Black Academic Voices
The South African Experience

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Foreword

Black Academics: The South African Experience is a bold announcement that black academics, particularly black women, will no longer endure their suffering in silence. Rather, they will speak and document their experiences to provide not only a record of what they have endured and continue to endure but also inspiration to those who will someday follow in their footsteps. People of African descent have often been denied legitimacy as historical subjects. The academy has positioned us as ‘people without history.’ One of the enduring legacies of this book, therefore, will be that it places the particular indignities that black academics have faced on the historical record. No longer will it be possible to say, ‘That never happened.’ Nor will it be possible in the future to dismiss acts of discrimination as rooted in the peculiarities of individuals. This volume definitively shows that what are so often dismissed as individual acts of discrimination are rooted in structural forces and can only be remedied, therefore, by revamping and reimagining what the university is and does.

Make no mistake, however, this book is no ‘pity-party’ or celebration of victimhood. These chapters are about resilience, struggle, self-actualisation and survival. These are stories about how to endure the unimaginable indignity of having one’s intelligence, integrity and selfhood questioned at every turn. The voices documented here also provide strategies. They explain how to fight back – and, sometimes, win. They explain how to collaborate and make alliances. They explore what it means to make new definitions of community. And they resolutely announce that we black academics are here to stay. We are not going anywhere. We are determined to occupy these spaces and make them better for everyone – black, white, LGBTQ, rich, poor, male and female. The academy was not made for us, but we are remaking it to be better than it has ever been.

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### Acronyms and abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>affirmative action</td>
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<tr>
<td>APK</td>
<td>Auckland Park Campus of University of Johannesburg</td>
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<td>CIOMS</td>
<td>Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences</td>
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<td>CV</td>
<td>curriculum vitae</td>
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<td>DFC</td>
<td>Doornfontein Campus of University of Johannesburg</td>
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<td>DHET</td>
<td>Department of Higher Education and Training</td>
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<td>EE Act</td>
<td>Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998)</td>
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<td>HBU</td>
<td>historically black university</td>
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<td>HEI</td>
<td>higher education institution</td>
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<td>HESA</td>
<td>Higher Education South Africa</td>
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<td>HIV and AIDS</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</td>
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<td>HoD</td>
<td>Head of Department</td>
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<td>HoS</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
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<td>HPCSA</td>
<td>Health Professions Council of South Africa</td>
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<td>HSRC</td>
<td>Human Sciences Research Council</td>
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<td>HWI</td>
<td>historically white institution</td>
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<td>HWU</td>
<td>historically white university</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTQ</td>
<td>lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer</td>
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<td>MerSETA</td>
<td>Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<td>MA</td>
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<td>MRC</td>
<td>Medical Research Council</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organisation</td>
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<td>NCHE</td>
<td>National Commission on Higher Education</td>
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<td>NWU</td>
<td>North-West University</td>
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<td>RAU</td>
<td>Rand Afrikaans University</td>
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<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
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<td>SASCO</td>
<td>South African Students Congress</td>
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<td>SRC</td>
<td>Student Representative Council</td>
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<td>SWC</td>
<td>Soweto Campus of University of Johannesburg</td>
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<td>TB</td>
<td>tuberculosis</td>
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<td>UCT</td>
<td>University of Cape Town</td>
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<td>UFS</td>
<td>University of the Free State</td>
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<td>University of Johannesburg</td>
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The question of what it means to be black continues to haunt humanity to this day (Manganyi 1973, 2016). Since colonial encounters, several scholars have grappled with the concept of blackness (see Fanon 1967; Lugones 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2007; Ngũgĩ 2009; Wynter 2003). Here, we define ‘black’ following Steve Biko’s (2004) definition, which is inclusive of all those below the human line – people of African, Indian and mixed descent (Fanon 1967; Grosfoguel 2016) – who come together in solidarity in recognition that white supremacy oppresses them, even though differentially. We recognise that the postcolonial state under black leadership continues to engineer and reproduce new categories of blackness that result in further bifurcations of ethnicity. As we shall see in the different chapters in this book, emerging categories of blackness in postapartheid South Africa are more complicated than ever. Frantz Fanon (1967) and others point out that the invention of blackness was basically about questioning the very humanity of black people. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (2009) took Fanon’s argument further by adding the concept of ‘dismemberment’ to explain the exclusion of black people from the category of the human race – or what Walter Mignolo categorised as ‘anthropos’ versus ‘humanitas’ (2009).

Christina Sharpe’s (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* has demonstrated that the creation of race was closely tied to economic greed, which was used to justify enslavement and colonial conquest. Sharpe’s theorisation of black violability, black death, and black living is conceptualised from a place of deeply personal grief, demonstrating (like Puwar 2004) that it is not accidental that black people have deliberately been excluded from the consecrated space that universities have become. This exclusion positions black people as perpetual students, and white people as overlords who produce knowledge. To justify this exclusion, discourses of merit are deployed to bolster the argument that black people are not quite ready to occupy this space as creators of knowledge (Canham 2015). This continues to play out in the academy where the university, as a global power structure, continues to embrace neoliberal hegemonic policies. Over the past few decades, there has been burgeoning literature that seeks to demonstrate the pitfalls of neoliberalism in relation to public education (Baltodano 2012; Habib, Morrow & Bentley 2008; Janz 2015; Nussbaum 2010). Bruce Janz (2015: 275) in particular has critiqued the move...
towards ‘a corporate model of knowledge-production which is based on instruments of accountability and competitive metrics.’ There is pressure for academics to fast-track the production of research outputs. Different universities compete with each other to increase enrolments in a situation where students are made customers. By adopting priorities set in the private sector, universities tend to value productivity over knowledge creation. There is no doubt that neoliberalism has ‘transcended the realm of economic policies to become a political rationale that undermines major structures, processes and institutions in liberal democracies particularly public education’ (Baltodano 2012: 487).

Neoliberalism thrives on competition for resources and instrumentalisation of people and, thus, pits black people against each other as structures; and prevailing institutional culture at universities protects whiteness. While we acknowledge that this might be a crude representation of the racism inherent in neoliberalism (and of its wider characteristics) we argue this based on the knowledge and understanding of spaces saturated in a history of racism coupled with pressure to share scarce resources in order to accommodate more diverse populations. For example, we demonstrate that categories of blackness such as blacks of Indian descent, black people and Africans from the rest of the continent, are often pitted against each other to share ever-shrinking resources. It is usually the historically underprivileged who eventually pay the high price of being ‘latecomers’ in the system. We are thus infantilised as perpetual development projects that have to perform Anglo-Saxon forms of competence – or we are denied entrance, access to full participation and promotions (Makgoba 1997). Although blacks, in general, experience this exclusion, it is particularly true for black women.

The presence of black women in the academy brings discomfort to those who have crafted them out of the biopolitics of knowledge. Over and above current chapter contributors, previous works by black women in the academy (for example, Magubane 2004) have challenged the myth that black women in the academy are mere consumers of knowledge rather than co-constitutors in the process of knowledge production. This myth has led to a situation where many black women wrestle with recognition within the university (Mabokela & Magubane 2004). The contributions in this book, the majority of which are by black women, provide a contemporary analysis of the state of blackness in South African universities using first-hand experiences in the form of autobiographical work. The authors engage with conceptions of patriarchy, sexuality, gender and nationality as colonial matrices of power to make sense of their exclusion from systems of power and knowledge in the academy.

When we conceived of this project, we were critically conscious of wanting to create a history-making process. This, we believed, would enable us to have a narrative record that, at a certain time in history, this particular group of black academics existed. Beyond our existence, we wanted to share that we have experiences, feelings, and thoughts; and these warrant a historical record. Through this assertion, we seek
to authorise our value as individuals and as important historical beings within the South African academy. Moreover, it is our desire to have our interlocutors grapple with the idea that we are important historical subjects who are consciously aware that they are functioning within an academy that did not have them in mind as equal participants. We are cognisant of the fact that positioning this project as an insertion in history is not an immodest project. Immodesty is associated with arrogance. Arrogance in black people is seen as dangerous and disobedient. We are very aware that this project is a dangerous and uncomfortable undertaking. It leaves us exposed. But, together with the authors, we believe that the negative exposure is far outweighed by the value of inserting our voices into the historical arc. We therefore offer our stories, being fully aware that we also give ourselves up to further scrutiny from others. We are also acutely aware of Sharpe’s (2016) writing about the futility of appeals to powers that be to recognise and protect black life, and about the implicit–explicit harm that this can cause black people.

Faced with the tension of our bold undertaking and the almost paralysing fear of exposure, particularly because these are lived narratives where most of the contributors are still experiencing what they have shared, we facilitated a workshop for the editorial team and contributors. This workshop walked us through this tension and allowed us to engage with our position in a way that not only resonated with our intentions and fears, but also in a manner that charted a way forward. The workshop also guided us in terms of how we could engage this task in a way that would honour our lived experiences as black people in the academy at this moment. We are better for this workshop experience and our stories are presented more boldly, honestly and stridently. Some of the insights captured in the chapters were developed through this generative process.

We deliberately chose to present ourselves in the biographical voice, fully cognisant of the fact that biography is a genre of creative writing. The association of biographies with creative writing exposes it to the charge of unreliability. Critiques of this work may very well say that our accounts of our experiences are unreliable, emotional and libellous. In response to this we wish to assert that to grasp history, it is important to understand the relations between biography and society (Mills 1959); and the stories in this book demonstrate that. We affirm that these biographies contribute significantly to the moral, political as well as intellectual dilemma that current South African social sciences is grappling with. C Wright Mills (1959: 76) further argues that ‘we cannot very well state any problem until we know whose problem it is.’ Therefore, this book is an effort to claim our experiences and to state that these are our problems and successes within the academy. Those with different experiences are encouraged to write their own books. The academic world will be a better place with more biographies of people claiming their academic citizenship, especially if those people do not come from the dominant culture within this space. It is no coincidence that, despite the call being widely distributed to all universities, the biographies in this book represent voices of academics from historically white
universities. It is our contention that blackness becomes salient in a very particular way in previously white universities because, in these contexts, race continues to be a marker of exclusion and inclusion. To demonstrate this, from North-West University, we received contributions from colleagues at the Potchefstroom campus where white Afrikanerdom continues to subjugate black experiences; and nothing from Vaal Triangle and Mafikeng campuses – that are historically black.

Related to the construction of black people as dangerous, as well as to the held view that biography is unreliable, the fact that this book is primarily written by black women means that there is a distinct possibility that the accounts documented in the book will also be perceived as untruthful. We know this because black women autobiographers have been historically positioned as overly emotional, and as liars. The experiences of black women autobiographers such as Phillis Wheatley, Dorothy West, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jessie Fauset, Octavia Butler, Zora Neale Hurston, Ellen Kuzwayo, Maya Angelou, Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde and others have been put into doubt. Enslaved women who went on to write their memoirs about their experiences were also read as unreliable by those occupying societally normative identities. For these reasons, and inspired by the lineage of women who precede us, some of us had to overcome our fear of rendering ourselves visible, but we recognised that our fear was also rooted in the history of denial, silencing, and derogation of black experiences. As a result, we hope that the reader views these autobiographical works as the product of critical and self-critical appraisal rather than as an empathy-seeking project.

In approaching this project, we are guided by Mignolo’s (2009) concept of epistemic disobedience, which we find particularly relevant in terms of framing this book. Mignolo points out that ‘the task of decolonial thinking is to affirm the epistemic right of the racially devalued’ (2009: 4). He proposes a radical departure that visibilises the author’s positionality. In this regard, he notes that knowledge should be reframed to focus on the knower. For Mignolo, the decolonial option suggests that we should privilege lives over disciplines; and this is exactly what we attempt to do in this book.

We also recognise and acknowledge that we are functioning within what Mignolo (2009: 8) refers to as geopolitics of knowledge where ‘the epistemic privilege of the First World’ is the norm and where white knowledge and white history define and govern the culture. Mignolo (2009: 4) argues for the ‘unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued.’ In accordance with this position, we hope that our biographies of experiences in the academy are a significant contribution to understanding and, possibly, remaking the academy in ways that will mirror all experiences – and facilitate debates that will change the terms of the conversation.

Autobiography is of central importance to this project. It allows us to engage in historical work. For better or worse, the publication of this work means that others will be able to trace our footprint in the academy. Those who walk with us and those to follow will forever know that we were here. We chose a publisher with open
access deliberately because we want this work to be accessible to everyone, including students who may not imagine themselves as academics. We want to encourage this imagination so that black students begin to swell the ranks of postgraduate classes and those of academia. Our stories share experiences that are difficult – but they are also hopeful. We would like prospective academics to see both sides. When Grace Khunou invited us to participate in this project, she was absolutely clear that exclusion, despair, failure, belonging, hope and success were all part of the experience of being black academics. For some, despair rings out of the pages. For others, hope shines through. These are our experiences but we know that there are many more. At this historical juncture, we insert our stories into conscious existence, and challenge notions that frame knowledge as only legitimate when others share our stories on our behalf. In speaking for ourselves, some authors ground their chapters in existing theory while others theorise from their embodied experiences. In doing this, we did not want to be trapped in pre-emptive testimonial injustice. Pre-emptive testimonial injustice is when we want to establish the accuracy and sincerity of the knower before she speaks. We did not want to be preoccupied with the politics of who constitutes a good informant or who doesn’t – which is the core of what pre-emptive testimonial injustice is (Fricker 2007).

A number of writers have written from their embodied experiences and work with emotions in ways that advance embodied meaning making (Wetherell 2012). This enables us to demonstrate that bodies are not divorced from the cerebral processes of the mind. We thus challenge the Cartesian divide of the feeling body as separate from the thinking mind (Grosz 1994), and the black body as the domain of feelings while the rational mind is the reserve of whiteness. Our bodies communicate and make meaning of our distress, humiliation and joys. It is, after all, our gendered and racialised bodies that attract, and are the targets of, classism, racism and patriarchy. The emotions that we express in response to the exclusionary manoeuvres of universities come from bodies that feel and make meaning of these exclusions. Our universities are steeped in a colonial residue that, in turn, fills our bodies with a sense of alienating dread. We therefore tell our stories with a keen sense of the productive potential of centring our bodies and the emotions that they generate as registers of our victimisation and resistance.

Together with Nellie McKay (cited in Guy-Sheftall 1995), we believe that the academy was not made for blacks (or women). It is also our contention that the ‘culture’ of the academy does not belong to us either. It was therefore important to us that this project allowed the contributors to practise Mignolo’s (2009) ‘epistemic disobedience’ in their approach to writing their chapters – if that was what they preferred. So, we encouraged the contributors to write about their experiences of the academy as theoretically minded persons, rather than talk from the position of knowing the culture of the academy. The contributors were encouraged to delink themselves from limiting influences, if they wished, to present themselves as humans in the academy.
The association between autobiography and creative writing means that we are also engaged in creating. We are creating our presence and our epistemologies in a legible manner through writing. Through undertaking this journey, we recognise that writing is not only fear inducing, but that it is freeing and can indeed be cathartic. We know this from the many readings of each other's work and through the retelling of our stories to one another. When we are together, the looks of recognition, affective responses, exuberant laughter, empathetic hugs, anger and joy are visible expressions of our liberation and cathartic release. The meetings to discuss our work have been affirming and whimsical as we also talked about creating what we wish we had; while at the same time providing a supportive network that provides coping mechanisms for 'surviving' the academy. This book therefore is in part an expression of that wish.

The stories in this book are moving not only because they are told in the voice and chosen style of their authors, but because they are human stories. These stories are moving too because we are not providing narratives as detached observers reporting on the past; some of these are current and ongoing experiences – hence, the intensity of the emotions and the deeply personal approaches adopted. Given how black and women writers have been historically positioned, we initially feared that the works in this book might be dismissed as emotional. However, after careful deliberations, we consciously agreed to write these stories with emotion. Emotions matter and have always mattered; what has historically been in question is whose and which emotions matter. This influences decisions as to whose emotions should be shown, hidden, dismissed and written about. Anger as an emotion is easily dismissed as compared to happiness. Thus, black women are usually pressurised to be happy as an attempt to disengage from the causes of their anger (Ahmed 2010). Similarly, Lorde (1984) bequeathed us with the concept of the feminist killjoy to demonstrate the backlash that follows the insistence of naming unhappiness and its causes. Emotions indicate 'standpoint', feelings that bring discomfort and, most importantly, an opportunity for the privileged to check themselves and their assumptions of neutrality in politically charged spaces.

While the standard response is to dismiss black women's emotions, we insist on articulating ours. Like Reitumetse Obakeng Mabokela and Zine Magubane (2004), we ask the reader to hear our voices. We affirm that writing emotions is in line with Mignolo's (2009) conceptions of epistemic disobedience and reimagining knowledge, the knower and knowing. Margaret Wetherell (2012: 3) argues that adding emotion to the social sciences 'signifies a more extensive ontological and epistemological upheaval, marking a moment of paradigm change.' We therefore write in the tradition of this paradigm of epistemological upheaval.

In addition to the upheaval of emotions is the complexity of difference. The stories in this book capture the diversity of black academic experiences and views. This diversity is inherent to personhood. As black academics, we are not a monolithic, undifferentiated group (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012), thus, the stories problematise the
term ‘black’. We are also not a single story (Adichie 2009). We come from different institutions, we have diverse formative experiences, we come from diverse academic specialisations and we occupy different subject positions in relation to sex, sexuality, class and ethnicity. All of these diversities contribute to how we experience ourselves as academics and how we interpret these experiences within this space.

Coming from different disciplinary backgrounds means that we work as thinkers. We teach and write in the service of our specialisations and careers. With this book though, we chose to use our academic tools in service of ourselves. We turn our analytic lens to make sense of ourselves. We are operating in the space of a double register. We are the raw text while simultaneously being the interpreters of the narratives. This means that we take responsibility for our story, how we present it and the sense making that we bring to bear. As authors, this is a powerful position to inhabit. We posit that this is in part why this project raises anxiety for ourselves, for those who hear of the project and perhaps for the potential reader. We use this power to claim our hurt and our belonging for ourselves. The project is political because it is a demonstration of black agency with the implicit refusal to wait to be interpreted by others. We follow a lineage of black writers who have claimed their own interpretative power. As a forerunner, *Hear Our Voices* by Mabokela and Magubane (2004) was particularly useful to us because it modelled a group of black women academics taking responsibility for their own experiences. We seek to do that with this book.

Of course, we recognise that this is not the definitive biography of any of the authors in this book. Each of these stories is a biography. We have selected only parts of our stories for this project. While the story will remain the same, the interpretative lens that we use may shift at different times in our lives. Ten years from now, we might feel differently about particular experiences. This does not challenge the legitimacy of these stories. At this moment, the stories as we chose to tell them, and the interpretations that we bring to bear, are our truths.

A major part of the book is made up of stories that focus on the misrepresentation of black women’s bodies in the academy. The central premise of these stories is the assertion that academic spaces continue to maintain exclusionary institutional cultures where blacks and women have to adapt to institutions that refuse to change themselves so that everyone who is deemed a part of them is catered for. Again, the stories show that the academy leads to undesirable experiences of anger and at times a self-identification as the ‘angry black woman.’ These chapters illustrate the result of unequal treatment stemming from racial and gendered differentiation. Peace Kiguwa, in her chapter titled, ‘Negotiating the Academy: Black Bodies “Out of Place,”’ brilliantly writes about how experiences of these differentiations are easily labelled as oversensitivity and even paranoia. This labelling, she argues, is levelled primarily at those who speak up against racism. The challenge of recalcitrant institutional cultures is also articulated by Grace Khunou in her chapter, ‘Writing to Stay: Running
Shoes Replaced with High Heels.' Khunou argues that lack of transformation in the historically white university is because of unchanging institutional cultures that, instead, create double standards where black and white academics are not treated in the same manner with regards to access and promotions. Like Khunou, Katijah Khoza-Shangase in her chapter titled, ‘Intellectual and Emotional Toxicity: Where a Cure Does Not Appear to be Imminent,’ provides an account of how achievement for black women is not defined in similar ways as achievement for others in the academy. She concludes that white privilege continues to position black women’s bodies differently from others. These particularities of experiences are further captured in Grace A Musila’s chapter, ‘Thinking While Black.’ Musila complicates the usually simplified assertion of blackness in the academy by drawing on Fanon’s ‘white gaze.’ She argues that the assimilation of blacks into already existing hegemonic academic spaces is problematic because institutional assumptions about blacks, and what they can contribute, have not changed. Importantly, Musila allows us to think about the fluidity of blackness by demonstrating how identity shifts, based on geography and experience.

The book is also made up of stories that problematise the term ‘black’ by presenting particularly different experiences of blackness. The story presented by Kezia Batisai, in ‘Black and Foreign: Negotiating Being Different in South Africa’s Academy,’ succinctly captures how marginalisation and silencing tactics are used to exclude black migrant academics and students from the academy. She argues that the black migrant academic from elsewhere in Africa should be seen as contributing to the transformation of the South African academy and not taking away from it. On the other hand, the contribution by Hugo Canham, ‘The Polemic Body,’ provides an argument that the black masculine body is made problematic in the academy. Through his own experiences of being labelled as ‘polemic,’ Canham shows how the black experience is not homogenous and how gender can be used to position black bodies differently. The theme of black bodies as different is taken further by René Koraan in her story titled, ‘Belonging: Whose Word is it Anyway?’ The questioning of the word ‘belonging’ by Koraan is a powerful move for her chapter and for the conceptualisation of the book in general. The concept of belonging is contested and various authors grapple with it in different ways in this book. For instance, Koraan’s encounter with whiteness before she goes to university and at university leads to particular experiences of her blackness. She argues that colour-blindness will not address issues of discrimination. She, rather, calls for the problematisation of blackness and whiteness as significant for the transformation of the academy. In the chapter, ‘Valuing/Belonging and Devaluing/Unbelonging in the Academy: An Intersectional Perspective,’ Pragma Rugunanan brings in the experiences of blackness from an Indian woman’s perspective where she also questions the notion of black as heterogeneous. This chapter brings in an important concept to understanding the complex notion of belonging; she asserts that being valued deepens belonging.
Some of the stories in the book capture the move to affirm self through providing empowering knowledge, and the affirmation of one’s students. The stories in this part of the book illustrate how difficulties in the academy can lead to powerful ways of producing knowledge and of centring the student’s position. Colin Tinei Chasi’s chapter titled, ‘Don’t Teach me Nonsense,’ shows how struggles emanating from one’s history of education can potentially facilitate decolonial ways of teaching. Interestingly, the chapter illustrates that these new ways of teaching are not necessarily easy solutions as the academy continues to challenge one’s sense of being in the space. Conceptions of being in the academy are further illuminated by Edith Dinong Phaswana in her chapter, ‘The Limits of Being and Knowledge in the Academy.’ Like Chasi’s, this story affirms the position of students in the struggle for being and reimagining knowledge in the academy. Her story signifies the multiple forms of labour (educational, psychosocial) with all its burdens and lack of acknowledgements that black academics find themselves doing with and for students. Even though this labour is unacknowledged, Chasi and Phaswana find it personally rewarding because it affirms their being in the academy. These experiences are echoed by Motalalepule Nathane in her chapter titled, ‘Sitting on One Bum: The Struggle of Survival and Belonging for a Black African Woman in the Academy.’ Nathane argues that even though she feels unwelcomed in the academy, she creates ‘belonging’ in her classroom where she is able to do powerful work with her students. Nathane takes the reader on the journey of her career to illustrate the particular barriers that she has encountered as a black woman. While these encounters had her ‘sitting on one bum,’ she has harnessed her power to carve out a space to belong on her own terms. Similarly, Allison Geduld in her story titled, ‘Belonging to Oneself,’ affirms teaching as an empowering position for those that are marginalised in the university. The experiences that she recounts illustrate how the self-hate that emanates from negative labelling can adversely affect relationships with students. She, however, argues that these negative experiences can be mitigated by positive mentors who can help facilitate a move towards the classroom and one’s students. It is here that she finds her sense of belonging.

In summary, this book offers insights into the black academic experience as illustrated in the different chapters. This supports our assertion that there’s value in multiple perspectives offered by the biographical lenses.

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

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

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

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

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

My reading of race in this chapter

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

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

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

Racialised subjectivity must therefore be approached through this recognition of intersectionality

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

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

Race is about space

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moment 1

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

Moment 2

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

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

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

**Moment 3**

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

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

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

Moment 4

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

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

**Moment 5**

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

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

Concluding thoughts

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

Acknowledgements

Reflecting on journeys – past and present – fills me with deep appreciation for the shared and safe spaces provided by Jill Bradbury, Hugo Canham, Ronelle Carolissen, Norman Duncan, Zimitri Erasmus, Derek Hook, Grace Khunou, Malose Langa, Antonio Lentoor, Andile Mthombeni, Mzikazi Nduna, Puleng Segalo, Garth Stevens and the Witsie research team. The Subsequent Feminists, Hlengiwe Ndlouv, Emma Monama, Evelyn Hove, Mercy Mupavayenda, Tsakane Mahlaule, Shibu Motimele and the Woman Warrior who recognised the need for this space, Lindiwe Makhungu. I thank you all.
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One of my friends shared with me that she wears high heels not because they are comfortable, but because they keep her awake and present during long battle-like meetings in the academy. So, I have decided to replace my running shoes with high heels; I am writing this piece to stay present. I, like her, have been awakened to the discomforts of running, to the reality that I take myself with me everywhere I run, that is, I take my visible black skin and female body with me. I have, uncomfortably, noted that this black skin and female body is not seen for its beauty, potential and contribution but as disruption. To be able to effectively contribute, I have decided to stop running and, rather, to deliberately disrupt.

My decision to stop running was heightened after Eusebius McKaiser intervened at the *Being at Home* book launch at University of Johannesburg (UJ). I had shared at the launch that I have run from one academic institution to the other, and was planning to run again. After the launch we had a short chat where he rightly indicated that running, although useful for self-protection, has its limits. As a result of this brief conversation, my resolve to stay was strengthened; I decided to put on metaphorical high heels and deliberately disrupt through confrontation. Deliberate disruptive confrontation here is not only about the other, it is about me. It is about acknowledging the lie that meritocracy will work for me as it works for others and, instead, to recognise that only constant, deliberate disruptive confrontation of the lies oppression has taught me as a black woman will allow me to humanise myself and achieve my endeavours in the academy. Confrontation here also means I need to commit ‘epistemic disobedience’ as conceived by Walter Mignolo (2009). Epistemic disobedience means I have to deliberately refuse to fit the script that has been crafted for me by the patriarchal, heterosexist, racist, capitalistic, colonial system. Deliberate disruptive confrontation also means I have to be a black woman academic on my own terms. It also means hard work; it means I need to know the language of power and hold it by the tail as I let it look at itself.

In her song, ‘Freedom time,’ Lauryn Hill (2002) shares that we deceive ourselves if we believe that retreating will allow for the lies to go away; the reality is that without constant confrontation we contribute to our own slaughter. As I ran from one
institution of higher learning to another, I thought I could avoid the ‘death of me,’ but I have now recognised the ‘unescapable death of me.’ I know that I can’t continue to ‘dine at the table of deceit’ and that deliberate disruptive confrontation is the only answer (Hill 2002). This chapter is the act of me writing and speaking back. As a girl and the youngest in my patriarchal family, I was constantly chastised for speaking back; I was labelled rebellious many times. Now, like bell hooks (2014: 9), I fully recognise and embrace that speaking back is power, that the value of ‘moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, making new life and new growth possible.’ I declare writing and speaking back as deliberate disruptive confrontation and the reclaiming of one as present – and significant. This chapter is a deliberate disruptive confrontation of the academy as an oppressive space; it is a statement in my attempt to stay and unravel the power that has kept me, and those like me, running.

My early years and problematised girlhood

My journey in the academy has been accompanied by mixed feelings. I have felt joy, pain, despair, anger and many other unspeakable feelings. At the beginning of my life as a university student, I was for the first time forced to see myself as black. I was a minority at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). I and my black peers spent most of our time in queues at the finance office, in struggle meetings that were then run by the South African Students Congress (SASCO), or in the Student Representative Council (SRC) office. This lifestyle at university was not very different to how I was raised with regards to struggles around my position in the world. For most of my life before university, I was just a girl, a woman in the making. My experiences being a girl in the townships of Soweto were quite gendered, so I had no question that I was meant to be a girl and that I had to fight to get what I believed was mine in a gendered and unequal world. I was the only girl born among brothers, and my mother was raised in a patriarchal family where she had to be ‘feminine’ to belong; to protect me from the harshness of her world, she wanted to teach me to be a ‘proper’ girl. My aunts played an important role in this attempt. I think they failed in their quest because I was never a ‘typical’ girl. I constantly questioned the status quo, and refused to do what was expected of me just because I was a girl. Notwithstanding the constant contestations with my mother and family on what it meant to be a girl, I was clear that I was one even though I did not fit into the category comfortably.

When I went to university, I harshly learned that I was not only just a girl, but that I was a black girl. I realised in those early university years that the plot of my being was beginning to thicken, and that I was not entirely the author. However, I told myself that through hard work and sacrifice the playing field would be flattened. What I did not recognise in my early years was that my presence was an uncomfortable
default disruption, that is, a disruption I did not choose – a disruption defined outside of me. I thought I could author my own story by avoiding confrontation, by playing the ‘merit’ game, but I found that the structure was rigidly defined to keep me out. I realised that, unbeknown to me, I was raised a girl in a sexist world and I became black in a racist world. Thus, the two issues – my race and my gender – are intertwined in my life experience and always have been. This is because structural inequality for black women is multiple, and it morphs into intangibles constantly. This is also true in the academy.

Am I woman?

In my early struggles with being a girl, I never anticipated that being a black woman would also involve contestation; I naively thought that my fight for my humanity ended in my family. After 10 years of teaching, research and active citizenship in the academy, I surprisingly find myself asking the question examined many years ago by Sojourner Truth (1851): ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ I never thought being a woman mattered to me at all because I had fought against the limitation that comes with the label. As a young girl, I had constantly fought against what RW Connell (1987) calls ‘emphasized femininity.’ Given my upbringing, I felt being a proper girl or woman limited what I can be and achieve in the world; as a result, I rebelled against the notion of being a proper girl. But here I was, being confronted with the reality of being a black woman, a ‘thing’ without a gender – a nonbeing. My question, ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ became deafening at the University 21 meeting I attended at UJ in September 2015. At the meeting, I uncomfortably listened to a Council on Higher Education’s transformation researcher imply that black women’s positions do not matter in the South African academy. He said something to the effect that ‘white women are the majority in the academy – they will be leading for a long time and that is a good thing.’ What was problematic in what he said was not just that it was true, but that it was true in a room with only four black women – in a higher education context where black women were overlooked, discriminated against, juniorised and a minority. There was a deafening inequality, illustrated by numbers and my experience.

The problem with the fact that white women were the majority in the South African academy and will continue to be was because of the limits it raised with the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998). The intention of the Employment Equity Act (EE Act) was to

achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through elimination of unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce. (1998: 12)
Women were one of the designated groups in this Act. The continuing discrimination and disadvantage of black women in the South African academy indicates how the Act failed to account for and control the reality that South African women are not a homogenous group. In her analysis of American society, hooks illustrates how in that context,

when black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about, racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women. (1982: 7)

I argue that this argument made by hooks also applies in the context of South African higher education, with regards to the EE Act in particular. The imperatives of the Act failed to address the fact that, with apartheid’s racial engineering, white women accessed privilege that allowed them access to spaces and resources that most black women could only dream of. In authoring the EE Act, the state did not acknowledge that ‘the gender system is not just hierarchical but racially differentiated, and the racial differentiation denies humanity and thus gender to the colonized’ (Lugones 2010: 784). Consequently, the unfortunate answer to my, and Sojourner Truth’s, question ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ is NO. Maria Lugones (2010) argues that, ‘no women are colonised, no colonised females are women.’ Using Lugones (2010), my analysis of the EE Act suggests that the reference to women in the Act did not include black women because this group was already excluded from the historical meaning of the term ‘woman.’ Again, looking at the point raised by hooks (1982), it is clear that what is called for here is the restoration of humanity to all, with a particular focus on black women, and doing away with ways of being and doing that perpetuate patriarchal, heterosexist, decolonial and capitalistic ideals. My experience of the academy in post-1994 South Africa is from an emptied out, racialised, gender category that does not carry the imperatives of redress but, instead, suggests inequality.

This recognition of our historical exclusion as black women suggests that we need to deliberately disrupt – through confrontation and by embracing femininities that are not scripted as such in the patriarchal, heterosexist, racist, capitalistic, colonial system. We need to claim the varieties of being woman and human and insert them in the academy by normalising our presence; this, unfortunately, will only happen by increasing our numbers, thus also reducing our need to run.

**Yearning to be ‘woman’**

Institutional cultures in the South African academy are crafted in such a way that black women feel unwelcomed and fall outside what is regarded as the norm. So, even though my question, ‘Ain’t I a Woman,’ was sparked by the comments at
the University 21 meeting, it is asked in the broader context of the South African academy. As I wrote this on the 10 November 2015, South Africa had low numbers of black women in the academy. Wits University had just appointed their first black African full professor; the University of cape Town (UCT) had one African woman – who was not South African born. Although the numbers will play a significant role in normalising the existence of black women as knowledge creators, it is important to acknowledge that the overwhelming issue for black women in the academy is the silence on the inequitable ways they experience these spaces in which they continue to be defined as the other.

The racial and gendered inequalities experienced in the academy have been debated and written about before. Marlize Rabe and Pragna Rugunanan (2012: 2) reiterate that ‘the imbalances of race and gender do not seem to have disappeared; instead they re-appear in new ways that seem to perpetuate the racial and gender inequalities of the past.’ What recent debates on decolonisation of the academy began to show is how transformation in South African universities has continued to position blackness in similar racial hierarchies used in colonisation and apartheid; these hierarchies are meant to dehumanise through the divide and rule strategy, where some blacks are portrayed as better and thus more preferred and others as not.

Apartheid racial categories continue to play out in contemporary South Africa where Indians, given their historical positioning, have somewhat better access to resources and academic positions compared to coloureds and black Africans who remain vastly marginalised in the academy. Sakhela Buhlungu illustrates a new phenomenon that became the norm after 1994: over the years ‘the number of black South African academic staff had either stagnated or declined over the years at various universities, whereas the representation of white South African academics increased – especially white women – as did the employment of African international scholars.’ Again, women continue to occupy low numbers in both research and teaching positions, and most of them are in positions of lecturer or junior lecturer. These low numbers are because of, and are an indication of, intersections between race, class and gender oppression.

The continuing under-representation of black women in the academy obviously indicates an important and continuing undermining of transformation. But what remains a fundamental and continuing problem (which is the focus of this chapter) is that black women (black ‘foreign,’ African, Indian and coloured), even if they are regarded preferentially in the hierarchy of ‘beings,’ are nevertheless all at the bottom; they are ‘below the line of humanity’ (Grosfoguel 2016). This racial hierarchy pushes them to compete as they try to survive in the capitalist Western university – and try to be woman in the limited yet normative sense defined by coloniality, capitalism and patriarchy. The preferential treatment of some over others does not at all change how the colonial system positions the entirety of black women – as nonhuman. Ramon Grosfoguel (2016: 10) further shows that
the people below the line of the human are considered subhuman or nonhuman; that is, their humanity is questioned and, as such, negated (Fanon 1967). In the latter case, the extension of rights, material resources and the recognition of their subjectivities, identities, spiritualities and epistemologies are denied.

It is therefore important to note that, because black women are generally under-represented and marginal in the academy, and their experiences illustrate intersections of multiple oppressions, it is important for them to find points of belonging that can improve collaboration and move away from the patriarchal, capitalist and racist fuelled competition that the current system encourages.

