The transformation narrative in South Africa

South Africa, akin to many countries that have a long history of racial exclusion of the black population, has not evaded engaging the controversial race phenomenon since 1994, the year that marked the end of apartheid and the beginning of democracy. The need for institutional transformation constituted the main agenda to deracialise all sectors of the newly formed democracy through integration processes. It is against this backdrop that South Africa explicitly condemned segregation and embarked on numerous anti-racist projects guided by the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) and the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) among other legislative frameworks. Efforts towards institutional transformation of South Africa’s higher education landscape, for instance, witnessed the merging of some universities (Durrheim et al. 2004; Wolpe 1995) in order to destabilise deep-seated racial structures and simultaneously redress the ugly past of exclusion. That notwithstanding, dichotomised ideologies from an apartheid past continue to shape many institutional contours across the country. Black South Africans’ diverse experiences of exclusion in the academy (captured in this volume) testify to how such a ruinous past to this day produces and reinforces polarised spaces many occupy in the higher education institutions, among other oppressive corners of this democracy.

10 years into flag democracy.\(^1\) Furthermore, the point of the book in Magubane’s words, ‘was to contextualize and historicize these experiences – to show that they were not about isolated individuals but about deep systemic problems and to root those problems in history\(^2\).’ To be precise, *Hear Our Voices* profiles the stories of black academics who experienced the University of Cape Town (UCT) – either as lecturers or students – in very silencing and marginalising ways, and how they made sense of the transformation discourse over the years. Thus, *Hear Our Voices* for Magubane was an attempt ‘to get those experiences into the open’ through subjective narratives that contested existing transformation discourses and lack thereof.\(^3\)

The general absence of black African (female) academics’ biographies observed above speaks to the question: ‘Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in the sites and forms which these voices are uttered?’ (Ogundipe-Leslie 2001: 139). Early works of African feminist scholars attribute the absence of black women’s voices to how conventional research often trivialises such data (Magubane 2004), arguing that it is ‘too personal, too specific and atypical’ (Mbilinyi 1992: 66 citing Ngaiza & Koda 1991). These feminist scholars locate women’s experiences within a historical analysis of the scientific project of the academy – a project that has been historically experienced by women as gendered and marginalising (Batisai 2013: 61). For instance, Marjorie Mbilinyi (1992) draws on the seminal work of Sandra Harding (1987) to underscore how traditional epistemologies have marginalised women from research circles. This is evident in how conventional research designs constructed science as men’s domain where women were neither visible nor audible as ‘knowers or agents of knowledge’ and the image of ‘the researcher’ was exclusively ‘male’ (Mbilinyi 1992: 32). In an attempt to fill the scholarly gap above, I adopt theoretical and methodological standpoints that are heavily informed by my feminist identity. This is an identity which – over and above respecting one’s story or those aspects of life that are usually pushed to the peripheries of research – acknowledges the intellectual contributions subjective experiences (such as African women’s biographies) make to an existing body of literature.

This chapter, through a biographical approach, theorises and analyses the extent to which black academics have been affected by institutional reform or lack thereof post-1994. Interrogating the meaning of being black in the academy, and what subjective interpretations of such tell us about transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa, is core to my analyses. The chapter draws on narratives and discourses deeply entrenched in personal experiences and observations made in the academy in order to create platforms conducive for desegregating and ultimately transforming the higher education landscape in South Africa. The process of capturing both moments of belonging and the politics of exclusion in the academy compels me to embark on a self-reflective exercise through which I remap my journey at UCT – a place where I cumulatively spent more than half a decade both as a senior student and emerging or early career scholar.
Throughout the chapter, I am at work to insert my personal experiences in the academy – exciting and unsettling in several ways – into a black and foreign narrative that represents transformation-related achievements and challenges that the higher education landscape has to grapple with. Taking inspiration from Pumla Gqola (2002: 11), this biography of a black African female academic is not about ‘writing back to white feminists, to colonialism, to patriarchy, to apartheid…but [it is] about refashioning the world in exciting ways where the difference within is not a threat but a source of energy.’ When ‘stitched’ together, the intersecting subjective identities alluded to above do not merely constitute my biography but they are profound lenses for exploring multiple systems of exclusion in the academy, through which transformation could be imagined, understood and eventually realised. The subsequent section unpacks the category ‘black and foreign’ and grapples with the question why the category matters in understanding how exclusion is experienced in South Africa’s academy.

The ‘black and foreign’ category in the academy

When I graduated with my PhD in 2013 at UCT, exactly a year before South Africa celebrated 20 years of democracy, we were only two black African graduates – from Zimbabwe and Ghana. Reflecting on these statistics, I asked myself: ‘What happened to my black South African counterparts?’ and it immediately dawned on me that my experience as an ‘other’ in the academy should shape the long journey of transforming higher education institutions in South Africa. Writing from a biographical standpoint, I map my intersecting identities – predominantly as a black and foreign academic – core to personal trajectories of how I have navigated South Africa’s higher education landscape. Profiling the meaning of being an other within the academy, this chapter illuminates how moments of belonging and the politics of exclusion have been played out in academic environments. My intellect in this biography revisits UCT to analyse how polarised and hierarchised the process of becoming and being an academic has been for me, among other black early career scholars.

