another security guard at the student bus location. For this reason, she assures me, she no longer stays past work hours but leaves the premises as soon as she is able.

Encounters such as these are familiar for many gender-diverse, nonconforming and female bodies in institutions of higher learning. Recent student protests that highlight the everyday violence that women and gender diverse bodies experience attest to this precarity (Dlakavu 2017; Ndlovu 2017; Xaba 2017). These moments remind us of the challenges in navigating institutional spaces as precarious bodies that are not protected. I have reflected elsewhere on similar encounters of navigating space as a
queer black body (see Bradbury & Kiguwa 2013). These different experiences remain charged within affective economies of shame and fear that translate into silences for many black queer bodies.

**Moment 5**

December 2014. The month and year of my graduation as doctoral student. It is a very bittersweet moment for me. I am filled with the memories and hope of my late mother. I want to laugh and cry at once. The ceremony comes and goes in a blur. Later that evening I tune into social media. My mentor and intellectual crush, Pumla Gqola, has uploaded pictures of me on the stage with a short commentary that conveys her well-wishes and pride. I smile. Later that evening I receive an email from another intellectual crush, the late Elaine Salo. She does not know me but she reaches out. She has seen the uploaded pictures. She tells me of her pride on hearing about my achievement. Her words are etched in my memory: ‘Another black woman graduate.’ I am struck by her choice of those words. It is also the day that I form a connection with a soon-to-be intellectual crush, Danai Mupotsa – we shared the same stage that momentous day.

I recall these moments and many like them because they return me to hope. Amidst the tears and anger and frustration there are possibilities of hope and joy. Our capacity for engaging mentorship and feminist bonds that sustain us – even if it is just in the practice of reading each other’s works or reaching out to each other. So how do we engage these tumultuous spaces and pedagogies we are a part of? Throughout my academic journey – as student and my current role as member of faculty – I have had an ambiguous relationship with feminism. This ambiguity has been reflective of my questioning and search for an anchor – both for how I navigate the academy as well as society at large. In the end, it is the struggle toward social justice and a fight against social and institutional injustice that centre me in my current location as a black feminist. My immersion in critical social psychological work on race and racism has influenced my current thinking of racism as intertwined with affective economies. These affective economies sustain racist beliefs and practice, rendering them intractable. Expending energy on changing beliefs is inevitably futile, for indeed, ‘there will always be one more thing.’ Building a body of work on black and gendered scholarship committed to building alternative knowledges remains the goal. Working toward the creation of pedagogic and structural spaces that do not violate black women’s and gender-diverse bodies is fundamental. In my classroom, the possibilities for working with technologies and embodiments of affect have been especially useful for me. Actively engaging with structural policies and institutional practice, such as sitting on sexual harassment cases, student readmissions committees and so on, is also another avenue through which I seek to contribute to this alternate reality. It remains important that we hold spaces for each other – if we are to realise the possibilities of home that my colleagues imagined – as black female academics.
Through formal and informal mentorships, shared social spaces, these female-friendly spaces have sustained me but also help me to challenge my own blind spots. I consciously prescribe alternate reading materials that will challenge students to resist dominant and narrow worldviews. This includes the political, conscious act of prescribing marginalised work by black female writers. I think consciously of the examples and stories that I bring to my lectures, what histories are present in our reading of the world.

**Concluding thoughts**

I conclude this reflection piece with an incident between a young, brilliant postgraduate student I supervise and myself. On this occasion, she is in tears, feeling overwhelmed by what she perceives to be her inadequacy to succeed in academia. I try to assure her that her work has, in fact, been exemplary of the kind of innovative and creative questioning that is the mark of a critical scholar. She tearfully tells me it is not enough – she somehow seems unable to produce the outputs she has seen modelled. I ask for clarification. She runs through a series of familiar and unfamiliar names, including myself as her supervisor. This conversation has stayed with me. It has impressed on me, more than anything, the importance of telling our stories as black academics. Our stories of success – however we define it for ourselves – but more importantly, our stories of struggle and failure. It brings me no joy that a promising young black woman feels paralysed by what she wrongly perceives as black female exceptionalism. We must take on the responsibility and task of showing our journeys to the new generation of young black academics. We must do the work of unsettling false notions of black female excellence and exceptionalism. We must do the work of true mentorship. I started this chapter with one of my favourite Maya Angelou quotes. My sense of it varies at every reading. For this moment, I will read it as the hope that we will arrive, someday, at a place that is not lonely for us – that does not leave us behind. That does not leave us at a loss for how we remind others and ourselves of our humanity. This is what home would mean to me. To get to this place, however, requires that we undertake the difficult and messy work of ‘how?’

**Acknowledgements**

Reflecting on journeys – past and present – fills me with deep appreciation for the shared and safe spaces provided by Jill Bradbury, Hugo Canham, Ronelle Carolissen, Norman Duncan, Zimitri Erasmus, Derek Hook, Grace Khunou, Malose Langa, Antonio Lentoor, Andile Mthombeni, Mzikazi Nduna, Puleng Segalo, Garth Stevens and the Witsie research team. The Subsequent Feminists, Hlengiwe Ndlouv, Emma Monama, Evelyn Hove, Mercy Mupavayenda, Tsakane Mahlaule, Shibu Motimele and the Woman Warrior who recognised the need for this space, Lindiwe Makhungu. I thank you all.
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