The womanhood of the oppressed can only be served through recognition of the particularity of their experiences as outsiders within. Patricia Hill Collins (1986: 515) maintains that the benefit of the outsider-within position is that ‘it allows Black academics who are in touch with their marginality to tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender.’ The competition resulting from the yearning to be woman does not allow black women academics to fully utilise this marginality, that is, not only to produce unique analysis but also to occupy the academy deliberately so that their disruptive bodies can bring a change that will work for them and, hopefully, for all.

**I am a black woman**

In ‘Hear Our Voices,’ Reitumetse Obakeng Mabokela (2001) indicates that most black women in the academy occupy token status. They are not made to feel at home because of rigid university institutional cultures that create barriers that violate their existence in these spaces. Institutional culture, is defined as what is done in organisations: ‘Grounded in the shared assumptions of individuals in the organisation, the challenge with South African universities and black women in these spaces is that, “the space has been appropriated for us”’ (Magubane 2004: 1). Therefore, the assumptions about the spaces are not shared because black women are clearly in the zone of nonbeing where contestation and ‘conflicts of class, gender, and sexuality are articulated with racial oppression therefore such conflicts are managed and administered with violent methods and constant appropriation/dispossession’ (Grosfoguet 2016: 14). The violence in these spaces is experienced by those in the zone of nonbeing – black women whose being and accomplishments are appropriated and their capabilities questioned.

The token status of black women is perpetuated through constant scrutiny of their professional abilities. I have experienced this scrutiny of my professional abilities in many ways and over long periods. One of the most significant times when I experienced this challenge to my capabilities was through institutional barriers to promotion experienced by blacks generally, but by black women in particular.
When I was ready to apply for promotion to associate professor at my previous university, I prepared my application and teaching portfolio. I then sent it to my immediate supervisor who was a white woman. She called a meeting to discuss my application. During this meeting, she indicated that she did not think I was ready; she mentioned that I needed to have at least 20 articles to qualify for promotion. I was stunned because I had read the policy on promotion and way surpassed the requirements. The policy requirements for promotion to associate professor were very different from what was required in this discussion. My publication record at the time of that meeting was twice what was required – but this was not commended nor acknowledged. When I mentioned the inconsistency between what she was saying and the promotions policy, she merely said that the promotions committee was subjective and would require the 20 journal publications. I then questioned the notion of a subjective promotions committee because, from my knowledge of how the university worked, none of those subjectivities would be on the side of black women given that their personal experiences would not be shared in this committee; they were a minority at the university and might not be represented in the committee at that time.

Her reference to the subjectivity of the promotions committee suggested a lot of exclusions for me; it meant that their (committee members’) selfhood, culture, ideology and privileged positions were not critically engaged with to check how historical exclusions were perpetuated. Unchecked subjectivity in untransformed institutional spaces is one of the biggest challenges of institutions that remain undiversified. On my countering her subjectivity argument, she indicated that she was not saying these things to dissuade me, and that she would write a supporting letter for my application. At the time of those discussions, I had been appointed a mentor – a black woman who had just been promoted to associate professor. Before meeting for the first time with my mentor, she requested that I send her my CV so as to frame the discussion for mentorship. When I arrived for the meeting, she indicated that she did not see why she was appointed my mentor given that I was clearly on the same level as her, or maybe even above, because I had a higher Google citation index and my publication record was at the same level as hers. My supervisor was making requirements of me that were not in line with university policy on promotions. Why was I required to outperform everyone else? Why should I be exceptional to be recognised as ordinary? Andrea Hunter, Gladys Hildreth and Tammy Henderson (2010) argue that constant scrutiny and constantly shifting goalposts for black women is tied to the growing need for black women to outperform in order to be seen as equally qualified.

I refused to be examined by a subjective promotions committee at a university that was, to a large extent, still exclusionary in how it treated black women. Once again, I put my running shoes on and I ran. I ran to another university, a university I had run away from seven years earlier due to the same institutional culture challenges. Even though running at this time was a deliberate confrontation of a requirement
I thought unfair, it was most importantly a disruptive move to self-preserve. This move was disruptive because the script written for black women is that they are mules that do not need to, nor know how to, self-preserve. In A Burst of Light, Andre Lorde (1988) passionately and combatantly instructs that ‘self-care is not self-indulgence but self-preservation’; here, she illustrates that those who are not taken care of – black women – have to take care of themselves so that they can continue to engage in deliberate disruptive confrontation. My running in this context was a move to allow me life, to stay in the broader South African academy to deliberately and disruptively confront it.

My language and accent under scrutiny

After the Rhodes Must Fall movement in early 2015, the idea of Black Lives Matter was publicly signified both abroad and in South Africa. One of the most interesting quotes coming from these discussions has been one of my favourites: ‘If someone can't speak English it means they know another language.’ The language debate in South Africa has a long history, and that history like so many other aspects of South African history has privileged the white world through the signifying of the English language. Therefore, when you know and are able to speak English with a certain twang, you are considered intelligent – regardless of what you say.

The language and accent debate is important in my experience as a black woman who did not receive expensive Model C education. I went to black schools in the township of Diepkloof in Soweto. I therefore have content but not the appropriate accent. As a result, when I walk into a class and start talking, some students (black and white) walk out. This is mainly because I sound like their domestic workers, so I can't be good enough. I forgive the students to some extent because most of them have not encountered many black women in any position other than domestic workers or (often) uneducated cashiers at one of the many retail shops around the country. I do blame the powers that be for not training and promoting more black women; I believe that the more of us there are in the system, the less shock my accent will elicit. I also blame the South African government and education system in general for not educating us on racism, sexism and the other -isms and how they silently operate in everyday life.

When I teach, I deliberately disrupt the notion that English is the only language of teaching and learning and its unfair privileging in the South African academy and formal business world. I deliberately disrupt by using multiple South African languages to make examples; I do this mostly in my first-year inequality class to illustrate how privilege and inequality manifest and are perpetuated even in our classrooms. In 2015, my head of department (HoD) called me and indicated that several students (all of whom where white) had complained that I used African languages in my class; she recommended that when I did so, I also translate. What
the complainers did not share with her was that I did translate. Why did they not share that? What was their real problem? When I first went to university in 1996, I never heard any of the languages I grew up speaking in Soweto in any of my lecture halls; I encountered one black African lecturer from my undergraduate studies until Master’s. As a result, my constant companions for my first few years at university were multiple dictionaries: the English dictionary at the top of my list, followed by the dictionaries of sociology and of political science. Why is it that students who don’t know Setswana, isiZulu and other African languages are not afforded the opportunity to learn it as I was forced to learn English in my university lectures? None of my lecturers was concerned about whether I understood or not – that was my problem and I made it a point to learn.

Those complaints were also captured in my teaching reviews. What I made of the comments was that students were challenged to learn. My expectation was that, like me and many other English second-language speakers in South Africa and in the universities, these students would take an interest in other languages – source a dictionary, ask a friend. Instead, there were complaints. What was interesting is that a few of the students found that the use of my signature greeting – *Dumela* (Good day)*⁷ – brought a certain level of comfort and appreciation of their humanity. My use of examples in other languages other than English also allowed students who grew up speaking those languages to better understand the sociological concepts we studied in the course. The heterogeneous experience of my use of a mixture of languages in my teaching illustrates the unequal and contested nature of the academy and the unequal privileging of English. To illustrate the heterogeneous experiences of my disruption of English as the norm in teaching and learning, some of the students’ feedback in my teaching evaluation is shared below:

- The lecturer’s use of different languages outside of English can be problematic in that one can miss out something due to language barrier.
- She should stick to a language we all understand and also give relevant examples that are not racist. Over and above, she is a great lecturer very energetic and encouraging.
- Her multilingual ability accommodates everyone and encourages students to participate. Very good lecturer.
- Sometimes during the lecture the lecturer talks in her vernacular language excluding some people who cannot understand and creating discriminative environment but other than that she is an inspiring individual who encourages critical thinking and determination. She is a true asset to the department.
- I personally think Prof. Khunou is very traditional; she speaks African languages in our lectures which I think is not good for white students.
- The lecturer was able to provide useful information, whereby different languages that is accepted in class were also encouraged; using other languages was well good.
The lecturer tended to use other languages making it difficult to understand. Other than that I have no complaints regarding the lecturer and her work.

The lecturer’s voice sometimes is not proper plus she uses other languages beside English. (personal communications)

The last comment above is a complaint against my accent. I do not speak English like a white person. You can pick up, when I speak, that I grew up in a working-class family and that even though the Bantu education I received intended to make of me a ‘drawer of water and a hewer of wood,’ as suggested by Hendrick Verwoerd, it failed.

As I indicated earlier, I forgive the students who complained to my HoD and, in the spirit of deliberate, disruptive confrontation I welcome the honest comments shared in my teaching evaluation; they came in handy in my thinking of my impact, and the need to continue disrupting by unsettling coloniality in all its guises. What was most shocking and unforgivable was a comment made by one of my white female colleagues at my previous university, when I indicated excitedly that I had a thing for Kuhn and had some ideas for engaging with his works. She snobbishly told me that before I even think of studying and writing about Kuhn I should pronounce his name properly first – then I would have ‘permission’ to study him; and then she walked away. Hugo Canham (2016) writes about how one’s accent and link to one’s race can be used as a demerit in interview processes in the academy. My accent in this case was a demerit from a colleague who was privileged not only by her race, but by the institutional culture that suggested that English and a particular English gave you merit to be an intellectual. This scene happened in an exam venue, so I could not scream and shout or throw things around; this is true in the physical sense, but I did say a few nasty things and throw a few things in my head. I did, however, eventually feel the blow and I recoiled back within and, I think, to some extent I agreed with her – who was I to even attempt to study Kuhn? I, thus, buried my desire to study Kuhn; I was not good enough and I could not even fight back or affirm the truth. This was violent; this was a violence that most black women suffer silently every day in the South African academy. What I like about the current context is that the space to speak back with a questionable working-class accent is becoming the norm. However, more should be done as the ways of thinking that prompted the attack I experienced are still very much alive and will remain so for a long time to come.

**Stereotyped: Black woman as incapable**

The positioning of black womanhood as not knowledgeable is also seen in the continued lack of popular imaginations of black woman as intellectuals. In alignment with the idea of black woman as maid, black women academics are brought in to help others fulfill their desires to pursue ideas and get promotions because they do not and should not have agendas of their own. You therefore find many of us as research assistants and co-supervisors (never the main supervisor, which means less influence.
on the direction of the project). Again, given the assumption that black women exist to help others, black women are not expected to be creative, thus, when they introduce new ways or don't follow the set script on, for example, how to put together a function or teach a class their ideas are questioned because they are untested and thus can't be trusted.

When I joined my current department in 2014, I found myself in a difficult position when I was tasked to organise a prize-giving ceremony, and was expected to do it in a particular way. I was told that I should rely on the person who did it the year before. When I chose to do it my way I received a backlash as this was not acceptable. Because of this situation, I had to exclude myself from the organising committee – I was not going to be window dressing, I refused to continue work in a space where I was not required to be creative. I refused to follow the script set for me. Black women who do not follow the script already written for them are problematised and labelled as angry and lacking in collegiality. What was interesting is how my refusal and confrontation of the inequality was redefined. At the end of 2014, on the departmental reflection on the year, a new narrative of my refusal to participate in the organising committee was shockingly reframed as, ‘you were overworked.’ This reframing was done to make me feel like part of the team, like my feelings and thoughts mattered. Unfortunately, I could see right through it, now I was not only incompetent – unable to organise a mere prize-giving – I was now not coping. The onslaught is never ending; black women can never be fully human.

At the end of the day, with all the challenges experienced what remains unquestionable is that I am a black woman. As I ponder what this means from both a personal and political point, it becomes clear that

I defend everyone, yet I stand alone,
I share humanity's pain, yet my PAIN is unknown,
I know Black pain just like Black men do,
yet I am told my turn for restoration is still on its way,
I keep my head and patiently wait,
I fight alongside white women, at the line of victory I find myself all alone,
left behind because once again my restoration is a long way away.
My struggle continues and my patience is gone,
I cannot wait any longer.
The two-edged sword batters my heart and head, I am left spinning with anger and frustration
Why me I ask,
The answer silently and violently hits me.
I am a Black Woman,
Dismembered
Assumed immune from hunger and pain,
when I know these better than any other.

I am a Black woman
I am Sojourner Truth,
I ask Ain't I a Woman,
I ask not because I want to be declared delicate and soft,
I know I am that and more,
I am Sojourner Truth,
My reality demands hard masculine labour, and sweet Mammy Love,
I perform Masculinity as I do Femininity,
I am never the norm,
I am caught between a soft and a hard place,
A rock for my family and community,
I am a Black woman

I do not conform,
History has forced me to go beyond the Norm,
I am Madikizela,
I am Nomzamo,
I marry yet I remain single,
I give birth to two children yet am called to be The Mother of the Nation,
A princess turned into a soldier,
A woman assumed to be without agency and emotions,
Misunderstood,
Refused by those I have served,
I belong to no one,
Protected by no man,
I am a Black woman.

I am as female as any other, soft protective and loving,
Yet I am forced to be fierce in my love of my children,
For fear that I might lose them, I teach my sons hard lessons on how to survive in a White harsh world,
I read them heart wrenching stories of slavery, lynching, rape, murder and plunder,
I teach my daughters to be self-sufficient and strong,
I teach them to be the rock,
Yet I yearn to teach them the softness and surrender,
But I know is not how the World sees them.
I am a Black Woman.
I am Spirit manifested into a Black female body,
Here to teach new lessons,
To reposition the old story,
Here to give permission to my sons and daughters to live full lives,
To be more,
To fear not what the other says,
To draw strength from the beyond, from old songs and hidden yet revealed stories,
From dreams brought forth by stillness,
From realities that look ordinary with seeds for the extraordinary.
I bring restoration through my embodiment of both the masculine and feminine.
I am a Black Woman.

Mentorship: The academy demystified

I never liked the idea of being mentored and taken under the wing of someone experienced. I was always rightfully suspicious of such endeavours. However, after a number of terrible experiences when I worked for national government, where information was hidden, and opportunities for growth were shared with only a few, I realised that my dislike of these processes was based on my experiences of inequality in the academy where mentors would usually be white (I found that most of these older academics misunderstood what I needed because of their epistemic position). On my return to the academy in 2010, I was fortunate to be appointed a mentor who was very clear about transformation and what it means and demands. My mentor challenged white supremacy; he gave me information that was useful for navigating the harsh academic world. He also affirmed me; he was the first person who told me I could write, even though it took me a while to believe him. I know he meant it because he was not easily impressed.

He clarified the steps and demystified the academy. I was therefore affirmed through his mentorship. This was true even though the gatekeepers in the system saw it otherwise. He refused to promote black people just because they were black, or keep them out just because they were black. He wanted my work to speak for itself, and for this to happen he understood that space and resources needed to be provided. He steered me to funding opportunities, and taught me the tricks of the trade. I think that just hiring black women without providing the necessary support for them is setting them up for failure. Mentorship programmes are good but they need to be well thought through so that they work to not further exclude but to facilitate the much-needed change in the academy.
Safe spaces

I have put away my running shoes because I realised that there are ways I can make the academy my own. After multiple trials, I know that I can't do that by recoiling into myself or by running, but by staying and deliberately disrupting through confrontation. This agenda to confront and disrupt is facilitated by the fact that a few spaces have been carved by those who have come before us; although currently small, they can be grown and nurtured. The most important of these spaces for me has been the availability of funding opportunities for transformation. Without these opportunities, I would not have been able to put my running shoes away. The Carnegie and Mellon Transformation funds have been a lifeline for me as an upcoming academic. These funds allowed me the much-needed space to do research, read and write. More of these spaces are needed for the grooming of young black women academics.

This book has also been an important moment in crafting a space for black women and for black academics in general to carve out spaces where we can take back the responsibility and privilege to define who we are ourselves. This book has allowed us the space to use our outsider-within position, to use our experiences of marginality, to provide analysis of the academy in ways that give voice and speak back. The critical role of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences has played a key role in facilitating not only this book but its broader mandate to increase PhDs in the humanities and social sciences, and has spearheaded the birth of a large cohort of black women academics. Their work in this regard has been an important disruptor of the historical script that black women can't be knowers.

The dialogues on what it means to be black in the South African academy, which the editors of this book undertook as a broader part of this project, created an energy necessary to begin the work of challenging the inequalities inherent in the academy. These dialogues were also spurred by the #FeesMustFall movement. This movement has been an important turning point in creating the further possibility for me to put my running shoes away – it has helped me appreciate my broader role as a black woman in the academy.

Doing our thing our way

I find that even though it is interesting to be among a variety of people, it is always easy to be with those for whom you do not have to constantly have to prove your humanity. For many years in the academy, I found myself wasting time and energy trying to assert my humanity in spaces that did not necessarily see this as true. Now I know that to make it work, we black women need to create our own spaces so that we can do our thing our way. Doing our thing our way does not mean we should form groups where we agree – but where we debate fiercely, disagree and facilitate growth.
I have stayed in the academy because of the multiple collaborative spaces I created and cocreated with fellow black women and a few black men. These spaces I have found sweeten the harsh realities we mostly find ourselves in; this has contributed to my decisions for putting my running shoes away. For the academy to work as a space for black women to enter and stay, spaces need to be provided – created for growing sweet spots for collaboration and mentorship. Such sweet spots have not only created space for me to learn and grow academically but they have provided healing, a room for self-love and joy.

My first published article after returning to the academy was rejected. As many who have gone through academic publishing will know, I was devastated. But I received generous help with that article from Pumla Gqola. Many other women have facilitated my stay in the academy; given that many black women are in other spaces in the academy other than academics, I find myself having great moments with support staff from the cleaners to human resources officers; these are the people who have helped me make sense of the academic corners that most of us don't know. I have thus been told that I don't act like a professor. I always respond to this by saying that I only know how to be myself. I think this is true for many black women in the academy – we can only feel at home if we insist on doing our thing our way. We have to just be ourselves because twisting and turning so that others can be comfortable leads to running; internal conflict with self is much worse than confronting and getting it over and done with.

Conclusion

Even though I have replaced my running shoes with high heels, I realise that there are benefits to running. Running allowed me the space to go to a safe space to heal my wounds and regroup, running gave me back my power, and running was revolutionary because it was an important move to self-preserve. However, what putting away my running shoes means is that I recognised what Audre Lorde (1988) meant when she said, ‘your silence will not protect you.’ I therefore call on those who have similar experiences to deliberately use their already disruptive presence to confront the daily oppressions they experience through speaking and writing back, through mentorship, through sourcing funding, through collaborative work and other avenues yet to be explored.

My running was a temporary strategy, a strategy within a much broader strategy. Even though I don't have my running shoes on currently, they remain on standby because the truth is the academy is still, to a large extent, a contested violent space for black women. And, as long as that is so, I know I might need my running shoes because self-care remains an important part of the work to free the oppressed.
Notes
2 'Black', in this chapter, is used as a political term born of the shared experiences of Indians, coloureds and Africans.
3 I was an SRC member during my undergraduate year at Wits. I held the portfolio of education officer, which entailed representing students throughout the year (but mainly at the beginning of the year) to address exclusion, which was mainly due to finances. Shockingly, but not surprisingly, almost 20 years later the #FeesMustFall movement arose as a result of similar challenges. During my time in this office, I represented and consulted with only black students of African descent; although there were many from the humanities and social sciences departments, the majority was from engineering. This work was my early reality of the struggles of university life for black students.
4 This type of feminine is the kind that intends to reduce women to one thing and one thing only – the servants of men, without a say, without personal desires and, most importantly, without masculine traits. What Connell (1987) refers to as ‘emphasised femininity’. This femininity that I rejected from an early age resonated with Lugones’ (2007) conception in her ‘Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System.’
5 From Truth’s speech delivered at the Women’s Convention, Akron, Ohio on 29 May, 1851.
6 ‘Gaining and maintaining power by breaking up larger concentrations of power into pieces that individually have less power than the one implementing the strategy’ (Wikipedia).
7 Nkosio B, Brazen ‘trickery’ in transformation, Mail & Guardian, 6 March 2015.
8 Dumela is a Setswana and/or SeSotho greeting.
9 I initially understood this word to describe ‘a work environment where responsibility and authority is shared equally by colleagues. You know you work in a collegial environment when your co-workers smile at you, and you don’t have to hide from your supervisor’ (Vocabulary.com). However, in unequal institutions, the term (like many other terms such as ‘merit’) is used to continue to exclude. They are used to control the already oppressed and create a situation where the oppressed are expected to be happy under conditions of oppression and inequality.

References
Intellectual and emotional toxicity: Where a cure does not appear to be imminent

Katijah Khoza-Shangase

The audiology way

I have diagnosed myself as suffering from intellectual and emotional toxicity induced by racism, harassment, discrimination and white privilege within the academy. Toxicity is defined as the degree to which a substance can damage an organism or the degree to which it can be poisonous (Campbell 2007). In audiology, my field of practice and research, there is a phenomenon referred to as ototoxicity. Ototoxicity is the property of being toxic to the ear. This form of toxicity is commonly medication-induced, can be predictable but not always preventable, but can be identified, monitored and managed to varying degrees of success. Imagine: I, as a black female academic with my intellectual and my emotional well-being, am this organism; and the academy with its culture, systems and policies – this substance. My journey through higher education, from a black female student to associate professor in a historically white university, resonates and mirrors this phenomenon of toxicity exceptionally well. It is my contention that my journey confronts what I label intellectual and emotional toxicity – where my ability to feel healthy and safe, accepted and celebrated within this space, where my ability to produce intellectual outputs and to engage in the intellectual culture, is continually poisoned. This intellectual and emotional toxicity I believe, like ototoxicity, can be described in the following manner:

- It is most often permanent.
- It has a gradual onset, but is progressive in nature (in the absence of treatment or clinical management – in this case, in the absence of direct and systematic institutional intervention).
- Its degree or level of severity varies from individual to individual.
- It can be exacerbated by the presence or history of other toxins in the individual affected; in my case, these other toxins are all the consequences of apartheid and patriarchy that a black woman my age in South Africa has been subjected to.
- It is influenced by an individual’s level of sensitivity or their tolerance level for toxicity.
- It is preventable – preventable through either complete avoidance of the toxic substance (and replaced by a nontoxic alternative which, in most cases, is not possible) or through the use of interventions (such as co-use of protective substances where these are available). The decision regarding which mode of prevention to adopt is based on risk–benefit ratio (Campbell 2007; Khoza-Shangase 2017).
I argue that permanent intellectual and emotional toxicity of black academics may have deleterious consequences on excellence in innovative teaching, on research, and on service in any institution of higher learning in South Africa that values these three pillars of academia. Therefore, the identification, naming, categorisation and confrontation of the toxins leading to such toxicity needs prioritisation because they serve no benefit to the academic project but, rather, are potential risks to innovation and excellence in this sector. It is my argument that because there is no cure for this kind of toxicity (as in ototoxicity) management emphasis should be on prevention because the damage is often irreversible. I believe no therapy is available to reverse the toxic damage that the academy as it stands has inflicted on academics (specifically black academics). However, I also believe there are methods to minimise the toxic injury while retaining the ‘toxic agents’ (transformation blockers or protectors of white privilege) who remain important and necessary for the academic project, while the academy begins the process of decolonisation and real transformation. These methods might involve toxicity identification and monitoring, where barriers to inclusion and belonging for black academics are identified early – with immediate prescription of toxic-protectors when subclinical symptoms are identified. University managements should have procedures and policies in place to implement in cases where even subtle (subclinical) toxicity is identified because early intervention is key. Subclinical symptoms are very early symptoms that are often only picked up by sensitive measures before they are measurable on clinical measures; and these are identified before permanent damage occurs (Khoza-Shangase 2010). In the case of the academy, the permanent damage is varied and can be as severe as the death of a black academic’s career within higher education.

In ototoxicity, where permanent damage has already occurred, the management plan changes to that of provision of assistive devices, compensatory strategies, counselling, and so on, to improve the quality of life of the afflicted individual (Khoza-Shangase 2013). Interestingly, in ototoxicity, although ototoxicity is undesirable, the ear damage can sometimes be used to help people with Ménière’s disease. This is a disease of no known cause, which is marked by sudden episodes of dizziness and vertigo. While for most people with this condition, it can be controlled with medication, a small number require surgery (Ghossaini & Wazen 2006). However, the use of some ototoxic drugs can actually improve this condition, while causing less damage to the hearing mechanism than traditional treatments. In my analogy, I am still trying to find a passable reason why or how the emotional and intellectual toxicity I describe can be of benefit to the patient: the black academic. In my story, I constantly ask myself if I would have achieved what I have achieved thus far in the academy had it not been for the toxic experiences I aim to share in this narrative. I am not ready though, in this chapter, to answer that question.

In this chapter, I regarded and interrogated specific individuals’ as well as institutional structures’ roles towards toxicity of my intellectual and emotional belonging in higher education from my student days to my current position as associate professor
(whose application for promotion to full professor was declined after two and a half years of it being under consideration). In navigating the spaces in the academy, Table 4.1 reflects words and phrases that characterise my daily cognitive–linguistic internal conversation around my sense of belonging and exclusion. Belonging as a word was part of an era – a period – and it has remained locked in that era, hence, its blocked representation in the table. It is also depicted in the manner it is because it is a concept that is mostly locked or restricted to certain spaces and times within the academy.

Table 4.1 Words and phrases characteristic of my intellectual and emotional toxicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constant suspicion</th>
<th>Being tolerated</th>
<th>Failure</th>
<th>Meritocracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black anger</td>
<td>White oblivion</td>
<td>Whitesplaining</td>
<td>Grievance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power punished</td>
<td>Assimilate to survive</td>
<td>Intrusion</td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being silenced</td>
<td>Ungrateful</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having no voice</td>
<td>White feelings</td>
<td>Destabilisation</td>
<td>Whiteness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being accommodated</td>
<td>Passive aggression</td>
<td>Disruption</td>
<td>Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False generosity</td>
<td>Being policed</td>
<td>Policing</td>
<td>Privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black silence</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Racism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Context

South Africa experiences significant challenges within the higher education sector. With South Africa’s democracy being 24 years old, there have been opportunities that have presented within this space. Such opportunities include: opportunities to creating a more ‘vibrant, equitable, responsive and higher quality higher education system’ (HESA 2014: 1); opportunities for innovative development of a higher education system that is both globally competitive and locally responsive and relevant (as recently thrown to the forefront by the students’ national #FeesMustFall movement that demanded free access to higher education); and opportunities for intellectual engagements with important public issues that determine the direction that the future of this country would take. However, significant challenges remain. These challenges remain even in the presence of an internationally lauded Constitution (HESA 2014).

The challenges include but are not limited to the well-documented lack of appropriate and sufficient academic skills (particularly black, and especially black female), unfavourable academic-to-student ratios, infrastructural constraints to facilitate larger student enrolment numbers, general lack of resources for the size and the diversity of the population requiring higher education access, challenges with translating knowledge and policies into practice (particularly around transformation of curricula as well as academics), and so on (Soudien et al. 2008). The challenges around insufficient academic skills are quite significant if one considers the transformation imperatives as well as the documented reality of the ageing professoriate. The challenge surrounding insufficient academic skills amongst black
scholars is compounded by the fact that there's gatekeeping, which is meant to block the access, progress and success of these scholars within the academy – gatekeeping that I, and a number of my black academic friends, have lived experience of.

Furthermore, student access, opportunity and success continue to be unfavourable toward the black African student and, although this is seen at undergraduate levels, it is particularly pronounced at postgraduate levels (Seabi et al. 2014) – which I see as a strategic blocking point for transformation, as will be illustrated in my narrative. Throughput, dropout, undergraduate success and graduation rates reflect the fact that equity of opportunity and outcomes for black students is still required. These challenges, I believe, are linked to institutional cultures as well as academic cultures that are seen to be exclusive of the black African child, with curricula that reflect no or slow changes in curriculum transformation (curricula still based on a Eurocentric, Western epistemology); curricula that are silent on issues of language policy in a country with 11 official languages – hence my support for the widespread calls for Africanisation and relevance of curricula.

The development of the ‘angry black woman’

My life in higher education is a year older than our country’s democracy. It is therefore apt that I write this piece at this juncture in the history of our democracy where all forms of interrogations are occurring around where we are, what we have achieved as a country, what the challenges are that we are facing, and where we are or ought to be going from here. It is also apposite that I would pen this piece at the precise moment when media attention is heightened around issues of racism, transformation, employment equity, de/colonisation, free higher education, and so on – in all spheres of life, not just in higher education, both locally and internationally. For me, personally, it is fitting that I have picked this very moment because I recently turned 40. I’ve always been told that life begins at 40 (for women) and so, conceivably, this exercise for me is aimed at allowing me to confront and consequently bury the demons – so that I can then begin my life. In this process of confronting, Walter Mignolo (2009: 15) describes my process as ‘epistemic disobedience’ that is ‘necessary to take on civil disobedience’, and is what I feel I am engaging in with this narrative.

My journey as an academic member of staff is just over a decade old. It was, in fact, two years after I joined my institution that it, in its 2008 submission to the ministerial working group investigating racism in higher education, described itself as ‘a so-called historically white institution, with a character inherited in the pre-1994 years which was largely white and male academic staff, largely white middle management and senior support staff and largely black support staff in the lower levels’ (Soudien et al. 2008: 9). That pre-1994 inherited character, at a glance, remains glaringly and significantly unchanged (except for perhaps an increase in white female staff numbers). In actual fact, this inherited character might have got
worse if what Professor Sakhela Buhlungu (vice chancellor at the University of Fort Hare) says, in the Mail & Guardian article by Bongani Nkosi (2015) is true when he talks about ‘brazen trickery in transformation’ – where management of academies in South Africa count foreign black scholars as equity candidates in order to ‘fudge and skew’ how transformed they are.¹

Today, if you pick up my updated detailed academic CV you will note the following about me: I am the 2017 Business Women Association of South Africa’s Finalist – Academic Category. I am an associate professor and former head of department at my current institution. I am the first and, to date, only black South African to be awarded a PhD in my field (audiology), and first and only to be associate professor in the country. I am a member of a number of committees and boards at discipline, school, faculty, university and national level. I play an important leadership role in my profession beyond the university, particularly within the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). I have been nominated for various awards and won many, particularly in the area of research and best contribution to my field. I raised millions of rands in funding for my discipline in the past few years – for research, infrastructure, personnel, equipment (clinical training) – over and above my own funding towards my research and that of the students I supervise (for example, Carnegie, National Research Foundation/Thuthuka, University Research Committee, Department of Education). My research focus is in the area of HIV and AIDS, TB and pharmaco-audiology and my publications continue to be the main audiological evidence from developing countries. I have authored a number of peer-reviewed journal publications and technical/research reports and position papers. I have completed a number of presentations at national and international conferences, many of which were invited. My research impact is also indicated by the number of journal reviews, editorships and research examinations I engage in. I have taught several courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (and extensively supervise research). I have fully engaged in curriculum development of many of the courses that I have taught, and those taught by staff in the department in my previous role as head of department, as well as in my role as chair of the education committee of my professional board. I obtained all my academic qualifications from my current institution and have been in its employ since March 2006.

I have been told by a number of people who have reviewed my CV outside my institution that it is impressive, with exceptionally respectable achievements that I should be happy with and incredibly proud of. I have spent significant amounts of time on trying to be ‘happy with and incredibly proud’ of my CV. The truth of the matter is that I am cerebrally happy and proud but am emotionally not; and it is through the process of writing this piece that I have come to realise the reasons for this state of being. The one achievement reflected on my CV (on the first page) that I am remarkably proud of and elated about is my Code 8 driver’s licence. This is uncanny because it is the one and only achievement in my life that I obtained after
a failed attempt. Despite the fact that I failed once before getting my licence at the second attempt, this remains the only achievement that gives me pure unadulterated joy and such a sense of personal achievement.

I made sure to commence this narrative by presenting my academic and intellectual biography in higher education because this piece is very much focused on that. It portrays Katijah as an academic, not as a friend, aunt, sister, daughter, wife, mother – all of which I am too. I have prudently and purposefully, for this exercise, detached myself from those other roles; not because these other roles are not important in my life story, but because they are that important and, hence, require shielding from my work story – which seems to have been characterised by what I now refer to as toxicity. Because I am not a literary writer, putting together this piece was exceptionally gruelling. Firstly, it was challenging because it is my very first piece of writing where I do not have the customary structured headings such as: literature review, research design and methods, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, reliability and validity, results and discussion – as commonly found in the type of writing I do in my field. Secondly, it was testing because this is such a personal journey, where the academic notion of objectivity, for me, would mean failure to tell my story, my own personal story in my own voice. Thirdly, it was arduous because I have learned in my time within the academy that confronting issues of transformation (and racism) in higher education is not an act that is celebrated, and nor would sharing such issues openly (as in this chapter) be endorsed or tolerated.

Resistance and protest at lack of transformation has been a feature in previously white universities in the past, and more so recently. We all know what happened to Professor Botman (late rector from the University of Stellenbosch) and the alleged reasons advanced in the media. We are all also aware of the reaction to Dr Siona O'Connell's (2015) column on ‘What UCT’s Not Telling the First Years’ (Dr O’Connell is a lecturer at the University of Cape Town (UCT) who received hate emails and was ostracised on campus following her publication in the Cape Argus).^2 Most recently, we all saw the vicious attack on a well-known and highly respected black woman academic at UCT in which her colleagues questioned her academic qualifications. Professor Mamokgethi Setati-Phakeng, South African mathematics educator and researcher, who holds the position of deputy vice chancellor, research and internationalisation at UCT and has been appointed as the next vice chancellor of that university, experienced this attack in the glare of the South African public.

In this chapter, I draw strength from Zine Magubane (2004: 7) in Hear Our Voices where she says the aim of sharing our stories is ‘to expose the racist (and sexist) practices that still suffuse the institutional culture of South African universities, despite their public pronouncements about their commitments to “diversity” and “transformation.”’ I also listen to TO Molefe (2012: 5) in Black Anger, White Obliviousness when he justifies his opinion piece by saying that it is his attempt, as this is mine, ‘to influence more people to tell their truths about South Africa’s racial
history and present, and to listen to others’ truths so that we may finally begin to reconcile, for real this time.’ This therefore is my rebellious moment, my after-40 tears (taken from the concept of after tears, a celebration after a funeral to celebrate the life of the departed). It is for these reasons that I have deliberately snubbed consistent adherence to any form of traditional literary, academic, biographical writing conventions in honour of telling my story, in my own voice, in my own way; so have this in mind when reading my indulgence. My deliberate abandonment of the normative writing style is also my attempt at exhibiting Mignolo’s (2009) epistemic disobedience of a culture in the academy that does not belong to me. I only wish I could have written this in isiZulu, my mother tongue, because I believe that would have allowed me to go to places, and would have made it easier for me to tell my story from my heart.

Accept the situation as it is; take us to court, or resign

Following what seemed like an exceptionally long (over two years) period of ‘investigations’ into a formal grievance (discrimination, harassment and intentional malice against me by a very senior member of staff, and the reason I had to step down as HoD of the discipline) I had lodged against a white professor in the university, I received an email from the industrial relations office indicating that the powers that be had decided that my grievance be removed from the table, that all parties involved must recommit to the jobs they were hired to do, and that failure to do so would result in disciplinary steps being taken. As the aggrieved party, I was astonished, confused and intensely angered by this new development in my grievance process. This was especially infuriating because at my last meeting with the powers that be, I had been assured that an investigation would be conducted into my grievance. It was at this meeting where I was told ‘the investigation will reveal one of three things: the grievance is valid; the grievance is not valid; or the grievance is valid but not substantive enough to warrant any action.’ I was therefore expecting communication along those lines; and this communication indicating that the matter had been closed took me by total surprise and left me baffled. I immediately requested a meeting for clarification, and it was at this meeting where these words, which have played in my mind every day since then, were uttered to me:

I have made my decision to close this matter. This matter is now closed.
If you are not happy with this decision, you really have three choices. You accept my decision, and that means accept the situation and live with it, or you take us to court, or you resign.