Adopting a flashback approach, I deploy my ‘fairly recent’ exit from UCT as an inroad into reflections on how I experienced this higher education institution over the years. The self-reflective exercise unpacks my race, gender, nationality, class and socioeconomic identities in ways that illuminate how transformation contours can be mapped through intersecting subjective positionalities. This standpoint is inspired by Patricia Hills Collins (1998) whose notion of intersectionality serves as a theoretical and methodological tool for unpacking an individual’s multiple identities, such as race, gender and class, which often double as categories of inequality. Thus, a focus on my intersecting identities allows the chapter to capture the ideological and structural contours that I had to navigate as I walked my entire journey at UCT.
As I capture ideological and structural contours that I had to navigate, I point out how I learnt not to passively embrace being different in the academy by subverting constraints and capitalising on opportunities subtly presented to me, and those that I looked for. Self-reflective narratives in this biography heavily draw on the meaning I assign to my tutorial/seminar room encounters, ‘employment offers,’ institutional culture, and to seemingly simple social relational interactional practices that emerged as I roamed the main avenue on campus, among other complex contours. Embedded in this biographical piece is a powerful theoretical and methodological tool for interpreting the realities of being the other, and for simultaneously engaging the academy as a site of constant struggle. Beyond illuminating both moments of belonging and pockets of racial discrimination within the academy, my black and foreign identities stimulate debates central to transforming higher education institutions of the 20-plus-year-old democracy.

Fully alert to the binding clause that ‘black academics from Africa and beyond do not count with respect to employment equity quotas,’ stipulated in the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), and without undermining the inclusive construction of black (black Africans, coloured and Indian academics) in this book, I argue that the experiences of black foreign academics are noteworthy. One might ask why the category ‘black and foreign’ and its realities matters in South Africa’s higher education transformation narrative. The category matters because when the definition of ‘black’ in higher education transformation discourses is restricted to black South African academics, it misses the struggles and testimonies of black foreign academics. Writing from experience and observation, I strongly believe that stories of how black foreign academics navigate the higher education landscape in South Africa are an inroad into insightful discussions about transformation at large. My controversial positionality opens a can of worms that allows those interested in questions of belonging and the politics of exclusion to engage in progressive conversations about transforming South Africa’s higher education landscape.

In essence, my argument is that non-South African black academics’ experiences somewhat speak to the politics of exclusion that black South African academics battle with on campus. Thus, the subsequent section in this biographical analysis gives the reader a sense of the realities that black and foreign academics grapple with as they join South Africa’s higher education landscape. Overall, I infer that people constituting this category deal with a dual marginality that stems from a dual identity (black and foreign); and I believe the way they deal with such marginality is core to the transformation discourse in South Africa. Why? Because deeply embedded in this dual marginality is a theorisation that profoundly reflects on how black and foreign academics navigate their paths as early career scholars mirror the experiences of black South Africans. These reflections equally expose the generic politics of being black (irrespective of nationality) in South Africa’s academy in ways that simultaneously contour the road that the higher education landscape should walk in the name of transformation. The ensuing pages draw on my trajectories
as a black and foreign academic at UCT to illuminate how multiple contours of domination within the academy are experienced and articulated through the intersections of nationality, race, gender and class.

**Trajectories of a black and foreign academic**

Questions of belonging and the politics surrounding the exclusion of black academics in South Africa’s higher education institutions are lenses through which I reflect on how my academic career profile has evolved over the years. A mapping of my trajectory in the academy takes me back to August 2003 when I was appointed as a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Sociology at the University of Zimbabwe, to June 2005 when I joined Great Zimbabwe University as a relatively young lecturer in sociology, and to August 2011 when I arguably ‘downgraded’ to the tutorial room at UCT – a strategy that I adopted almost two years into my PhD journey to keep myself in the teaching loop.

It is worth specifying that prior to migrating beyond the borders of my nation, I had lectured for three years at Great Zimbabwe University where I (together with fellow academics) imparted knowledge and produced an excellent generation of students who later registered as honours, Master’s and PhD candidates at the University of the Witwatersrand, University of the Western Cape and the University of KwaZulu-Natal among others. Though I knew very well that I did not get into UCT as a lecturer, I had high aspirations based on the contribution I was making to the higher education landscape in South Africa. My full-time PhD candidature did not let the academic spirit in me die and I found myself capitalising on junior academic opportunities presented to me by UCT’s Sociology and Gender Studies (then African Gender Institute) departments through tutorship contracts. Thus, the notion of belonging, for someone who negotiated entrée into academic circles at UCT through engagement in tutorials, was about how I made sense of tutorship contracts and subsequently navigated tutorial spaces.

