‘Do you know that you are polemic?’ she asked. This question, cushioned in a peal of laughter as it was, left me shaken. I struggle with this information. It is difficult to write about it too. In the words of Sara Ahmed, ‘the argument is too much to sustain when your body is so exposed, when you feel so noticeable’ (2009: 41). To stand out can be a sore point, she says. But I am getting ahead of myself. I will return to this incident that marks my most recent awakening. Let me begin elsewhere.

Our bodies are inscribed with markers that are saturated with meaning (Puwar 2004). This truth was forcefully brought to consciousness in the moment that this chapter draws on. Here, I reflect on what this moment has meant for the way that I understand myself as a black man within the academy. I posit that even if I do not recognise the ways in which my body is saturated with meaning, other people make meaning of how I inhabit the world. Ignoring how others see me is unsustainable. Even when one does not want to know, illicit knowledges come in whispers and sudden outbursts in informal settings. With an analytical lens informed by Ahmed and others, I turn around and face up to the whispers and outbursts by reflecting on the new awareness that being told that I was polemic has wrought. I want to know how one's body becomes polemic and what the possibilities of stretching this concept are.

Frantz Fanon (1963) has documented how he was seen as a threatening black man in the streets of Paris, and Audre Lorde (1984) has recounted how a little white girl who saw her push her daughter in a stroller pointed at her daughter and said, 'Look; a baby maid.' As a black man my body has protected me often. In my reentry into mainstream academic life, I have used this ‘neutral’ body to remain palatable. While my blackness has been inescapable, my sex has neutralised the blackness. I say this because black women are construed as more threatening than black men in the academy (Gqola 2004; Tufvesson 2014). And so I navigated my world as an acceptable black man that both sides of the South African race divide could engage with. Even as black women have a harder time within the academy, being a black man has its challenges. While I had previously experienced moments of physical precarity in the presence of some white women, knowing the triggers, I had generally succeeded in disarming my black maleness. I believed that this demobilisation of myself would make me less threatening and therefore more acceptable. I had learned the perils of being unacceptable and the deep unhappiness that this status comes with.
The moments of demobilisation appear innocuous in their everydayness. Without one's PhD qualifications scrawled across one's forehead, one looks like any other black man that people are taught to fear and loathe. Renowned Harvard University professor, Henry Louis Gates, experienced this first hand when he was arrested for trying to enter his own house after dark. Keeping one's hands in sight when in an elevator, standing at a distance from white bodies while waiting to draw money at a cash machine, sitting at a safe distance from white women in meetings, squirming while others laugh at culturally insensitive jokes, choosing who to ask questions, keeping your voice unthreatening while teaching, are some of the ways in which we who are dark (Shelby 2005) disarm ourselves in certain spaces within the academy. And yet, in these moments I have also been aware of my throbbing temple, glazed eyes and deep sense of alienation from the situation and myself. Reading the literatures of African American writers such as James Baldwin, Ralf Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston gave me a language for these feelings. It was with a deep sense of recognition and revulsion that I read Baldwin's response of an experience of racist victimisation in a restaurant:

There is...no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any White face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruellest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all White people and to bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled. (1970: 30)

Even as the happy image of representing diversity (Ahmed 2010) is maintained, there have been moments when the brittle facade has cracked. It cracked the other day. It had been a long time coming but when it did, it appeared unexpectedly. We were not at a work meeting. We were out in a restaurant where we were entertaining a visiting professor. Maybe the drinks had loosened the inhibitions. When it came, it had the suddenness of thunder: ‘And do you know that you are polemic?’ Bam! There it was lying across the table between us like an intrusion. As inappropriate as an exposed sexual organ. I, who had crafted my persona as neutral and disarmed my body, was now being called polemic in the presence of my colleagues. Years of demobilisation had been seemingly wasted. I wondered if the disarmament had been my subjective experience, which had not been shared and therefore not worked. I had to respond and I did. ‘I expect nothing else. There is no way I can teach without having a view and advocating for social justice,’ I said with an uncertain smile. Not being quite sure where the accusation of being polemic had emerged from, my retort was weak. Had I been strident in meetings? Did she know about my classroom manner and, if so, how? Was she reading my blog, a private but public space where I occasionally spoke my truths? This is the second-guessing that many who came before me had experienced. Writing in 1949, Baldwin stated:
One is absolutely forced to make perpetual qualifications and one’s own reactions are constantly cancelling each other out. It is this, really that has driven so many people mad, both white and black. One is always in the position of having to decide between amputation and gangrene. (1970: 94)