Bear in mind that this occurred at the very same time I applied for personal promotion to full professor, a time when my application was under review.

My feelings and thoughts have immediately been transported to how I felt as an undergraduate student (1993–96) when I realised, with continuing evidence, that
my university reifies, celebrates and protects white-as-normal epistemological and sociocultural values. The above encounter leads me to believe that socially, culturally, structurally and intellectually, postapartheid institutions of higher learning are still largely run in a way that perpetuates the notion of white superiority (for example, the university can’t afford to discipline a white, rated, full professor – whose rating contributes to what university rankings are all about – in favour of a black female associate professor with no rating). My experiences have served as testimony to the invidious and destructive nature of this white-as-normal epistemological position to the transformation imperative in higher education. My experiences also suggest that since 1994, successive vice chancellors and their executive team members have not really been able or willing to confront this transformation crisis head-on. Perhaps sharing these stories will help in confronting the enemy given that it is said, ‘if you see evil, and you name it, it recoils.’ Perhaps sharing these experiences will also afford the academy an opportunity to introspect, conduct more stay interviews instead of exit interviews, and implement measures to aggressively manage issues that ensure exclusion, rather than belonging, of black academics in higher learning. One of my favourite Zulu proverbs says ‘Ingane engakhali ifela embelekweni (A child who does not cry, dies in the sling [If you do not speak up about your problems, you will not be heard]).’

Allow me to now take you through a shortened version of my story from birth till now in academia, with a selection of short illustrative narratives from what I regard as critical life-defining milestones within this space. After deep reflections on these life-defining moments, it has become clear to me why and how I may have become an angry black woman.

**Undergraduate entry point: ‘You will need support’ at the age of 17!**

I came to the academy as a 17-year-old girl who had been through an exceptionally good schooling system that started at a reputable public school in KwaZulu-Natal, and ended in an inclusive, integrated and privately funded Grades 11 and 12 independent college in Gauteng. I was among the top-performing scholars throughout; I never once contemplated that I might experience academic difficulties at university. I had never failed a test in my life! In fact, if I came home with a report indicating that I took second position in my grade (which happened twice in my entire schooling), my family would be troubled that something was amiss – that I had been sick during exams, and they had failed to notice it, or that I had secretly started dating! This latter, a hypothesis that promptly lead my mother and my brother’s wife to send me to the clinic for family planning – a hypothesis that was subsequently rejected. So, imagine my disbelief and devastation when I, and I alone, all excited and hopeful for the future, was told that I needed to be registered on a ‘different, extended curriculum.’ I was ‘guided’ to register on a five-year, instead of the normal four-year, curriculum that the rest of the 30 girls who had come to
register in Senate House with me were registering for! As a naive, innocent and trusting 17-year-old who had lived a somewhat sheltered life in boarding school, I did not have the knowledge or ability to analyse and appreciate that incident for what it was. Perhaps it was also my exceptionally tolerant upbringing that made me blind to such unconcealed discriminatory treatment. I should mention that the rest of the girls who were going to be in my class were all white; I was the only black African student. This would be my life for the entire period of my study, barring ad hoc classes with other black students in the department in various extended curriculums.

I immediately asked the white woman who delivered the news to me (Mrs G, whom I later learned was appointed my department mentor) why I was supposed to be registered on the extended curriculum, and the rest of the girls not. At this point, all I was thinking about was ‘There is no way in hell my family can afford to pay for an additional year that was not communicated to them ahead of time!’ My question seemed to cause Mrs G to become visibly uncomfortable. She smiled and looked at me and said, ‘You will need support in this programme, and the extended curriculum gives you the opportunity to do well.’ So, clearly, this was for my benefit, I quietly thought. Still panicking about the financial implications, even though this seemed like a supportive measure for my benefit, I asked: ‘But how do you know that I will need support, and the rest of the girls won’t? Did I do badly in my matric marks compared to everybody else?’ Mrs G then, and only then, irritably asked for my academic transcript that detailed my matric results. She scrutinised it, her eyes glued to the paper, with a swift change in her skin colour signifying an elevated level of discomfort and, perhaps, embarrassment on her part. She sheepishly said:

Oh! You wrote under the Joint Matriculation Board? And you did well? I am going to let you register under the normal four-year curriculum. But, only if you agree to meet with me once a week in my office where I will make sure you are coping. The minute I see that you are struggling, because this is a difficult programme, we will change you to the extended curriculum – and you will receive academic support to make sure you pass.

There were emotions and thoughts that I had at this moment: Emotions and thoughts, because of my age, I could not understand

I did not understand what had just happened, nor the implications thereof. I was simply so relieved that I did not have to call home and tell them that I would need to be at university for an additional year, and that they would have to provide money for that year as well. This was my entry into higher education. This was also, in my hindsight analysis, my harsh introduction to the politics of race in higher education, which would shape a significant part of my academic life in this institution. What this incident illustrates, is the belief held by the white academy that black students are poor, and weak academically, by virtue of their skin colour. It is a fact that discriminatory behaviour is often hidden under the guise of support when, in fact, it
is merely a deficit model view of the black child. And it is the obvious implementation of obstacles that are there to make the black child have access with no success. No consideration for the financial, emotional or psychological implications of this black-specific extended curriculum was made. Had I not, as a 17-year-old, probed this treatment, I would have landed up on an extended curriculum by virtue of my skin colour and nothing else.

This ‘welcome’ day was followed by four protracted years of feeling lonely, different, marginalised, silenced, and so on – made initially worse by the weekly ‘support’ meetings with Mrs G. At these meetings, which I attended regularly and punctually, I would be asked the same questions: ‘Are you coping so far?’ ‘Do you feel you are managing or do you want to change to the extended curriculum?’ And my responses would always be the same. I was doing fine, and I did not want to be on the extended curriculum. The woman would go through all my assessments and marks and say, ‘Okay, looks like you’ve passed everything thus far. Let me know if you are struggling,’ and we would confirm the following week’s appointment. This happened for the entire first semester. When the June examination results were published, I could benchmark my performance against others. I was again very surprised that my marks in all courses were better than those for at least half of the class, and yet I was the only one going for these weekly sessions. My first support session of the second semester became my last because I asked Mrs G the same question: ‘Mrs G, why aren’t all the girls who got marks lower than mine receiving support? She muttered something under her breath, which I can’t recall, but I remember her saying, ‘You have done well in the first semester, and it is clear you no longer need support.’

_There were emotions and thoughts that I had at this moment: Emotions and thoughts I still could not clearly comprehend_

I, again, did not have a clear grasp of what had been happening and what had just happened; I was just pleased and relieved that I no longer had to schedule the appointment into my already very busy diary. That weekly appointment had not only provided me with a constant reminder that I was different in the department, and caused me constant anxiety, but it had also added significant time pressure on my already busy schedule. It was, in fact, my callous introduction to the reality of a non-inclusive institutional culture. This is the culture that was the lived experience of all black students then – and remains so for a number of black students and academics I have spoken to in recent months. The fact that it is assumed you will fail within this space, without any supporting evidence, and the fact that the treatment you receive grooms you for failure rather than success speaks to one of the possible reasons why academies have failed to retain black students to become academics – and black academics to become professors. This expectation of black failure is systemic and deeply entrenched in how the academy views and treats black bodies.
Undergraduate exit point: ‘Congratulations Katijah! We are so proud of you’

At the age of 21, after what felt like an exceptionally long, lonely and harshly isolating four years of study, I was looking forward to leaving that space forever. The numbers of black students were miniscule in the department and, in my class, I was the only one. For those four years, my lived experience had been that of a fly on the wall – there, not really there, observing but not really allowed to meaningfully engage as someone who belongs in the space, consistently careful not to touch or break anything in case my presence is noticed and I get fumigated. This is the place where I, my language, my culture, my very being was nonexistent in at least 95 per cent of the academic curriculum. My main exposure to black people was only in the clinical curriculum since, in most instances, black patients who could not speak English were allocated to me as the only black student; my allocated white patients probably protested to the clinic manager ahead of the appointment time because those were always swiftly altered. Pumla Gqola writes about this in Hear Our Voices and says: ‘With very few exceptions, I could not recognise myself in the UCT humanities curriculum. At this institution I was to identify lies and snatches about myself clearly in the course material’ (2004: 28). That space is where I spent an average of 10 hours a day, every weekday, during term time – and, sometimes, holidays because of the punishing schedule that required a significant number of clinical training hours. For the only black student who could speak African languages in a programme dealing with speech and language disorders; my clinical hours also included serving as translator and interpreter to other students for a significant amount of my time – a skill, as I look back now, that I should have received credits for, but did not. Perhaps I did not receive credits because I was simply ‘serving’ in the traditional and expected way that a black woman would in a white community? And perhaps because as a black person in South Africa, being multilingual is not seen as an exceptional skill, as it is for a white person who can speak English, Afrikaans and French, for instance? This space was supposed to be more ‘home’ than my actual home at that point, and yet it was truly not. The space had rejected me in every possible and conceivable way, and had not even come close to accommodating me as an individual. This space had been a physical structure where I came to learn; it had failed to be an ‘environment that offered security and happiness,’ a ‘valued place regarded as a refuge’ and it had failed to be ‘a place I could call my own,’ a place where I ‘belonged.’ This space failed, and still does, to afford me my right to ‘enter it and be part of the community not just to get things done, but to also be part of a sustaining, connected, and interdependent set of communities’3

I knew without any doubt that once I left this university, I would never return, not for any reason. So that day, our last day on campus, was especially exciting and yet nerve-wracking at the same time for me. This was the day the final examination
results were to be posted on the departmental notice board, the day when we were to find out if we were going to be graduating. I had never failed any examination in my life, and knew that I was not about to start, so I was fairly confident that I had passed all my exams. However, the pressure of those final examination results was very high because they were what was going to finally elevate me and my family from poverty. My passing those exams also had implications for my younger brother’s schooling because he was my responsibility, as I had been my older siblings’ responsibility – in what is now termed ‘black tax’.

Being the first person in my immediate and extended family to ever go to university, I was not carrying my hopes and aspirations only, but those of my entire family and community as well – represented by omama besililo (women from the burial society who knew my mother’s struggles, some of whom had made biscuits for me for residence food, most of whom had already started using my university-gained knowledge to make their and their family’s lives easier – for example, getting me to complete forms for them, assisting them with all kinds of applications, accompanying them to the banks and municipal offices where fluency in English and reading abilities were required, and so on). Having been the only black person in my class, I was aware that the profession I had chosen appeared to be reserved for whites only (or appealed only to whites, as was explained to me when I enquired); so my being in the programme bore that responsibility as well. But this societal burden was not new to me. I’ve always walked into a room knowing that I was not walking in alone and representing myself only; I have always walked in with family, community and, sometimes, my entire race. The academy’s ignorance and obliviousness to these added pressures that a black child carries not only show evidence of its white privilege but also work against its stated goal of growing its own timber – if this is a genuine goal.

On that last day, everybody was carrying a ruler to draw a straight line between their name and their marks to make absolutely certain that the marks being checked were truly theirs and not those of a classmate (the presentation layout then was on unlined paper). One by one, the girls were giving out jubilant screams. After each girl had finished checking her marks, she would step aside and give the next girl a chance to check while they stood aside observing and congratulating everybody else. My turn finally came, and I checked my results. I had made it! My goodness! I had passed well too! Right at that moment, a white professor from the university came to the notice board and, in a loud, proud, clear voice said, ‘Congratulations Katijah! We are so proud of you!!’ Very quickly, one of the white girls replied before I could: ‘We all passed, why are you congratulating her only?’ Silence. This silence lasted for about a minute, but it felt like a loooong time. I don’t remember what the response was; I don’t believe there was one.
There were emotions and thoughts that I had at this moment: Emotions and thoughts that were now familiar, but I still could not clearly articulate

I believe that, by this time, I had chosen silence as a mode of response simply because it had become too exhausting to directly respond to such blatant acts of racism. What this professor meant was, ‘Congratulations Katijah (our only black student)! The whole department is so proud of you because we did not think you were going to make it in record time as a black student in this white programme – !!!’ What I had achieved in the department was disruption of whiteness. I had performed inconsistently with what had been expected of a black person, hence, the false praise from the professor.

PhD entry point: ‘Well done on your MA! Are you certain you want to do a PhD?’

A couple of years after obtaining my Master’s degree (MA) in 2000 while a clinician at Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Hospital, I decided to enrol for a PhD in audiology. This decision was based on the fact that I had intensely enjoyed the research component of my MA experience, which had been through coursework and a research report. While attending one of the postgraduate meetings where possible research topics are usually discussed, one of the white professors who was a potential supervisor for my PhD came up to me and said, ‘Well done on your MA! Congratulations! Are you certain you want to do a PhD? You are such a good clinician! Our profession needs good clinicians you know…not everyone is cut out for research.’ This, coming from the only academic with a PhD who could supervise PhD students in the profession in the department at the time, was devastating. I knew, at that point, that I would not have much option in terms of supervisors in the programme because my MA supervisor (who was not in the field of audiology) had already indicated that she did not feel equipped to supervise me at PhD level. I also knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that I would not wish to be supervised by this professor after the comment she had just made. Why was it so hard to believe that after obtaining my MA, my decision to enrol for a PhD was a carefully considered one? Why was this question asked of me only and not of any of the other students (who were white)? If I was such a good clinician, what prevented me – and only me – from being both a good clinician and a good researcher? If our profession needed good clinicians, didn’t it also need good researchers? I was one of the first, if not the very first black student to get an MA degree in audiology in the country; why was this not celebrated and encouraged? I was definitely the first to enrol for a PhD; why was this actively discouraged? Without intrinsic motivation, I would not have enrolled; and had I not been intimately used to this exclusion, I would probably have enrolled at another university – something I did consider. What this professor was essentially saying to me was:
How in the world did you get your MA? Who do you think you are to think you can obtain a PhD? No black person has ever enrolled for a PhD in this profession in the country before. You should stick to your lane, stay in your box!

There were emotions and thoughts that I had at this moment: Emotions and thoughts that were now remarkably familiar, and this time I knew exactly what they were

Although I believe I probably took this stance very early on in my academic career, this is the first vivid memory I have where I told myself, ‘I am going to show you that I can do it and excel in doing so, I am going to prove that people like me can do it and be good at it.’ My disruptive, defiant, resilient and activist personality stubbornly kept me going back to this institution even though I had vowed at the end of my undergraduate studies that I would never return. By this time I had decided, ‘I will not let you win! I will not dim my light so that yours can shine.’ This is the position that Motlalepule Nathane in her chapter, Sitting on One Bum: The Struggle of Survival and Belonging for a Black African Woman in the Academy in this book adopted when she asserts, ‘Ek gaan nerens, ek daak nie maar ek phola hierso.’

Notwithstanding, my MA supervisor saw me through an exceptionally difficult PhD process where she did all she could; but it was simply not sufficient – through no fault of her own. I finished my PhD in three and a half years, which was impressive, but had the bulk of my data analysis and results interpretation supervision from one of the external examiners who was very thorough and constructive in his evaluation of my thesis. As harrowing as the process was, with the emotional support of my then head of school, I welcomed it because not only did it elevate the level of my work but also taught me research supervision at the same time – a skill I have subsequently utilised as a postgraduate research supervisor in the academy. All this was of course following another opportunity for me to have emotions and thoughts – emotions and thoughts that had become part of most of my major milestones within the academy. This was on PhD thesis submission day when the potential supervisor who never was found me in the staffroom and said, ‘Katijah, I hear you’ve submitted, congratulations! I guess the proof of the pudding is in the eating, hey?’ What she meant was, ‘You actually completed your thesis? That can't be true! There's no way you are going to pass.’ The constant expectation of failure and lack of support and confidence in one's abilities and skills is an overriding, steadfast and constant presence in a black academic's life.
**Entry into the academy as an employee: ‘Your contract says you are employed as a lecturer, is that correct? It’s a very demanding position you know...’**

My PhD process had proven challenging financially and timewise for me as a clinician at the hospital where I was working. So, when I was advised of an advertised vacancy in the academy, I grabbed the opportunity and applied. I was at the data collection stage of my PhD and had been made to believe that being within an academic environment would not only allow me access to intellectual support but it would also afford me time to focus on my work because postgraduate studies were regarded as part of the workload; and it would unlock opportunities for much-needed research funding. It was pretty clear at the selection interview with the deputy HoD and head of school (HoS) at the time that the position could be mine if I wanted it; they made it blatantly clear that the department needed a transformation candidate. I was, regardless of my race, more than qualified for the position, had more than appropriate experience and was ready to move to a teaching post. But I was not desperate because I was extremely happy in my job as a clinician and had been promised research funding for the following year by the Department of Health. This was probably why, when the deputy HoD called to offer me a position as a clinical tutor in the department, I comfortably turned it down and indicated that I would only come to the academy in a position of lecturer. I had already investigated and found out that with a Master’s degree, I qualified for a lecturer position. The deputy HoD must have gone to the HoS with my response, because a few days later, I received a phone call from the HoS offering me a lectureship position. This was not the position advertised, though – this was a position ‘created’ for me in the department through the use of the then vice chancellor’s equity fund. Had it not been for the HoS – a black woman who saw it appropriate to access this fund – I would not have joined the academy. I am also aware that were it not for this fund, a large number of black academics would not have joined the academy. It is important to note the ease with which I was immediately juniorised into a tutor position although I more than qualified to be a lecturer. In actual fact, at the time, there were a number of white academics in the department who were lecturers and who did not possess MA degrees. This act of appointing qualified black academics in more junior positions than whites is reported across various institutions in the country. Kezia Batista in her chapter, ‘Black and Foreign: Negotiating Being Different in South Africa’s Academy’, in this book shares a similar experience. Such juniorisation of blacks is in line with the mastermind of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd’s infamous statement about blacks being ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water,’ regardless of an individual’s abilities and aspirations.
There are emotions and thoughts that I have at this moment about this incident: Emotions and thoughts that are characteristic of intense anger and a sense of hopeless despair

On 16 March 2006, my first day as an employee in the academy, the first person I met was the HoD. Besides the fact that nothing had been prepared for me, the HoD also did not seem to be aware that this was my starting day – and she brazenly expressed this fact. No one was waiting to welcome me, no office had been prepared for me, let alone stationery, desk, computer, and so on. At my meeting with the HoD in her office, she spent the first few minutes scratching around her desk for what seemed like hours for my employment contract because she was not sure what position I had been employed for (remember, the deputy HoD had been part of the selection interview – surely one hand would have informed the other of what it was doing?). When she finally found the contract under a pile of papers, she quickly browsed through it as her face adopted a shocked expression and a look of sheer disgust:

Your contract says you are employed as a lecturer, is that correct? It’s a very demanding position you know, and most people are not able to meet the probation requirements. I can motivate for it to be changed to tutor to make sure you meet the probation requirements if you like?

What was actually meant here was, ‘Who would employ you here as a lecturer? There’s no way you are going to cope with the demands of a lecturer as a black person. The only way you can even be working here is if you are a tutor.’

The all-too-familiar feelings and thoughts that have become part of my lived experience in this space came flooding through: Feelings and thoughts I have learned to live with – with the help of therapy, 20mg daily Paxil and 5mg twice a day if necessary, Urbanol

These feelings and thoughts became the defining feature of all my endeavours and achievements within the academy. As a black academic, you are expected to fail and so you are provided with support, you are ‘assisted’ into less demanding positions, you are guided away from engaging in activities that define what it is to be an intellectual. A year after I was employed, I unknowingly served informally and unofficially as a deputy HoD because the HoD at the time, when confronted by the then new HoS on my exact role in the department said, ‘I did not make her appointment official because I wanted to test her first.’ What was meant here was ‘I did not want her to be deputy HoD, and did not believe she could do the job.’ Even if you are given responsibilities that are not typically given to black people, this is done unofficially because you still have to prove yourself to the powers that be – a practice I don’t believe is standard practice for all academics. At that time, I was the only black academic woman in the audiology department, and the only academic with a Master’s degree in that department.
My career path advanced to me being appointed HoD because the HoD had quit the position with immediate effect. Prior to my appointment as HoD, this former HoD called a staff meeting to oppose my appointment, and expressed the following:

I’m opposing her appointment for her own good...I am concerned about her...She’s young, she needs to focus on her young family, management will negatively affect her ability to grow as an academic...she won’t have time to publish...she’s a past student in the department, etc., etc., etc...

At this meeting, one of the black members of staff questioned that HoD:

All previous HoDs became HoDs when they were young. Besides yourself, none of them had PhDs, and Katijah has a PhD. All, including yourself, were past students in the department; and yet you did not have problems with them being HoD. The only difference I see here is race. Are you opposed to Katijah becoming HoD because of her race?

I am told that there was silence, followed by a very untidy denial attempt, which ended in an immediate termination of plans to block my appointment. The fake concern expressed here was actually, ‘The department can’t be run by a black person.’

My role as HoD was extremely challenging but with an extremely supportive HoS, it was not only enjoyable and fulfilling, it was also extremely productive and successful. The HoS I speak of here is a person who was not apologetic about transformation as an imperative, one who was incredibly excellence-orientated (with everyone, regardless of race) and an HoS who once said to me: ‘As a manager, you have failed dismally if an individual leaves your organisation in the same position she or he came in.’ That became my motto in leadership and mentorship positions I have since held. The period when I was HoD under this HoS was the only time I began to be hopeful about my role and my position as a black woman within the academy. It was the only time in the history of my stay within the academy when I felt seen and heard. This feeling of belonging was, however, short-lived as the term of office of that HoS came to an end and he found a higher position in another institution. Fast-forward to one year after the appointment of a new HoS; I quit as HoD and my reasons were constructive dismissal.

There are emotions and thoughts that I now completely understand. I know exactly what they are, what they mean, and where they emanate from. I define these emotions and thoughts as emotional and intellectual toxicity

These emotions and thoughts have been labelled by many (most of whom have played an active role in developing and nurturing this toxicity) – as me being an angry black woman, an overly sensitive person, a prickly individual, and so on. These are labels that I have learned to embrace because I quickly realised that they were silencing tools that white power was using to try and exclude my voice and my impact in the academy. They were used to bully me into silence and into a box and a lane meant
for me – to invisibilise me. Grace Musila, in her chapter, ‘Thinking While Black,’ in this book, deliberates on this very phenomenon when she asserts that ‘we are more than our rage, our resistance, our frustration,’ and asks questions about ‘how do we nurture black affirmation? How do we craft a healthy, dignified blackness, in a world where blackness is a captured identity location that needs permission to speak, and must play nice and tiptoe around white sensitivities?’

Because almost all of my academic achievements are framed within this emotional and intellectual toxicity lens, I believe it is for this very reason that my driver’s licence, which happened in a place far away from the academy with no academy association whatsoever, takes such a prized spot on my wall of achievements. It is detached from all the experiences of exclusion I have while fighting to belong within higher education in this country, as a black woman. In my almost 25 years in higher education, my experiences have mainly been those of exclusion, with a brief short-lived, 5-year period of a taste of belonging.

Conclusions and recommendations

In sharing my personal story, I wish to highlight the important fact that black South African academics (like myself) who have had an unquenchable thirst for the world of academia, and have had successes despite the enormous challenges they face, have been anything but passive victims or willing accomplices in the toxic environments they’ve found themselves. I have, from the day I set foot within the academy felt what African-American novelist Nellie McKay has written: ‘To be black (and female) in the academy has its own particular frustrations because it was never intended for us to be here. We are in spaces that have been appropriated for us’ (Guy-Sheftall 1995: 451). For us to feel that the academy is also for us, and for us to achieve the yearned-for sense of belonging, it is crucial that we share our stories without fear or favour. This is especially true because the number of black women academics in South Africa paints a dreary picture, with them being grossly under-represented and almost nonexistent at professorial levels. This under-representation not only means an absence of their voice and an omission of their ideas in curriculum and research; it also means there is an almost nonexistent capacity to lobby and impact on change for this group. The small numbers of black women academics make individual activism harder because the perceived risks are disproportionately higher. When critical mass is lacking, those who are glass-ceiling-breakers are forced into being risk averse, betraying their beliefs, all in an effort to self-preserve. If we don’t share our stories, the words of Martin Luther King in Jesse Stellato’s Not in Our Name: American Anticwar Speeches 1846 to the Present (2012: 144) will ring true for this and future generations: ‘If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.’ If we succumb to the obvious and blatant attempts to silence us by labelling us as angry black women, or describing us as prickly and oversensitive, or by bullying us out of the space by
punching us down, 'glory' will never come. It will remain an Oscar-winning song by John Legend and Common. And this extends to us giving up on asserting ourselves in the knowledge generation of the academy by failing to insert our knowledge in publishing – or being boxed into publishing only certain types of knowledges that support certain narratives, something I have become very cautious of.

The experiences I have shared, I believe, speak to the following important components of a serious transformation drive:

- **Honest acknowledgement of serious shortcomings and problems around white privilege, racism and lack of transformation is required.** It is important that academies realise that they have a moral obligation to actively engage with and address the legacy of apartheid in all their activities.

- **Acknowledgement of racism and patriarchy as the key features of colonialism and apartheid that continue to profoundly shape the social composition of academic staff nationally is called for.**

- **Active recruitment of black students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.**

- **Creation of institutional cultures that are inclusive, cultures that facilitate prosperity and a sense of belonging for everybody.**

- **Talent management, especially at postgraduate level, for institutions to engage in ‘grow your own timber’ initiatives if staffing profiles are to change.** These staffing profiles need to reflect visible and greater representation of black and female staff members.

- **Mentorship and career development of black staff if staff productivity, staff retention and career advancement are to happen.**

- **Careful monitoring of barriers to transformation (institutional culture, institutional policies, active and genuine engagement with racism, and so on) with implementation of genuine early interventions where they are identified.**

University management, in deliberating on ways forward in terms of addressing the toxicity within the higher education sector, will need to perform careful risk–benefit assessments around academic staff, over and above institutional assessments. If, amongst their staff as in my narrative, there are members who introduce or sustain toxicity in the institution (and serve as barriers to successful transformation initiatives), their benefit to the system should to be carefully weighed against the risk they pose. As in ototoxicity, when no drug is completely safe, and as when the Food and Drug Administration may be willing to accept more severe side effects from a drug used to treat life-threatening disease (such as HIV infection), so one might argue that no perfect academic exists on this planet either. However, where the toxicity of a drug has been established and definitive side effects documented (for example, it has been recorded to result in death, is life-threatening, requires inpatient hospitalisation or prolongation of hospitalisation, results in persistent or significant disability/incapacity, and so on), then clear and decisive intervention strategies are implemented.
One might argue whether the above side effects of drug toxicity are applicable in the context of intellectual and emotional toxicity, as I posit. Many black academics within and outside my institution have described such symptoms in relation to their experiences of exclusion within the academy. I recently responded to a question about how I have survived within the academy – why I have stayed so long – and my response was ‘I have died a million deaths.’ I have constantly felt that my life and my existence within the academy are threatened daily; that I receive medical and psychological treatment for stress, anxiety, gastro-oesophageal reflux, insomnia, constant headaches, panic attacks, and so forth – all induced by the toxic environment I have found myself in. I have often felt completely disabled and incapacitated to do my job because of the constant and unrelenting assault on my being within the academy. These feelings and experiences are a theme common to many black, especially black women, academics I have interacted with.

In drug toxicity, once the adverse effects are identified, options analysis promptly ensues. This is where all appropriate options for action about the toxic drug are determined and listed, where advantages and disadvantages as well as likely consequences (impact analysis) of each option under consideration are described – and this is also where suggestions on how the consequences of the recommended action would be monitored or assessed (FDA 2013). Following this logic, the same strategy could be adopted by university management in dealing with identified toxic individuals or toxic environments and systems. One obviously has to acknowledge that such actions would be influenced by a number of factors, as in any benefit–risk assessment. For example, in drug toxicity (CIOMS Working Group IV 1998) a number of factors including considerations around economic issues, nature of the medical problem, indication for drug use and population under treatment, stakeholders and constituencies, and so on, are made. Similar, and additionally appropriate, factors that adhere to the country’s labour regulations could be deliberated on when intellectual and emotional toxicity benefit–risk assessments are made. Careful consideration of these influencing factors would go a long way toward creating an academy that is responsive to the needs of the marginalised.

After such a contextually relevant and contextually responsive benefit–risk assessment has been conducted, I believe that lack of decisive action by university management can only be interpreted as active complicity in the murder of the black academics within the academy. In drug toxicity, an option referred to as maintenance of the status quo (CIOMS Working Group IV 1998) exists as one of the possible options that can be taken; however, this option is only viable if there is no evidence for concern regarding the drug in question. The current tumultuous climate in higher education around issues of transformation and decolonisation, as witnessed in the media, has provided enough evidence to completely eliminate maintenance of the status quo as an option. The nature and weight of the evidence is, unfortunately, often determined by the very people responsible for the toxicity – as has been
the case in my narrative. Because of these built-in measures that support toxicity, maintenance of the status quo has been, and will remain, the default position unless drastic measures are adopted to dismantle it.

Another option to deal with toxicity, as used in drug toxicity, is the watching and waiting option. This is where monitoring occurs for subsequent experience of the toxic event (CIOMS Working Group IV 1998; Khoza-Shangase 2017), usually if insufficient evidence exists, and additional data gathering is required for any action to be taken. Again, in intellectual and emotional toxicity, I argue that this option should no longer be on the table. Sufficient evidence, 24 years after our country’s democracy, exists for us to know that there is a serious lack of transformation, with extreme paucity of evidence of the inclusion or belonging of black academics within the academy.

If the above two options are no longer available to the academy, it is left only with more drastic options including active and direct modifications to the system or functioning of the system that include restrictions of the availability of the toxins (for example, fire staff who pose a threat to the transformation project) alongside active and direct institutional training around issues of diversity.

As in my lived experience, if intellectual and emotional toxicity cannot be cured, higher education in South Africa will continue to embrace and celebrate historically dominant discourses that do not characterise all South Africans (and in this case, specifically, exclude African discourses). Blacks will continue to feel excluded in the curriculum as well as in power and space sharing, the research agenda and outputs will continue to present narratives that do not reflect our truth and our worldview (prevailing epistemology and ontology is far removed from us). Current dominant cultures in our institutions will continue to affect student learning, their progress and their success (while at the same time alienating black academics). And, lastly, the status quo will continue to negatively affect the development and retention of a new generation of academics that must include black women, who are currently completely under-represented in the academy. Given that intellectual and emotional toxicity cannot be cured, prevention is key – alongside active and continuous management of the already diagnosed toxicity.

In prevention, early identification and early intervention are crucial to successful management of intellectual and emotional toxicity. This includes identification of the already presenting toxicity as well as its monitoring to ensure that any intervention is efficacious. However, for future prevention, determinants for toxicity need to be identified and listed with risk populations, risk factors and risk environments carefully categorised. Under risk populations, black people, black women, and women could be on high alert for the academy. Risk factors such as age (particularly young academics in these populations), personal susceptibility to the toxicity (coping abilities, resilience, and so on), daily and long-term exposure to the toxic substance should be further red flags for primary prevention. Lastly, risk
environment in the form of institutional culture, institutional support, regulations and policies, and so on, should form part of primary prevention strategies.

Strong political will from management is critical. Pronouncements made publicly by management of their commitment to the transformation imperative without measurable results should be met with disdain. The ad nauseam public debates about transformation by top management must end! The evident satisfaction with establishments of transformation offices and mission statements about transformation should be viewed as the stalling tactics that they are. White supremacy should be confronted and dismantled where identified, and new institutional powers and institutional cultures reflective of inclusivity and redress be installed. The era of higher education reproducing and reinforcing white racial interests and perspectives must end. This should be done with haste – there won’t be enough excrement in the world to express the imminent black South Africans’ uprising against those perceived to be blocking access and success of black academics to the pre-1994, inherited, exclusive academy. There won’t be enough conversations to quell Hugo Canham’s (2017) ‘generative potential of Black rage.’ Within my profession, which deals with speech–language/communication pathology, the continuation of the status quo has serious ethical and clinical implications (supported by evidence on global health), which indicates that groups who do not form part of the dominant culture have worse health outcomes than the dominant populations (Flood & Rohloff 2018); these authors argue that health programmes conceived and delivered using the clients’ languages are likely to be more efficacious. Within my profession, I believe that actual diagnosis and treatment of language disorders cannot ethically and accurately happen without consideration of the impact of the emotional and intellectual toxicity this chapter puts forward.

Acknowledgements
#IamWinnieMadikizelaMandela
#SheDidNotDieSheMultiplied

Notes
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Thinking while black
Grace A Musila

I

In June 2015, I had a difficult exchange with a young black academic on social media, who asked me a question I am still trying to answer. I would like to reproduce part of that conversation here, because this piece is part of my search for an answer for my young friend:

Friend: Hi Grace, I wanted to ask you a relatively personal question – how do you own being a black woman academic in this white and patriarchal space?

Me: That’s a difficult one. I wish I could answer it coherently. The honest answer? I am still looking for ways of owning it, and the energy to do so (and I hear the same from my colleagues too). The ‘Oprah’ answer? Find the balance between strategic diplomacy and being true to your convictions. Strategic, because we are still guests in the academy, with guest privileges, which the system reminds us it can withdraw at will. So, even when you are being radical, you have to cover your back, otherwise the system will find ways to use that against you, and you will have done no favours – neither to yourself nor the black cause. And the second part, conviction, because it is a hard road, and you will only keep walking it if you believe in what you are claiming, namely, conviction about blackness and womanhood, whatever that means to each of us, which in turn, is a work in progress. Once you are clear about what you believe in, you also become clear on the non negotiables: those things you will not compromise on, because such compromise will kill your spirit. Once you find the balance, you gradually develop the wisdom to choose your battles – not every battle is worth fighting. Some are pointless wastes of energy and ego indulgence, while others are absolutely important to take on, even if you know you will lose, because they nurture your clarity on what is at stake and what you will not willingly compromise on. I guess that is a long paraphrase of my answer, which is: I am still trying to figure this out...

This question has stayed with me since June 2015. My friend was asking many questions in that one question. She was asking, how can we be black women academics in the South African – and by extension, global – academy? She was asking, how do we develop, embrace, and nurture spaces and practices where blackness is not ‘overdetermined from without,’ to borrow Jean-Paul Sartre and
Frantz Fanon’s (2000) phrase? She was implying something I have always known, but I am yet to find a grammar for articulating. She was implying: we are more than our rage, our resistance, our frustration. How do we say that? How do we nurture black affirmation? How do we craft a healthy, dignified blackness, in a world where blackness is a captured identity location that needs permission to speak, and must play nice and tiptoe around white sensitivities? How do we say with Henry Louis Gates Jr, ‘I’ve been black for my whole life, also a [wo]man; but I’ve come to suspect that this isn’t the whole story’? (1998: xxvii). How do we say this in a world that reduces us to our rage, and then delegitimises our rage by valorising a conciliatory ethos underwritten by continued black vulnerability and the myth of bottomless pools of black forgiveness? How do we articulate and embody what Hugo Canham (2017: 6) correctly describes as ‘the generative potential of Black rage,’ which holds the promise of self-love? These are questions I have yet to answer for myself. For now, all I can offer is an attempt to explain why these questions emerge at all, for a black academic on a majority black continent, in a majority black country.