Out of these junior academic contacts and levels of interaction emerged deep politics of exclusion that entailed grappling with questions from students in my several tutorial groups over the years. As students complimented my teaching philosophy, they simultaneously asked questions that I could not and did not respond to partly because the student population neither constituted the right audience nor created a conducive platform for me to pour my heavy heart out, given that I did not want to come across to them as an ungrateful mad black African female academic. They remarked: ‘You explain theoretical aspects very well and you make use of relevant examples...you are such a good academic...why are you a tutor...why don’t you take us for lectures?’ While these questions did not bother me that much in the early years of my PhD journey, those that emerged after completing my PhD did. When some of my former students who were now postgraduates (honours) noticed that I was still a tutor, they raised a series of concerns and posed questions that sort of
problematised my entire UCT journey. Making specific reference to my previous academic contribution and relevance to UCT as well as my future in this space, some of my former students asked:

When we were undergrad we understood that you were still working towards your PhD...you tutored us...and you did that very well...but now you are a doctor...why are they not giving you a chance to either lecture us or convene seminars? Even if it means for two weeks as a guest lecturer...just to cover some of the areas you are very good at?

Why don't you apply for a lectureship post? You were very instrumental throughout our undergraduate studies and we truly hope we won't lose you in the process. If you leave us for Wits or UJ...eish...that will be a great loss. UCT should do something to retain passionate and knowledgeable people like you...you know?

(A series of complimentary questions asked by my former students between 2013 and 2014)

Beyond appreciating the impact my teaching philosophy made on their academics, the series of complimentary questions above hints at how committed I was to my work. This level of commitment is also evident in the fact that tutoring meant that I had to work with a new cohort of tutors each year, some of whom I had tutored in their undergraduate studies. This juniorisation was largely because my applications to upgrade to a lecturer were constantly met with a negative response; I was told that the posts were meant to attract or attracted ‘senior’ people. Neither working with very junior people nor the fact that a committed person with an excellent work ethic and consistent, remarkable student evaluation reports was never given a chance to teach beyond the tutorial room discouraged me. Instead, the series of questions from students became a source of strength and power to soldier on for I was certain about two things: I wanted to do my PhD, finish it in record time, and change my academic story and profile. I therefore remained focused and kept my eyes on the prize in spite of the challenges. Balancing my demanding and often conflicting academic responsibilities and identities – as a resident, full-time foreign PhD candidate and tutor – was a well-calculated means to an end both in the short and long run. Beyond being a way of meeting my existential needs and financial obligations as a self-sponsored PhD candidate,4 I perceived tutorship contracts, salary slips/advises and experience gained at UCT as an inroad into an academic career at any of South Africa’s higher education institutions.

Cleary discernible from my narrative is that I did not view the marginal spaces I occupied at UCT as merely oppressive but as spaces that implicitly allowed me to grow and move in different ways. Growth throughout the PhD journey was about making a deliberate effort not to carry the burden of being black and foreign; and upon completing the PhD, the strategy was about not trying to prove myself within the same UCT environment. Why? Because my survival strategy, alluded to above,
automatically reduced UCT to both a training ground and an inroad into the academy. I therefore exercised my intellectual and emotive agency and explored other academic avenues beyond UCT. The survival strategy worked very well because on 1 August 2014, exactly three years after I downgraded to a tutor, the tutorial room experience from UCT, along with my past as an academic in Zimbabwe, became an inroad into a full-time and permanent academic career as a lecturer in sociology at the University of Johannesburg – and, subsequently, as a senior lecturer with effect from 1 August 2017. In spite of the positive outcomes, the complex realities of my past academic experiences haunt me today. As elaborated below, I am a product of how I experienced moments of belonging and made sense of pockets of exclusion throughout the PhD journey.

Completing my PhD in four years meant chasing external and internal deadlines that respectively took the form of immigration visa regulations, which limited my stay in South Africa and a university clock that never ceased to tick the moment I registered as a resident, full-time PhD candidate. Striking a balance between the demands of my full-time PhD candidature and a very heavy tutorship workload left me with very little time and space to build a publication profile and a sound salary history – prerequisites core to negotiating entry, promotions and salaries in the academy. Today, exclusion for me means working as an early career scholar or emerging academic who has to grapple with baggage from years spent as a self-sponsored foreign PhD candidate who relied on a meagre income generated from involvement in countless tutorials year in, year out. The impact exclusion has on female academics in the United Kingdom somewhat corroborates my experiences. For instance, it has been observed that these female academics tend to focus on underappreciated ‘academic citizen’ roles that do not lead to promotion or pay rises and also take on more administration and ‘caring, supportive and collegiate’ roles than men, acting as a brake on their promotion chances.5

My narrative is that of a black foreigner but the experiences it captures somewhat speak to the realities of black South Africans on campus. The fact that the majority of students involved in junior academic activities (tutoring, for example) at a predominantly white university are black is a powerful lens through which I unpack the politics of transformation at UCT. For me, the preceding point not only exposes the socioeconomic realities of black postgraduate students at UCT but their aspiration to become academics. For instance, my desire to be an academic at UCT was unambiguous but, as alluded to earlier, the only academic space that I knew was the tutorial room, irrespective of enthusiasm, let alone my senior postgraduate status. It is against this background that I pose a self-introspective question, key to transformation:

If my trajectories akin to those of fellow black (South) African budding academics are any indication, then why not nurture and empower this
cohort of aspiring academics in the spirit of ‘growing your own timber’ and transforming the university, and the higher education landscape at large?