I am still uncertain about what had occasioned the public description of me being polemic, and this piece is an attempt to disentangle my perpetual qualifications. I am interested to know the moments when certain bodies become polemic. This necessitates an examination of my own body, which is already perpetually under scrutiny. I am a road runner and this has made my body lean. I am neither tall nor short. My hair is often very closely cropped except for a short spell of growing an unruly Afro for three months. My accent is urban black with shades of ‘colouredness’ from my teenage years at boarding school. Except for my blackness, which is really brownness, I believe that I am unthreatening. But I don’t look like most academics at my university or in my department because they are largely white. I look most like the students, janitorial and technical staff. These bodies have no authoritative voice in the institution. They are silent or, in the case of students, they are passing through. My body is therefore either precariously in place or polemic. When a senior tenured professor tells you that you are polemic, it marks the moment of transitioning from precarity to a body marked as polemic. There is something colossal and grotesque about the word. It undoes my many years of education and identifies me with the chattering classes of radicals so reviled by the middle classes.

The word stays with me. I repeat it often under my breath. I tell friends about it. A few days later, I awaken early from a dream about being polemic. I look up synonyms of the word. Impassioned. Bold. Outspoken. Controversial. Uncompromising. Passionate. Persuasive. I will reclaim the positive meanings but now my eyes linger on ‘controversial’ and ‘uncompromising’. I think about my five years in the university management and administration. No one had ever described me in any of these terms. In fact, I had felt a little too tame for my role. This takes me to an incident that demonstrates just how nonthreatening I think I had become. I recount this experience in the present tense because of the affective power it still has over me:

The design consultant to whom I am directed is not the person that I regularly work with. I have not really spoken to her throughout the three years that I have been in and out of the marketing department’s open-plan office. I approach her with trepidation and hover beside her, hoping to catch her attention. She stares into her computer screen aware of my lurking presence but not prepared to engage it. I make myself small so that I do not appear to be hulking over her. I need her. The project is urgent. My boss has delegated it to me midstream. I begin talking. My tone is apologetic because I am clearly disturbing her. She turns around, her eyes flashing and her cheeks on fire. ‘Can’t you see that I am busy?’ Her voice is menacing. ‘Get away from me. Leave me alone!…You can’t just come here and expect me
to drop what I am doing.’ She is yelling. I have been reduced to a child. To nothing perhaps. An empty space.

Something is happening to my body. Sweat prickles under my arms. There is a vague ache in my lower back. My head is hot and my legs beg me to sit down. My face reflects my humiliation. My eyes glaze over, mercifully sheathing any tears. I am disabled and not sure what to say. I am shut up. I look at her colleagues at their desks. They look at me in sheepish amazement. Someone shifts their weight in a chair. Maybe I mumble an apology. I walk unsteadily towards the design consultant that I regularly work with. I lean on his desk and resist the urge to go to the bathroom. His face is full of concern. His colleague speaks to me in isiZulu, lamenting the incident and apologising. She explains that this woman is rude to most customers. I allow them to placate me.