I often say to myself – only half-jokingly – that there is a gap in the South African insurance industry: an insurance cover for the souls of black folk (to borrow WEB Du Bois’s phrase) working in South Africa’s historically white academy and corporate sector. There is need for this insurance cover, for black souls’ health. But as we wait for the insurance industry to address this gap, we have to find various ways of hanging on to our sanity, as people who dare to think while black: people afflicted with the curse of insight – the ability to see through various facades and their rhetoric, which remain empty for people of colour because they encourage us to aspire to what Alex Alston (2015), following Keguro Macharia, describes as a humanity whose ‘vernaculars of the human’ inherently exclude black people. Rhetoric such as Multicultural. Multilingual. Multiracial. Dignity for all. The list of politically correct rhetoric perpetually renews itself, often cannibalising many well-meaning debates and concepts.

Like my colleagues, I too adopt various mental and spiritual diets to hold my soul together. One of my favourites is black writing, especially black writing from the African diaspora. It is partly in gratitude to this body of writing that nurtures my humanity as a black person that I open this meditation with a poem by one of my favourite black poets, Paul Laurence Dunbar. In ‘We Wear the Mask’, a poem reflecting on black people’s experiences in the US at a historical moment when black lives mattered even less, Dunbar (1992) writes:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes –
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

Many black colleagues, like me, know these masks, intimately. In some ways, writing this piece – and indeed, the essays in the book as a whole – is an act of removing these masks that need no explaining for black readers who know what it means to ‘become’ black.

Black writing is important to me, and among the many loves of my life, are fictional characters in some of these works. Characters whose sheer outrageousness, cheek, humour, courage and total ungovernability – to use that South Africanism – make my spirit sing with delight and weep with astonishment at their intense humanness. One such person is Janie Starks, the protagonist in Zora Neale Hurston’s (1986) Their Eyes Were Watching God. I love Janie for reasons too complicated and lengthy to recount here; but her complex relationship to whiteness comes to mind for me when I think of my journey to becoming black in the South African academy. As a child raised by her grandmother – a recently emancipated slave in the South – she grows up together with her grandmother’s employers’ white grandchildren, subject to the same forms of punishment for mischief, which the children get into frequently. One particular incident in Janie’s childhood stood out for me, and is worth citing in full:

Ah was wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn’t have found it out then, but a man come long takin’ pictures and without askin’ anybody, Shelby, day was de oldest boy, he told him to take us. Round a week later de man brought de picture for Mis’ Washburn to see and pay him which she did, then give us all a good lickin’. So when we looked at de picture and everybody got ponted out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat’s where Ah wuz s’posed to be, but Ah couldn’t recognize that dark chile as me. So Ah ast, ‘where is me? Ah don’t see me.’ Everybody laughed, even Mr Washburn. Miss Nellie...pointed at de dark one and said ‘Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ ownself?’ Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said: ‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’ Den dey all laughted real hard. But before Ah seen de picture, Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest. (Hurston 1986: 12)

Janie’s childhood experience with her blackness here resonates for me in complicated ways. Although she has always been black, she becomes black when she finally sees herself in relation to whiteness. The process of becoming black here evokes Fanon’s thinking on the experience of blackness as relative to the white gaze, or, as he puts it, ‘not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man’ (2008: 82), while the reverse is not the case, as Fanon warns us. Elsewhere in Black Skin White Masks, Fanon comments on the ways in which the black person’s
identity is overdetermined from without; not only because a new black person comes into being under certain kinds of white gazes – ‘I feel, in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new genus. Why, it’s a negro!’ (Fanon 2008: 87) – but because, as per Sartre, the black person, like the Jew, is overdetermined from without. Finding themselves fixed under a gaze tinted with stereotypes of Jewishness or blackness, they are faced with an awkward choice: if they confirm the stereotype, they give these lines of thinking new life; if they actively set out to resist them, they illustrate that there was some truth to the stereotype. Or as Sonia Kruks argues, Fanon exposes the contradictions embedded in the tensions between the universal and the particularist assumptions of French society:

Either the Jew attempts to assimilate to the norms of ‘civilised’ society (hence confirming his or her Jewish particularity as a stigma which must be eradicated) or the Jew indulges his or her particular practices and customs (hence confirming the very stereotype that the anti-Semite has of the Jew). (Kruks 1996: 116)

Janie Starks’s childhood experience in certain ways illustrates Fanon’s ideas on one sense of becoming black.

For Fanon though, it is important to find ways of dismantling both this over-determination from without, and the attendant mythologised black person produced by the white gaze, precisely because, as he protested, in response to Sartre:

Black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal... My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as lack. It is. It is its own follower. (Fanon 2008: 103)

This is Fanon’s resolution of the Jew’s/black person’s dilemma as per Sartre. It is also Fanon’s response to Sartre’s thinking, which adopted a Hegelian logic of racism that, as Kruks argues, read blackness as ‘an element in the dialectic (that is, a European perception of the teleological unfolding of history) which will eventually disappear into a raceless and classless society’ (Kruks 1996: 117). By Sartre’s logic, Kruks writes, ‘the Black and the Jew are constructed by the look of the racist coloniser/anti-Semite, and have no ontological experience of their own, outside of this gaze. So, they are destined to disappear with the eventual elimination of anti-Semitism/racism’ (Kruks 1996: 117). For Fanon, this is simply ‘another version of the Western Enlightenment vision of man: ethnic attachments are a sign of parochialism and backwardness which must be removed in the pursuit of freedom [in addition] the Hegelian dialectic (employed by Sartre) implicitly endorses a European “I” (or eye) (Kruks 1996: 118).

Fanon, Sartre and Kruks grapple with the question of what to do with racial difference, especially when it is framed as both a product of a racialised gaze that creates mythologies around otherwise neutral racial differences, and a form of ethnocultural particularity, with the implicit pressure of assimilation into hegemonic
cultures, in this case, white. In Fanon’s view, racial difference cannot be addressed as a problem to be resolved through black integration into a hegemonic white cultural script that masquerades as neutral, non-raced universal. This rhetoric of integration into a hegemonic white normativity entails the absorption of the specificity of black struggles into a faux-normative whiteness, most recently articulated in popular responses to the Black Lives Matter movement by claims that All Lives Matter. Equally, as Alston (2015) eloquently notes in a critique of black respectability as a response to the recent onslaught of anti-black violence in the United States, it is important to bear in mind that ‘what respectability politics hinge on is the possibility of incorporating black life forms into a Western idea of humanity configured entirely on the dehumanization of blackness’.

Sartre, Fanon and Kruks, then, speak to questions of becoming black. Or, more specifically, the two ways of becoming black: in the sense of being raced through the white gaze, and in the sense of awakening to an immanent black consciousness, and grappling with what it means to embrace and live out this consciousness, in a world that prefers to make one black à la the white gaze. I read Janie Starks’s encounter above as the beginning of her becoming black – though her experiences in the novel unfold in ways that accent intra-black politics of race, gender and love. My journey to, and within, the South African academy has been about negotiating both modes of becoming black.

II

Despite growing up in black neighbourhoods and schools, being exposed to pan-African and black thought from across the continent and, indeed, across the world, I became African when I went to the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) for my postgraduate studies – and only became black when I moved to Stellenbosch.

So what do I mean by becoming African and black at these institutions? How did I only become black during my postgraduate studies, when I had studied history and literature both in high school and undergraduate studies in Kenya and, indeed, studied the politics of racism, colonialism, apartheid, the Negritude movement, the protest literature of South African writers, and the searing critiques of racism in the fiction of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, George Lamming and Richard Wright long before I set foot in the South African academy? And why didn’t I become black at Wits, where my home department, African Literature, exposed me to more of this scholarship, writing and thought? The answer is simple: in high school in Kenya, race was never an identity I experienced viscerally – largely because it was a predominantly black school, with a small handful of students and teachers of other races. The same applied to undergraduate studies in Kenya. More importantly, as an undergraduate, I was in a literature department – something I took for granted as a banal fact of naming, in the same way one could be in a sociology department or a history department.
In terms of curriculum content, in high school, we started Form One (Grade 8) with 16 courses: maths, biology, chemistry, physics, English, Kiswahili, German, geography, religious studies, social ethics, history, home science, art, music, agriculture and physical education. We narrowed down to 13 subjects in Form Two, and eventually ended with 8 subjects in Forms Three and Four (Grades 11 and 12). What this meant was that, one way or another, you were exposed to multiple bodies of knowledge and ideas and histories from across the world: a lot of which we admittedly considered irrelevant. In English and Kiswahili literature, our set works included the drama of figures such as English William Shakespeare, Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, Nigerian Wole Soyinka and Tanzanian Ebrahim Hussein; the fiction was drawn from west and southern Africa, and collections of poetry from across the continent. The important thing about this curriculum content was that we moved smoothly from Peter Abrahams to Bertolt Brecht, from John Ruganda to Nadine Gordimer, from Alex la Guma to Ngrom Alex La Gum. There was no hierarchy of knowledge, although we remained haunted by the then fashionable prioritisation of the so-called hard sciences over the arts and social sciences.

My undergraduate curriculum in the literature department at Moi University would feature the same exciting journeys across literatures and thought of different thinkers from all over the world, once again, sans hierarchy. When you move smoothly from a discussion of Greek tragic theatre and Aristotle’s thoughts, to a reflection on Yoruba cosmology and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, you come away with the assumption that Yoruba and Greek philosophy are equals: that they are simply different ways of understanding the world, and neither is in any way superior to the other. And this is where I got the wrong sense of the world; I understood the racist histories from which we came, and from which South Africa had just come, with the official demise of apartheid – but I had yet to comprehend racism as a lived experience. I had yet to become black. I had arrived at my twenties seeing my blackness as a banal statement of fact, rather like the baby fat around my tummy that insisted on sticking around late into my twenties. It just was.

Postgraduate studies at the Department of African Literature at Wits brought two things to me: an awareness of myself as an African (and not just a Kenyan), and a deeper celebration and immersion into scholarship on black life, both continental and diasporic. This was a powerful and nurturing immersion, which on hindsight, cushioned me from the struggles my black colleagues were wrestling with in their interactions with their intellectual homes at the university, and that may not have had such a matter-of-course affirming relationship to blackness and Africanness as the African literature department did. At the same time, in the early 2000s, there was a large contingent of graduate students from across the continent studying at Wits. We formed a loose community that would often bump into each other at the Postgraduate Club (the PiG) and bond over heated arguments about politics, soccer and the merits or demerits of Amstel Lager – along with more serious conversations about our research and our various contexts back home. I became an African and
a pan-African, thanks to these after-hours classes on Africa, and the formal classes in the African literature department, whose syllabus was unapologetically African in impulse – and broadly, interested in the literatures, lives and cultures of people of colour across the world. This did not mean strict exclusion of white writing and scholarship; rather, it meant a clear privileging of literatures and scholarships of people of colour in conversation with each other, and with white life and writing. These contexts further consolidated my assumptions about the place of African knowledge and thought broadly, and African lives specifically. Black lives mattered, as a matter of course. Black thought mattered, as a matter of course.

Raised to take it for granted that there was nothing political about naming a department, English or literature or African literature (a naiveté I must take full responsibility for), nothing had prepared me for operating in an English department at a predominantly white university. While there were colleagues who shared my research and teaching interest in African literatures and, broadly, the lives and thoughts of people of colour, what I had taken for granted as an equality of literatures at the marketplace of ideas turned out to be far from a universal truth. For the first time in my life in the academy, I was faced with student resistance and even disregard for writings from the continent. Repeatedly, anonymous student feedback registered that they were ‘tired of reading about apartheid and postcolonial texts,’ even though these same students registered deep surprise at the banalities of how apartheid functioned – banalities such as the idea of separate utensils for domestic helpers who could be trusted with preparing their employers’ food, but couldn’t be permitted to use the same utensils as the employers. What I had taken for granted – that all students have a healthy curiosity about the world, which includes Africa – turned out to have been a fantasy. Suddenly, I found myself having to convincingly explain why these stories mattered: why the experiences of a civil servant in Accra at the height of the Nkrumah presidency, in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* mattered, why Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* was worth knowing and thinking about. Although the crisis of student apathy is hardly unique to South Africa, or my institution for that matter, the selective apportionment of interest and curiosity certainly is unique. Shakespeare and the Brontë sisters were an easier sell than Chinua Achebe or Ayi Kwei Armah. Yet these same students identified as African; and complained bitterly about having to explain their Africanness when they travelled overseas. Having arrived with a heady sense of my Africanness and pan-Africanness, I met myself afresh. I became black. Like Janie in Hurston’s novel, a fact that I had known all my life – that I was black – became activated and charged with new meanings, new anxieties, new explosive associations for me to manoeuvre around: new baggage. I started making peace with the reality that I would sometimes be confronted with all-white classrooms – and have to spend a semester with 16 young white people, for some of whom I would sometimes turn out to be the first black person to teach them. In these classrooms, there were three options: I could become the representative black, the native informant, and take it upon myself to take my charges on an educational tour of blackness and black life;
or I could be the discomfiting black, drawing their attention to my blackness and all the awkwardness that comes with black presences in predominantly white spaces South Africa, configured to guarantee white comfort; or I could choose to ‘mute’ my blackness. I often chose the mute option – not as an act of erasure, but as an act of self-preservation. I chose to protect a section of my soul I wasn't ready to share with people who might not be ready to receive it; or be prepared to receive it on the terms I needed them to receive it.

But neither the mute option nor knowing student resistance to African content prepared me for the depth of my students’ ‘innocent’ ignorance about the continent. One particular incident in 2015 stands out for me in this regard: I taught a third-year level seminar course titled, ‘Writing Violence: Strategies, Ethics and Aesthetics’. Among the texts we read for the course was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2007) novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which we read alongside her (2008) essay, ‘African Authenticity and the Biafra Experience’, where she explores what she terms the dangers of a single story. In the essay, Adichie describes encountering young American college mates who were disappointed that she did not fit their stereotype of Africans. In some ways, Adichie’s novel is an attempt to complicate single stories about the Biafra civil war and, broadly, African lives by, among other things, featuring a mix of both economically marginalised and middle-class African characters in her novel. A class assessment task required students to summarise Adichie’s essay and offer any commentary or critique of her ideas. One of my strong students wrote an eloquent summary, and made interesting commentary on the links to the novel as well, but in an intriguing moment of self-reflexivity, she noted in passing that before reading the novel she, too, had had a single story of Nigerians – and was surprised to encounter educated Nigerians in the novel. This observation by one of my more open-minded students disturbed me immensely. What does it mean to have a student a few weeks shy of finishing her undergraduate degree, make such an observation? What does it mean to have university students in 2015, at an African university, unable to imagine the existence of educated Nigerians? Just what is such students’ mental portrait of Nigeria, and Africa broadly, if they cannot visualise educated Nigerians in 2015?

Both my journey to becoming black across these three intellectual landscapes, and my students’ resistance to African (as in North of the Limpopo, African) and black content from both South Africa and across the continent, caught me by surprise in light of South Africa’s historical relationship to blackness and black thought, in contrast to Kenya. There are three black intellectual figures who are pretty much a ubiquitous presence in South African public discourse, both within but, most strikingly, beyond the walls of academia and across generational boundaries: Steve Biko, Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. These icons’ ideas are so well circulated in South Africa that it is not unusual to hear people who have never read them nor seen their writing, confidently cite them in everyday conversations. Biko’s observation that the most dangerous weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed, Fanon’s idea that the native condition is a nervous
condition and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o’s concept of decolonising the mind are easily the most widely cited ideas in everyday life in South Africa. That half the people citing these three thinkers have no idea which of their texts contain these ideas is beside the point; their very circulation beyond academic circles, in part, speaks to the ways in which the anti-apartheid struggle included a rigorous immersion in intellectual debates on race, which enjoyed powerful mobility and resonance beyond the walls of the academy. These ideas, coupled with the work and thought of such movements as the Black Consciousness Movement, Azanian People’s Organisation, and the African National Congress, laid a solid foundation for critical engagement with, and affirmation of, blackness and black cultural, political and intellectual life in public life and public discourse. For me, as a student newly arrived at Wits in 2003, one of the most beautiful sights and sounds was watching groups of confident young black students speaking isiZulu, isiXhosa, seSotho and other South African languages – loudly and with such pleasure – then switching just as smoothly and delightfully into English. Coming from a background whose curricula affirmed African ideas and scholarship, but whose public life, especially in middle-class circles and the academy, bore the stigmas associated with African languages, it was a wonderful sight to behold, and remains one of my favourite memories of Wits to date. So, with these contexts in mind, it would be a while before I would notice South Africa’s complicated relationship to blackness and, most worryingly, Africanness that plays out in many entangled ways: sometimes in everyday phrases like ‘Are you from Africa?’ but, tragically, sometimes in more lethal ways that intersect with other structural violences of poverty and racism, to produce brutal outbursts of xenophobic sentiment.

It is important to think about this paradoxical mix of sensibilities if we are to understand why thinking while black in the South African academy is such a fraught experience. In my case, it was important to not only engage with these contradictions, but to look for ways of making sense of my students’ resistance to content about African and black lives beyond the usual response of ‘not all of us are like that,’ which one always hears whenever one speaks out against certain forms of violence and hegemonic logics. This logic of ‘not all of us are racist/sexist/homophobic’ is dangerous for the ways in which it inadvertently reiterates and, in fact, gives new breath to hegemonic systems. Not only does it distract our attention from the people (actual white and black people, men and women, heteronormative men and women who sustain racism, sexism and homophobia, respectively) and their connections to these systems from which they benefit, regardless of their awareness of these benefits but, further, in prioritising a minority of default hegemons who reject the hegemony, it gives new breath to these systems, and sabotages any meaningful debate in dismantling these tendencies by refocusing our energies to that small handful who are progressive. It is commendable that a few hegemons are progressive; but it is more progressive for that small handful to stop inadvertently sustaining the system by being too precious about their progressiveness – and redirecting the debate to their progressiveness.
In making sense of my students’ resistance to this content, I had to remember two things: firstly, they live in a country and a world that persistently announces that Africa, African lives and indeed, African knowledge, has little economic value. There is little incentive to knowing and respecting African lives. There are minimal obvious economic rewards to taking African knowledge seriously. But second and relatedly, historically, white people have never needed to know and understand black lives and black thought, with the exception of anthropologists and historians, and broadly, African studies scholars. In other words, as a white person, you can get through life just fine, without knowing or understanding much about black life. The reverse is not the case though. See, historically, it has been in black folks’ interests to learn to read whiteness, not on the basis of skin colour – that is a monopoly of white supremacist systems – but on the basis of the often blurred, but ever present grammars of whiteness. Black folks’ survival, historically, has depended on that literacy in the between-the-lines grammars of whiteness. Condescension and disregard for black cultural lives are a major part of that grammar. Both are legible to many black folk. So, my majority white students read both history and contemporary society correctly; they do not need to know or understand blackness, black life, black thought, black histories. They could choose to, and many do, but more opt not to.

So, what does it mean to be faced with the task of regularly defending your field of study, your area of expertise? What does it mean to have to defend the study of Africa and black life, in Africa? In an African country? These are the dilemmas posed by the South African academy to black academics in historically white institutions. Coupled with this attitude towards this body of ideas is another bundle of attitudes towards black presences in historically white institutions of higher learning in South Africa. This is what I term ‘compulsory black exceptionalism’. One of the results of some unfortunate choices made by black political leaders has been to not only erode the legitimacy of affirmative action (AA) policies, but to create new challenges for AA beneficiaries (black people and women), in the form of even closer scrutiny of their performance with a certain expectation that they will fail, not because they are human, and can fail like anyone else, but because they are AA appointments and, therefore, deemed inherently substandard. The current rhetoric around AA as synonymous with lack of merit has created an environment where many black people and women are at pains to distance themselves from AA, and demonstrate that not only are they not AA appointees, they are also exceptional.

For many years, I am ashamed to admit, I was one of those black women academics, desperately trying to demonstrate to the hegemonic gazes (white and male) that I was not an AA appointee. Interestingly, it took the debate on land reform to actually see the folly of my thinking. As I followed the now clichéd argument that opposes land reform policies ostensibly because the beneficiaries failed to maintain these farms as productive enterprises – and therefore, it was implied, should not have been given these farms in the first place – it occurred to me that there was a narrative of compulsory success that was expected of not only the beneficiaries of
the land reform process, but also AA beneficiaries. If, as Fanon writes, there is a narrative of black exceptionalism, which goes hand in hand with the stereotypical portrait of black people as failures by default, then this narrative has been updated in postapartheid South Africa, with a narrative of compulsory success. Failure is not an option for black people, whose very presence in these historically white spaces is overdetermined from without.

This logic reminds me of Du Bois’s (1989) concept of double consciousness, in a different sense: in the paradox of the practised politeness that will be occasioned by your body being different, and therefore obviating some angles of conversation but, at the same time, a politeness haunted by certain received knowledge about blackness, AA and notions of substandard work. The second angle of this double consciousness then emerges through the rhetoric of exceptionalism – when students (and colleagues) are pleasantly surprised when you perform well, and reproduce Fanon’s rhetoric of exceptionalism. But it gets most interesting in how it plays out in your own life, where you come to expect particular kinds of gazes; the air is so toxically polluted by the taint of racist thinking that you already have preconceptions of how students and colleagues view you the moment you walk in. The solution then becomes proving them wrong by excelling.

But increasingly, I have become resentful of this culture of compulsory excellence for black people; and I have been thinking a lot about failure and the right to fail. Indeed, the right to fail while being an AA employee. For me, these expectations of compulsory success for black farmers and AA appointees are dishonest in all manner of ways but, most significantly, in their ahistoricism. Beyond the obvious fact that failure is part of human nature – it is part of how we learn – I have a problem with expectations of compulsory exceptionalism for AA and black academics precisely because, like the case of land reforms, the pressure of compulsory success/exceptionalism obscures a longer history of white academics’ (and white farmers’) failure that was subsidised by public funding, including black people’s taxes. It took many generations of white failure to produce the current crop of successful white academics/white farmers. So, it is ahistorical to expect compulsory success from black farmers/black academics who have not had the benefit of these histories of structural support nets. Increasingly then, I am interested in claiming the right to fail, for black academics and, more broadly, beneficiaries of AA policies.

Finally, one intriguing feature of thinking while black and female in the South African academy is the challenge of intersectional thinking – at the points of overlap between different struggles. Here, bell hooks’s ideas on her experiences of the US academy resonate in powerful ways. She writes that

> Crossing borders within the academic world, moving in and out of Black Studies, Women’s Studies, traditional English departments, and cultural studies, I am continually distressed by the willingness of one group to repudiate domination in one form while supporting it in another – white
men who take sexism seriously but are not concerned with racism or vice versa, black men who are concerned with ending racism but do not want to challenge sexism, white women who want to challenge sexism but cling to racism, black women who want to challenge racism and sexism but claim class hierarchy. To arrive at a just, more humane world...we must be willing to courageously surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege. (1994: 7)

The challenge of living and walking the world with a dynamic intersectional understanding of multiple struggles and the kinds of privileges that accrue to us as hegemons in certain contexts is an issue that remains largely under-acknowledged, in my view.

Along with this, the struggle remains: how to create, nurture and protect spaces and practices that affirm those who dare to think, while black and female, in the South African academy?

In her essay titled, ‘Women of Color in the Academy: Navigating Multiple Hierarchies,’ Mignon R Moore writes that

the work of women of color, particularly when it focuses on marginalized groups, has a more difficult time achieving legitimacy through traditional channels when the gatekeepers of those channels are white men. The service that women of color are consistently asked to perform, and sometimes feel a personal obligation to participate in, tends to go unreported and unacknowledged, many times even to the individuals doing the work. (2017: 200)

III

Black presence in the academy, globally, has historically been partial, largely distorted, and largely haunted by suspicions of quality deficits. We have always been placeholders for Eurocentric anxieties and their accompanying narcissisms. If we look at debates on ideas of the human – who is considered human and worthy of dignity at different historical points in European imaginaries – these debates often lead us back to the contradictions embedded in Europe’s definition of the human. So, whether we think of Sartre’s paraphrasing of the black rage of Fanon’s generation when he writes ‘your humanism claims we are at one but your racist methods set us apart’ (Fanon 2000: 8), or Simon Gikandi’s framing of this contradiction as one of the ironies of the culture of modernity which, in his words, ‘sought to promote a universal narrative of freedom and rights, even as it recklessly promoted ideologies of difference’ (2000: 24) or Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) meditation on the idea of the human as synonymous to the Western bourgeois man, and what she calls this man’s ‘overrepresentation’, ultimately, blackness has historically been considered
subhuman. This partly explains our distorted presences in mainstream academy, both as subjects of study and as scholars.

In this context, a major challenge for me as a black academic is how to bring our lives and our scholarly meditations to closer proximity, given a long history in which academic citizenship, like many other citizenships for black people, has entailed forms of alienation, cultural passing and double consciousness – to riff off Du Bois’s concept. Along with the structural factors that undermine this possibility of proximity, are questions about our academic practices: how do we position ourselves in relation to scholarly practice, both as researchers and educators? Whose interests do we serve? To what extent do our choices of what to teach or conduct research on take forward forms of critical consciousness and acts of affirmation of our humanity?

hooks reminds us that ‘black people survived the holocaust of slavery because they had oppositional ways of thinking, ones that were different from the structures of domination determining so much of their lives’ (1990: 2). Her observation here reminds us that oppositional thinking is not about posturing; it is not about setting our work apart from other people’s as an end in itself, nor is it about staging the spectacle of our resistance politics. It is about our survival. It is life-giving, it is about nurturing our minds and souls and futures with ideas, perspectives and decisions that treasure us, that are invested in enhancing, not diminishing, our humanity. This is why, for hooks, critical academic practice is about ‘sharing knowledge and information in ways that transform our social reality’ (1990: 5–6). As she cautions, ‘the university is basically a politically conservative framework which often inhibits the production of diverse perspectives, new ideas and different styles of thinking and writing’ (1990: 8). This is a view echoed by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten:

The only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one... It cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions, one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university. (2013: 26)

In the face of this, it is crucial to recognise the gap between the academy and black life, the impossibility of hospitality to black life in the modern university as it is currently structured, and the risks of becoming what hooks terms cultural overseers or informers (askaris, in South African parlance) ‘mediating between the forces of domination and its victims’ (1990: 9).

Yet, thinking while black in the academy entails navigating one’s presence in the various structures, and often having to make compromises in the interests of one’s survival. I offer an encounter with a peer reviewer of an academic journal, to which I submitted my paper in 2017, to illustrate this. I was invited by the editors of the
journal to submit a research note reflecting on the process of researching and writing my book, *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder* (Musila 2015). When I submitted my research note for peer review, one reviewer liked it very much and recommended publication. The second reviewer strongly disliked the piece and felt it should be rejected. One of the things the second reviewer took issue with was my citation of a Swahili saying, ‘*Suluhu mali ya uma*’, which I grew up hearing my mother, my grandfather and people in my family circles use. The reviewer commented:

‘*Suluhu mali ya uma*’: I would agree that this sentiment exists in Kenya BUT in over 50 years’ residence in and teaching about Kenya I have never heard this particular phrase, and neither has my husband who worked for over 20 years as a civil servant. Expressions like ‘*kula matunda ya uhuru*’ [eating the fruits of independence – used in particular to refer to those who first benefited under Jomo Kenyatta’s presidency], ‘*toa kitu kidogo*’ [give a small thing, referring to bribery] and ‘come we stay’ [referring to cohabitation] would be generally recognised by Kenyans. And my Kiswahili dictionary has ‘*suluhu*’ as ‘reconciliation.’ (Anonymous peer reviewer)

The Swahili proverb, ‘*suluhu mali ya uma*’ translates to ‘it is nothing, it is public property,’ and I grew up hearing it cited in my family when one was being wasteful with a resource, or careless with a household item. In my book and the research note, I used the saying in conversation with Peter Ekeh’s work on public morality in Africa, where he uses examples drawn from the Nigerian context to theorise the ways in which people would have no qualms about stealing from public institutions, but they would be morally diligent and exercise strict integrity around resources belonging to family associations, ethnic associations and such communities he terms primordial structures (1975: 106). In my work, I suggested that in Kenya, this culture is made manifest in wasteful attitudes towards public property as indexed by the phrase, ‘*Suluhu, mali ya uma*.’ This reviewer and her husband’s knowledge of Kenya is presumed comprehensive, authoritative, panoptical; because they had both never heard this saying, I must be lying. It cannot possibly exist without their knowledge. And they have 50 years’ residence and research in Kenya plus 20 years of civil service, plus a Kiswahili dictionary to prove that I am lying. That I am making up a fake proverb and pasting it onto Kenyan public life. Never mind that, apart from three generations of my family who often used the proverb in everyday conversation (myself, my mother and my grandfather, who was 87 at the time), I had cross-checked the accuracy of my transcription and interpretation of the proverb with two different Kenyan colleagues who had never met my mother and grandfather, and in whose presence I have never used the proverb. So, five different generations of Kenyans’ knowledge was summarily declared suspect because this reviewer and her husband were not privy to it.
I found this comment and its condescension so infuriating that, for a few days, I
considered writing to the editors and telling them I was withdrawing my paper. But
I had to rethink that response: I wasn't ready to be a killjoy, in Sara Ahmed’s terms,
because as she says, in sexist and racist contexts, ‘when you expose a problem, you
pose a problem’ (2017: 37). And sometimes part of being what she (following Nirmal
Puwar 2004) calls space invaders who have entered spaces not intended for them,
entails negotiating a compromise with systems designed to diminish us, so we can
live to fight again – because ‘you can receive some benefits by adapting yourself to
a system that is, at another level, compromising your capacity to inhabit a world
on more equal terms’ (Ahmed 2017: 36). As I simmered in rage, and contemplated
refusing to extensively revise and resubmit my paper, I weighed the costs of
withdrawing from a platform that does not have Africa-based scholars as its primary
contributors against the cost of having to work around this reviewer’s condescension.
In the end, I opted for working around her. I excised the offending saying from the
work, revised the paper as instructed, and it was published.

Subsequently, reading Macharia’s (2016) essay, ‘On Being Area-Studied: A Litany of
Complaint’, I wished I had been more imaginative, more courageous, less complicit,
in my response to this peer reviewer’s condescension. I wished I had the courage to
be a wayward native who wanders off, à la Macharia’s conceptualisation:

Primary school history taught me how to think about Africans. There were
two kinds of Africans: those who collaborated and those who resisted. Later,
I would encounter the native informant, a role that I could not perform, and
Gayatri Spivak offered me the language of complicity. Others entered the
frame: the sly native, the trickster native, the desiring native, the sage native,
the agential native, the undeveloped native, the homosexual native, the
queer native, the deracinated native. Increasingly, I have been interested in
the indifferent native. This native haunts colonial archives and, if you check,
recent NGO reports. This native fails to speak in the correct way. Chooses
not to answer questions. Rarely shows up. Shows up when not expected.
Offers banal observations – perhaps about flying termites...Perhaps the
indifferent native never has to say no. Perhaps the indifferent native simply
wanders off. (Macharia 2016: 188)

Maybe it isn’t too late for this native to wander off.
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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. 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. 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.

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, 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.

Clearly 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...on my way out of

here.6

The narrative above speaks to scholarship (Kivilu, Diko & Mmotlane 2010; Kotecha 2006; Moguerane 2007; Pattman 2010; Scott & Letskea 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, 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,20 an African American academic, when commenting on his Unisa experience,21 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.
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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‘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 what I 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. Otherisms 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 making. 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


Belonging: Whose word is it anyway?

René Koraan

What a happy day it was when I was informed by human capital that my application was successful! It meant that I would be a criminal law lecturer at the North-West University (NWU) Faculty of Law, Potchefstroom Campus, starting January 2009. With four to five years of practice (as a prosecutor) behind me, I was ready for a new challenge. A challenge I believed I would be great at because, somehow, I always wanted to be a lecturer. I also believed this was a door that God opened for me. I had been frustrated at my previous place of employment and was sending out applications, just about everywhere, to no avail. This door – being a lecturer – was the right door and the door chosen for me. Going back to the place where I received my tertiary education was daunting but I knew I was going ‘home,’ and that was exciting. My new position as an academic was sure to give me some sense of comfort against wondering eyes with question marks: ‘Who are you?’ ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘When are you leaving?’ The three Ws that will make any person uncomfortable even on the best of days. Being one of only two black lecturers at my faculty, I was sure to feel the extrinsic pressure. I was appointed in an equity post, however, this did not mean that I was incompetent at doing my job or lacked the required qualifications. Although this was my own subjective reasoning, I knew that not everyone would agree with it. After all, the misconception that black lecturers are not intellectually as strong or capable as white lecturers still lingered in the hallways of my alma mater. Entering this prejudged arena of one’s competence was a challenging yet exciting step to take.

Soon the familiar faces of my own lecturers appeared and I felt welcome: ‘This is a piece of cake, I can do this!’ – the motivational chat I would give myself, complementing the welcoming gestures by colleagues. I had my own office with my own laptop and my own secretary. Invitations for luncheons and a quick coffee seemed to be a daily occurrence. My sense of being different seemed to fade for a while. I was settling in, fitting in and all was well with the world because this is where I belonged. The optimist in me brushed off the fact that some lecturers would walk past me and not greet me, but it was beginning to tear at my optimistic nature. Maybe they did not know of my appointment, maybe they knew but just don’t know how I look? I could reason out excuses for the people I didn’t know because why else could it be so? After a few months, this changed and although my name was not voiced by some lecturers at least an almost-nod and ‘how are you?’ was indication of some recognition that I was there.
I was excited, and ambitiously prepared for the biggest step of a lecturer – giving that first class. I went to all the introductory courses for new lecturers, paying attention to everything, determined to get it right. When I entered the room, I was greeted in English though the other lecturers were greeted in Afrikaans. I imagined that this was based on an assumption that I could not speak Afrikaans because of the colour of my skin. Besides the Afrikaans greeting, I noticed the almost over-excitement in my greeter’s voice. It was as if she made an extra effort when greeting me and, for that, I guess I should feel ‘special.’ I responded in Afrikaans and could see the pleasant surprise and simultaneous shame in her face. I wanted her to know that I am Afrikaans-speaking and, in that way, assert my linguistic proficiency. As an Afrikaans-speaking coloured person, this was the first time I really felt like I was seen as different. Though I believe this was done out of courtesy, I could not help the feeling of being seen as different. Being the only black lecturer at those courses, I tended to listen more and speak less. In that way, I was still finding my black voice in this white-dominated space. Getting used to the ‘academic language’ was difficult and is still an ongoing process. This was the first time I really felt like an ‘outsider.’

On the second day of the introductory course, we were instructed to divide into groups. Soon everyone was in a group except me. I moved over to one of the groups and, in my effort to break the ice, I made the following joke: ‘Where is affirmative action in this group?’ This was followed by an awkward silence, some blushing faces, and forced smiles. I took my seat in further silence. I could not tell who was feeling more uncomfortable, me or the rest of the group. What I was feeling at the time was what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the ‘outsider-within’ status (1986). This is when an individual, me in this case, finds themselves between groups of unequal power (Collins 1999). ‘Thus, outsider-within identities are situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice’ (Collins 1999: 86). For a moment, I felt like I did not belong and, as irrational a thought as it may sound now, at that moment it was everything but irrational. A very proud voice inside of me whispered that I have a right to be here just like anyone else in the room. In fact, I deserved to be here. The voice stayed a whisper and soon faded. Nonetheless, ‘This is a piece of cake, I can do this!’ would become a phrase I would recite to myself daily. After all, I reasoned that I have been through worse and if God is for me, who can be against me?