Responses to the question above include allowing senior black South African students and their foreign counterparts more space to teach either as guest or assistant lecturers to prepare them for an academic career ahead. As alluded to earlier, a resident, full-time and self-sponsored foreign PhD candidate constantly battles and negotiates with external deadlines (immigration visa regulations that limit time) and internal ones (a university clock that never ceases to tick the moment one registers as a candidate). The latter is not peculiar to black foreign candidates but when combined with the former in the absence of sponsorship, it generates very complex politics of exclusion and notions of not belonging among foreign PhD candidates. For example, black foreign nationals who come to South Africa straight from their respective homelands on a study visa – unlike holders of work or business visas who have the liberty to work and undertake part-time studies with institutions of higher learning – survive on very limited resources. Once in South Africa on a study visa, what a foreign full-time student can do and become in the short run is quite limited. For instance, one is only allowed to work a maximum of 22 hours a week and, given the nature of work that one can do as a student, the earning is very minimal. This reality is not unique or isolated to South Africa because international students in the United Kingdom, among other countries, are subjected to similar study visa restrictions with respect to working hours.

It is however noteworthy that the tuition for PhD studies is fairly reasonable (for those from countries in the Southern African Development Community) such that it attracts a sizeable number of candidates but the cost of living in spaces like Cape Town complicates their overall financial realities. Thus, limited cash flow is one of the structural battles that foreign full-time PhD candidates fight as they endeavour to study or become academics and simultaneously maintain a decent lifestyle in South Africa and still sustain families back home. Striving to complete their doctoral studies against all odds, these senior students exercise agency and convert public spaces on campus into personal comfortable working areas to the extent that spaces like the 24-hour postgraduate computer laboratories, for some, become second or even third homes as they work until sunrise in what was dubbed ‘night shift’ or ‘night duty’ by my academic contemporaries. Yes, they will complete their PhD studies with perfection but one has to admit that doing a PhD with these restrictive structures and unforgiving realities in mind is torture. These complex realities illuminate the need for institutional effort aimed at making the PhD journey less emotionally and financially brutal.

The suggestion above could be achieved through provision of full-time residential funding that would even attract more black students to PhD studies, and have an impact on the annual throughput and the subsequent number of black people who are likely to join the academy post PhD. My suggestions are deeply informed by the
realisation that PhD candidates often earmark the academy and are destined to be academics. Full-time residential funding would ensure that those who are based at the institution on a full-time basis complete their studies without hassling about doing part-time work within and beyond the boundaries of the university so that their tuition and everyday existential realities are met, and universities in the long run will achieve the desired transformation results.

The trajectories shared above not only give the reader a sense of the realities that black and foreign people grapple with as they join South Africa’s higher education landscape. Rather, they lay a solid foundation for reading questions of belonging and exclusion at UCT as experienced and observed by a black and foreign academic.

**Reading questions of belonging and exclusion at UCT**

Writing from experience and observation, I believe that black foreign academics’ stories are bound to further illuminate the urgent need for transformation, equally demonstrated by how those constituting the black South African category experience the academy. For instance, my academic encounters and the meaning I assign to institutional culture and practices that I observed over the years capture seemingly simple structural, ideological and interracial interactional contours that I, akin to black South Africans, navigated at UCT. Dr Max Price (the vice chancellor of UCT), through the RhodesMustFall platform, touched on the complex question: ‘Is UCT racist?’ In response, Price pointed at two extreme ends that depict the nature of racial discrimination that black academics experience at UCT, relative to other universities in South Africa:

Chester: We are at UCT where peeing on black people, beating up coloured ladies…is UCT racist?

Price: There is a racism which is explicit like peeing on black people [Chester: Ja] like insulting them, I think there is very little of that at UCT. On the other end of the continuum there is subliminal racism, racism which is about stereotyping, it’s about body language, it’s about assuming that people who do not speak like you aren’t as intelligent, or aren’t as educated, [Chester: Ja] that sort of racism exists, widely I think.

Chester: So, basically, your answer is, Yes?

Price: Yes, that exists.

Chester: Let me go get my raincoat before I get peed on…I get my way out of here.6

The narrative above speaks to scholarship (Kivilu, Diko & Mmotlane 2010; Kotecha 2006; Moguerane 2007; Pattman 2010; Scott & Letseka 2010; Soudien 2008; Vandeyar 2010; Walker 2005; Wolpe 1995) that illuminates institutional and personal forms of racism within universities and schools in South Africa. Although I did not experience
explicit racism as happened at the University of Free State in 2008 where ‘four white male students made black African employees drink a bottle of beer, run a race, play rugby, kneel and eat what looked like mincemeat which had been urinated upon’ (SAHRC 2012: 14), subtle forms of racism as noted by Price were indeed a reality. As I roamed the main avenue on campus, among other complex contours, I observed over the years that implicit racial divisions at UCT are deeply embedded in how the university population fails to interact between and across racial categories. I noted how the culture of sticking to one’s racial group in public and private spaces limited opportunities for interracial interaction and compromised feelings and experiences of belonging at UCT. Though subtle among academics, this culture was evident in how students’ formal and social interactional spaces on campus were marked by race and class as students from the same backgrounds clustered together.