I should leave the room but I do not. This job needs to be done. Guests have been invited and the brochure must be ready. The deadline looms like a noose. When I can breathe again, I force myself to approach the woman’s desk. Her whiteness envelopes the space, taking up the very air necessary to breathe. My cheeks retain the heat of the initial exchange. My voice is clear in spite of itself. I explain that I have been sent by my boss to give her the correct content for the brochure. I hope that since she refuses to see me, she might recognise the authority and seniority of my manager. To be sure, I am a few rungs higher than her on the bureaucratic hierarchy but my identity, the black face that I bear, makes this count for naught. She listens to me but gives no indication of having heard me. I walk back to her colleague and reassign the job to him. He is not happy, but he agrees. I walk out, my head bowed. I feel removed from myself and observe a little boy from a dizzying height scraping along the ground. Brought down low and shut up.¹

I was not rude to the woman who features in the preceding narrative. When I informed the woman’s manager about her behaviour, her blue eyes told me that I should wait in line and not assume that I would get immediate assistance. Those close to me suggested that I might have been weak in not retaliating against the woman. I own my weakness, but I own it in context. White women generally leave me tongue-tied and I am unable to engage them with the fullness of my humanity that comes naturally in my engagement with other groups. I understand this difficulty historically. I suspect that there are sedimented layers of hurt lurking below. I strive to maintain a feminist sensitivity because I am acutely aware of how patriarchy continues to operate in ways that subjugate all women. I am aware of how quick some men are to use brute force to ‘discipline’ women and to resist equality. I do not want to be that kind of man. I contrast the stilted awkwardness that I experience with white women to my easy ability to engage with black women. I know black women intimately because they gave birth to me and continue to nurture and
love me. I have fairly healthy relationships with white males. I do not fear them and they do not disable me. I forcefully assert my equality when necessary. Perhaps I have an easier time with them because we share patriarchal privilege. My arguments are becoming entangled and I suspect that there are multiple possible explanations. My psychologist colleagues might have a diagnosis for this condition.

The preceding excerpt is publically accessible on my blog. I have often wondered what white women who have read this particular extract have thought about me as the writer and what they have thought about themselves as the subject of the blog entry. I can only guess. But I want to ask what experiences such as these evoke for white women. Here, I am interested in the white person who refuses or is unable to teach through a race lens. I suspect that for those who do not want to do race, reading the preceding excerpt somehow interpolates them into it. However, if they refuse to see themselves as raced, this reinterpolates the obviously raced black person. The black person becomes the problem even in the moment that he or she is identifying the problem elsewhere. Ahmed (2009) notes that if you embody race, then ‘they’ do race through you. So instead of engaging with my disabled affect and what it says about whiteness, I become the object – the polemic object.

A white woman called me polemic. In the moment, I am reminded that I do not belong in the academy. I am a body out of place (Puwar 2004). I am crass and crude and lack the historical conditioning necessary for the academy. Had I overreached? How? I bring my life experience, my research interests and my body to the classroom. I teach community psychology where, together with my white male colleague, we dismantle the psy-complex. This is the obsessive unidimensional gaze into the individual. We seek to broaden the unit of analysis from the individual to the community. Primed to look at the individual over the preceding four years of their studies, the Master’s students struggle to train their gaze beyond the white middle-class body for whom therapy was designed. They grapple with thinking sociologically. They typically resent interrogating their own positionality and relative privilege. I do not teach gently. I am also not aggressive in my style. Perhaps certain material makes me passionate. I cannot imagine that Paulo Freire (1972) envisioned teaching conscientisation dispassionately. I do not think that Steve Biko (2004) imagined that his meditations on black death and white liberalism were lullabies. Fanon (1963) was not intending to soothe anyone when he wrote The Wretched of the Earth. Perhaps my disposition is not common in the discipline of psychology because, with a few exceptions, we have not been teaching an ‘angry’ curriculum. So I am polemic. Perhaps I should concede.