This second day of the introductory course reminded me of a defining time in my life: my first day in Grade 10. This was my first year at what was known as a Model C school (previously all-white school). This was the first year when black pupils could go to a school that had previously excluded them. Due to my choice of subjects, I was the only black student in my class. I still vividly remember the first day I walked into the classroom. The silence was so loud that it deepened my feelings of uncertainty. I walked into the classroom and could see that all four rows (with double benches) were almost full. I walked to the first row on my left and took the third or fourth empty seat. Just as I sat down, the thundering sound of chairs shifting, bags being
grabbed and footsteps rushing off in a hurry, startled me. When I looked around me, I could only see empty chairs. My row, the second, and most of the third row were empty. In the third and fourth row, I could see all the white students stacked up like sardines looking at me as if I had some contagious disease. I was speechless. I could not make sense of this odd, insulting and discriminatory behaviour displayed towards me. As the days and weeks passed by, the benches around me started to fill up, but not without some ‘encouragement’ from the teacher. I wanted to tell them that there was nothing wrong with me, that I didn't have a contagious disease and that I was just human. Day after day, I wanted to tell them but I was too afraid and thus just kept silent. I could feel that the silence was making me sick. The words of Audre Lorde ring true:

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. (Lorde 1977: 43)

I felt so sad for this young black girl (me) sitting all alone on the other side of the class, choking on silence. However horrible that was, it was not the worst thing I experienced that year.

A few weeks after this incident, we were called to the hall in year (grade) formation. All the Grade 10 students reported to the hall for a reason forgotten by me now. As I entered the hall, I saw a few (black) friends of mine and we instinctively walked towards each other. We were only about four or five black students in Grade 10 at that stage. All students were instructed to line up against the far side of the hall. This was a big hall and, to my mind, could easily cater for about 1 000 people. It could be that I felt so small that even the buildings seemed gigantic. As the few of us lined up against the wall a familiar sound demanded my attention. The thundering sound of fast-pacing footsteps moving away from the wall where we (black pupils) were lined up, to the opposite side of the hall. We stood in disbelief (once more), wondering whether or not we should move with them. What was wrong with this wall? It only took a few seconds to realise that there was nothing wrong with the wall except for the people now lined up against it. At that moment, even with the other few black students next to me, standing against that big empty wall, I have never felt so alone and out of place. Not even in the classroom. This echoes Nirmal Puwar’s (2004) analysis of being a body out of place. Being in the university introductory course brought back that sense of loneliness. What I did in the course is what I did then in Grade 10: stayed silent most of the time, used humour to guard against awkwardness and when I spoke, made it as good as I could.

Soon the big day on which I would give my first formal lecture arrived. With the information gathered at the introductory courses, help from some of my colleagues, high hopes and expectations, I ventured into that lecture. Confronted
with predominantly white faces (about 95 per cent) – some with looks of curiosity, disrespect and ‘who do you think you are?’ – I chose to take the high road and refused to let anyone spoil my first formal lecture. The class was not that bad. We dealt with the theory, and I even involved the students by letting them do presentations. This was exactly how they explained it at the introductory course. I did it! With this victory, I went into the next lecture and the next.

After my third lecture, I was called in by the faculty’s director of teaching and learning. There, my victory would soon become a hollow one. It appeared that students were complaining about my lectures. They were asking for my removal because I did not know how to teach; they accused me of letting them do all the work. A week later, a panel consisting of the director, a senior staff member and a member from academic support services were sitting in my class, evaluating my competence. Never have I felt more incompetent and embarrassed. I did not belong here because the students did not want me here. My belonging was contingent on acceptance by those who owned the space (Yuval-Davis 2006). Looking back, with the definition of ‘belonging’ now in mind, I did not possess the necessary personal qualities to belong to this group (academia). The report from the panel came back and – what do you know? – it was not all that bad. I was encouraged by the panel members and motivated to keep on lecturing. With this affirmation of competence, I knew I could do this and was determined to prove all the naysayers wrong.

Just when I got on my feet again, the evaluation papers from the students came in. Students must evaluate the lecturer according to certain criteria provided to them. Evaluations are done in the form of multiple choice. Students also get opportunity to comment on the strong and weak qualities of the lecturer. These evaluation forms go to the director of teaching and learning of the faculty and then to the lecturer to reflect on. If ever I felt dismayed, nothing was to prepare me for the comments from some of the students. One comment I remember so vividly, literally took my breath away. It was this comment that dragged me down to reality. The five-word sentence read: ‘Go back to Cape Town.’ It is difficult to truly understand my distress over that sentence without some background context. This sentence impacted on me on different levels as a coloured person. It is somehow assumed that all coloureds come from Cape Town. I do not understand this assumption given that, most often, one can infer from the dialect of the person if he or she is from a certain region. The first thing that hit a nerve was the fact that I am not from Cape Town. I do not even have a Cape Town accent or dialect! This student made an automatic connection between me speaking Afrikaans and the colour of my skin to where they thought I came from. In an instant, I was confronted by the cold hard truth. The students were looking at the colour of my skin, and it was black and I needed to go. I felt cheated. I was not even given a fair chance. They did not know me or the potential I bear. Is this because of an assumption that I am only here because of the colour of my skin – and not my competence? Because I am black, does this make me incompetent? According to Madeline Heilman, caryn Block and Jonathan Lucas ‘the
widely shared view of affirmative action seems to be that women and minorities are selected because of who they are and not because of what they can do’ (1992: 537). I wondered whether the colour of my skin should be treated as a stain that needed to be washed out. Is my black presence spoiling the white canvas? A stain is, after all, an undesired and sometimes unexpected discoloration.

This was the first time in academia that I was confronted with a racial issue. I could relate to what Caroline Turner (2002) had said – being so easily ‘defined out’ rather than ‘defined in.’ Trying to make sense of the students’ disapproval of me, I started to think of the only black lecturer I had as a student at the same university. The lecturer had a unique way of teaching and back then even the few black students in my class disapproved of this way of teaching. This could be because of the regular absenteeism, dispersed way of teaching or the ‘don’t-care attitude’ that emanated from the lecturer. Could it be that the students had the same experience with other black lecturers? What about white lecturers? Would students be that bold as to complain about a white lecturer showing the same traits? I could not answer that question nor had I the guts to ask it. All black lecturers are not the same, and all white lecturers are not the same either. All lecturers have different and unique ways of teaching. Those evaluations made me feel out of place and, once again, as if I did not belong. It seemed as if the colour of my skin meant that I truly did not have the required qualities to be part of this group. Suddenly, the realisation – this is not a piece of cake and maybe I can’t do it – surfaced. The thought of not belonging in academia hijacked my thoughts and I began weighing my options. I started to question God’s choice of door.

This incident also reminded me of that defining time in my life in Grade 10. Due to the political unrest then, classes were regularly interrupted by marches and protests. During one of these protests, the teachers locked the classroom doors and kept us inside, protecting ‘us’ (white students) from the black students marching outside. The noise outside was nothing in comparison to the noise inside the classroom. The racist slurs, cursing and havoc was unbearable. When the door was unlocked, I ran out like a person possessed. I did not get very far and was confronted by a white male pupil who, at the time, looked to me like a giant. I thought he would let me pass because I was wearing the school uniform which should be an indication that we were on the ‘same team.’ He did let me go, but not before spitting in my face and mumbling racist remarks at me. I ran home in a daze. The next morning, I went back to school and took my place in the all-white classroom. Years later, as a lecturer, I decided that this is what I was going to do now, too. I am not the enemy here, and I am intent on taking up the same position – my position.

My tenacious spirit refused to give up and continued down the road of academia. Most of my colleagues were always very helpful and encouraged me to talk to them whenever I needed. Although I knew I could always ask for advice, I was reluctant to do so. I did not want anyone to think that I was incompetent and not worthy of
the position I held. I needed to motivate myself and dust off all the negativity. I am a strong, black woman and I am determined to make a difference and live my dream. I take seriously Toni Morrison’s (1977) caution that black people would do well not to be distracted by needing to perpetually prove that they are good enough. If I was to be treated as a stain, I might as well be a permanent one that no chemicals can remove. I decided to change my teaching strategy. I wanted to be myself, I wanted to show the students who I am and, in some way, motivate them to do better. I did some introspection and thought of why I wanted to become an academic in the first place. I thought of my own lecturers at that same campus, and thought of what I had wanted in a lecturer. I thought of what motivated me.

I remembered one of my all-time favourite movies, *Sister Act 2* (Rudin et al. 1993). The movie plays in a neighbourhood that presents all sorts of challenges to a group of young students. Because of their dire circumstances and people around them who are discouraging, they accept their fate. This is the fate of doing what your parents are doing, doing what everybody else thought you would do and ending up like everyone else in the neighbourhood. Most of them had no ambition to do something great because nobody saw greatness in them. Then, an undercover nun started at the school to give them life orientation classes. She dug up talent in places within these students where nobody else had thought of looking. Eventually the students could see the light at the end of a very dark tunnel. Their futures looked different, and included a ray of sunshine where there had only been dark clouds. They found themselves, and they found trust. This movie changed my life and made me believe that good can come from any bad situation. I knew the students in my class might not be faced with such dire circumstances, but I also knew that most of them were struggling with something. Whether it was depression, family issues, peer pressure, difficulty with studies, financial issues, difficulty with adjustment and so on, I wanted to help them by making my class an enjoyable learning experience. I wanted to give them something or someone they could trust in. I decided to try again, and I did. Once again, that recitation popped into my mind: ‘This is a piece of cake, I can do this!’ Maybe God did not make a mistake by choosing this door.

I started the class with a quote from *Sister Act 2*: ‘If you wanna be somebody, if you wanna go somewhere, you better wake up and pay attention!’ And this is how every class has started – from my fourth week of being a lecturer in 2009 to today. The rest of my first year remained a struggle and students just had to accept me. I needed to, and wanted to work, on a trusting environment – ‘How will they trust me and why would they want to trust me, a black lecturer who they clearly do not like?’ I knew, for them to trust me, they must know me – such a big vision which, at times, seemed impossible. To create a trusting environment is no easy task. The quote was the starting point. I explained to them the significance of the quote but that is not where I stopped. Little by little, I shared my experiences as a legal practitioner and as a black woman in the employment sector. I knew that I had to give to receive. This resonates with the argument of Meta Harris:
The creation of a trusting environment might require that the teacher be willing to be the first to take the step of sharing a personal event that has impacted who she or he is and discussing the impact of that event. The creation of a trusting environment that leads to understanding also requires that those in the position of authority – the teachers and professors – be receptive to all students, and not just to the ones like themselves. (2005: 49)

I also knew that I had to show no bias towards black students, and had to treat all the students alike (not to confuse this with colour-blindness, which I will discuss further on). This was challenging because the class consisted of about 90 per cent white students (whom, I believed, did not like or want me there). Though the students complained, the director of teaching and learning seemed to be in my corner, insisting on helping where needed. An important part of this philosophy is to always be myself. I want to be the same person in class as I would be if you met me in the mall. I believe that people, especially students, can sense when you are pretending and once they doubt your sincerity it is difficult to gain their trust. I continued with my new teaching philosophy and refused to give up.

During this process (my first year of lecturing) I learned that I was pregnant and, though this should have been a happy time in my life, I was concerned how the faculty would receive the news. I was just appointed and now I wanted to go on maternity leave in October, the busiest time of the year. I made sure to finish all my work as to not burden my colleagues. I did not want the ‘typical of black people’ stereotype that some white people have, to be confirmed by my pregnancy. So I did it all; I even marked my own examination papers at the end of that year. In fact, I insisted on it. This was a challenging time for me but I did it and no one could say ‘typical.’ How sad and frustrating it is to incessantly prove yourself worthy of a position. How tiring it is to work twice as hard just to be recognised. My experience resonates with Ella Bell and Stella Nkomo’s (2000) illustration of the emotional labour of black women in the workplace.

After my first year as a lecturer, I looked forward to the next. I was filled with drive, ambition and determination. I wanted to change the learning experience of students and make them excited about the law. I fell in love with lecturing and I believe everyone could see that. At the end of my second year, I received an award for inspiring teacher and a colleague received the top lecturer award. I could sense the surprise of colleagues, which was more than enough motivation to keep on doing what I love to do. Did this mean that I finally belonged here? The outsider-within status was slowly but surely nurtured, though no one really noticed. Again, this reminded me of Grade 10. During an English class, we were instructed to write an essay and then read it out loud in class. I worked really hard on my essay and wanted it to be perfect. I knew most of the other students in class had been receiving extra classes (in an array of subjects) since primary school. They were academically far ahead of me, and the standard in this school was much higher than I was used to
from historically disadvantaged schools. It was expected of me to keep up with the
class and any slacking was met with glares of ‘You wanted to be here, so keep up.
You should be able to do everything the white students are doing if you want to stay.’
This pretentious colour-blind notion from the teachers was supposed to encourage
inclusion. Hugo Canham (2015: 72) explains colour-blindness as ‘the belief that skin
colouring and the social constructions around skin colour do not matter and do not
make a difference in the world.’

When it comes to colour-blindness I agree with the following contention:

To bridge this divide between mainstream experiences and minority-group
experiences and to more closely approach the ideal of equal opportunity,
we argue that school and classroom settings should not endeavor to be
colorblind. Instead, they should strive for a climate in which group difference
– the difference in the local worlds experienced by minority and non-
minority students in the setting – is commonly recognized by all in the
setting and used in achieving a respectful understanding and valuing of all
students. (Markus, Steele and Steele 2000: 251–252)

Being colour-blind the teacher could not see my racial and social class background,
thus not taking into account my experience or lack thereof. This would be the first
time I spoke out loud in class even though it was well within the second quarter of the
school year. I stood up and almost recited the page-long essay from memory. When
I finished, there was a brief silence and then an unexpected applause. Everyone was
applauding my essay. I was pleasantly surprised at this especially because of how I had
been received a few months earlier. I was confused too. I did not really know why they
were applauding. Was it because I could actually speak English or was it based on the
content of my essay? I brushed off the questions and just soaked in the long-awaited
recognition. That was the confidence boost I needed to truly take my position in the
class. I was not less than the other students in my class, but I had to work very hard to
show this. Hard work was no stranger and obstacles were just challenges.

Although I got the hang of the lecturing part of being an academic, I still struggled
with the second leg thereof, research. Coming from a background of practice, and
having completed my Master's degree in 2005, I was out of my depth when it came
to research. Slowly but surely I felt the pressure to publish. I knew that I would have
to start with research eventually and, soon enough, I did not have a choice. Every
month, two of the lecturers must present a paper in front of their peers. Soon it
would be my turn and I needed to start with research. I was nervous and anxious and
truly needed a confidence booster that was nowhere to be found. Time was running
out and the thought of not being able to do it soon surfaced. It was a big challenge for
me but I found an exciting topic to talk about. Something that I felt comfortable with
and believed would be of some importance. I did my research in my way, not really
knowing how, given that it had been a while. Once again, I worked really hard to
make my presentation perfect. I asked some of my colleagues to sit in on a trial run and their input helped a lot. I was still nervous but felt prepared for the presentation.

I gave my presentation and I thought it went well for a first attempt. It was an interesting topic and I was asked a few questions I was proud to be able to answer. After the presentations, a senior colleague approached and thanked me for the good Afrikaans I spoke. I was taken aback by this condescending remark. I had been at the faculty for almost two years, only conversed in Afrikaans and even taught in Afrikaans. Was that it? What about what I had said? After what I thought was an interesting topic and informative presentation, all I got was ‘good Afrikaans’? Would the senior have made that comment if I were white? I do not think so. Had I just taken one step forward and three steps back? So many questions entered my thoughts. I felt like an outsider-within. I felt disappointed that after all my hard work doing the research, the fact that I spoke good Afrikaans was the highlight for some. I knew that it was only my first presentation and I had not really started doing research; but at that moment, after the comment, I could not see why I should even try.

I was not yet ready to do research, and focused on improving my lecturing skills. In my third year of lecturing, students voted me top lecturer of the faculty. Despite knowing how hard I worked, the award still came as a surprise to me. My first thought was that they had made a statistical mistake. I even thought the students had somehow made a mistake by confusing me with another lecturer. In some way, I found it difficult to accept this accomplishment. This is known as ‘imposter syndrome’ (Brems et al. 1994). GF Hess explains the concept as follows:

Many teachers feel like imposters – that they are not as competent or intelligent as others believe them to be. They live in fear that their ignorance and incompetence will be revealed to their colleagues and students. These teachers react to student evaluations by minimizing the value of the positive evaluations and ‘ascribing great significance to negative’ ones. (2002–2003: 138)

This will explain why the negative ‘Cape Town’ comment impacted on me on such a deep and personal level. It is evident that signs of the ‘imposter’ were visible long before this award.

Pushing these negative thoughts out of my mind, I remained confident that I had found my niche. I was born to teach. I think I know why God chose this door for me. The award was met with scepticism from some colleagues who saw it as a popularity contest rather than a reflection of good and competent lecturing. The previous year, when a white lecturer won this prize, it was great, but when I won it, it was suddenly a popularity contest without merit. Whatever negative comments I heard, nothing and no one could take away what the award meant to me. This was not the first time my competence was doubted and judged. A sense of déjà vu overtook me.

I remembered this from that defining year in my life, Grade 10. During an Afrikaans class, we were confronted with a set of facts that we needed to dramatise in a court
case. The smartest student in class volunteered to be the attorney and the teacher asked for a volunteer to be the prosecutor. No one wanted to go up against the smartest student in class; it was already a lost battle. To everyone's surprise, I volunteered to be the prosecutor. We had a few minutes to prepare before the trial started. By then, I had made a few 'friends' in class and they were cheering me on as I faced the smartest student. I took my place in front of the class facing my opponent. Her facial expression oozed confidence and she already smirked in triumph. Why I had to do this to myself, I don't know. Swimming upstream, against the current would be the golden thread throughout my life. I always want to do what others are too afraid to do or what others may deem impossible. The trial started, and she was doing a good job, but I was determined to show my worth. Sniping arguments ended in fiery and passionate closing arguments. The accused was found guilty – which meant the prosecution had won! The applause and congratulations were short-lived but, to me, that moment represented more than winning my first case. This, to me, was the impossible becoming possible. This was a black student discovering her self-worth and potential on a dominantly white platform. The next day I was greeted with a little more enthusiasm than before but I was still the black student in class with just a few white students sitting in her row.

The teaching award came from the students, which meant so much more than what some of my colleagues thought of it. I knew how hard I worked but it was still difficult to enjoy that moment because of these perceptions. When would I be good enough to belong here? It still felt like I was not accepted. I always wanted to please people but, over the years, I had learned that it was impossible to please everyone. I have to please myself and be satisfied with what I do and how I do it. This realisation pulled me through that moment of self-doubt. How strange, this feeling is – acceptance from the students but rejection from some of your colleagues.

As a lecturer, you are assigned a temporary lecturer to help with your administrative tasks, ensuring that your tests are organised and even helping out with some classes if needed. The temporary lecturer, however, was not allowed to present a formal lecture. The temporary (white) lecturer assigned to me and my then assistant (student) were having some difficulties and so I called them both into my office. During our conversation, the temporary lecturer got really upset and blurted out how he wanted to teach criminal law (my module) and how he would take over my position once I left. Taken aback by this outburst I involuntarily asked the question: 'Where am I going?!' I was trying to make sense of his outburst and his confident claim on my position. Of course his explanation was a simple one – he was speaking hypothetically in the event that I should leave the faculty. Long after the meeting, this conversation lingered in my thoughts. I wondered if this was due to the fact that black lecturers tended to not make it here at the faculty. Between my appointment in 2009 and this meeting, three other black lecturers had been appointed; two had already left and the third was well on his way out. The assumption that I would follow suit was not that far-fetched, especially given that the institutional culture
was so unwelcoming. Even so, the audacity of the temporary lecturer to even voice
his agenda was troublesome to me. Why he thought he could speak to me in that
manner was beyond me. Once again, I asked myself: ‘Would he have said that to a
white permanent lecturer?’ This was precisely part of the reason why black lecturers
do not stay. The disrespect and the dehumanising way in which some white people
speak to black people is enough to make them feel unwelcome. It tells them that they
do not belong.

The year 2013 proved to be a challenging one, in a good way. Although I had always
taught criminal law, that year I was asked to teach introduction to law and legal
skills in the first semester. I was happy to do this. The idea was to revamp the course
by making use of a more practical teaching method. I always love a challenge and
especially one where I get to make use of the incredible imagination I was blessed
with. I wanted to make it big and I wanted it to be perfect but, more importantly,
I wanted it to be a wonderful learning experience for all the students. When I
presented my idea of creating a simulated crime scene in the middle of campus with
police, traffic officers and paramedics, I could sense (once again) the doubt in my
capabilities and competence – I was never directly told that this was an insane and
near impossible mission. This did not stop me from making the first semester one
of the best semesters I ever taught. Swimming upstream and against the current was
something I did naturally with no encouragement needed from extrinsic sources.
This was something I discovered on a school bench many years ago.

Support from most of the faculty members and their faith in my ability to revive
this module gave me purpose, and I felt included. It was as though I was seen
and acknowledged for the first time. I felt worthy of the position I held, which
also instilled a sense of belonging in me. The reason I felt this way is not because
the institutional culture had changed, but because I found my own place and
created, in some way, my own sense of belonging. The challenge with big ideas is
the practical and statistical arrangements that come with them. On its own, that
would be challenging but being a black lecturer trying to penetrate invisible white
power structures made it even more so. My naive thoughts that people would want
to help realise the vision I had to improve student learning were soon met with
unwillingness by some. This was my big idea and I would have to see it through on
my own. The red tape alone was enough to discourage anyone, but it only fuelled the
motivational fire in me. Requesting necessary documents and being sent the wrong
ones (more than once), being summoned to offices to sign or receive documents as
if I was part of the support staff, being told that I should figure it out myself, and
being laughed at as if I were asking for a miracle – that is what I had to deal with
but, still, I did not give up. I often wondered if they would treat a white lecturer the
same way. Whether the white secretary would summon a white lecturer to come
and collect documents. Fortunately, in the midst of all this, there were also people
who wanted me to succeed and who helped me. Planning meetings and arranging
schedules gave me a sense of ownership. I felt I was in control of this project, and that
created a pocket of belonging. After a few months of planning, the simulation was finally realised and it was a big success. The students not only enjoyed the simulation but found it educational. It was something they could build on during their academic studies and even help them in practice.

At the end of 2013, I was once again voted the top lecturer of the faculty. This was a confirmation to me that I was doing something right, even though the imposter was still lurking at the back of my mind. At that stage, I did not care about the doubting glares. I did not care if I met the criteria to fit in. I was already there, which affirmed that I have a place. The challenge was figuring out what that place was, and whether or not I was comfortable in it. In 2014, my sixth year as a lecturer, I was teaching criminal law again. It was a new year with a new group of students and I was looking forward to it. Since I started at the faculty, black lecturers who were appointed could not adapt to the culture and place of our campus or, at least, that is what I thought. At one stage, I was the only black lecturer at the faculty but I was not too fazed by that. I studied at this university, I know the culture, I adapted in my own way. Now, thinking back, I assume that was partly due to my family. Due to my father’s line of work, we had to move a lot. I got used to adapting wherever I went. Once I have adapted, it becomes home. It did not take me long to get comfortable in my own skin. The same skin that was, according to me, unfairly judged.

Coming from a practical background, I can identify some challenges that the students encounter. I really wanted to help the students in that regard. Therefore, in 2011, I initiated an internal mock-trial competition. This would give students in their second and third years of study the opportunity to participate in a mock trial, giving them the necessary practical exposure they lacked. This was just when criticism of the quality of law graduates surfaced. I believed giving students this practical exposure would help them in practice. Having once been a new graduate, I know how difficult I found practice – not knowing when to sit or when to stand in court. The mock trials would give students an idea of the court set-up, teach them the basics and develop their confidence. The mock trials were voluntary and just over 50 students participated. The initiative took up a lot of after-hour sessions, and the administration of it was draining, but I did not mind because it would help the students and I was doing something I knew how to do. This initiative was not discouraged but it was not a priority and, of course, nobody had time or money to spare. Understandably – any spare time you have should go into research. It is the publications that will secure your promotion – anything else comes second or last. This was something said to me many times. Knowing that truth, I felt out of place whenever there was a discussion on research but I also knew that this was self-inflicted. Refusing to be caught up in the ‘publish or perish’ mentality, I continued doing what I loved – teaching. I was fully conscious of the fact that spending all or most of my time on teaching would probably not help me to be promoted. But I continued. Nothing prevented me from doing research except my love for teaching and a change in mindset. It was a decision I made, but I knew I could only avoid it
for so long. Somewhere, someday I would have to shift the balance to research, but not until I was ready.

The mock trials were a big success and the interest of the students grew from 50 participants in 2011, to 150 in 2013. I secured an official sponsor for the competition. Once again, my creativity kicked in and I thought of expanding the mock trial competition to the other NWU campuses. I wanted all campuses to get the practical exposure. I wanted the campuses to work collaboratively and learn from one another. I wanted students to be exposed to different cultures and to different ways of thinking. I wanted them to see how alike we are in spite of our differences. I guess I wanted to show them that there is no reason to move out of your row just because someone different is sitting in it. Even knowing the extra workload it would create, I never doubted my decision to do it. It is in situations like these where you have to believe in something higher, in someone higher, in God. I still believed that this God-chosen door was the right one.

With the help of a few of my colleagues, all went well and, in 2014, the first intercampus mock trial competition was held with great success. I wanted the world to know what our students are capable of and how proud I am of them. I wanted the legal community to see that we, as an institution, are doing something that will improve the quality of our law graduates. In 2011, 2012 and 2013, I struggled to get help from the marketing and communication office for proper publicity. I had to call on people who knew people and, in that way, got some publicity. This was a point of discussion on different committees in the faculty and was even discussed with the marketing and communications office. It appeared that we should follow the right channels to ensure publicity but we were assured of support whenever needed. With the intercampus mock trial competition, I made sure to follow the right channels to promote the mock trials. I was assured that there would be enough publicity and I trusted that because I did what I was supposed to do. Unfortunately, this was an empty promise once again. Maybe I would not have felt so bad and even angry if those promises were not made directly to me. I felt insignificant and it felt like the achievements of the students participating in the trials were insignificant to the university. Why was it that the stray cats on the campus received more publicity than this historical event where all three campuses participated and are now, for the first time in the history of the faculty, actually working together? Promoting intercampus relations has been at the top of agendas all over the university, and now that we were actually doing it, it was not recognised. I could not help but wonder, once again, if the trials were run by senior white lecturers, would they also struggle to get proper publicity? Still disappointed, I wanted to find out why there was no publicity and was met with, what I felt, more empty promises. The feeling of insignificance fuelled the anger already raging inside me. Suppressing the urge to ‘talk back’ (hooks 1989), I made up my mind to not go down that route the next year. I have witnessed the attitude or lack thereof towards the initiative and, as the saying goes: ‘Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me.’
The mock trial competition 2014 turned out to be one of the most challenging events of my career. Eventually, the year came to an end and 2015 lurked with new challenges and adventures. Research was to be at the top of those challenges. In 2014, there was an open call for application for funding projects that improved the learning environment – on the condition that you presented or published your research (project). This was the ideal opportunity to kick off my career in research. I was at a point where I wanted to do research. I wanted to do it for me and not to please people or to fit in. To do research in what I love to do seemed to be the perfect marriage. I applied for the funding and, in June 2014, I started my project. I am researching the impact of the mock trials on the students' theoretical and practical application of criminal law. The project is due to be completed at the end of 2015. I am excited about the project and I finally feel like I am making progress in my research. Just saying that last sentence is somewhat surreal to me. Although it felt like the faculty has given up on me ever publishing, I also know that I needed to do it for myself, and I needed to be ready to do it.

I received the top lecturer award for 2014. This fuelled my motivation levels once again. The students get one question during the voting process for top lecturer. They are asked: ‘Which lecturer inspired you most this semester?’ The majority of the students in my class are still white. The majority students of in the criminal law class voted for me. Is it not ironic that it was the criminal law students who complained and requested my removal a few years ago? Belonging has a subjective meaning. It is not what other people tell you to be or what the dictionary says it is. Belonging is what you feel it to be. If you are a black lecturer at a predominantly white faculty, teaching predominantly white students and feel at home, you do belong in your own way. I found or, rather, created my place of belonging in class and the mock trials but I still felt excluded in various other ways. I am, in a sense, a cocreator of my belonging and, easy as it may sound, it is not without, at times, almost impossible challenges. Comparing the events of her life to her grandmother’s quilts, Sonya D Jefferson says:

But as I continue to reflect on the quilts and my life, I realize this is a false perception. When viewed from a distance, context becomes clear, patterns and themes in the quilt and in my life become visible. There are connections among the quilt squares and among the moments in my life that provide a sense of each being a piece of a whole. Through a close reading of the stories I share I find the patterns and connections in my life. I begin to understand who I was and how I became who I am. With that understanding I complete another transition this time from Black girl child silenced by fear, to empowered Black woman administrator making a difference in the lives of Black children. (2006: 14)
Taking into account my experiences on that school bench, and those that followed, I cannot help but to agree with this sentiment. This is definitely a process that will test your spirituality. By cocreating, you carve out and claim your place – and even dare to break the invisible strongholds of a white institutional culture. So, whose word is belonging anyway if not mine, if not yours?

Notes
1 A position reserved for a candidate from an equity or previously disadvantaged group as governed by legislation. Due to the fact that law requires employers to make provision for these posts, the terms ‘affirmative action’ or ‘equity’ usually bear a negative connotation.
2 This is an action or policy favoring those who tend to suffer from discrimination, especially in relation to employment and education. It is also referred to as ‘positive discrimination.’
3 It is more probable that the teacher did not want to see, because seeing would place an extra burden of care.
4 Home can include feeling appreciated or valued. For me it is a much more comprehensive. Feeling at home also carries a subjective meaning. What makes one person feel at home will not necessarily make another person feel at home.

References
Valuing/belonging and devaluing/unbelonging in the academy: An intersectional perspective

Pragna Rugunanan

One of my very early memories is of my mother, standing cooking in the kitchen preparing the evening meal, in our small two-bedroom flat. It was a large kitchen and I played hopscotch on the kitchen floor while chatting to her. I remember her furiously rolling the daily chapattis for the evening meal. It was a task she hated for reasons alluded to below. Her voice resonated with pain as she reminisced about her father telling her it was no use to educate her because she was just an Indian girl who would soon be married off and only be useful in the kitchen. With that, he summarily took her out of school at the tender of age of twelve; she became the unpaid labour in his grocery shop in the small, dusty mining town of Kimberley. At twenty-one, my mom was duly married off to my dad, the eldest of 11 children. Instantly, she became unwitting mother to my dad’s youngest, 2-year-old sibling. And she inherited the kitchen, slogging out three meals a day for 14 people. Daily, she made mounds of chapattis to feed this large family. As I observed her rolling the chapattis that afternoon, with much angst and irritation she impressed upon me to concentrate on my education as the only key to escaping the kitchen, stranglehold of the Indian woman. She told me that if I was educated I would be financially independent and have power and agency over my life. My mother was not as lucky to be afforded this opportunity.

Culture and socialisation confined Indian women to a subordinate position within the family, reinforcing the primary role of good wife and mother. Fatima Meer (1972: 37) encapsulates this role as ‘the good woman is the virtuous woman, patient, suffering, venerating the tradition of the past and sacrificing her entire being to her husband, her children and her family.’ Our conversation echoes till today and the image of my mother, clad in her sari, standing at the stove, the nurturer of the home, remains in the back of my mind. As I grew into a young woman, the burden of being the good daughter, the good wife, the good daughter-in-law and the good academic – these identities – contested and constrained me. They fought a war, which I felt I never won. Whenever I felt I was within the goal posts of acceptability, one identity always jostled at the other for importance. Valerie Walkerdine (in Walker 1998: 337) captures this dialectic when she says ‘an academic woman simultaneously confronts the unbearable splitting of identity between the powerful person (the academic) whom she cannot recognise as herself, and the powerless being who lacks confidence (the woman).’ My identities vacillated between the ‘struggle to perform academically and to perform as feminine,’ which almost always seemed impossible (Walkerdine 1990: 144).
In a gender-stratified society, women are socialised as upholding strong family commitments; this is multiplied many times over in Indian families in South Africa. Marrying early and having children before I fully embarked on my career led me to focus on the role of motherhood and homemaker while trying to juggle my work life. I took the back seat of nurturer and caregiver so that my husband, as primary provider in the family, could have the space to develop his career – my rationale being that I worked closer to home and had greater flexibility at work. I was an academic, after all, and could not compete with his huge salary in the corporate sector. Believing this rationalisation, I took on the secondary and dependent role – thus, allowing my subjugation, and downplaying the importance and value of my identity and multiple roles of academic, wife, mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law that I inhabit. In Indian families, the traditional, gendered division of labour is so pronounced in the domestic sphere that, as women, we are trained and socialised to almost unquestioningly accept the patriarchal roles of the man as dominant figurehead and the woman in a subservient role, even if we are both similarly educated.

This chapter seeks to situate the study of gender, ethnicity and culture in the context of valuing and devaluing in academia. My play on the tension of valuing/belonging versus devalued/unbelonging is drawn from Ann-Dorte Christensen’s (2009) article, ‘Belonging and Unbelonging from an Intersectional Perspective.’ While the chapter could have been authored from the perspective of belonging, the tension was more than just belonging, it was also about being valued – the value of my identity as a mother, author and academic. And the value of value is so much more than just belonging; it is not only about being accepted, but that acceptance is valued beyond measure. Feminist researchers advocating an intersectional perspective argue that identities and belonging are interwoven between gender, class, race, ethnicity, caste and other social divisions (Christensen 2009; Yuval-Davis 2006). Christensen’s (2009: 23) conceptualisation of ‘belonging [as] a strong marker not only of collective and individual identities but also of distinction and social exclusion’ resonates with my argument in the chapter. My point of departure is framing valuing/belonging versus devalued/unbelonging from micro, meso and macro perspectives. The micro perspective concerns my journey as an academic, the meso level involves the institutions of family, culture and community and the macro level is the institutions of higher learning. Every level it is conjoined by the intersectionality of gender, race, class, ethnicity, caste and age.

In her articulation of belonging, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) makes a critical distinction between ‘belonging’ and the ‘politics of belonging.’ Her definition of belonging infers feelings of emotional attachment, of home, feeling safe and secure (Christensen 2009). In contrast

the ‘politics of belonging’ denotes who is ‘included’ and who is ‘excluded’ in communities. More importantly, belonging is constructed at three major analytical levels: social locations (constructed along different power
axes of difference, for instance, gender, class and, ethnicity); individuals’ identifications and emotional attachments (for instance, narratives about who you are and where you belong), and ethnic and political value systems, by which people judge their own and others’ belonging. (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199)

At the core of intersectionality is the interplay of social categories such as class, race, ethnicity and age, which intersect and overlap such that the ‘categories are mutually constituting’ (Christensen 2009: 26), and seemed to conspire at every stage of my career and life course. With reference to South Africa, Cheryl de la Rey, Amina Mama and Zine Magubane (1997: 18) talk of ‘multiple subjectivities and the differences among black women,’ indicating that the South African identity is replete with a multiplicity of meanings. In analysing race and gender in the South African context, Mama’s emphasis on subjectivity shows black women as ‘resilient, complex and powerful’ (in De la Rey, Mama & Magubane 1997). This point will be elaborated on later. Let me return to my journey as an academic.