Fully aware of the fact that crossing relational racial boundaries takes individual effort, I argue that desegregating such spaces at institutional level somewhat instils a sense of belonging in all population groups that feel excluded. My argument further legitimises the need for institutional commitment towards ‘a university that makes black students feel at home, a university that is inclusive’ as alluded to by Price,7 such that formal and informal university spaces emerge as platforms for interactional practices that confront and address the politics of exclusion in ways that inform institutional change. That notwithstanding, both covert and explicit forms of racism suggest that South Africa has a long way to go with respect to transforming the higher education landscape and spaces beyond. Transformation in this regard entails tackling one of the most unsettling and tension-ridden questions around white supremacy and patriarchy – contours within which identity politics (for women, especially) are formed and sustained (hooks 1994: 88).

Furthermore, my tutorial/seminar room engagement for almost half a decade exposed the tensions and polarised experiences of black and white students – often entrenched in discussions that explored the intersections of race, class and gender, among other identifying categories. Black students, on one hand, tackled and blamed the notion of white supremacy for producing and undermining their experiences of belonging on campus, and beyond. White students, on the other hand, noted that they were and are tired of carrying the white burden around. My subjective observation around the existence of polarised experiences among black and white students concurs with empirical findings from UCT where ‘24 black students from seven departments and four faculties participated in a Photovoice project during which they produced photographs and stories representing their experiences at UCT’ (Kessi & Cornell 2015: 1). The study findings demonstrate[d] that, through practices of material and symbolic exclusion, racialising discourses of transformation had a detrimental impact on students, affecting their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and academic performance. (Kessi & Cornell 2015: 1)
Closely related to moments of exclusion experienced by students is the way gender intersects with the major identifying category in question (race), and instils a sense of not belonging among black academics in the higher education landscape. Questions of race and gender are central to the transformation narrative because, as I write this biography, there are very few black South African female professors not only at UCT, but also at other (historically white) universities across the country. Although there are more academically valid sources (Kessi & Cornell 2015; Mabokela 2002; Mabokela & Magubane 2004; Naicker 2013; Rabe & Rugunanan 2012) that can be used to challenge the assumption that racial and gender discrimination has been defeated in South Africa’s institutions of higher education, an excerpt from an eNCA interview that Price had during the RhodesMustFall battle says it all:

Chester: Allegedly, you guys don’t even have one black African female professor, not even one. How do you guys…who is doing your recruiting? Steve Hofmeyr?
Price: So I think what you are referring to is black South African, we actually have three black South African female professors.
Chester: Three? Well done! Oh my God, how many staff do you have?
Price: We have many more black African women professors. But I don’t wanna say that as a problem…it is a huge problem.
Chester: From Africa? How many professors do you have?
Price: About 200.
Chester: 200…oh God I can’t…I can’t breathe…

Correspondingly, white students who were interviewed for Yazeed Kamaldien’s (2014) article in response to Shose Kessi and Josephine Cornell’s (2015) findings, expressed how they feel and experience the lecture room and the general university space. In their response to transformation questions at UCT, Keegan Smith and Daniel Thomas – first-year engineering (white) students – said this respectively:

KS: Most of the lecturers are white. We don’t have a lot of black lecturers.
DT: UCT does need to change. All the people in powerful positions are white so it comes across as a white institution. There should be a more diverse representation of power.

Price admits that the small number of female and male permanent full-time African and coloured professors at UCT mirrors the macro challenge that the higher education landscape in South Africa has to grapple with. Although these gender- and race-based statistics are commonplace, for me they raise profound questions of belonging to the academy and the urgent need for strategies aimed at transforming the landscape across the country. To this end, transformation strategies should not
only attract but endeavour to retain more black academics at UCT and beyond. In the absence of comprehensive transformation strategies, the intersection of race and gender, among other categories, produces hierarchised spaces that black people, especially those gendered as women, have to navigate. One of the key transformation questions that I pose is:

If black academics who are already in the system, and somewhat established, struggle to move up the hierarchy, what more of those who are still at the very bottom of this hierarchy – early career scholars like me?

The question is informed by how previous engagement with promotion questions opened a can of worms at UCT as evidenced by existing tensions around promotion procedures, and how some universities allegedly lower standards to allow upward career mobility for black academics. Nevertheless, the transformation question does not in any way disregard ongoing institutional efforts towards employment equity which as noted by Price include

special programmes to accelerate academic careers. [These...] in the last 10 years [saw] over 600 academics [going] through the Emerging Researchers Programme, which helps kick-start their research with training, supervision and mentorship, and provides research grants without requiring an established track record.