My student evaluations are mixed. I had avoided reading the evaluations until I decided to write this chapter. I select some excerpts from the evaluations. I have an ‘attitude and can appear a bit condescending and thus not facilitative’; ‘At times it can come across as though he does not value students opinions’; ‘Has a tendency of making students feel inferior as if their views are wrong.’ To be fair, many of the
students were complimentary and the preceding comments were not widely shared views. I will return to these but for now, I want to stay with unhappy feelings. None of the excerpts captured above makes reference to my expertise as an academic. They point to problems with me as a person. They are about the unhappy feelings that I evoke in the students. I take up a bit too much space. I must concede that these claims may have legitimacy and the feedback should inform my practice in future. I would however like to simultaneously argue that challenges to social hegemony are uncomfortable for those who benefit from it. Moreover, some of the feedback suggests that all views have equal opportunity. My orientation to bigoted views is that they need to be appropriately argued and that they should be challenged within a course underpinned by values of social justice. I draw a link between my ‘polemic’ body and my approach to teaching because I think it is plausible that those not inside my classroom may have become privy to whispered interpretations of how I teach and what I teach.

So perhaps I am polemic. But I am reminded of my body. I am implicated in the content of the course that I teach. My blackness is not different to that about which Zora Neale Hurston, Baldwin, Fanon and Biko wrote. Exaggerated, so that it dwarfs other parts of who I am and colours my essence. It is impossible for my affect to be neutral. Even if I were to wear a mask of neutrality, students and colleagues read me as black and angry. In other words, I am polemic regardless of how I chose to position myself.

The situation is further complicated in my third-year community psychology class. Because undergraduate classes are bigger than postgraduate classes, there is no time to build relationships with the students. The disruptive course content with which they are unaccustomed is not mediated by one-on-one interaction and positioning. It is destabilising and disruptive. I did not pay due regard to this in my first year of teaching the course. Here, I would like to focus on a single point of feedback: ‘The lecturer is intimidating and I do not feel comfortable talking to him.’ The student does not elaborate on what she or he finds intimidating about me. My teaching had clearly alienated some of the students. They had been challenged in relation to their class, race, gender, sexual orientation and class positions. Long-standing ideas of knowledge production and authoritative knowledges had been shaken. I agonised long and hard about the evaluation that stated that I was intimidating – until the night I was called polemic. It was as though with that word, I had been handed a key to understanding a script that had previously remained illegible. Whereas I had previously read the criticism as a reflection of my defective teaching, I now reread the evaluations with my new-found knowledge as a polemicist. Sure, I am not a great teacher. I don’t necessarily aspire to be one. I am more interested in social justice and I teach to conscientise by disrupting. My aim is to bring different knowledges into productive collision in order to facilitate the unlearning of taken-for-granted knowledges (Kiguwa & Canham 2010).
This takes me to my employment as an academic. Following Ahmed (2009), I wonder if I am expected to be grateful that I was hired to teach. Was hiring me and others like me further evidence that the department is ‘transformed’? Ahmed (2009) warns that for those who embody diversity, their arrival is read as evidence of commitment to change. I ask, then, if the expectation is that we should be grateful and happy now that we have joined the hallowed halls that were not built with us in mind (Puwar 2004). But employing me was not the most revolutionary thing that the department has done. I am not ungrateful but I believe that I have something of value to add. In business language, I think I had a value proposition. I did not trade my right to speak when I joined. In fact, I joined because I had unhappy things to say in writing and in my teaching. Again, Ahmed is instructive. She notes: ‘Our talk about racism is read as a form of stubbornness, paranoia, or even melancholia; as if we are holding onto something (whiteness) that our arrival shows has already gone. Our talk about whiteness is read as a sign of ingratitude’ (2009: 41).

But how do we think or feel by taking leave of our skin when it feels so acutely? When it covers us as much as it exposes us? We do not have the luxury of thinking ourselves outside of our embodiment. We are not afforded the opportunity. We have to own our bodies together with the meanings that they exude and attract.