**Entering academia**

Higher education in South Africa reflected the racist hegemony of the nation state under apartheid. The 1996 National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) report showed that the demographic profile of faculty in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa did not represent the broader profile of society. The picture, then, was polarised by race and gender, and with top management largely consisting of white men (Mabokela 2001). Black people and women were relegated to the lower echelons of employment. The HEI report showed that, in 1993, women accounted for only 32 per cent of the total research and teaching positions. Even more disconcerting, was that the majority of women were employed at the level of junior lecturer or lecturer (Naicker 2013). The body of literature on the subject of women in higher education confirms that women are represented in greater numbers in lower ranks of academia (Rabe & Rugunanan 2011; Tsikata 2007; Walker 1998). Black scholars were under-represented and black women were even more inconspicuous. A comparative study of women in higher education in South Africa and the United States found that black women are considered to be ‘outsiders’ in academic institutions and are ‘invisible and voiceless’ (Johnson & Thomas 2012). In exploring the racial and gender dynamics of sociologists in HEIs in South Africa, Marlize Rabe and Pragna Rugunanan (2011, 2012), examined academics’ entry into academia, the context of their work environment and their reasons for exiting the contested space. One participant’s striking reflections in that study reverberated with me: ‘I know I really fell into this’ (Rabe & Rugunanan 2011: 64). In sharing my story from the vantage of my experiences and personal history, I am able to make sense of the social structure that I was located in, that is, my individual identity and emotions as important indicators of who I am and where I belong and, more importantly, my political and value systems that guided me (Letherby 2003). I, too, fell into a career in academia; it was not on my list of career options when I graduated with an honours
degree in the early 1990s. Young, inexperienced and overqualified I battled to find employment. Fresh from activism at university, I wanted to be part of the change in the crafting of a new South Africa.

Simultaneously, marriage loomed on the horizon because my future husband was six years older than me. Not as much as age, ethnicity and caste forced our hand into early marriage before we were financially secure. Buying into the prescripts of cultural norms, we succumbed to the wishes of our families. While we are both Hindu, marriage across ethnic lines in the Indian community was almost as big a travesty as marriage across racial lines in apartheid South Africa. My husband, in his favour, had a doctoral degree that made him acceptable. I, on the other hand, with just an honours degree was less valued in my future extended family and could not compete alongside the prestige of the doctoral degree. The power of the extended family had already instituted its claim over me. The social locations of caste, class and ethnicity connived to keep me on the outskirts of this new community. The politics of belonging – to fit in and be accepted – conflicted with my expectation of being valued.

Shortly after marriage, with little experience to enter industry and overqualified, I grabbed at the opportunity when a temporary lecturing position became available at a historically black university (HBU). This particular HBU was a multi-campus creation of the apartheid state to provide urban black students from disadvantaged communities with access to university. As a temporary lecturer, I was asked to teach a class of first-year sociology students. With little idea on how to teach, and even less guidance on where to start, I was thrust into what eventually became my career and my calling. Similar to my identity as a young wife and mother, the intertwining roles (wife, daughter, mother, academic) slipped between the private and public domains; women's gendered roles are never separate, never distant, one always informing the other. Trying to create a balance seemed almost inconceivable. During this period, leaving one’s child at childcare facilities was still unheard of in the Indian community; it was expected that the woman would become a stay-at-home wife and look after the needs of the young family. Flouting this expectation, I used the flexibility my job afforded me to care for my family. Notwithstanding the nonexistent childcare facilities and lack of family-friendly policies at work at the time, I tried to balance the academic self with the feminine self, invariably at a high personal cost. The outwardly balancing act masked multiple forms of guilt: at the lack of academic productivity and progress, and lack of family balance.

As I matured in my role as an academic at this HBU, the camaraderie and support from my colleagues spurred my growth and academic development. However, the institution, characteristic of all HBUs in the country, lacked the academic environment that could potentially produce vibrant academics. Young academics were neither nurtured nor mentored and could easily become lost in the system or disillusioned. In the early days of democracy, HBUs were a distant cousin of the established, historically white universities (HWUs); they were victims of power...
struggles and racism, and were considered the distant other of academia. The racism and difference was not only directed at lecturers, but at a fundamental structural level – the resources and facilities with which we had to operate were wholly inadequate. Even ‘white’ technikons were far better equipped than HBUs (Mabokela 2002). Even though I felt a sense of belonging to the institution, the institution itself was looked down upon and devalued in the broader higher education landscape. As academics, we were undervalued compared to our peers in the established institutions. Power at a macro level filtered through the institution and served to disempower, in particular, black and female academics. White academics, privileged by their colour, seemed largely unaffected by these power struggles.

Belonging and acceptance in academia means improving one’s qualification and studying further, otherwise your value decreases. With the aim of improving myself, I investigated the options for a Master’s qualification. I remember, all too well, my interview at a HWU, a supposedly progressive university and bastion of academic freedom. Because I had a young child, my husband accompanied me to the interview and waited with our child outside the venue. During the interview, I was horrified when I was asked how could I possibly cope with reading for a Master’s while having a young child – would my child accompany me to classes? This was post 1994, in a democratic South Africa. I was taken aback by this negative gender stereotyping and appalled that so-called progressive colleagues could even pose such discriminatory questions. I left with a bitter aftertaste from that interaction and chose to study elsewhere. The ‘mommy track’ is a concept first used to describe female lawyers who choose to spend less time at the office and more time with their families (Schwartz 1989: 72). The negative association emanating from this choice is that the women were considered less serious and, thus, valued less than their male colleagues. The mommy track stigma applies in academia too.

My experiences reflect the findings of Reitumetse Mabokela’s (2002) study of 26 women academics employed at diverse academic institutions, including HBUs, HWUs and a technikon. Significant findings illustrated that female academics had to constantly prove themselves and were under continual scrutiny to perform, institutions lacked respect for women, and their work conditions impeded their steady progress, conditions of work were inequitably applied and stereotyping and misconceptions among racial and ethnic groups were rooted in apartheid-era ideology that perpetuated discrimination and perceptions of inferiority–superiority (Mabokela 2002: 191–202). The valuing of male-centred or masculine traits epitomised the masculine culture and structure of the university. This stereotypical view of the competitive, singular male academic was valued above that of the female academic with a child.

‘The dominance of gendered ideologies’ characterised my early adulthood with the belief that work was marginal to my identity and life (Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005: 168). I unconsciously fell into the pattern where ‘women were essentialised in a patriarchal discourse that presumed heterosexuality, domesticity,
and motherhood’ (Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005: 168). Working full-time and trying to complete a postgraduate degree at the same time is challenging at the best of times. Add to the pot two children under the age of four and that mixture becomes something of an overload. Thrown into this mix was the brutal and unexpected death of my father. His death was too painful to handle, and I ignored trying to deal with its effects while immersing myself into a balancing act of motherhood, coupled with forging an academic career. My husband, adding to his doctoral degree, decided to embark on reading for a Master’s in Business Administration at the same time as I was busy with my Master’s degree. Instead of the support I craved, I was pushed even further into carrying my multiple loads, upholding the dominant gendered ideology, the image of the ‘good wife’ (Meer 1972). Belonging to an academic institution allowed me flexibility to manage these multiple roles, but at what expense? At times, I was in a deep state of despair, overwhelmed, and battled to lift myself out of this state of being, assailed by the guilt of being, guilt of working, the constant guilt of worrying if I was doing enough for my children, for my career, for me.

I became the ‘muted’ (Delamont 1989) other. Did I have a choice, did I allow this subjugation and give in to stereotyping of cultural and ethnic minorities both on a personal and professional level? The effects for academic women underlie Walkerdine’s (1990) argument that they must confront the splitting of ‘the life’ from ‘the work’ – between ‘woman’ and ‘professor.’ My early entry into academia and biological imperatives of childbearing and child-caring functions slowed my advancement in academia (Potgieter 2009). Missing at the HBU was the collegial support from senior academics and the institution in the development and mentorship of young academics. Women academics were less likely to be mentored by senior staff or to benefit from informal and formal networks. Supporting research by CD Butler (2005: 22) found that ‘young entrants into academia suffer from a lack of mentoring, instruction and career strategy.’ Confirming this view, Heidi Prozesky (2006) observed that women did not always realise from the outset of their careers that activities other than journal publications were not as highly valued or rewarded through promotion in the academic system. My first article, submitted to a journal shortly after completing my Master’s degree, was sent back with major changes. In retrospect, the changes were not as overwhelming as they appeared at the time but, having no one to turn to or advise me, I chose not to address those comments. Without mentorship, and lack of a roadmap for career enhancement, the decision was pretty much taken out of my hands. Post 1998, the fluctuating higher education landscape in South Africa with impending mergers and staff retrenchments created much uncertainty and pain. After being retrenched because of the merging and downsizing of historically black institutions (a senior white colleague was retained, while two young emerging black colleagues were retrenched), I did not foresee my return to academia. I chose, instead, to close that chapter of my career and to spread my wings.
Spreading my wings

After leaving academia, I joined a government institution that supported research and development at HEIs, thus, I remained connected to academia. Initially, I was involved with a programme that focused on research capacity building at HBUs, focusing on mentoring and grants management of black researchers like myself. I could identify with their needs, frustrations and feelings of discrimination. Now I could empower them in a way that was denied to me. Travelling to HBUs that were situated in far-flung areas of South Africa (courtesy of the apartheid state), such as University of Venda in the Limpopo province, took a further toll on my young family. Having dependent children, without the advantage of family-friendly work practices and flexible work arrangements, the new work dynamics had a cumulative effect on my children. Whatever work–life balance I thought I had in academia flew out the window when working for an organisation that insisted on set hours of work, little flexibility, and that demanded constant travel around the country. Worse, I also saw no movement in terms of career progression and upward mobility in the organisation.

The daily grind of spending almost three hours on the road and guilt about sickly children took its toll. A short period of belonging gave way to a greater sense of unbelonging. The dissonance of not belonging, but more importantly, devaluing, was greater here. Although with a postgraduate qualification, the majority of our work required us to be paper pushers and was administrative heavy. In fact, we called ourselves the ‘post office workers’ in lieu of our title: professional officers or POs. The devaluing of our work, our qualifications and our self-worth was denigrating. Something had to give and I resigned shortly thereafter.

Having left permanent employment with a steady income to put the needs of my family first and to freelance, with no idea of where my next income was coming from, was daring beyond measure. I drew upon my skills honed in academia and an incomplete short course in business management to secure part-time work. For three years, I worked in various organisations in the tertiary sector in areas of training and lecturing. As a part-time lecturer, I had exposure to training in middle management in the human resources field. With an organisation aligned to the Manufacturing Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority (MerSETA), I was exposed to various major manufacturing and electrical industries to lecture in human resources management and industrial relations courses. My academic background and teaching in higher education provided a solid foundation in this regard. Exposure to practical and on-the-job training provided valuable experience and practical examples that I draw upon even in my current lecturing environment. While carting children to and from school, I was at times juggling four part-time jobs to eke out a living, earning a miserly salary. Trying to manage this with the constant stress of trying to make ends meet was difficult all around. My constant attachment to different sectors of higher education, in different organisations and teaching to different levels of students and levels of management, made me feel at home here. I belonged.
Returning to my calling

‘The present and future self is always rooted in [our] past selves’ (Walker 1998: 338) captures my academic journey. Throughout my absence from academia, I was involved in education at some level – in lecturing, training and development, and research. The work of Everar & Weber and Saloshna Vandeyar (2004) on black academics at HWUs in South Africa explored the complexities of black academics’ everyday involvement in structures of their oppression and how racism is indelibly institutionalised. In 2007, I was approached several times to join an academic department at a merged institution. Strangely enough, when I first applied for a lecturing post in 2000 at the very same HWU, I was interviewed in a room dominated by a group of white men; one even questioned me in Afrikaans to test my ability to teach in the language. There was only one white woman among the interviewers. This was six years after democracy. In South Africa, specifically, the pronounced racial and gender inequities remain embedded in institutional and social relations (Mabokela & Magubane 2004; Mama & Barnes 2007; Rabe & Rugunanan 2012; Soudien 2010). Even stranger, they chose to employ a senior white man who could not speak a word of Afrikaans. There is the persistent view that men are more suited than women for academia (Tsikata 2007). Interestingly enough, I now received three calls to teach at the same institution.

My re-entry into academia at a recently merged HWU institution brought with it new challenges and difficulties to surmount. The choice to give up my own business, which I had built from scratch and take up a secure income, was a difficult decision to make and a life-changing one at that. Having been out of academia and effectively closing that door when I was retrenched, I felt out of my depth and thrown in the deep end of a shifting, fluid and transforming higher education landscape. Colleagues who I was once on par with had all progressed and were established academics in their respective fields. Some were close to professorial appointments with accomplished portfolios of publications. Newer and younger colleagues had their doctorates, a step-in to belonging in the academy. Even though I brought in a vast array of experience, my lack of a doctoral qualification became the marker of distinction and social exclusion (Christensen 2009). I felt adrift and a sense of unbelonging. In an effort to belong, I felt I had to do more, be more, to be accepted, to be valued. Kathy Davis (1997: 185) confirms that ‘as soon as you discover that you do not measure up. The more you do, the more wanting you are made to feel.’

Intertwined with these psychological effects were the huge teaching loads and ever-greater supervision loads, and lack of sufficient teaching and administrative staff. Heavy teaching loads were given to junior colleagues and those without doctorates. Worse was the growing bureaucratisation and marketisation of academia that enforces a ‘publish or perish’ mentality (Mabokela 2002). This was the new bar to determine belonging and being valued in the academy. Institutional culture still favoured the white elite who predominated in the higher echelons of academia.
Academic staff were expected to cope with the heavy teaching and supervision loads with little recourse to additional administrative assistance and with continually decreasing budgets. We are measured against unrealistic levels of performance, without reward or recognition, such that a hostile work culture (Mabokela 2002) predominates. This, I argue, is the new normal in academia.

Research shows that socialisation processes lead women to more ‘person orientated, nurturing and caregiving roles’ (Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005; Maürtin-Cairncross 2003: 157) while underplaying the research and publication roles (Maürtin-Cairncross 2003; Prozesky 2006, Tsikata 2007). In addition, the gendered socialisation of men and women produces an unequal division of labour, both in the public and private domain, where domestic responsibilities and career breaks limit women's advancements (Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005) and have an impact on their self-confidence and self-efficacy. Female academics resuming their careers were found to be more vulnerable, with family commitments having a research-inhibiting effect (Asmar 1999). These compounding factors impact on the perceptions of self-confidence and self-efficacy beliefs and, in turn, on academic performance. L Vasil (1996) points out that women’s lower self-efficacy is a critical factor affecting their chances of attaining seniority.

To achieve this seniority, I would need to embark on a doctoral degree. My interrupted career meant that I had to start at an entry level, even though I had 10 years of teaching experience, with little consideration given to my diversity of skills and experience in private industry. In retrospect, I did not have the voice and power to assert this advantage strongly enough and female colleagues didn't encourage me in this regard. Even if I had, my work experience was not going to be be considered, because many black academics’ experiences did not count in terms of appointment. My lack of research qualifications and publications became a barrier to my academic advancement (Chesterman, Ross-Smith & Peters 2005; Thomas & Davies 2002). Trying to bridge the gap to fit in at the department was difficult; colleagues, while congenial, were protective of their research spaces and guarded about their work. I experienced the ‘chilly climate, lack of mentors, being made to feel invisible, not being taken seriously’ (Potgieter 2009: 1) and, coming from an orientation of openness and sharing, I found it hard to fathom this distance, lack of trust and willingness to share. Thus, belonging also inserted boundaries of exclusion.

Whatever the reasons, I found that the circle of life had brought me back to this point to pursue a dream deferred, of reading for my doctorate. That would be my stepping stone of entry into the academy, of belonging and being valued and of fulfilling a dream. However, the multiple confluences of family-related responsibilities (working full time, with dependent children and caring for elder members of the family) were further underpinned by the interplay of social categories of gender, class, race, ethnicity and age. They intersected and overlapped with my social location in society with its associative power axes and the identification and emotional attachments of who I was and where I belonged.
Embarking on a doctorate is a five-year commitment that leaves little room for balancing private and professional lives. Anita Maürtin-Cairncross (2003: 157) notes that research and publication ‘is a solitary activity that takes time away from [one’s] family.’ Some women are unable to separate their family duties from academic identity and research obligations. The multiple, overlapping and abnormal overloads of teaching, supervision and administration are major inhibitors to productivity leading to burnout in the academy. Aside from the pressure of academic life, is the strain graduate studies has on family and extended family relationships. I was so consumed with the doctorate that I lived and breathed it every moment. One day, deep in thought about some piece of the PhD puzzle, a deep, gut-wrenching pain exploded within me. Out of the blue, I realised that for the longest time I had not hugged my youngest son. Yes, he had matured from a needy child to an independent teenager, but when did he grow up? While I was present, I was not really present; I could not account for this time lapse.

When, the question remains, is all of this enough? The problems of valuing/belonging versus devaluing/unbelonging remain steadfast in different guises. There are disparities in how staff of colour are treated. The reverse has now occurred; African women and men are more valued than other people of colour. Even contributions relative to colleagues are not equally valued. Representativity in the department does not lead to absence or elimination of discrimination; even female academics have been undermined by other female academics (Cummins 2005). Instead, the stakes for black women of Indian origin have become much higher. Apartheid produced a racialised hierarchy, with whites at the top, Indians, coloureds and blacks at the bottom; this hierarchy has been redesigned in a postapartheid workplace. With whites still in positions of power and privilege, black academics jostle in their placing; they are dependent on qualification and publication outputs as the defining markers of success in academia.

This reordering of the hierarchy was brought very clearly home. A black academic from an international university was introduced as a research fellow. At the start of the academic year, because many academics were not officially on campus, the research fellow was shown the closed doors of many of the African academics in the department. She was introduced by a senior female academic, who spoke glowingly of the achievements fellow African academics in the department. When I was introduced, I was simply introduced as ‘a co-coordinator of a programme’ no enthusiastic welcome of my achievements as a black female academic. No, just a co-coordinator. With that, I was summarily dismissed, instantly ‘invisible’ and devalued. Whether purposeful or not, one needs to be conscious that in our inclusion of some we seek not to exclude others, that in our narrative of the politics of belonging, we seek not to perpetuate the global matrices of power of difference and exclusion. The valuing of black academics should not be at the expense of devaluing others in the academy. This form of ‘tokenism’ (Potgieter 2009: 4) is a form of patronage that masks a deeper racism and sexism hidden in our subconscious.
We need to be vigilant against the ‘race-science’ spectre that sought to divide and rule by creating divisions among black people. Melanie Walker (1998: 336) noted the ‘everyday practices of exclusion which are more subtle, more deeply embedded, and more difficult to contest and resist.’ Even today, the practices of exclusion are more muted. There is limited research in the South African context that examines the obstacles created by women in power against other women who are climbing the ladder towards promotion.

**Conclusion**

Reflecting back on Mama’s (in De la Rey, Mama & Magubane 1997: 19) emphasis on subjectivity and the view of black women as ‘resilient, complex and powerful,’ made me realise that instead of apologising for my atypical background, I needed to rise above this negative framing and show how enriched I am by my non-traditional background. Many colleagues in academia have never ventured from the safety net of academia, let alone left permanent employment with no other employment in sight, or started a business from scratch. Instead of apologising for the slow progression of my academic career, my role and identity is much more than that. It has shaped who I am now, a stronger and much more powerful woman. In the nine years since I re-entered academia, I completed a doctoral degree, published and copublished 10 journal articles and book chapters, graduated seven Master’s students, reviewed a significant number of theses and journal articles and was the recipient of four external research grants. Encapsulating Mama’s position of black women, I extend the notion of inclusivity by sharing with my students, be it in the form of resources, bursaries, books, access to literature, by building them up, providing mentorship and providing a roadmap for their future careers. I empower them.

On a personal level, having two mature, well-balanced children graduate from secondary school with distinctions puts everything into perspective. Our identities are indelibly carved through the intersectionality of our social, political and historical environments and selves. ‘Once an identity is part of me I cannot disown it, yet it need not own me’ (Ropers-Huilman 1997: 332). Rising above the image of the good mother and good wife, I have found the space where I am good enough for me.

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Don’t teach me nonsense

Colin Tinei Chasi

On 22 February 2016, I received an email message from a student I last saw several years ago. In truth, I do not recall this student. More accurately, the student’s name is no longer familiar to me. It is unfortunate that I have always struggled with names, even of people I know very well. At least, I do remember the lecture to which the student refers. The student’s email read as follows:

Dear Dr Chasi

Quite vividly, I remember in late 2010 Monash Lecture Theatre 1, when you introduced Fella Kuti to us, during your comms lecture. Although comms was not my major or minor I instantly fell in love with it to the extent that I wished I had pursued it from the very onset. It was a moment of epiphany, an enlightenment or rebirth of sorts that I experienced but could not articulate in that particular lecture. A lot of people found you rather too profound for their understanding but instead I saw what I could turn out to be from the way you taught. Believe it or not, I found myself crashing your lectures during my free periods just to have a dosage of that critical analysis you possessed. I got to know and understand more of the Durkheims, Bourdieu, Williams etc. and even the likes of Fella Kuti whom I had never known in my entire life. I remember in the last lecture I attended, as if it was a parting word of advice; you said: ‘Students you need to prefer your priorities instead of prioritizing your preferences.’ Those words have never left my mind. I graduated in child and youth development 4 years ago but realizing that it wasn’t my precise calling, I went on to push myself into the communications sector. Although I’m still very junior and have a long way to go, I appreciate your input in my life and want to thank you Colin. I hope to further pursue communications and reach great heights.

The student ended the letter with the kind words: ‘Warm Regards.’

Instead of simply feeling the warmth of the student’s kindness, I remember the teacher who taught me through my last year of primary school (Grade 7). His laughter, sarcasm and cruelty fell hard on my young mind. I remember the searing pain of the headmaster’s cane which fell upon me at his behest. Who would believe me if I had said that a teacher trumped up charges against a 12-year-old boy? But I had no fear of being disbelieved or of being beaten. So I told my truths and the violence, what they called discipline, washed over my back.
Mom and Dad gave my Grade 7 teacher the honour of brokering my brother’s wedding. I learnt to speak to him. Sometimes I reflect on how he, too, has died. So many people have died. Friends and other people I do not know how to think about have died.

You see, fortunately, perhaps, I was already toughened by years of cold cruelty. Still, I forget the faces of the other teachers who spared me no shame, cane or pain. I also do not see with clarity the face of the boarding school matron who made sure that the little black boys got the roughest deal. The stale smell of strong liquor often reminds me of her old wrinkled hands.

Mom and Dad made sure I visited Matron on her death bed. I was coming to the end of high school. Who can explain how I somehow learnt to feel her cruelty? Can you think why I silenced my anger? I listened to her. She spoke of her children. It pained her that the war to end colonial rule had forced her son into battle. It pained her that her daughter now lived like black people. It was not clear to me what that meant. Then she said how sad it was that I, of all people, should visit her. Perhaps that was her way to say sorry. She died a few days later. She said she had been so mean and I was so young.

I am proud to hear that any of my students had high regard for me. For I have seen many instances in which students had few reasons for having high regard for teachers and others who are given the privilege and responsibility of taking care of them. Is it not too often the case that the norm is for people to have extractive attitudes, values and practices that prioritise using and abusing? Is it not that in many instances those who are used and abused are children, pupils, students?

Who has not seen people misusing their positions as teachers to deny young people chances at escaping the drudgery of poverty? Just out of high school, in 1993, I was commissioned to teach in the second and third terms at an underprivileged rural secondary school in Zimbabwe. Before me, the students had been taught by a young volunteer from a large donor country who had seemingly taken the work as a joke. She taught the students, for example, that methods of contraception included not bathing (because the stink meant that no one would desire to have sex with you) and that girls could avoid pregnancy by doing star jumps after unprotected sex. I have it on good authority that efforts of local government officials to remove her from the school were met with threats that this would imperil other donor projects. Not only had the students been miseducated in this manner, they had also done very little of the curriculum. Yet the students had developed a trust relationship with this young white woman as she regaled them with accounts of life in a distant and more advanced world. They distrusted me, a young black man, who demanded that they unlearn what they had learnt and that they work extraordinarily hard to complete much of the two-year syllabus in two terms of a year. The fact that I was a man did not help things as the boys and girls in the class thought of me as a potential predator on the girls in the class. To cap it all, fellow teachers and the learners themselves told
me to not do anything about the situation since the subject I was teaching had always had a near 100 per cent failure rate.

Instead of simply soaking in the student’s words, I think about how my father died over the just-ended December vacation. He was a teacher. Sometimes I am amazed to hear the newness of what his students say about him. It pleases and challenges me to know that when he died, so many of them wanted to come to his funeral or just to say something about how he changed their lives, through messages on Facebook or through a message from someone who would attend the funeral.

Will my children know what to say to people who may have something good to say about the life I live?

Trying to understand what it meant that his father was receiving a doctorate, one of my sons imagined that I must be thought of as a doctor of words. He reasoned that I could do little to heal people. How will they understand the many hours I spend away from home, working at university? Will they know that I read Paul Willis’s (1977) Learning to Labor – which speaks about how children who learn to identify and fight against oppression often knowingly but unintentionally act to powerfully reproduce the very conditions of oppression that they know so well? Will my children ask about how I could have decided to be a little more focused on my own their interests, on teaching them what I learnt, on trying to earn a better quality of life for my family? Will they understand that I think there is an unalienable responsibility for each person to do the most possible to advance humanity – that this is what humanises us?

Will they think that I understood the fact that I am so alienated from the students I sacrifice so much for – that the time away from them was often not spent in the joy of pleasant meetings between people who could know each other’s names and hopes? Not many of my own students know my name or my face because the lectures in which I ‘met’ them were too large to permit any such real meetings between students and lecturer. If they know this, will they think of how grand it is that I did nevertheless talk to my students about how all people can learn the art of loving, open doors of human possibility by questioning without fear? Perhaps they will read Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks and ‘recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness’ (1986: 181).

Will they think that I tried to say something important about how we live and die in the time of HIV and AIDS? Could it make sense to them that I willingly lectured over two thousand students in a year? The numbers are crazy. Can anyone understand the idea of teaching so many students? What chance is there that they will not wonder why I gave up for them so much of the time we should have shared as father and children? Will they say that professors too act knowingly but with unintended consequences – like ‘the boys’ that Willis (1977) writes about, who knowledgeably fight against domination and without intending it end up replicating themselves in the oppressed roles of their parents?
I want them to know that to win the trust of my students, I treated them with unconditional positive regard. I wish my children to know that I insisted that my students are partners in the work of ensuring they do well in their studies and in their lives.

Even in my first experience of working as a teacher when, as I said earlier, I was just out of school myself, I gravitated towards working with transparency, towards including the students in reflecting upon their own progress with the curriculum. I also took simple but effective measures to ensure that they felt safe to approach me. Even today, I both metaphorically and physically maintain an open-door policy so that students feel I am accessible and know that they are safe in my presence. This is sadly important because of the ways in which black men are over-represented in our societies as sexual predators and generally as dangerous, unpredictable people who must be watched. It is also fantastic to do this because something as simple as keeping the door open shows that the lecturer is engaging transparently with everyone. In South Africa, I think that this may be particularly significant because of the ways in which the pursuit of safety amidst fears of crime has occasioned the recreation of cities creased with high walls and constrained movements and freedoms that, as Charlotte Lemanski says, perpetrate and accentuate ‘divisions that exhibits remarkable similarities to the apartheid city’ (2004: 102). Each opening of doors is a powerful yet simple act against apartheid legacies!

In South Africa it is important that lecturers make their offices safe spaces by paradoxically countering apartheid.

I am so proud of the fact that that first class of students and I completed much of the curriculum and that about a quarter of the students passed science – the highest pass rate for any subject at the school. This experience showed me the value of working hard to win the trust of students, affirmed that positive and outstanding results can be achieved even in the most complex and compromised contexts. I aspire to be able to say that I do the same with my own children, in all ways that parents are surely the first and most significant teachers of their own children.

The simple fact is that it matters a lot to me that a generous student, whose name I cannot associate with a face, still thinks the teaching I did in 2010 was of great significance.

That year began with another student writing an online complaint about me. She, the first-year student who complained, said I was an example of a lecturer who does not care. She had some reason. I was late for the first class of the semester – because I had not read the late message which announced a venue change. So I met briefly with a fraction of the class before cancelling the rest of the lecture because it was clear that something was organisationally not as it should be. Sometime during the term she approached me to apologise. Her complaint had got the attention of university management who quizzed me about it because there had been an unusual number of complaints at the start of that year.
I am inspired by students. How could anyone not be inspired by the story of the young man who, from the meagre money loaned to him for studies by the state, cared for and then buried his brother, mother and father and still managed to pass his degree in reasonably good time? That young man crisscrossed the country on an empty stomach and trying to beat the epidemic that struck his family down. When they had one after the other died, in perverse yearly sequence, he said to me he no longer had a reason for not doing well – but that the memory of their lives, and the knowledge that they never had the chance he had, would fire him to do great things.

The hopes of my students humble me just as they scare me when I find them to be too familiar and too comfortable with pessimistic accounts of the world. How strange is it that young people should be so cynical sometimes? And would it not be stranger still if the youth of this colonial and apartheid heritage would be anything but disjointed and alienated from their own concerns? As teachers we have to nudge our students towards acceptance of their own hopes and dreams. We struggle to get them to act with critical consciousness of their own needs, in their contexts, and with appreciation of the powers they have to be the change they desire.

For all this, yes, I marvel at how many students I have taught have found ways to connect even with me. For in truth I have not had much time with them – an hour or two per week. And I have often taught extremely large groups of students – sometimes over six hundred in a venue. Even from groups of hundreds that have formed my many classes, they manage to find the intention to care and to build that makes teaching such a big part of my life.

Notice that I struggle to say the students I taught are ‘my’ students. How can they be mine? Would making them mine involve establishing myself as a proprietor who can do as he wills – in the manner of the teachers who shaped me with hard words, unmeasured blows and mean dismissals? Is it not better to allow them to be who they are, for themselves and for those they love?

Fela Kuti’s song, which the student remembers me sharing, is called Teacher Don’t Teach Me Nonsense. I used it to speak about how they should learn to question me and everyone else who would make them vessels suitable for receiving great gifts of knowledge. I reminded the class that in many instances they know more than I do and that in many other instances what I know more of is just wrong and irrelevant to them. Real education involves, I suggested, establishing oneself as a questor for knowledge. It involves what Paulo Freire (1993) describes as a pedagogy for freedom in which asking questions is fundamental and the mere imbibing of given answers is to be feared. On this understanding, teachers and students have a shared role to ask questions together with each bringing unique knowledge sets and perspectives to bear on the issues at hand.

I systematised my understanding of education from reading works that challenged the dominant voices of their time, works of Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, Søren Kierkegaard and Achille Mbembe. Fanon (1994) I think, was right to say that you
cannot have normal psychology in an abnormal society. His thought showed me that one cannot have normal education in an abnormal society. Likewise, in my research on HIV and AIDS communication I have argued that it is problematic to ask that people have normal sex in an abnormal society. It is Kierkegaard (1947) who showed me, though, how to write from within a limited place with the intentions of going beyond it. Kierkegaard (1947) wrote to critique the Christianity of his time using the limiting scholarly framework he had learnt from Hegel. He produced a theory of the particular individual from critically engaging Hegelian claims to universals. One is not Christian because of the universal facts that concern what one knows or that relate to where one is situated in history. No, Kierkegaard declared that one's being is chosen in freedom and choice. And Mbembe (2001) showed me the possibility of playing with existing theories while acting as a scathing witness to the crude and ugly tyranny by which many are ruled by a few who perpetuate given colonial legacies.

I refuse that my teachers should teach me the nonsense of becoming a poor mimic, applier or summary writer. There is much that one can learn from teachers who serve now as counter-models, as people whose behaviours are not to be repeated. I learnt these lessons from the cruel deliverers of cold comfort, twisted words, abused power and impossible to understand pain.

Even from the worst examples, one can learn what one wants or what one does not want.

I want to share the following unwarm words with teachers who touched the youthful me with violence:

Dear Unnamed Teachers of the Youthful Me

I thank you for making me know very early in life that being different is sometimes the unjust cause of undeserved accusations and condemnations. In my classes I love to talk about the possibility of a cosmopolitanism by which we can embrace each other with our differences. I imagine possibilities in which people establish thick relations in which diversity, creativity, dignity and worth are the norm.

I am loath to give you credit for any good that has come of me for there are many losses yet to be overcome. In any event, there is something dishonest and unclean about making a fetish of pain and cruelty by claiming they are the way to any good.

Perhaps you will remember me better than I remember you.

The idea that I found a way to go on may also give you some hope. I know that I marvel and find hope in all my students who against all odds have done well in classes I have taught. There is much that is inspiring about the resilience and power with which my students overcome the pain of broken
homes, empty stomachs, lost belief in society, and the altruism by which we can still learn and teach each other.

I am still trying to learn to call out the alphabet without stopping and doubting if I got the whole order of letters correct. It is still difficult for me to sit still for long periods. Having a laugh with just about everyone who is willing is still something I do. When I work I often get caught in the moment. It remains a constant preoccupation of mine to find better ways to do things or at least to find more interesting ways of doing so.

People in power do not scare me. I know both the limits of coercive power and the wondrous possibilities of leadership that is, as Reuel Khoza says, attuned to followers. Attuned leadership is established on the basis of valuing and listening to followers in order to use wisdom to guide action towards mutually desired ends. My own teaching has attempted to be attuned in this way, significantly because I am sure of the limits of using force against reluctant followers since I have seen the many fellow students who were lost along the way, repelled rather than drawn by the force of teachers.

If you learn anything from our brief but abiding relationship, I hope it is that there is something valuable about learning from others without being bent too much by their power.

If you meet me and remember me, please greet me. Odds are that I will struggle to remember you at first. Through the pain it is difficult for me to remember your faces. But I will greet you and I will try to remember the finer moments. Perhaps we can even create new memories that are easier to remember.

I wish to say these things with kindest regards.

Can anyone doubt that teachers can make a positive difference? My father showed me that. At his funeral, a man I hardly knew spoke of him being like a father to many, many students. He told of how my father had transformed a struggling school into a most successful pipeline of good students, good sports people and teachers who went on to lead other schools. Most enviably, for me, because I have not had the ability to know all my students’ names, the man spoke of how my father knew all his students’ names – in a school with a thousand-odd young people.

As a lecturer I wish to learn from the past in order to somehow enable my students to do well in the future. I argue that we can reform the violent structures of our societies by finding ways to direct all the resources available to us towards achieving futures that are remarkably different and desirable. This is a dream that we spoke about a great deal within the team I led when I was head of the Department of Communication Studies, between 2010 and 2016.
In that time, we used all resources in pursuit of development and health. Decisions, from those regarding the hiring of the secretary to those regarding the recruitment of the most senior academics were centred on bringing in people whose lives were dominated by the wish to produce a context team that is excellent in both research and teaching when we knew that the extremely large classes we teach mitigate against excelling in both areas. For each lecturer we had over five hundred students!

We sought to change rules that made it difficult for students to march through the system. In particular, we took on and changed the prerequisite rules that made it impossible for students who did not do well in some modules to progress to others. How could we not listen to stories of students who were forced to return to university for a year's study in order to repeat a single failed module – when a year's living expenses often doubled the annual income of the student's family household?

It was not difficult to listen to my students’ stories. These were the stories of those I grew up with and studied with. At Fort Hare I studied with people from the poorest of poor South Africa. Can you imagine how I think with sad love of the young woman I met in my first week there? She offered that she and her sister could act as ‘wives’ for me if I just shared a room with them. After two years of avoiding her, one day she finally came upon me in the middle of an open patch of land. She understood, she said. It was fine that I had not wanted her deal, she said. It may have been better for her and her sister with me, she speculated, than with the man they now stayed. It was clear that she knew that she and her sister had made a pact with daily abuse and shame in order to beat the poverty from which they came.