Addressing the racial and gender imbalances at UCT and beyond is very important because, currently, the small number and even absence of black (female) academics in some faculties is felt by black students who, in the process, question whether their opinions or contributions in lectures matter or not. The preceding argument hints at the need for comprehensive transformation strategies cognisant of the contribution of black academics to curriculum development and reform, especially for academic courses that grapple with the complex existential realities specific to the black population in South Africa. Over and above benefiting black academics, such transformation will also benefit black students who, according to ongoing decolonisation and transformation discourses, often feel excluded and fail to participate in meaningful academic discussions in tutorials and lectures. Kamaldien notes that these experiences of exclusion have been attributed to 'the institution’s “whiteness”.' Similar sentiments are also captured by the Department of Higher Education's report of the ministerial committee on transformation and social cohesion and the elimination of discrimination in public higher education institutions (Soudien et al. 2008). It is against this whiteness background that I argue that if the black and foreign PhD candidate is the same person who has the potential to eventually join the academy as a lecturer, whose presence in the lecture room and on campus will somewhat make those from designated groups feel at home, then that candidate equally matters in the transformation narrative.
**Why ‘Rhodes had to fall’ 20-plus years after democracy**

Conversations among the black population and observations that I made throughout my journey point to how subtle racial discrimination produced and sustained inherently polarised experiences and standpoints as well as pockets of exclusion at UCT over the years. Indeed, there were moments when my black academic contemporaries shared their experiences of how both their mere presence at UCT (and South Africa, for non-nationals) and intellectual capacity were challenged and undermined by the white population on campus. However, fear of further victimisation denied them a voice and a platform to air their disgruntlement beyond the corridors and what were considered politically correct interactional spaces on campus. Common among foreign nationals was the ironic discourse around how they had dealt with racism in their respective countries only to come to South Africa and fail to confront the challenge. Although the black population on face value appeared to have reduced a complex challenge to small talk, I was certain that the shelved and unresolved racial injustices were an undercurrent with great potential to irrepressibly explode one day. Beyond my subjectivities, Price commented on why black students only reacted now to the presence of Rhodes’s statue at UCT and acknowledged that:

In 1994 and before that…this [UCT] was a predominantly white university and now that we have more than 60% black students, we need a university that makes them feel at home that is inclusive…and if what they are telling us is that their reaction to Rhodes and the other statues, other names of buildings and other ways the university works make them feel like outsiders…we must address it.12

Price, in an earlier conversation for Kamaldien’s article, acknowledged that:

Black students say white students are better able to deal with white authority. They have an easier affinity with their white professors. The black students say it’s like the white students are talking to their dads. Black students end up not talking or asking questions in class. One black female student said she does not want to ask white students in her class for help. She believes it would perpetuate a stereotype that she’s not good enough to be there.13

I, among other scholars and analysts, would not be wrong if I partly attribute UCT’s RhodesMustFall battle to the long-standing racial imbalances alluded to above. Gqola (2004) – who was a professor of African literature at the University of Witwatersrand at the time of writing the chapter but has since moved to the University of Fort Hare, and who also contributed a chapter in Hear Our Voices (Mabokela & Magubane 2004) – concurs with Price’s narrative. Gqola acknowledges the effect of the demographic shift in student population on campus but quickly draws our attention to the challenge of the new, which is different from the challenges of former times. Gqola, to that effect, speaks to the slow pace of transformation more than two decades after democracy. She infers that
21 years is a long time to make as little headway as we have in universities and the young people in and outside universities are feeling the cost of limited transformation...In 2015, the dream of a transformed university landscape remains elusive. Our hope has been replaced with disillusionment. At universities, there have been colossal failures and miniscule successes over the last 21 years, apart from transforming student numbers. (Gqola 2015)

The falling of Rhodes, in a nutshell, was symbolic because it created the most needed platform through which black students confronted and spoke back to longstanding structures of racial divisions and exclusion at UCT. The fact that black students participated in this protest irrespective of nationality supports my theorisation that the politics of exclusion that black South Africans and black non-South Africans battle with on campus speak to each other. In other words, the colour of one’s skin is the source of racial discrimination that knows no national boundaries and, subsequently, being black on campus becomes a common basis for fighting and toppling a racially divisive system. Hence, the need for an all-encompassing definition of ‘black’ to ensure that mutual experiences of both categories are not left out of the broader transformation narrative in South Africa. On the other hand, I believe that there are inherent tensions between and among the two groups of black Africans that undermine the all-encompassing definition of ‘black’.

Over and above the fact that black foreign academics do not count towards the current imperatives of employment equity (discussed below), the tensions alluded to above largely stem from the dominant discourse about ‘a better black’ who is not only foreign but Zimbabwean. For instance, I have observed how ‘the black Zimbabwean ticket’ sold at the expense of black South African counterparts who have been framed in academic and public discourses as incompetent and lazy. Debates revolved around why black South Africans are outsmarted and outnumbered by foreign nationals, predominantly Zimbabweans, who complete their PhDs in record time and join the academy, among other sectors. Responses to this question, for me, often lack critical depth because they fail to take into account the multiple socioeconomic barriers that the former category of people has to deal with in their journeys of becoming academics. Of particular concern to me is the clearly discernible mismatch between policy – such as the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) and the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997), among other legislative frameworks – and the lived realities of many black South Africans, 20-plus years after democracy. There is still a long way to go before black South Africans can fully come on board. Hence, black South Africans need to continue to confront and engage with the controversial race phenomenon until real democracy is achieved through transforming the higher education landscape, among other national sectors.
The voices of fellow black (non-) South Africans in the academy

This thematic discussion goes beyond my subjective trajectories, observations and analyses to capture the voices of fellow black (non)South Africans, especially how they have approached questions of belonging and exclusion in the academy. Locating her analysis in the fairly recent #RhodesMustFall and #TransformUCT movement at UCT, as well as #TransformWits and #RhodesSoWhite, Gqola points at ‘a new grammar’ through which she speaks to the ever-evolving episodes of protests in the higher education landscape. She infers:

The impatience of university student and staff bodies is not going away. In higher education and in government, a new grammar has emerged. It would do us well to develop the intellectual who will understand and engage with it. (Gqola 2015)

It is at this stage that I try to find the place of more black African academics in the transformation discourse and insert their voices in what Gqola, in the excerpt above, refers to as a new grammar. Gqola alerts us to the need to develop an intellectual who will understand and engage with this new grammar and, for me, this intellectual is not only a black South African academic but a non-South African black academic as well. This all-encompassing approach to transformation takes the analytic discussion in this chapter to Caroline Ncube who, in an article titled ‘Rhodes: Views from a Black Associate Professor at UCT’, inserts her voice in the transformation narrative. Ncube says:

Amid the calls for radical transformation at...UCT, there are many voices seeking to be heard. That must be heard. I am compelled to speak too. I am a black African, non-South African, female associate professor at UCT. As a foreign national I make no bones about the fact that my presence at this institution does not advance the current imperatives of employment equity. Those can only be advanced by the employment of designated (as legally defined) South Africans. Yes, I have a role to play in fulfilling the larger Afropolitan mission of the university and I add to the diversity of the university community. I identify with black South African students and staff and it is my fervent hope that black students and colleagues find me relatable to, as a person with similar experiences of racism.

Emerging from the excerpt above is the argument that the presence of black foreign academics, who have proved to be equally vital to the higher education landscape across the country, creates a sense of belonging and a progressive academic community that black South African academics and students can comfortably identify with. This, in a way, speaks to the concerns around the number of black academics across the higher education landscape in South Africa. However, the all-encompassing transformation discourse is heavily contested by some black South African academics. Drawing on the Employment Equity Act that clearly
defines what designated and non-designated groups mean, UCT’s Xolela Mangcu and Sakhela Buhlungu (who was at UCT at the time of writing the chapter but has since moved to the University of Fort Hare) argue against counting black non-South African academics. The pair says respectively:

XM: The presence of foreign African academics and students creates a false image of transformation.16

SB: It is a cop-out where international scholars, who just happen to be black, are counted as equity candidates. It’s the most – dishonest, most hypocritical and cynical thing you find.17

Mike Morris, a professor in economics at UCT, challenges the restrictive construction of blackness in the transformation discourse and the subsequent marginalising effect of such. He argues:

Those who articulate identity politics focus on the subliminal shared experience of ‘blackness’, of being ‘African’, and ‘oppressed by race’. Now suddenly being black from Zimbabwe doesn’t matter? And why would black students in South Africa not share or learn from the varied experience of our African brethren?18

Although Ncube concurs with Mangcu and Buhlungu that her presence at UCT does not and should not in any way count towards the current imperatives of employment equity, she interrogates and unpacks the meaning of being black within and beyond the academy. Being black for her is about her race and not her country of origin as captured below.

It is the pigmentation of my skin and not my nationality that motivates the security guard who tails me at a mall or the student who questions my academic abilities on the basis of my race. In other settings, it is indeed my nationality that exposes me to hatred and violence – but that is not why I am writing today. Today, I write to publicly add my voice to the calls for radical transformation at UCT.19

Bearing in mind that, indeed, transformation and set annual targets are about South African blacks from designated groups defined by the Employment Equity Act, there is need to somehow encompass the accounts of black foreign academics in the spirit of solidarity (Biko 2004) – and of internationalisation and diversity widely preached and celebrated at UCT and other institutions such as the University of Johannesburg. Creating a platform where the voices of black academics from outside South Africa are heard somewhat ensures that they (non-South African academics) cease to be just an irrelevant statistic in transformation discourses, and emerge as brothers and sisters whose experiences and realities, not nationality, matter in the struggle towards transforming the landscape. This, in the process, eliminates the risk of undermining the contribution non-South African black academics make
in South African institutions – and their transformation. Thus, I infer that the presence of black foreign academics in the higher education landscape across the country reinforces an academic community that black South African academics and students feel comfortable to be a part of. Embracing non-South African academics’ experiences, rather than presenting them as merely different from those of black South African academics, deals with unnecessary and uncomfortable hierarchies of blackness in the academy.

**Beyond the South African/non-South African binary**

Although there are pockets and moments of belonging in some South African universities, evident in remarks such as, ‘Unisa has truly helped me in my pursuit to be a better academic and a better citizen of the world. With Unisa I feel I have truly come home,’ made by William Omari Miller, an African American academic, when commenting on his Unisa experience, being black for both black South Africans and non-South Africans in the academy is predominantly a constant struggle. The story of being black within the higher education landscape in South Africa is a particularly interesting one because it is an identity deeply entrenched in the divisive ideologies of the colonial and apartheid systems. These are systems that thrived on race science which, in colonial and apartheid South Africa, differentiated between Indian, coloured and black African. This, in the postcolonial/postapartheid eras, continues to divide black South Africans and the rest of the continent. Therefore, the meaning of blackness in this chapter is fully alert to the narrow hierarchies of blackness and the impact of such on black solidarity in South Africa and the continent at large.