I am polemic. The awakening that comes with new knowledge forces one to think back at what might have been interpreted as innocuous events at the time of their occurrence. One such occasion was when a black colleague suggested that some of my white colleagues were afraid of me. She refused to say who it was that was afraid of me. I did not push. In part, I did not really want to know. I was surprised that there were people who were wary of me. I had not fought with a single person. I wracked my brain and found no memory of even a collegial exchange about something to do with the curriculum, exams, workload, parking, students. Nothing. Elsewhere I have been told that my eyes speak even when I am quiet. Perhaps they had seen flashes of unconcealed irritation. I am compelled to return to my body. Perhaps my very presence is a nuisance. An intrusion to be tolerated on condition that I remain silent. When I walk down the corridor, my swagger may be too sure. Am I a bit too confident when I speak aloud in meetings? Does my writing come a bit too stridently? Do I need to back down a notch? Will this make my body a little less polemic? Will those who have voiced their fear of me, fear me any less? I think not. Black men’s bodies have been an object of fear ever since they first shared space with white bodies. The only thing that will restore the equilibrium of white ease is when my body and other polemic bodies leave the consecrated space that is white academia.

About leaving. I have left before. It is not part of my plan now. In fact, I plan to stay. But I can understand why so many have left over the years. Spaces discipline polemic bodies. I have written about these bodies before. In a City Press newspaper column, I recounted my experience of being part of appointment committees where I knew the black woman applicant would not get the job, even before she made her
case. Together with Susan Sturm and Lani Guinier (1996) and MW Makgoba (1997), I have pointed out that merit has colour and that colour is not black (Canham 2015). Black women job applicants for professorial and senior management roles are polemic bodies from a distance. By distance, I mean that unlike men, they are unambiguously polemic. Their very presence in interview chambers is disruptive. While black women, like all people, are capable of conservatism, their bodies represent radicalism. Their presence messes with the psychological equilibrium of consecrated spaces. The reasons given for their lack of suitability all align to a particular theme. They will alienate students, they need more time to develop, they are aggressive, they are too soft and will be walked over, and perhaps they should be considered for another (more junior) role when it comes up. This last option has an optimistic promise, which is really about making everyone on the interview panel feel better about themselves. This is not to suggest that black women are not employed. However, my experience has been that those who are employed either create niches of belonging within feminist and human rights spaces or they leave for ‘black’ universities. But leaving does not enable one to take leave of her body. Other-isms emerge in new spaces, and the cycle continues.

The jury is out on the fate of the polemic body. The conditions of staying were alluded to at a ‘diversity’ workshop that I attended at work. After months (I had only been at the department for about four months) or years of tension, the entire school, incorporating three departments, was encouraged to attend a workshop, which would surface and address some of the tensions. Some of those at the forefront of the tensions did not attend the workshop. For those of us who did, it was an awkward exercise in avoidance. Many of us have mastered what not to say in spaces that are purported to be about saying. We know the burden on the black body to hold itself together, and the consequences of ugly feelings. And so I avoided eye contact with certain people. Without knowing that I had already been construed as polemic, I tried to be the practice of neutrality. I smiled knowingly at my black colleagues and reassuringly at my white colleagues. It became apparent that this space of the diversity workshop was to workshop us into a space of equilibrium where all experiences and feelings mattered equally. It was not about unpicking which feelings had been suppressed and which ones privileged. Departmental histories of departures, arrivals, silences, and those who stay were not on the agenda. In this context, what happens to bodies that do not belong? They remain silent. But it is complicated because even when one is silent, the body speaks its non-belonging. Someone will call it out as being polemic.

To be fair, silencing and balance was not necessarily the intention of the organisers or the facilitators. I posit that it was the intent of the affective energy of the hegemonic bodies in the room. Here I invoke Ben Anderson (2009) who states that bodies generate atmospheres. Affect then can belong to more than one body. When we know what powerful bodies in our presence want, we internalise their affective energy such that it wills us to be silent. Elsewhere, I argue that the concept of atmospheric affect
gives us insight into ‘how one is immediately made aware of certain experiences and reality when one comes into the space of a group from which the affect animates’ (Canham 2014: 46). This is not to suggest that a space cannot have competing atmospheres, but within spaces of inequality where certain bodies are guests, those spaces are already marked by affective energies invested in maintaining dominance.