Have you spoken to the young lady who came to university with the R400 that makes up the family savings? Have you asked her how it feels to pay R200 of this as a registration fee? Do you know how it is to live on less than R10 per day in order to stretch the money out until the miracle you and your mother pray for comes? The history and legacies of colonial segregation and apartheid still mean that the vast majority of South Africans remain too poor to pay on their own for access to university education.

Have you studied with someone who tries to learn econometrics without having studied the order of precedence for doing arithmetic calculations? Have you seen them trying to memorise thousands of raw numbers and maths symbols in order to be able to say they did do two years of a course that pays – to not stay in the bereft humanities?

We worked hard and transformed our already excellent teaching team into a very good research team. A team that taught nearly six hundred students per academic became one of the most research productive teams in the country. Where the team used to produce small single digits of research units per year, in 2015 we produced about 10 times that with more secured as forthcoming publications.
It is exhilarating to know that our small team of academics, facing the giant teaching challenge of a genuinely ‘massified’ teaching environment, have acted as midwives to the dreams, abilities and futures of many students. For the first time, we see strong numbers applying and getting into Master’s and doctoral study. Where there were one or two, now there are a dozen or two with more knocking on the door. Do you wish to go to the neighbourhoods from which many of them come, neighbourhoods in which sometimes, in living memory, no one else is known to have gone to a university?

Some folks ask why I don’t use my education and ability to learn to make money. At base, they want to know if I am an ascetic. They reason that anyone who is content to be a professor must be willing to give up valuable opportunities to earn a life of luxury and wealth in order to try to make heroic sacrifices that advance education and other people’s chances of getting on in life.

I know about the poverty of those who teach. My grandfather lived through the colonial era in Zimbabwe. He spoke of seeing the pioneer column – the trek of colonialists who went on to claim sovereignty over all the country. He trained with the first black people who became missionaries of the Methodist Church of Zimbabwe. After falling out with church leaders for contesting the inequity of how blacks were treated, he became a teacher for a short while. When I knew him he was a poor man. He had sold his last cattle to send my father to school.

The first school at which I taught was actually the last school my grandfather taught at!

So I know about teachers not being well salaried.

The question of not loving myself enough to seek an easier life is not one that I entertain much. It just seems to be the wrong question. It misdirects attention from the fact that I love the achievement of growing by learning new ways and of sharing these with others. The question goes against my understanding that humans are unique among animals for the ways in which we altruistically seek to inform one another – and for the ways in which we are willing to be informed by others. The human craft of building cultures and institutional arrangements that actively try to develop and propagate the best of what we have collectively learnt ratchets up the power and authority with which humans are able to influence their lives on earth. Education, then, is power. It matters that we pursue it with care, that we advance freedom.

Freedom is not only positively associated with development and related capabilities to avoid epidemics, famines and other avoidable forms of suffering. As my father and his father taught me, freedom is also inalienable even though people can be taught to not know their own sovereignty.

Nothing I say can express how I thank my students. I thank them for the commitment they have to hearing new things even when society speaks relentlessly about how lazy and incompetent they are. I thank them for the kindness they have in taking time out of their young lives to grow in the kinds of things I love to work on.
I do not know how to reconcile the fact that my powerful father did not always see and stop teachers from putting their canes to work on my back. I know that when he knew he intervened. He got my primary school to rewrite the letter of condemnation that my Grade 7 teacher had sent as ‘a testimonial’ for me to get a place in high school. I also do not know why my father did not hate very much. I know that he accepted that the world was cruel and that he believed it is possible for us to make a difference for ourselves and for others.

We talk, my students and I, about the countless poor and rich people whose taxes pay fees, resources and salaries. ‘Warm regards’ for their contributions are richly deserved. We rejoice when we hear that finally masses are rising up against the misuse of education to perpetrate colonial and apartheid legacies. For us, there is much to be grateful for. Nobody deserves teachers who teach nonsense.

For those dear readers who have been students of mine, I hope this account reveals that the dispenser of knowledge who has stood in front of them is positioned in a biography that matters. I have aimed to illustrate this by revealing myself to be a person with a life history that marks and shapes, without determining, how I meet possibilities and limitations in the world. Perhaps, dear reader, you can think about how we can make this sharing and claiming of recognition a part of growing practices of granting dignity and worth to everyone.

Dear reader, it is amazing to be here.

References
The fall of apartheid in South Africa certainly began with all sorts of optimism about the future of black people within the country, on the continent and in the diaspora. Apartheid in its totality dehumanised black people at such unprecedented levels that it was not easy for any black person outside the borders of South Africa to aspire to live here. The lack of basic human rights for black people within this territory was in itself a deterrent for those who love freedom, equality and justice. This period was also marked by widespread movements of diverse people into and outside South Africa. In the midst of these exoduses, a new cohort of black students and academics from the continent and abroad arrived at our historically white institutions (HWIs) and ushered a newly transformed space, at least, demographically. These new groups of academics were adding to the few local black academics who had already seized this opportunity. For the first time in the history of South Africa, black students formed majority student body at HWIs. These new changes further complicate and problematise how blackness is conceptualised within this space. I use the concept of blackness as the decolonial theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres deploys it. Maldonado-Torres (2016) explains blackness in terms of how it is lived and experienced (phenomenology of blackness) and, also, on how it emerged and solidified in modern civilisation (genealogy of blackness). Others speak of the ontology and evolution of blackness. Blackness constitutes a political constituency rather than a biological group although I recognise that, relative to other countries, apartheid South Africa complicated and institutionalised blackness in hierarchical terms by putting Indians at the top and Africans at the bottom. This problematic construction of blackness continues to haunt us in postapartheid South Africa up to this day as this book purports to demonstrate, using black experiences in the academy.

By now, it is an obvious fact that not everything in our institutions of higher learning is going well. Despite various attempts over the past two decades to transform this space, our institutions continue towards chaos, insecurity, violence, exploitation and oppression in terms of integration. If the past two decades began with all sorts of optimism about the future of the South African academy, the third decade is gradually losing all that. This can be seen in the confrontational manner and the violent nature of the ‘fallist movements’ that saw the removal of Rhodes’s statue and university fees scrapped for undergraduate students from low-income families. Perhaps the question we should ask is, ‘What is it that we are not getting right at our institutions of higher learning?’
This chapter seeks to grapple with this question using my own observations and experiences in this space. It is the third chapter in which I highlight my lived experiences within the higher education sector in South Africa. The first essay was published in a book entitled Stepping Up: A New Generation of South African Leaders, where I allude to some of the challenges I experienced as a student at the University of Pretoria (Phaswana 2013). The second publication (Phaswana 2014) was a contribution in a volume, Liberation Diaries, edited by Busani Ngcaweni where I was reflecting on my own experiences as both a student and lecturer in HWIs in South Africa. The current chapter uses a personal biographical sketch to demonstrate how narrow conceptions of ‘being’ and ‘knowledge’ have the potential to hinder transformation efforts in the academy. The following section sets the scene by foregrounding my own identity markers to explain this narrow conception of being.

Setting the scene: The burden of being black, South African and woman

My perspective here is marked by my own educational journey, sociohistoric experiences and cultural location as a black African woman of South African descent who grew up under apartheid South Africa, later became a foreign student in the United Kingdom (UK), and is currently an academic in postapartheid South Africa. First, as a black woman, I believe I share similar political struggles with other black women in South Africa and beyond. Pragna Rugunanan’s chapter in this book has articulated the challenges she faced as black woman of Indian descent in the academy, even though in relation to coloured and African women, white South Africa would distinguish her as the ‘preferred other’ because of her Indianness and the troubling and complex history of South Africa. Reading the works of (United States) US black feminists such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Melissa Harris-Perry, Tiffanny Patterson and others affirmed me in the academy – as did living and experiencing the UK academy. As a result, embracing this identity with other black women enabled me to resist oppression and the dehumanising conditions that all black women experience in the academy, worldwide. I also share my blackness with all those coming from what Frantz Fanon calls the ‘zone of non-being,’ who by virtue of their ancestry, continue to suffer epistemic exclusion around the world (as cited in Grosfoguel 2013).

The struggle for being black and foreign started in the UK where I was a foreign student. I noticed how the history of racialisation in the UK had left a similar legacy to the one in my home country. In my interactions with fellow black Africans from the continent, particularly those from West Africa who were closest to me, there was (as depicted by whiteness) an implicit assumption that British-born blacks were lazy with a sense of entitlement. I understood how the modern colonial heterosexual capitalist world, with its logic of competition (for space and resources), would make a black foreigner complicit in the racialisation of local black academics; there
are academic benefits and gains that come with being perceived as a ‘better black’ within racialised spaces. Relative to British-born black academics, black African and Caribbean immigrants were the ‘preferred other’ within the racialised British academy while the former became the ‘quintessential other.’ In a scathing feminist critique, M Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997: xv) observed this in relation to how the US academy created a gulf among black women scholars and feminists. They noticed that immigrant women of colour were ‘less threatening than African American women to white women who often preferred to deal with our “foreignness” than our racialisation in the US, this in turn, created divisive relations between us and African American feminists (1997: xv). It will certainly take honest black foreigners in the host country to recognise this marginalisation of black locals in racialised societies such as South Africa, the US and the UK. I would further register that any black scholar who does not take this ‘racial history in mind’ runs the risk of weakening black ‘solidarity and coalition’ in the academy – to paraphrase Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Njambi (2005: 119).

Second, my being African solidified in the UK academy where my accent became a marker of identity among other black people. This happened when I asked questions in the classroom or presented seminars and conference papers. It was a silent, unspoken disbelief that always asked: ‘Did she ask that question?’ ‘Did she really write this paper?’ This was due to British assumptions of unintelligent, backward and barbaric African women – even though British society has encountered thousands of intelligent Africans over the centuries. Beuko-Betts and Njambi (2005: 119) note that being African in the US academy meant that they had ‘to be forced to constantly dispel doubts and anxieties on the part of students and faculty who have already conceptualised blackness, Africanness, and femaleness as markings of inferiority.’ It was in this British space that I even doubted myself in the presence of other blacks for the first time. As a class or seminar dispersed, I would be asked: ‘Where do you come from?’ – which was a haunting question that still annoys me as I write this! It cut as deep as ‘Look, a negro!’ did for Fanon (1967). This question (which was repeated over and over again in the many social spaces where I dared to open my mouth) was always so irritating that I would react with a harsh ‘Why?’ This was after realising that my response about coming from South Africa did not yield a different gaze – because those who were familiar with white South Africa had their own assumption of what I would call ‘intellectual deprivation’ of black South Africans under apartheid rather than material deprivation. I note this as intellectual to distinguish it from academic or epistemic deprivation, which is what apartheid managed to do.

Having grown up in apartheid South Africa, I knew I was African but this identity was always pushed to the back of my mind, as apartheid claimed that Africa and Africans outside South Africa were uncivilised and backward. These assumptions remained unchallenged in my mind even though in the community of Zebediela where I grew up there were always old men from Malawi, Zambia, Swaziland and
Zimbabwe. Some of them were prominent community leaders whom I looked up to – the Mkandawires, Masekos, Phiris, Nyonis, Nkomos. We could identify them by their family names and accents, which were always different from local accents. At least in Zebediela, where I spent most of my youth, we referred to them as maNyasa [foreigner] and not the derogatory, makwerekwere [outsider]. Their accents became markers of their foreignness, as it was for me in the UK. However, we never saw them as lesser, unintelligent or backward as we were conditioned to think of them. Undermining African immigrants is part of poor, urban multiracial contexts of South Africa but not for those of us who grew up in rural all-black communities under apartheid. Postapartheid South Africa brought migrants from East, West and Central Africa in large numbers, and my first encounter with them was in my other home in Moletsane, Soweto. Two young men from Nigeria rented a back room in our street in the 1990s, and I remember how these folk stood out because of their physique and dress code. At the time, we used to call them maKhalanga even though we did not know understand that the Khalanga were from Zimbabwe. The point I am trying to make here is that, at least in the many black spaces where I lived, I have never encountered a situation where the humanity of fellow Africans were undermined or doubted by other blacks. It was in the UK where I discovered that identity shifts according to geography. For the first time, my Africanness took central space – after I had escaped being just a black Ndebele girl in South Africa – and I fully embraced this new identity even though it slightly contradicted what I knew about being African. Being African in the UK and coming from South Africa had its own challenges because it meant I have to engage in what Beoku-Bets and Njambi (2005) termed the ‘ritual of convincing’ Europeans that Africa is not what they think it. I even found myself trying to convince fellow Africans from elsewhere, who had arrived in UK before me, that I have always travelled by train from Inhlanzane station to Park station with my father for shopping. I am used to going up and down escalators or lifts in the shops on the high streets of Johannesburg, or travelling longer distance trips by train between rural Zebediela and Johannesburg.

Like other contributors in this book, I claim being South African to distinguish myself as belonging to a subgroup of black African women within the academy who, by virtue of our social, historical and political location, have been negatively construed as lazy, incompetent, backward and unfit to teach at HWIs in South Africa. This identity differentiates me from other black African women from the continent in the South African academy, as Kezia Batisai has mentioned in her chapter. Batisai has indicated how the dominant discourse of a better black in South Africa is not just foreign but Zimbabwean. She notes, ‘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.’ Such assumptions further reinforce stereotypes and fragment black solidarity.
Being black and dehumanised or subhumanised

In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire (1972) writes ‘the only model of humanity we know is that of dehumanization.’ My understanding of Freire here means we have no point of reference on how to be or do humanity. Like bell hooks, Freire's book was very liberating for me and inspired me to imagine an alternative model of humanity throughout my teaching career. I grew up in situations where I witnessed oppressors who completely lost their humanity in the ways they unleashed violence, privileged animals over humanity, derived pleasure at sufferings and derived material gain from suffering – as Freire notes. I yearned for a different world and an alternative model of humanity. For Freire, the one who thrives on 'unjust social order' has already lost the human status. Concurring with Freire, I grasped then that there is no one who can teach me how to be human because both the oppressor and the oppressed have no model of humanity other than dehumanisation. I have the responsibility to unlearn, and to relearn how to be human.

Fanon (1967) in his book, *Black Skin White Masks*, also occupied himself with the black condition and helped me grapple with my own existential condition of being black in an anti-black world. Fanon dealt with this predicament and offered us the concept of being ‘overdetermined from without.’ Recently, Maldonado-Torres (2007) also advanced Fanon's work by showing us how modern civilisation and its invention of blackness continue to haunt us in the present. He provided us with the concept of ‘misanthropic scepticism’ – which has to do with questioning, scrutinising, and doubting the humanity of people who are not of Caucasian descent. This scholar attributes this to the darker side of modernity, which has continued to shape the modern world since colonial encounters. For him, it is this persisting coloniality that makes all these possible. He distinguishes coloniality from colonialism as the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (Maldonado-Torres 2007: 243)

bell hooks (1994) writes that she came to theory when she was desperate and hurt, struggling to makes sense of the world around her. Theory, for her, became a healing balm to soothe her pain. Like her, the theoretical explanations of the authors I cite above helped me to comprehend what was happening around me from a very early age, and helped me to locate my struggle as intertwined with my being and background of coming from a marginal community. Moreover, theory enabled me not to isolate the struggle I am experiencing as located only in the academy, but as a
struggle for existence and survival because of my being black. My whole life journey of growing up as a young black African girl in apartheid South Africa resonates with the observations these authors have made, even though I encountered them later in my life and some of them wrote before I was born. Through their theoretical lenses, I discovered that my idea of being and doing human was that of dehumanisation – and this was encrypted in my mind at a very early age, as I show next.

As young children growing up in rural Zebediela, we had no toys and books; we used to do role playing during our play activities. One of my favourites was being a teacher in a classroom with my peers as learners. I do not even remember role playing as learner in these play activities. Sometimes, in the absence of peers to play with, I would teach a stand of mealie stalks in my mother's backyard. Ironically, also resonating with my observation of teacher behaviour and conduct at the time, I would whip the mealie stalks when I imagined they were not cooperating during this play activity. In the process, I would destroy my mother's mealies! This conduct, in part, reflected the level of dehumanisation that I, as a child, was observing. It reflected my sociohistoric experience at that time. Lynching and hard labour were used as forms of punishment and they were our everyday realities in this context. Literature on slavery and colonialism also attest to this. In the black apartheid schools I attended, black teachers would use corporal punishment excessively, particularly on those students who were academically struggling. As Freire (1972: 29) points out 'the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, as it does follow the guidelines of the oppressor.' Sometimes black teachers would even say to learners ‘jou houtkop’ [you woodenhead]). These teachers would hit students with a rod on their head in an attempt to make the woodenheads absorb the lesson content. Instead of seeing the classroom as a learning and nurturing space, the classroom became a place of fear, conformity and obedience – a depressing space that, in attempt to escape it, children would fake sickness.

After passing matric, I proceeded to train as a teacher – one of the few skilled occupations available for blacks under apartheid – which later culminated in an academic career because of my love for ideas. I needed to be at a place where my inborn love for teaching and ideas would be harnessed, and university was the right place to be. My search for knowledge saw me leave for England to pursue a doctoral degree. This move was partly motivated by my despondency after encountering another attempt of dehumanisation directed towards me. The postapartheid government had embarked on a restructuring and redeployment process during the transitional period, which threatened to take me to a distant area far away from my family – another form of dehumanisation prevalent in black South African communities. Many young people grow up without the presence of biological parents due to the legacy of the migrant labour system that the new dispensation has not attempted to challenge but tries to normalise by not transforming apartheid spatial arrangements. Most children in South Africa see their parents once a year during the Christmas season, due to the precarity of black lives in this context. It is acceptable for black
parents to leave their children in the care of others while caring for other people’s children at a distant location. At the time, I was a very young widowed mother of a 7-year-old daughter and it did not matter to those in authority that I should leave my home and my child. Fanon warned us about how the subjection of black lives stipulates that one should forego the will to live but embrace the will to survive. I was redeployed by the education authorities through a process known as ‘Last in, First out’. This was despite the fact that I was the only person teaching mathematics at this black high school (and with a heavy teaching load). The fact that I was young and the last one to come in meant that I had to leave for another distant school. The longest-serving staff member was retained, regardless of his inability to teach mathematics at Grade 12 level. The consequences for the black children studying mathematics at the school surely did not matter for those in authority even though they were black too. The patronage system prevailed and preserved long-standing relationships among colleagues. By citing the above, I intend to show that the dehumanisation of black lives happens beyond racial boundaries as Steve Biko (2004) has cautioned about internalised oppression and self-loathing. This sums up my section about how a limited comprehension of being leads to internalised dehumanisation. In the next section, I grapple with the prospect of being black and knowing.

**Being black and knowing**

The prospect of being black and knowing preoccupies my mind immensely, ever since I understood that our humanity has been doubted throughout generations. The questions that always bother me are: Is it possible for a non-being to produce knowledge? What canon of thought would that be? Can it be regarded as real knowledge? Is there a link between being black and knowledge production? – to use Fanon’s concepts. I grappled with these questions during my PhD in the UK, which was drawing heavily on what I observed and knew from my South African context. As I always tell my students, embarking on a PhD for some of us who come from marginal communities is a soul-searching spiritual wrestle. One’s inner self is shaken to the core and one’s whole being is challenged in very hurtful ways. I learnt during my PhD that black people are scripted out of texts, invisibilised in spaces or, even worse, completely erased from the land of humans. The doctoral journey is where one discovers that our voices are misinterpreted if not silenced.

It was specifically this insistence that I should think ‘universally’ and ‘objectively’ that was exasperating, especially at the end when it became clear that it was a guise to cite Western theorists. My worldview was repeatedly dismissed as ‘narrow’ and ‘subjective’ because it was not fitting with dominant paradigms. Something deep within me was rejecting this way of approaching my studies because I knew that some of the knowledge I was drawing on was a reality in my context. To cite one example: my supervisor asked me to take out some of my writings where I narrate how a young Nigerian immigrant was scared to speak to me during my research...
due to xenophobic attitudes he experienced in South Africa. A week later, however, xenophobic attacks broke out in South Africa and I was advised to include that experience because it was now validated by the BBC and other media platforms (see Phaswana 2008). It was Miranda Fricker’s (2007) work on pre-emptive testimonial justice that made me aware that ‘our social types operate in advance to prevent our views from being heard or solicited’ (my emphasis).

My ideas lacked the necessary ingredients of doing social sciences. The nagging question of: ‘What is your theoretical underpinning?’ can be loosely construed as ‘Which white man (in the social sciences) do you align your ideas with?’ I argue so because any reference to ‘epistemic aliens’ like Frantz Fanon, Archie Mafeje, Thandika Mkandawire, Toyin Falola, Molefi Asante and Amina Mama as thinkers was often dismissed as provincial. What really irritated me was that I was enrolled for a PhD and part of its requirements was to produce ‘new knowledge’ and here it was denied. I soon realised that new ideas are not allowed to flourish within the academy as long as they are linked to particular bodies – especially bodies that are considered less human. I concluded that like our skin, our ideas seem very dark and somehow needed to be ‘brightened up’ by some white theorist. Our sociohistoric experiences get censored, and at worst, dismissed.

The prolific decolonial scholar, Ramon Grosfoguel’s, concept of the Westernised university helps me to make sense of these experiences. By ‘Westernised university,’ Grosfoguel (2013) refers to any university in the world that has its knowledge foundations rooted in Western canon of thought. It may be geographically situated in the Global South or in the Global North. This author notes that the foundational structures of knowledge in a Westernised university are essentially racist and sexist because they inferiorise and peripheralise other knowledges produced by non-Western subjects and women (including European women). Those who are assumed as ‘lacking rationality’ were epistemically excluded from the Westernised university knowledge structures even though they were physically present (Grosfoguel 2013: 87). Grosfuguel critiques what he termed ‘the epistemic privilege of Western Man in Westernized universities’ structures of knowledge as follows:

Our job in the Westernized university is basically reduced to that of learning these theories born from the experience and problems of a particular region of the world (five countries in Western Europe) with its own particular time/space dimensions and ‘applying’ them to other geographical locations even if the experience and time/space of the former are quite different from the latter. These social theories based on the social-historical experience of men of five countries constitute the foundation of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in the Westernized universities today. (2013: 74)

In our Westernised universities, knowledge systems are sidelined based on what Walter Mignolo (2002) calls the ‘biopolitics’ and ‘geopolitics’ of the knowledge producer. Being black, African, woman and coming from the Global South puts one
at the lower hierarchy of knowledge production, as is being male in this context as Hugo Canham shows (Chapter 7 of this book). This author was labelled as polemic for his scathing critique of whiteness in his writings. On the flipside of epistemic privilege is epistemic inferiority, Grosfoguel (2013: 75) notes:

In Westernized universities, the knowledge produced by other epistemologies, cosmologies, and world views arising from other world-regions with diverse time/space dimensions and characterized by different geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge are considered ‘inferior’ in relation to the ‘superior’ knowledge produced by the few Western men of five countries that compose the canon of thought in the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Grosfoguel enabled me to acknowledge that even though I am alumni of three universities in Africa, I am a product of a Westernised university and I carry Western epistemology regardless of where I studied in the world. As that author argues, it was not a matter of coincidence that the Westernised university, as a global power structure, had to expand beyond Europe and North America to produce and reproduce Westernised subjects who will continue to do the job for the ‘master’ for a longer period of time – beyond the master’s departure (end of direct colonialism). This stark reality help me to understand why it is difficult for Africa to liberate itself from the shackles of imperialism, coloniality, neocolonialism and neo-apartheid, even despite the increasing numbers of educated Africans. It is these ‘rituals of validation’ we perform at Westernised universities that makes many African continue to seek a stamp of approval from the West in dealing with African issues. This can be seen and observed as African statesmen bow down to Western powers, as distinguished African professors seek validation by exclusively publishing in international journals where ‘international’ means anything other than African countries. This inferiority complex starts right from our encounter with uncritical Western knowledge, which we hold with high esteem at all costs. Engaging in alternative African knowledge is received with disdain, criticism, suspicion in such a way that one even risks their tenure in historically white universities or faces the wrath of the system.

It was at this initial stage of my PhD that I had to concede to this epistemic dominance and subscribe to white theory – or I would have prolonged my PhD years or even run the risk of not obtaining the qualification. Others refer to this as ‘playing the game.’ It entailed suspending a big part of what I wanted to do for my PhD by following the prescribed rules, which I can only explain as reinforcing white dominance. The key lesson that I picked up from this process was that the concepts of universality, objectivity and neutrality are conveniently used to hide the visibility of dominant structures of knowledge and the skewed idea of a one-world paradigm (Grosfoguel 2013).

What is even more disturbing is that the majority of social science publications produced in South Africa, including those by progressive black people, focus on
black lives as the subject or object of research. It is as though studying black lives is
currency for quick publication. One still struggles to come across black and white
researchers who study white lives in South Africa. The lens is always on black
subjects who, in my view, are over researched, considering that they were the focus
under apartheid. I refrain from engaging in this type of work that studies black
people in order to meet university targets. As a black woman scholar, I am aware
of the debilitating effects of our misrepresentation in scholarly work – therefore,
engaging in critical scholarship is not an option. As can be seen, this black
positionality of alienation influenced the type of knowledge I engage in. It is because
of this background that I argue that the foundation of knowledge in a Westernised
university is limited because it is based on racist and sexist logic to quote Grosfoguel.
My longing for an alternative epistemology in the South African academy grew until
I had an interesting encounter in the UK.

**Black History Month as liberatory encounter**

Towards my final years at the English university, I had an interesting encounter. I saw
a poster advertising a lecture series during Black History Month, and thought I should
walk into one of those lectures someday and eventually did. I found students seated
with their eyes glued to the presenter. Of course, this was a mixed class with a majority
of black students. The presenter had a black Caribbean accent and he introduced us
to important readings that would change my life and sparked interest in my scholarly
work. What was difficult to fathom for me during these lectures (which, at the same
time, invoked mixed feelings of anger and excitement within me), was that I had
to encounter black intellectuals this far away – at a British university – after having
studied at three universities in South Africa that never exposed me to black thinkers.
The excitement was apparent – it entailed liberation from suffocation. I stayed in that
long lecture hall and vowed never to miss one in subsequent days and the following
year; unfortunately, my stay in the UK came to an end when I completed my studies.
That presenter introduced us to classic black texts by authors such as CLR James,
Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amil Cabral, Anta Diop, Ngũgĩ
wa Thiong'o, Léopold Senghor, Marcus Garvey, WEB Du Bois, Audre Lorde, Sylvia
Wynter and many others. Even though his prescribed list had very few women and
Africans from the continent, it managed to unravel a big part of my intellectual
puzzle. It was, therefore, a liberating encounter and affirming experience in two ways:
First, to recognise that black people as early as the early 20th century had written and
published academic texts awakened me; the Westernised universities I participated
in had not equipped me with such alternative knowledge. Second, the fact that I
could read a text and insert myself (together with my 21st-century experiences as a
black person) within their texts affirmed my troubled conception of blackness across
geographical boundaries. Next, I write about re-entry into South Africa after years of
assuming the identity of a foreign student and embracing my Africanness.
Neo-apartheid and university mergers in South Africa

My re-entry into the South African academy was through a newly merged institution – University of Johannesburg (UJ) as a postdoctoral fellow. This move was made possible by my British doctoral supervisor who recommended me to the then vice dean (research) in the faculty of humanities at this institution who had indicated to my supervisor that the university was recruiting postdoctoral fellows – and encouraged me to apply because there were not many role models for black students at this newly merged institution. She felt very strongly about the need for black South African role models in our institutions of higher learning. Luckily, this coincided with my personal ambitions. This was the university where I had completed my Master’s degree prior to going to England, although in a different faculty. UJ, therefore, became as my exit and re-entry into South Africa and, because my postgraduate experience at this university had been enjoyable as part of the first groups during the first decade of our democracy, I welcomed the idea.

University mergers were part of a nationwide initiative to redress past imbalances in higher education provision in South Africa, and UJ enjoyed the status of being a successful merger. This became one of its strengths as well as its pull factor among black students due to its affordability relative to other universities in Johannesburg. I came back to a noisy and newly transformed university, at least demographically. I received many welcoming, smiling faces from students and this was exciting, notwithstanding the ‘white gaze’ from faculty as some noticed that I had a PhD – to use Fanon’s phrase. The whole department was white except for one postdoctoral fellow from Zimbabwe – 15 years into democracy! Nonetheless, I was full of enthusiasm at the time and I suspect this was due to the impression I was given by my white professor who was, in many ways affirming, for black students. I can confidently say this because during my tenure as faculty at UJ, a group of students asked me for permission to nominate her for the national ‘Woman of the Year’ competition, which I agreed to. The idea of giving back to my community as I had envisaged during my interview with my sponsor, Ford Foundation, was being realised in my lifetime – as well as being a role model for the majority of black students from marginal communities.

However, one of the most difficult things I had to witness, and which opened my wounds of being black and dehumanised was working at two different campuses of UJ; our department had footprints in two campuses – Soweto (SWC) and Auckland Park (APK) – and, later, a third with the inclusion of Doornfontein (DFC). To be precise, SWC is situated in a black township and was a previously black university, Vista, whereas APK is in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg and was the formerly white Afrikaans university, Rand Afrikaans University (RAU). These campuses depicted the social locations of students in the wider racialised society of South Africa. They reflected the legacy of apartheid spatial arrangements in many ways, as I will show below.
These experiences reminded me of my initial convictions when joining the institution. It was to give back, to educate my community, and I decided to align myself with like-minded women colleagues in the department who focused their energies on teaching the majority of students who were, in many instances, ridiculed for their inability to meet standards. We worked hard to assist these students with the vice dean (teaching and learning) who supported us immensely. A lot of our efforts, time and creativity went into teaching meetings; we improved and worked hard on our pedagogy. Sometimes this meant meeting at our homes, trying to do our best for our students. I found a deep sense of belonging with those women colleagues, and we all took on heavy teaching loads.

Unfortunately, for me, this meant travelling between the two campuses where my other colleagues would not go due to their privileged status of being white and female. For some reasons, my white female colleagues were reluctant to teach at campuses other than APK. Although this was not put on paper, there was a hidden policy of safeguarding white female colleagues from teaching at SWC. Male colleagues could go and teach at SWC irrespective of their racial background, but every black woman who worked in my department for the duration of my stay at this university had to travel to SWC. Teaching at SWC was an experience on its own because it unearthed the depth of coloniality entrenched in the institution.

During the few years I taught at the faculty of humanities, my observations of the divide between these campuses in terms of how faculty treated staff and students based at SWC are disturbing. Staff do not enjoy the same privileges as their counterparts at APK. The level of services and resources provided at SWC was, at worst, dehumanising for staff and students. At APK there were endless supplies of tea, coffee and milk with amenities to grind coffee. I was surprised to find that this was not the case at SWC. I had to bring my own tea bags and milk because none was offered at the SWC campus. I questioned the faculty officer at the time who confirmed that the faculty used to offer tea but not anymore because departments had to do this. This included bringing printing paper to the machine when you wanted to print. This meant that, no matter how close I lived to Soweto, I still had to drive to main campus to collect paper in the morning.

For students, this included a long wait for the intercampus bus service that was always overcrowded. Sometimes this turned into stampedes because students became frustrated by the long wait, knowing they would be sent out of class at APK for being late. The bus system was poorly managed. Since I had joined this institution, the students’ representative council complained about the buses, with no changes effected. Other problems at SWC included poor bandwidth, lack of proper feedback mechanisms to students because scripts were delivered late from APK to SWC, lecturers not honouring consultation hours (with impunity) resulting in resident lecturers being overwhelmed by frustrated students. APK became the headquarters rather than a peer campus. At first, I was a bit aloof when I heard all these complaints when I was based at APK. However, I came into contact with these realities when
I was asked to coordinate at SWC, and had to deal with these issues myself. This was one of those hurtful experiences in my academic career – having to witness black suffering on this scale. I became unpopular for raising these issues and, as usual, problems were placed back on the victims (students) and their culture. These students’ experiences were hurtful because they were not different from my own experiences as I will show next.

**Outsider-within status at UJ**

The concept of ‘outsider-within’ is used by Collins in her 1986 piece, ‘Learning from the Outsider within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought’. In her article, Collins makes a case about the challenges black sociologists encounter in bringing together their personal experiences, identities, values and perspectives with dominant narratives in academia. I use it differently here to discuss how my biography of belonging and exclusions always clashed at UJ. During my postdoctoral studies, I was once requested to present a guest lecture to an undergraduate class – whether this was a test or not, I agreed nonetheless. My unrecognised long teaching experience came in handy because, immediately after delivering the lecture, I was asked to take a first-year class in the next semester. This was exciting but, as I reflect now, it was to relieve others from the workload in what African American feminists term the ‘nanny phenomenon.’ The nanny phenomenon is discussed extensively by Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) and advanced by Beoku-Betts and Njambi (2005) in relation to US workspaces, including academia. At our historically white universities, the effect of being like a nanny is felt when one is expected to parent and nurture large undergraduate classes, only to be prohibited from proceeding with the students to postgraduate level. This was the case for me for some time until I saw a white colleague with no teaching experience being allocated postgraduate students. Even white junior colleagues at the time were allowed to teach at postgraduate level. Therefore, when my tenure was confirmed, I demanded postgraduate students too. It was also interesting to observe how other dynamics played out. A Zimbabwean colleague, who was there before me, never had the opportunity to teach. His exclusion from teaching responsibilities was mainly based on his radical Africanist approach to scholarship, particularly his defence of land expropriation in Zimbabwe, rather than his identity per se. I tapped into some of his radical views – at least, then, the sharing of office space while discomforting became a space for us to share ideas about critical pedagogy. These negative perceptions of being came from some of my colleagues, but as my former colleague and friend, radical feminist Patricia McFadden, used to say to me: ‘Edith, we still have a lot of cave dwellers in our midst. And they need to come out and kiss the sun.’

The unsettling racialisation and sexualisation continued, and came mainly from some of the senior white male colleagues rather than women. It is common to see the discomfort that black educated women pose to white middle-class men in the
academy. In most cases, these men do not know how to deal with them. Moreover, in the South African context, most white folks are often reluctant to open up their spaces to black bodies unless that black is coming to serve them. One colleague once asked me: 'Edith, don't you wanna work for us?' instead of 'don't you wanna work with us?' I quickly picked up the hidden meaning in his use of prepositions and immediately corrected him. I could sense he was attempting to mark the space as his and project me as a 'space invader' in ways akin to Nirmal Puwar's (2004) concept. Harris-Perry (2011) asserts that systems do not offer citizens equal opportunities for public recognition because of stereotypes or stigma associated with marginalised groups. Here, I was suffering from ‘misrecognition,’ to use Harris-Perry’s concept, and this applied to my Zimbabwean colleague on many occasions. The outsider status of my black Zimbabwean colleague and me meant that our common racial identities trumped differences in national identity, even though my identity as a woman meant that he was seen as naturally possessing higher intellectual prowess than me.