The chapter, against this backdrop, deliberately moves beyond the South African/non-South African binary in a way that echoes the work of Zimitri Erasmus (2001, 2010, 2017) who critiques race science, particularly the racial categories inherited from the country’s divisive past – and those informed by the global historical forces. Likewise, solidarities across the continent that go beyond nationalism speak to the seminal work of Biko (2004) who emphasised the importance of collective forms of blackness aimed at liberating black people from long-standing race-based hierarchies of domination and exclusion. In the spirit of black solidarity, my analysis in this section draws the reader’s attention to the black academics’ collective. As I frame black academics as a collective, I am cognisant of the colonial gaze and the global matrices of power that often treat African people as a homogenous group in ways that undermine notions of heterogeneity, individuality and diverseness (Arnfred 2004; Tamale 2011). Balancing between homogeneity and heterogeneity, I acknowledge that the theoretical, methodological, and analytical standpoints that I adopt, and the knowledge I produce for the academy (through teaching and research), cannot be separated from my personal experiences of alienation and exclusion in the academy,
which I believe fellow black academics guided by the feminist standpoint identify with. For instance, I acknowledge in one of my publications that as early as 2008 I started to analyse the politics of diverseness, inclusiveness and exclusiveness by posing a self-introspective and interrogative question: ‘Who am I and how am I different?’ In search for answers to the preceding question, I resorted to my intersecting multiple identities as a black Zimbabwean woman, an academic, an intellectual activist and feminist who has been living in SA since 2008. Consequently, I captured and assigned meaning to my experiences of negotiating being the ‘other’ within specific time zones and geographical spaces foreign to me. (Batisai 2016: 122)

The construct ‘self as other,’ for me, raises ontological and epistemological questions that serve as powerful phenomenological lenses through which I imagine and explore the politics of identity and difference – core to the knowledge that I produce. The ontological questions that emerge as I interrogate notions of selfhood and personhood vis-à-vis collective identities are deeply embedded in the subjective meanings that I assign to my lived experiences of being different, and the subsequent othering that I negotiated from context to context (Batisai 2015), including the academy.

However, it is imperative to note that, in practice, the most significant differences between black academics intersect in ways that collectively influence their positioning in the academy and the subsequent effects that has on how they access opportunities and resources – and the types of knowledge they produce. For instance, the spirit of solidarity has become central to the theoretical, methodological, and analytical standpoints that I adopt – and the ultimate type of knowledge that I produce. As I teach and write for publication, I use the collective spirit to critique and redefine my Africanness in a way that ‘allows me to internally cope with the pressures of a looming identity crisis and simultaneously embrace who I am and that which I consider to be my African identity against all odds’ (Batisai 2016: 124). This is a black African identity that defies nationality, language barriers and pigmentation differences ‘such that black foreign nationals emerge as brothers and sisters whose black African identity, not nationality, matters. Africanness as a result of this “embrace” ceases to be territorialised and reduced to one’s national identity’ (Batisai 2016: 127). The academy, from this progressive and collective standpoint, ceases to be a site of struggle between black and black because black (non) South African academics become alert to the divisive effects of racism (such as the better black discourse), which they often miss as they complete for space and recognition.
Concluding remarks

It is worth reiterating that experiences of exclusion in the academy hardly find their way into biographical academic pieces. The observation does not in any way undermine the works of Mabokela (2002), Mabokela and Magubane (2004), Naicker (2013), Rabe and Rugunanan (2012) and, of course, this volume. What is particularly interesting for me is that Hear Our Voices, for example, profiled the stories of black academics who, like me, experienced UCT (either as lecturers or students) in very silencing and marginalising ways – and how they made sense of the transformation discourse over the years. Today, my biography, similar to others captured in this volume, furthers what Mabokela and Magubane (2004) started, for it exposes the way black academics, whether emerging or established, negotiate identity and difference but, most importantly, how they either confront or deliberately circumvent exclusionary structures that deter them from retaining a meaningful and relevant spot within the academy.

Often, belonging is about capitalising on individual agency and collective battles black academics fight in order to survive within the academy. These micro and macro level fights are sustained by the eventual sweet victories emerging out of a strong spirit of endurance and resilience demonstrated over the years as black academics located in such constraining contexts earn a good report and move up the professional ladder against all odds. Broadly, this biography conforms to the spirit of transformation through a process that pays particular attention to, and draws on subjective experiences of, all black academics with an ultimate pressing objective to transform the higher education terrain in South Africa.

Notes

4 I say this without undermining the support I got from my department (then, African Gender Institute) and my family as well.


10. See article authored by black academics at UCT as part of UCT’s series on transformation (Vissého Adjiwanou, Adelene Africa, Floretta Boonzaier, Barbara Boswell, Mbongiseni Buthelezi, Yaliwe Clarke, Victoria Collis-Buthelezi, Reza Daniels, Roshan Galvaan, Shose Kessi, Progress Njomboro, Nkululeko Mabandla, Zethu Matebeni, Daniel Munene, Jay Pather, Elelwani Ramugondo, Vimal Ranchhod, Rael Salley, Kevin Thomas).


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