The ambiguity of affective atmosphere makes it difficult to read but Gernot Böhme (2006) advises that tone makes affect more accessible. The tone setters speak verbally and in embodied ways. Sitting in the audience, I was aware that certain bodies with a historical investment in maintaining disciplinary hegemony were silently and not so silently communicating their position. When some whites claimed a position of uncertainty and fear of judgement that they were racist, some blacks hastened to comfort them by saying how great they were and how they did not view them as white but simply misunderstood colleagues. The emotional labour for soothing white feelings was passed to the blacks who buckled under the pressure of white affect. Here we were in a room with various bodies where diversity became a cuddly concept (Ahmed 2009) for maintaining things as they were. For Patricia McFadden (2003), black people who affirm whiteness are right-wingers.

A follow-up workshop was held but it was less threatening this time because on the agenda for discussion was curriculum transformation. I say this was less threatening because as academics we can pretend that the curriculum belongs somewhere in the objective realm and that our bodies have nothing to do with it. The workshop did not disappoint because our bodies where never implicated in the discussions. Nobody took any major risks in this workshop. As a black person, Baldwin’s claim resonated with me on this occasion. He points out that as black people, we are outside of history. Of white people, he says that from the point of view of power, they can be anywhere in the world and not feel alienated. History has canonised them as the victors and they are related to Dante, Shakespeare and Michelangelo. ‘Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory...but I am in Africa watching the conquerors arrive’ (Baldwin 1970: 140). How does one make a claim to knowledge when the parameters are so defined? In my head, I know that lineages of African knowledge production are long and steady (for example, Mamdani 1998; More 2014), but how does one begin to make this point within a department of psychology that has battled so long to mimic the biological sciences? And so, without announcing it, some of us who teach outside of the mainstream of psychology quietly teach Fanon, Biko, hooks, Manganyi, Mamdani, Hill Collins, Freire, Puwar and others. In the meetings purportedly held to engage these issues, we recognise the stakes and hold our polemic views to ourselves. But as I have illustrated, the paradox is that our views are known. They are assumed, as a consequence of the very polemic bodies that we inhabit.

Now I suspend controversial and uncompromising and return to the other synonyms of polemic. Impassioned. Bold. Outspoken. Passionate. Persuasive. If I am to claim the word polemic, then I have to accept that it has positive meanings that I reclaim
and associate with belonging to the academy. My belonging is discursively related to the ability to be impassioned, bold, outspoken, passionate and persuasive. The world acts on me but I also have the ability to act on the world. Even though I might express these qualities differently to colleagues, I do possess them. They are most evident in my teaching and writing. While I recognise the positive attributes of the word 'polemic', I do not believe that it was meant to be positive when it was hurled at me in its cushion of prickly laughter. But I must own these too.

To interrogate the ways in which I belong in the academy, I must trace my history in higher education. I have occupied different roles at the university where I work. Prior to coming to the university, I worked in the international donor sector in the world of HIV and AIDS. At university, I began as a contract lecturer before entering the tenure track at the age of thirty. As the first member of my family to go to university and not having had a family member who had preceded me as an academic, when I started teaching, I was not certain if this career was for me. My friends were making money in banking and I wanted to ride the crest of first-generation wealth maker. But I soon discovered that this was not for me. I moved to the university administration as a project manager in the polemic space of the transformation office. In this capacity, I could earn better than a low-level academic job while also doing ‘real’ work that would make a difference in people's lives. I have come to see the transformation office as a shock absorber, a middle space where people project the inadequacies of the change process. It is a space that allows the university community to absolve itself of its responsibility for change. Moreover, it is a space that attracts negative feelings. This enables conservatives to see it as an instrument for lowering standards. It is an uncomfortable space. Associated as I was with this space of discomfort, I embodied the identity of the institutional polemic. Together with committed colleagues who rapidly burned out, I worked with the thorny issues of race, sex, gender, sexual orientation and other social asymmetries. My particular role was to use donor funding to support the research work of black and female academics. This means that I was passionate and outspoken even when I was not speaking. I had associated myself with problems. Those who are afraid of problem people would be afraid of me. This enables me to understand why some people exhibit fear of me in the present. Having positioned me as fearful, my previous role lives on in me even after I have abandoned the transformation office. I have now returned to the department of psychology – the place where I started as a higher education worker ten years earlier. Those who are unsure of how to deal with me try to avoid me when they see me coming.

This is a position of power. Conservatives are disempowered around me but progressive black academics from many parts of the university seek me out as an ally. Having been in the ‘belly of the beast,’ they know that my understanding of the university is not provincial. At the very least, they know that I will empathise. We converse and form a community of understanding. A chance meeting at the student centre or car park allows us to engage with matters that we might not consider
talking about with white colleagues. Old hurts can surface within a space of relative safety. In these spaces, when recognition is mirrored in the eyes of a long-suffering colleague, lightness emerges. We talk about how students undermine us by discussing us with our white colleagues. We talk about the white huddles where decisions are made. We recognise the unofficial white caucuses and we name them. This mutual recognition is freeing and strengthening. It allows us to make sense of our different states of madness and facilitates how we navigate the academy. We build allies across departments. When we write books and papers together, the process is more than a meeting of minds. It is intellectually and emotionally affirming. These projects allow us to engage across disciplines and universities. My involvement in this book project has sensitised me to the sadness and joy of being black in the academy. I've learned the tools of survival from those who have come before me. In the lonely world of academic writing, I have found it affirming when a sentence that I have written has resonated with someone. It has made the sadness bearable and illuminated the joy more sharply. Slowly then, I have begun to insert my stake of belonging into the ground. I remain acutely aware that my belonging implicates that of other scholars on the margins. This is to say, that the more that I belong, the more I can facilitate solidarities of belonging among black scholars including those from the rest of the continent.

Nira Yuval-Davis provides a useful framework for understanding belonging in a complex and dynamic manner. For her,

belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way. [It] is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations. (2006: 199)

This dynamic conceptualisation of belonging is important for me because it enables me to claim the transient forms of belonging where I may belong in one moment and feel alienated at another. Therefore, I can experience belonging in relation to black women colleagues but I must also recognise that there are moments when my gender privilege may be alienating to them. As a South African national, I navigate the academy with insider privilege. This means that I must be attuned to how the academy alienates my peers from the rest of the continent in ways that might be different to my experience. Because belonging is not based on a reified fixity, I can experience belonging in relation to white colleagues whom I have experienced as supportive of my welfare and with whom I have mutual intellectual interests. For Yuval-Davis, social locations are one of three analytical lenses through which belonging can be understood. These include categories such as black, white, American, African, male, female, class position and others. She however cautions that even at their most stable, social locations are ‘never constructed along one power axis of difference, although official statistics – as well as identity politics – often tend to construct them in this way’ (2006: 200). This is a timely reminder of the messiness of identity (Lemke 2008).
as power structures the ways in which we inhabit the world and influences how we experience belonging and exclusion. My limited ability to relate to white women compared to my relative fluidity in relation to white men may, in part, be understood through this intersectional lens of shared gender privilege.

A second feature in relation to which belonging is conceptualised is identifications and emotional attachments. Yuval-Davis notes that ‘as a rule, the emotional components of people’s constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they feel’ (2006: 202). Against the backdrop of our apartheid history, it is unsurprising then that as black people we have moments of heightened attachment to our raced identities. Blackness is regularly depicted in everyday interactions and popular media as lacking competence (Canham 2015), emotionally labile, angry, entitled, disease ridden and invading spaces meant for white people. These tropes are alive in higher education and beyond. For example, when whispers suggested that a black colleague had done a substandard job in teaching an area of work in which he has deep expertise, in his rage, he told me that the only reason he could think of as the basis of these malicious rumours was his blackness. Failure was expected of him and unsubstantiated rumours would be used to ensure a public shaming. In these moments of black injury, black solidarity and belonging is heightened through our emotional attachments. In this instance, social locations in relation to power and disempowerment cohere and enable possible resistance against oppressive conditions.

In our created spaces of belonging, when we share notes about senior black academics whom we can call on for support, I am struck by how nurturing particular people have been to many black academics. In our conversations, I realise that the person who recruited me to the university was responsible for many other black academics joining the academy. I discover that he shielded many of us from experiences that might otherwise have made this career untenable. Others have left but many have stayed. He, too, has left for another university where his ability to grow black academics is even more important. But we who have remained in the academy are not adrift at sea. We find strength in each other. Having experienced nurturing, we try to nurture each other. Unofficially, we mentor younger academics. We advise each other about how to approach or bypass conservative managers. We learn from our white peers and refer promising students to each other for supervision. When my old mentor referred me to my first PhD student, I knew that just as he had always believed in me, he was intervening to publicly demonstrate his confidence in me. I want to do this for other polemic bodies so that they, too, can lay claim to belonging in these institutions that were not created with us in mind (Puwar 2004).

Those of us who choose to stay have recognised that we need to create belonging for ourselves. We have stopped wanting to enter what Manuel Castells (1996) calls defensive identity communities. Our collective experiences of exclusion have amply illustrated that we cannot rely on institutional structures and cultures to facilitate
our productivity and sense of belonging. Positioned as polemic bodies, as we are, we know that we have to create spaces of belonging for ourselves. We do this by affirming each other's work and personal worth, building alliances with progressive white academics, advising each other, taking political risks by supporting those of us who are under threat, writing together, and finding joy in what we do. Part of being polemic is being bold. If I am to capitalise on my polemic status, I must strategically position myself as protective of those who are marked as more vulnerable. In this way, those who fear me might halt their exclusionary attacks. I want to enable my niche of belonging to encompass others so that they are sufficiently safe to create their own niches.

My personal blog is a space that I have created to make sense of my world. While I naively imagined that my readership would be a small group of friends, I must now recognise that some of my colleagues occasionally read my blog. My inner polemic thoughts are publicly accessible in ways that leave me feeling vulnerable and exposed. But I must imagine ways to work with this exposure of my black body and its dark thoughts. I must remain alive to the possibility that my honest articulation of my experiences and thoughts will allow some insight into the life of at least one black academic and that some positive understanding can develop. I should, however, remain open to the real possibility that this blog will lead to others seeing me as even more dangerously polemic. I come to realise that the fear generated by my unhappy thoughts of black rage (Canham 2017) in my blog will create a generative space for me. I must entertain the possibility that those who have something to fear are better off leaving me alone to do what I have to do. As a polemic body that is both accepted and feared, perhaps I can teach and write in peace. Maybe this will enable me to be more bold, persuasive and impassioned in my quest to contribute to a more socially just world.

I come to the end of this piece with my body very exposed. For now, I have the opportunity to press 'delete.' However, when this piece appears in press, my exposure will be complete. I will be the polemic heretic. But writing this has made me come to terms with certain truths. The most profound of these is that I am polemic regardless of whether or not I publish this chapter. And so the piece will be sent to the editors. I will feel exposed, but I have to remind myself that I am already exposed. The moment of becoming polemic is a revelation. I have not dreamed about the word since writing this chapter. Perhaps the dream will return. Perhaps it will not. The second realisation that writing this chapter has enabled is that I have created my own sense of belonging, which I sometimes share with other black academics in ways that are generative. Our belonging sometimes hinges on identity politics and sometimes on how our identities hinge on our social location as marginalised people. Black belonging allows for the possibility of resistance and the reclamation of our dignity. All of these things that my story has illuminated make being black in the academy both heartbreaking and joyous beyond measure.
Notes
1 How I was shut up, HugoKacanham, 28 July 2013. Accessed November 2015, https://hugokacanham.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/how-i-was-shut-up/

References