John McWhorter points out that ‘being white does offer certain people freedom not available to others. You can underperform without it being ascribed to your race.’ Some colleagues would pass sexist and racist innuendos towards other colleagues and students. Even if these matters were brought to those in authority, there were no consequences. The system protected white men as part of majority culture at this institution. I argue so because I have witnessed how other black colleagues have received warnings or been dismissed. Other female colleagues who had been there longer than me were aware of this, as I picked up in our casual conversations. There was only one junior white female colleague, who like me was on contract appointment at the time, who would speak out and challenge these racist and sexist attacks on students and staff. She was the only one who would 'speak truth to power.' Her courage to stand against patriarchal forces was quite admirable. This should not suggest that I could not speak up or voice my opinion on the matter. I was fully aware of my positionality in relation to how the system operates. As a black woman in a contract position, in speaking out I was going to run the risk of being permanently excluded from the space. I had to devise a survival strategy on how to navigate these uncomfortable, alienating experiences until my probation period lapsed. I chose to be mute knowing that even 'the mute speaks' but a different language, to paraphrase Nthabiseng Motsemme (2004). Hugo Canham (2014) also shows how oppression requires that one demonstrates contentment in every situation. Black bodies are often expected to be cheerful in the midst of suffocation and, in return, others read this as ‘docility’ and ‘acquiescence.’

I felt like an intruder, an outsider, as someone who was not supposed to be there; there was deliberate attempt to juniorise and invisibilise me in many other spaces. A mere request for services from some white male junior faculty administrators would be met with hostility. Sometimes, it would take another white colleague to complain or ask on our behalf before we could get recognition or assistance. I mention these
incidents of exclusion to conscientise others in similar positions. Some incidents were quite revolting. For instance, when the acting dean refused to allocate a research subsidy for me after my first journal article was published. And when I was asked to teach an undergraduate class, and was underpaid for teaching the full term on top of my postdoctoral research. I say so because a white temporary lecturer was once paid more money for doing a similar job – as I picked up from a financial statement that was never again shared. As new black entrants, we are repeatedly placed at lower salary scales in comparison to others; this is one of the biggest reason why black lecturers leave the academy – and it seems deliberate. Even more shocking was, when in 2014, I was rated low during performance assessment – yet I received a teaching excellence award from the same faculty. My Zimbabwean colleague used to joke about these experiences asking, ‘Edith, this place is toxic. How come you are treated like a stranger in your own country?’ Due to our different nationalities, he expected that I would receive different treatment. Grosfoguel (2016) touches on this in advancing Fanon’s concepts of ‘zone of being and non-being.’ He argues that people in the zone of non-being share racial oppression such that gender and other identity markers become irrelevant in this zone and hence our common treatments of violence, dislocation, alienation, disrespect and unethical treatment.

This biased perception of being persisted, even in other social spaces, and it was always annoying to observe how some of my white colleagues would introduce me to other white people: ’This is Edith. She is a doctor. She studied in England,’ which I read as a form of validation for hanging out with me. The reference to my PhD was also to caution the person I was meeting on how to engage with me. These introductions usually confirmed the particular individual’s conception of me and suggested to me that without these credentials I did not belong. Whiteness has the ability to open or close the space for us when it deems fit. It can decide whether you belong or not. Instead of recoiling, I made it my project to teach a few lessons about what it means to be human and how some of their constructions of blackness are highly problematic and uninformed. After all, I was an internationally trained leader of social justice and this was my forte. My activism and commitment to new humanism kicked in, as it did years before I entered this university. I vowed not to allow the long history of deception to cloud me. I wanted to challenge these narrow conceptions of being as have been taught in this country; the classroom became the space where I did this. Together with some white female colleagues who were also experiencing marginalisation in terms of their sexual and gender identities, we engaged in critical pedagogy in the classroom. I share my experience below.

**Countering devaluation of teaching in the academy**

Teaching enabled me to survive this alienating and dislocating space. It gave me a sense of belonging, even though devalued, and I pursue it precisely for its liberatory possibilities of self and students. As academics, we must act against our
own ‘instrumentalisation’ because no one will do it for us in this neoliberal world (Janz 2015). My understanding of Bruce Janz’s explanation of instrumentalisation of universities entails ‘the corporatisation and bureaucratisation of universities where “unquantifiable” outcomes are forcibly quantified using market metaphors’ (2015: 276). In the South African context, a particular unit of research output brings subsidy dividend to the university, which makes many experienced academics chase publication at the expense of imparting knowledge to students. Teaching is becoming less valued and relegated to junior staff who are, in most cases, women. The academic project is reduced to publication only. The other side of instrumentalisation has to do with student pass rate; a certain percentage of students should pass in a class – and it does not matter if one class had 1 300 students and another only 20. The percentage system might suggest that the same pass rate (for example, 80 per cent) is rewarded in the same way, regardless of the number of students in class and without considering the terms of catering for 1 300 students – such as receiving 50 email queries from students in one day.

US decolonial scholar, Tiffanny Patterson, talked to us about prioritising what struggles to fight because there are many struggles in racialised societies. I have to strategise within the confines of my context what I am able to prioritise at particular points in time. As black academics enter these prestigious white spaces, they tend to overstretch themselves because they spend time trying to ‘compete to prove that they are equal to whites by neglecting students’ (hooks 1994: 5). I see teaching as political work; I have indicated earlier how skewed perceptions of being and knowing reinforce domination, exploitation and dehumanisation in spaces that should be liberatory. When I was teaching three large classes of 1 300 students, spread over two UJ campuses, I also managed a tutorial team of approximately 20 students, was expected to do research and publish and do a community engagement project as part of my key performance areas. These excluded my other political and social commitments: speaking at various community platforms as we are few, supporting the government where black service providers in the form of academics are rare, and sitting on boards of ailing community-based organisations. The burden of being a highly educated black woman is huge and exhausting at the same time. The demands and requests one gets from community is multiplied once they know you have obtained a PhD. Unlike elsewhere, the PhD is not an individual achievement but a community one. Even in the academy due to under-representation of black women, we are sometimes overburdened as we are requested or invited to speak on various panels – sometimes only to be tokenised on panels targeted at men.

The classroom remains the space where I breathe fresh air, ‘where possibility for the radical change we are imagining in society should happen’ (hooks 1994). I am in no way suggesting that publishing should be abandoned for teaching but black scholars coming from the margins need to recognise the equiprimordial nature of their roles – researcher, teacher, activist – because the dominant narrative is to privilege one role over the other. In most cases, due to the empty promise of ‘black
middle class’ research (by virtue of the monetary value it attracts) is privileged over teaching. It is even worse in South Africa where government pays monetary subsidies for both the individual and the institution. Even more worrying is that with the crisis in education worldwide, professors do not want to teach – and, at the same time, find fault with graduates as they enter postgraduate level. In South Africa, it is even more concerning because most workers are still fighting for a minimum wage of R20 per hour. Parents and students sometimes do not get value for money in knowledge terms because students are denied what Jonathan Jansen (2009) calls ‘epistemological access.’

At Westernised universities, we were taught to understand the world by reading only theories of the superior, imperial, patriarchal ‘subject’ of the West. In my classes, I situate Western epistemology by showing my students that some of the grand theories they learn are particularistic. The Western way cannot be the only way of knowing and doing humanities. I want my students to acknowledge and understand that we all think from where we are – locus of enunciation. Mignolo (2011) argues that the logic of racialisation disqualified other modes of thinking in two ways: by maintaining the enunciative privilege of Euro-America and by ranking our languages as inferior to European languages. Today, for those of us who have managed to acquire European languages, even accent is ranked as I discuss below.9 It is therefore imperative that a shift in how knowledge is created needs to take place, that is, it must include knowledge created by those bodies deemed inferior, including the geographical spaces regarded as third world. This approach to teaching and learning allowed me to diversify the canon of thought in my classroom as I drew from a variety of sources and epistemologies from all over the world. It also enabled me to break disciplinary boundaries and embrace an inter/multi/trans-disciplinary approach to teaching that enabled me to offer relevant social science for my students. It is a bold decision that seeks to say Euro-North America is not the only legitimate site of knowledge production.

This assists students to ask different questions when embarking on research, and not ask question as imposed by dominant discourses. Over the years, I have learnt that the majority of our white colleagues undermine our curriculum or unfairly dismiss some of the questions black students seek to pursue – because they do not fit in with their dominant experiences. Like Fanon, I want to attempt to deal with ‘African’ questions and this has been a choice even during my PhD. The exclusion of Africa and Africans on the epistemic landscape has disadvantaged us scientifically, economically and culturally. As a result, the renewal of Africa will need a shift in ‘what’ and ‘how’ we teach the contemporary African student. This approach to teaching has enabled me to engage in inter-epistemic dialogue with the West, rather than through what Grosfoguel calls the ‘Western monologue’ in the academy. Personally, I have ceased to participate in Western monologues because white arrogance can be exhausting. In one of our conversations, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni identified this as ‘epistemic deafness’; by this he refers to how white
academics, due to their imperialistic attitude, attempt to undermine black thinkers and their scholarship. In my teaching, I engage the works of Western scholars who are progressive and are imagining a new way of doing human. I deliberately select material of scholars who are ready to embrace other worldviews. I warn my students to be wary of scholarly work that sustains coloniality, which includes some black scholars. I teach them to approach the peripheral scholarship from the Global South with humility, understanding the hostile environment under which they are created and disseminated. Our universities in South Africa still have a long way to go in terms of promoting epistemic diversity – a world where many worlds are possible.

In the classroom, our being is not only questioned and undermined by whites but also by some of the students we teach in these HWIs. UJ caters for diverse groups of students from all social backgrounds, which includes black students who have never had black authority at educational institutions. On one occasion in my classroom, I encountered an issue of accent again, albeit in South Africa this time. In one of my undergraduate classes I pronounced an English word in my Sotho accent, and the students burst into laughter. Instead of feeling embarrassed or offended, I was disappointed and took the opportunity to teach a few lessons on how mentally colonised they were. I helped my students to realise that it was not about my pronunciation because it was obvious I am not a first-language English speaker; it was more about ‘who is speaking?’ It was not just a challenge on my being but on my positionality in the hierarchy of the university – because it would not have happened with my European-born colleagues with different accents. That incident opened up an opportunity for learning through dialogue with students. Some of the students confessed how no one laughs when Afrikaans-speaking lecturers mutilate English words; how they were blown away with my pedagogy (including my ability to clarify theory they have struggled with) although when they first saw me they thought: ‘What does she know? What can she teach me?’ It was clear that these poor students were ingenuous. In their naivety ‘to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor’ (Freire 1972). In comparison to the core ‘beings’ at this university I was that ‘non-being’ who was even struggling to pronounce certain words. For this reason, I think we need more black academics at our institutions of higher learning so that these ‘odd’ accents can become part of the mainstream at our universities.

I have survived this space by pledging solidarity with other black academics at other institutions and outside of my own department. Engaging with other black faculty made me realise that my struggle is not isolated. This book is also part of this kind of collaboration. Publications that continue to document academics’ experiences such as *Hear Our Voices* by Reitumetse Mabokela and Zine Magubane (2004), *Being at Home* by Pedro Tabensky and Sally Matthews (2015) and this current volume confirm that the struggle should continue. We have been crafted as this black body with supposedly limited ontological density and we unconsciously–consciously strive for recognition from the powers that be but, like Fanon, I am willing to challenge the stereotypes of substandard and subhuman being – not through playing the game but
being myself in my thinking and doing. This saw me receive a distinguished award in the faculty in 2014. There are those who believe awards mean nothing but awards are validation from peers and students that one’s work has worth. I always ask myself, if I had been afraid to pursue my critical pedagogy would I have been where I am today – teaching at two prestigious presidential programmes and training executives.

In wrapping up, I want to recollect that random walk into a Black History Month lecture that provided me with access to an alternative epistemology. It is my wish that every black student should be exposed to diverse knowledge systems, and not the supposedly universal knowledge that turns to obscure knowledge systems and reinforces domination. In my view, universalism will only be achieved when we bring together all the diverse knowledge systems that advance humanity onto the same table to form universal knowledge, and this should include aspects of the Euro-American knowledge system that are highly progressive. Today, I have found homage at an institution that shares similar views. Within this space, I am advancing the theory and praxis of what I call ‘Afrodecoloniality’ – a unique blend of multiple perspectives that have originated in the Global South and in Africa. Afrodecoloniality seeks to blend decolonial epistemic pradigms, Africology, Africanity and Afrocentricity. When teaching is approached from this perspective, it becomes liberatory and affirming for those of us who have been epistemically excluded. I marvel at the possibilities for change that I see with my students when there is alignment between their subjectivity and the curriculum. I have received commendation from my students and peers alike, including at the Young African Leaders Initiative where I interact with young people from the whole of the South African Development Community (SADC) region. This reinforces my quest for an alternative epistemology and my pursuit for a new model of humanity.

Notes

1. It is common in South Africa to have one home in the city and another in the country due to the migrant labour system that is a characteristic, and a legacy of, apartheid South Africa.
2. There was an assumption where Afrikaners in South Africa thought black people were so strong and tough that even if you hit them hard on the head, or if they fell on their head, they would not be hurt.
3. Professor Ramon Grosfoguel mentioned this while delivering a lecture at the Decoloniality Summer School at Unisa in 2013.
4. In 2005, the two campuses of Vista University (East Rand and Soweto), Technikon Witwatersrand (Auckland Park and Doornfontein) and Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) merged to form the massive brand known today as UJ. However, the East Rand campus has since closed.
5. McFadden P Visiting Professor at Unisa, personal communication, March 2016
6. McWhorter J (2015), When students are compelled to have ‘White Privilege 101’ classes, The Daily Beast, March 2015
7. I was selected for the Ford Fellowship based on this recognition, and I was trained in Washington, DC in 2006.
References


Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it. (Freire 1993: 45)

While there is an increased number of black African women who hold doctorates, the reality is that black African women remain largely invisible in institutions of higher learning (Phakeng 2015). Women in South Africa remain on the periphery of knowledge production and are often not taken seriously as producers of knowledge (Potgieter & Moleko 2004). This is particularly so in academia, which remains largely in the hands of historically advantaged groups. Black African women have generally occupied the lower stratum in institutions of higher learning and in an environment characterised by persistent racial inequality and gendered power relations (Mabokela & Magubane 2004). Also, institutions of higher learning are hierarchical in nature, with the power and racial structures that are a clear manifestation and reflection of what exists in the broader South African society.

The South African government, in collaboration with international and regional partners has made strides to address the scarcity of black academics in general, and particularly women, through investment and funding opportunities for PhD studies. This was partly in response to historical facts of the low numbers of African women PhD graduates in South Africa, which stood at only 10 in 1996 and increased to 106 women in 2012 (Cloete 2015). Within this group of women entering academia, there is a specific cohort of first-generation graduates whose families do not have a tradition of academics. The trajectories of these academics are strongly influenced by the educational background of black Africans from previously segregated schools under the infamous Bantu education system of apartheid South Africa. This prevailing education system post 1948, subjected many black Africans in rural areas and periurban townships to an inferior system of education with economic and educational deficits.
Furthermore, there are countless obstacles confronting this cohort of black African women academics. These include challenges in negotiating entry, not knowing how to work the system that is often alienating and antagonistic, as well as meeting the academic targets set by universities such as pressure to publish a set number of journal articles. Failure to meet these requirements within record time is often viewed as an individual’s failure and not necessarily seen as an issue embedded in the system. In my own experience, these challenges presented in the struggle to meet my probation targets within the first three years as an academic member of staff. The requirements set for me were to publish, register for a PhD (while carrying a full teaching workload and research supervision in a professional degree field that involved supervision of student practical training and field work assessments) and carry an administrative load. Also not considered was the time that it takes to settle into pedagogy and develop creative ways of teaching and assessment to meet the demands of students who come from diverse and unequal backgrounds, grounded in the history of domination and marginalisation arising from the legacy of colonisation and apartheid.

This piece is a narrative and the real lived experiences of my life as a marginalised, oppressed and racially discriminated black South African. Narratives in the experiences of black women academics have also been used in the work of Reitumetsie Mabokela and Zine Magubane (2004) with a specific focus on race, gender and the status of black South African women in the academy. Subsequent to that, the work of Joseph Jinja Divala (2014) interrogated the voices of black women in academia on being and belonging in the South African higher education. “The narratives have served as a powerful tool used to combine social and academic experienced that shaped the identities of black women as learners, professionals and academics in different historical epochs and locations’ (Maodzwa-Taruvinga & Divala 2004: 1963). It is my hope that this piece will translate into the three elements of a narrative as proposed by N Chabani Manganyi (2005). Firstly, that it will serve as a powerful way of revisiting and reading into my past. Secondly, that it will demonstrate the creation of new identities brought about by an internal shift that took place in the eighth year of my stay in academia while attending a race, social justice and transformation training workshop. This training gave me tools to grind my long-repressed internalised oppression. And lastly, that this narrative will allow me to register the need for social change and this, for me, is the change that has to start from the inside – at the individual level, then at a collective group level and, ultimately, at institutional and societal levels.

The interesting title of this chapter, ‘Sitting on one bum,’ speaks to my reality and my experience for the greater part of my eight years in academia. This saying is an expression in public discourse and also used as an idiom in my native language, Sesotho, to describe a hostile and an unfriendly environment brought about by the experience of not belonging. This title also speaks to a feeling of uncertainty: a sense of not being welcomed or wanted in a space mostly characterised by a strong
element of foreignness. In Sesotho this expression is 'Ho dula ka leraho lele leng' or, in isiZulu, 'Ukuhlala nge sinqe esisodwa.' When directly translated to English it means, 'Sitting with one bum, or sitting on the edge of the chair.' This expression perfectly captures my experience as a black African woman in academia. The experiences of uncertainty and sitting on the edge of the chair were felt mostly as I walked through the corridors of the institution – particularly when I sat in spaces with individuals armed with powers to decide if I was worthy or had what it takes to be in this space. On the contrary, I scarcely ever experience the feeling of not belonging when I am in lecture halls interacting with my students. A lecture hall is like home to me. Teaching and interacting with brilliant young minds feels like a purpose, as though it is what I was born to do in this lifetime. Perhaps one of the reasons I feel a sense of belonging in class is that I know I am needed in that space, particularly given that my classes are comprised mainly of black students. I know that it is powerful for black students to see a black woman from the same circumstance as theirs standing and teaching in an institution where black women are in the minority. This is the contradiction that has kept me in this space for the period that I have been here: the reality that I can have a sense of belonging at one level of pedagogy and lecturer–student relations while, at the same time, contending with not belonging at the institutional level.

I start this chapter with a brief overview of my family background and my childhood experiences in the dusty streets of a native township during the dark and sombre days of apartheid. This is followed by an in-depth narrative of my schooling in the 1980s, during the political uprisings in Evaton township in the Vaal Triangle. The core focus of my narrative will be on confronting the rage I had accumulated for many years, and realising that I had a lot of unspoken ‘stuff’ that was playing a significant role in who and what I am within the academy as well as generally in the world. Finally, I dedicate much attention to my experiences of sitting on one bum and on the edge of the chair in an academic institution, to a moment of defiance which leads me to a resolution. This resolution is better expressed through a statement used by black people during the Sophiatown forced removal of families to Meadowlands: 'Ek daak nie, maar ek phola hiereso.' In Marabi or Sophiatown tsotsitaal, this expression means 'I will not be moved and I am here to stay.' This stance is strongly rooted in my rage: the rage I must acknowledge I have not fully confronted. My newfound attitude has been the main force to help me survive academia. This attitude can be explained as the belief in oneself – as described by Steve Biko’s philosophy of Black Consciousness and Freire’s view on the need for the oppressed group to engage in the process of affirmation and asserting oneself (Freire 1993; Manganyi 2005). This resolution is also accompanied by what I call the higher law of predestination – often described by Manganyi (2005) in his reflections on the making of a black psychologist in apartheid South Africa. This view states that in certain situations, as human beings, we are in these spaces for a reason and a purpose that is greater and higher than ourselves. I believe this to be true for me as a black South African woman within academia. I am here. And, I am needed in this space.
My encounter with learning in an education system in South Africa started on the floor of an overcrowded classroom with no furniture, no teacher or teaching or learning material. The place was Evaton township in an area called Small Farms in the year 1980. The education district office of the time made a decision to enrol all learners who did not possess the necessary documents such as birth certificates and family permits. In periurban townships, it remained illegal for many years to accept learners without these necessary documentations and a permit to live in the area. This resulted in high enrolment numbers of learners in an area with limited school buildings. Therefore, for a period of over three months, my classmates and I were placed in a church-like classroom, waiting for authorities to come up with a plan on how to educate us. I was subsequently placed in a class after a plan was devised to offer learning in two time-linked streams of morning (7 am–12 noon) and afternoon (12 noon–5 pm) classes. Therefore, this autobiography is an attempt to share my narrative as a black African (South African) woman in academia with a struggle for survival and belonging. This narrative also highlights issues of identities and difference in a historically white university in South Africa. Mandi Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Joseph Jinja Divala (2004) argue that identities in academia are always under construction and deconstruction in contexts that are complex and characterised by struggle, contestations and uneven playfields. These authors assert that within the discourse of transformation it is essential for universities to take stock of the extent to which they have created enabling environments that take into account the history of marginalisation and background of inequality (Maodzwa-Taruvinga & Divala 2004: 1962).

I am the first generation of university graduates in my family, and spent the first 12 years of my schooling life in township schools in Evaton. Evaton is one of the oldest townships based in the southern part of Johannesburg in Gauteng province. The township was established in 1904 as a settlement for the gold mine workers on the Reef, and remains one of the few periurban townships in which black Africans had land tenure or property rights pre 1994 (Evaton Renewal Project n.d.). I was born on a farm called Klopperskraal, approximately 15 kilometres west of Evaton township where my paternal extended family were tenant labourers for over two generations. Education was highly valued in my family, even though both my parents had no formal education themselves. They instilled the value of education from a very young age, always stressing that education was the only way out for a black child growing up in apartheid South Africa. My father was, at some point in his life, a mine worker in the Rustenburg mines and my mother was a domestic worker all her life. My parents’ value for education was manifested in them making a hard decision to move from the farm to nearby Evaton township. This move was because there was just one small school on the farm which only offered three elementary grades (Grades 1 to 3). This groot trek (big move) happened when I was only four months of age, and led to us leaving behind the secure farm life of abundance, and the safety provided by the greater clan and extended family. This remains the most
difficult decision that my parents had to make. My siblings and I got an education in Evaton because there were a number of primary and high schools in the area. Life in urban townships in the 1970s and 1980s was harsh because it was characterised by different forms of regulations aimed at controlling the lives of black African families. These were the pass and permit laws that led to the constant arrests of blacks in the townships (Evaton Renewal Project n.d.; Khumalo 2014). My parents were well aware of these realities and the facts of life in urban townships and, therefore, knew exactly what they were getting themselves into. This was the sacrifice that my siblings and I would eternally be grateful for all our lives.

My rage about an unjust society started at the age of eleven, while in primary school during the 1984 state of emergency military occupation of townships in the Vaal Triangle (Noonan 2003). My schooling was constantly disrupted by the political unrest that affected most urban townships in the 1980s. It was during these years of military occupation that I witnessed the dehumanising brutality and atrocities perpetrated by white young men in the military and police force against innocent residents who were fighting for their freedom. I learned at a very young age how to escape rubber bullets and tear gas, how to exit my classroom through a small window, how to jump over our high school fence while running away from white military men who wanted to shoot my kaffir kop (kaffir, an insulting term for black African; kop means head in Afrikaans) in their quest to improve and perfect their skills of shooting the target that was not seen as a human being. This was my first experience of open violence within a white oppressive system that denied me and my people our humanity – a system that easily justified its brutality, and was relentless in its agenda to dehumanise. I had many unanswered questions and my 11-year-old logic could not make sense of everything that happened around me. One of the many questions was, and still is today, ‘Did they (white military men) know what they were fighting and why they had to shoot and kill blacks?’ Black people knew what they were fighting for, and the township youth (who were also known as klipgoiers [those who throw stones]) knew what they were fighting for; they were fighting for the freedom of black people. In the words of Freire (1993: 44), it is ‘this injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors that declared the yearning of the oppressed group for freedom and justice, and instigated their struggle to recover their lost humanity.’ There was a determination among the residents that ‘We will stop at nothing to free ourselves.’ The resistance and fighting was to recover the humanity lost over 400 years ago through slavery, colonisation and apartheid.

My rage was further sparked by growing up in the racially divided township of Evaton, where the racist prohibitions and practices of the apartheid era reigned supreme. This was particularly so in the schooling and education system. Until the 1984 political uprising, Evaton was a multiracial community. Indian, coloured and African families lived together in the same community. Indian families were mainly business owners with their houses attached to their business premises; they
were not usually integrated into the community life of the township. On the other hand, coloured families were part of the community life and were fully integrated with the black African families. The only thing that separated black Africans and coloured children was the schools that the children attended. My coloured friends attended better resourced schools in more affluent areas outside the township. This segregated schooling for the different races was in accordance with an ideological educational framework for blacks (Bantu education) which was established and implemented in 1949 by Afrikaner nationalists who advanced a paternalistic view of inferior education for blacks as a special responsibility of a superior white race (Hyslop 1999).

Bantu education served the interests of white supremacy (Hlatshwayo 2000). It denied black people access to the same educational opportunities and resources enjoyed by white South Africans. Bantu education denigrated black people’s history, culture and identity. It promoted myths and racial stereotypes in its curricula and textbooks. Some of these ideas found expression in the notions of a separate ‘Bantu society’ and ‘Bantu economy’ that were taught to African students in government-run schools. This so-called ‘Bantu culture’ was presented in a crude and essentialised fashion where African people and communities were portrayed as traditional, rural and unchanging. Furthermore, Bantu education treated blacks as perpetual children in need of parental supervision by whites (Hartshorne 1992).

One of the pains carried by the majority of African children in my township back then was the fact that our coloured friends had the privilege of riding a bus to school every morning to a more privileged area outside the township – while we walked long distances to extremely poorly resourced schools. Many a time I wished I could ask someone this question, ‘What do I need to qualify to be in that group?’ The message was powerful and clear for me even in those early formative years; there was some form of deficit I had that did not qualify me to be part of the in-group, and this deficit was the wrong colour of skin. Skin colour was the only thing that distinguished my coloured friends from me. Evidence surrounding me indicated time and time again that the lighter your skin colour, the better and more deserving you were. This reality in my past seems to be persisting in my present lived experience in postapartheid South Africa.

Furthermore, it was in a place outside my township when, at the age of nine years, I experienced an injustice that was too much to bear; an unfairness that my sister and I coined as ‘injustice of the highest degree.’ In a whites-only suburb called Three Rivers near Vereeniging where my mother worked as a domestic worker, we were confronted with opulence that simply did not make any sense to us. To this day, opulence is something that still overwhelms me; it is something I still struggle with – particularly in the context of South Africa where so many people live below the poverty line. I remember the clean wide streets with pavements and tarred roads, big houses with swimming pools everywhere and big yards with beautiful
gardens and trees. The gardens were so big one could assume that every family had a personal park in their yard. The parks were clean and had monuments and statues that celebrated apartheid heroes. What was particularly notable about the schools in the suburb was that they had the most beautiful sports fields we had ever seen, with particularly huge rugby fields. The stark difference between this suburb and my dusty township was like night and day. The message in my head was louder and clearer this time, and that was: ‘There has to be something wrong about people like me that we live in such squalor conditions.’ It was again my experiences of the best and worst of both worlds that left me with unanswered questions. These early experiences instilled a false sense of inferiority in me, and justified me despising myself. There was this deep knowing, without anyone saying it, that people like me did not belong in this part of the world that was reserved for whites only.

My experiences of not belonging, particularly in a white-dominated space, can be linked back to my childhood frequenting the whites-only suburb where my mother worked. These feelings of not being welcomed originated at the tender age of nine years when I had the opportunity to visit my mother during school holidays. In this area, black people arrived early in the mornings and had to leave the suburbs by a set time in the evening. Depending on the employer, black children were usually not allowed on the premises where African women worked as domestic workers. Because my mother worked as a live-in domestic worker, she had to sneak me into her quarters in the early hours of Monday mornings and the next time I saw the light of day would be on Friday afternoons when we returned home to Evaton. My time there was spent in this tiny backroom with very little movement, which was extremely frustrating since play was important to me. As a child, I wondered why I was not allowed to be in this space. I missed my friends and the freedom of free play in my township. Very soon, I understood that I had to cooperate with my mother on this one and keep to the rules of staying in the room with limited movement. I waited for my mother’s knock at the door to bring soft warm Maltabella porridge with fresh milk for breakfast, and midday she would bring lunch. Waiting a few hours for my mother to bring me breakfast and lunch felt like waiting for days. The only thing that kept me sane during these waiting periods was going through the pages of Keur and Rooi Rose magazines – wishing I could have the life of the people in those magazines. The payoff, and the highlight of my days, was taking a walk to the nearby park with my mother once it was dark, after she knocked off from work.

These early childhood experiences engraved strongly in my mind that a black girl like me does not belong in a space for white people. I knew, deep down, that I was kept in that tiny room because I was not wanted and did not belong. I have carried this sense of not belonging all my life, and it has manifested in a certain type of silence that possessed me when I was in white spaces, particularly with people who I perceive to have power over me. Just as I had to be silent many years ago as a child, silent because I strongly felt like an intruder, I used silence to survive the first few years of my life in academia. Silence was familiar to me and in this space too, I
perceived white people to be the legitimate rightful owners of this space. Like many other black African students, I existed in this institution of higher learning with low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority. I also realised that being a rightful owner came with some form of power to include or to exclude. I soon realised that there were powerful individuals within the academic space I inhabit, and their power involved control over persons and over resources. I have seen how this power over a person and resources manifests itself in my academic institution. It played itself out in the sharing or withholding of information about opportunities for development as well as in sharing of crucial knowledge on how to work the system in order to succeed. This power also ensures compliance, and I was compliant in the first few years of my life in this space. I said yes to every workload allocated to me. I thought I was not allowed to say no; I actually didn't know that I could say no, and I didn't know how to say no.

It has taken me more than a decade to undo the damage on the mind and the selfhood of the 9-year-old girl stuck in a tiny backroom in that Three Rivers suburb. This undoing was mainly through dismantling beliefs that I held about myself – beliefs that were simply not true. These were beliefs such as that because of the colour of my skin and where I come from I was somehow inferior and less deserving. I have now embraced my newfound victory and liberation in what Biko (1996) described as an idea of freedom and its implications for speaking without fear, and the realisation that there is no freedom in silence. This freedom is about asserting self and also about the process of affirmation that Freire (1993) discusses as one of the essential elements for the oppressed groups. It comes with a conscious decision to eliminate everything negative that I have believed about myself. It has been a long, and continues to be an ongoing, journey to get to this space.

I always wanted to pursue a career in academia; this was my childhood dream, a dream often dismissed by adults in my life. I was constantly advised to choose a more modest career that would be realistically and, perhaps, more easily attainable. My passion for education was strongly influenced by my parents. I must confess that I did not like school and would have dropped out many years ago if I had had a choice. I enjoyed learning, but not schooling as a system. In my parents’ house, we were sent to school even when we were not feeling well; my parents’ reasoning was that the teacher would send you back home if it was really bad. In my family, missing school was like the highest form of treason. My mother was in charge of doling out the punishment for anyone who was reported to be missing school; this was her terrain. I once witnessed my mother handle my brother who had been bunking school, and it was during this experience that I made a promise to myself to never to miss school. One of the main reasons I did not enjoy school, apart from the constant political disruptions, was that there was a strong element of punishment and shame that I associated with school. I was one of those learners who would still have unpaid school fees by September of each year, and the list of those owing would be called
out in full view of the entire student body during the morning assembly. This was a source of constant embarrassment for me. I was also one of those learners who did not have the full school uniform and never had the requisite textbooks that parents had to provide in government schools. My experience was that some teachers were not sympathetic to the diverse and challenging circumstances confronting learners from poor families. To this day, it still does not make sense to me why an adult would physically punish a child for her parents’ not paying school fees and for not being in proper school uniform. At the top of my list about what I hated about school was the gendered division of labour in the classroom. Girls were expected to sweep and be on their knees scrubbing floors daily after school while the boys played outside, pretending to pick up litter. However, there were, of course, things that I did like about school. I loved playtime on open fields, and enjoyed the laughter of free play and friendships. I also felt safety and love from some teachers who were attentive to the needs of the learners: teachers who were kind and did special things for learners. One such teacher was Mrs Magakoe. She had the ability to identify hungry learners in her class. She brought extra food to school every day and would ask particular learners to stay behind for a few minutes during lunch break and gave them something to eat. She did this with sensitivity, gentleness and care – with no shame attached. I was a beneficiary of Mrs Magakoe’s kindness and was inspired by her generosity to do well in my studies so that I did not disappoint her.

Pursuing a career in academia was sparked by an event that took place in my community many years ago. It was a graduation celebration of Mr Makhobotlaone’s daughter. She had completed her studies while on a scholarship overseas, and the community celebrated her achievements. I remember being in an atmosphere with individuals in graduation regalia and feeling that I was on a different planet. I remember the song playing in the background; it was ‘Purple Rain’ by Prince. I did not fully understand what was happening at that event but I knew, in that moment, that I wanted to be a part of that world. I remember a deep desire to speak the language spoken by those people – to be like one of them in the future. As children were playing and adults celebrating, I was captivated by what was going on around me in that space. Later that afternoon, I asked my brother to explain what the function was about and why everyone was dressed so differently. It was the first time I had experienced and witnessed an event like that in my community. My brother explained that it was a graduation celebration and that people who had been to university and completed their studies dressed like that. The encounter left a powerful impression on me, and the power to believe in something bigger than was presented by regular township life. I remember being enthralled by the thought that that person was a woman, just like me, and came from the same environment as mine – and, yet, had studied overseas. A seed was planted and I began to believe it was possible. That was the beginning of my big childhood dream, and long journey that culminated in 2006 when I was offered a position as a lecturer at the university.
My first experience at university was in 1998, eight years before I was offered the opportunity to teach. I had heard a lot of things about this prestigious institution before I was offered an opportunity to study here; and most of what I had heard was mainly from people in my community. I had heard that this institution was reserved for whites; and these well-meaning community members had encouraged me to rather try historically black universities for people like me. I was told that a black girl like me would not make it here. I remember overhearing one community member saying to my father that I would need special permission from Pretoria (seat of government) to study at this university, and that my chances of being accepted were very slim. I learnt later that the individual was referring to a ‘ministerial consent’, which was permission from the apartheid minister of education to all black, coloured and Indian people to study at historically white universities. The aim was to regulate the number of blacks (inclusive) getting higher education. I must admit that my saving grace was that I was naive in that when I heard those stories, for some strange reason, I didn’t think they applied to me. I was consumed by the world in my imagination and, in that world, I saw myself here. There was a clear crisp picture of myself in this great place.

On my first day of registration, I was assisted by a kind white woman in her late fifties. She gave me career advice and said I was a ‘previously disadvantaged student.’ My first label on my first day in this place. I was initially offended by the label and, with my Grade 12 understanding, thought it was negative and degrading. In my view, I came from a privileged community that was rich with community life, and rich connections with great people and good values. What I knew very well was that I was from a racially oppressed background and that I had been racially discriminated against all my life. I did not like this new label. I felt the new label she branded me with had some form of deficit view. This career adviser recommended that I register for an academic English language course because I was going to struggle as a previously disadvantaged student. She explained that the standards were high in this place and cited high failure rate: of any class of students, half would fail and be academically excluded. There was also something about the way she spoke about the failing students. Her manner made it sound as if it was the norm for disadvantaged students to fail; that it was expected. From where I stand now, I strongly feel that the high attrition rate among black students in institutions of higher learning is influenced by a host of structural disadvantages that still persist in postapartheid South Africa – and that being previously disadvantaged is not the only cause.

It was this very early negative labelling that denied me the full, and potentially positive, experience of my university life – and got me, over the years, accustomed to racialised behaviours in my daily interactions. I remember one professor in class stating categorically that, as black African students, we were privileged to be in this institution and thus we must be grateful. She went on to tell us the reasons why we needed to be grateful, including the fact that we were funded by the Tertiary
Education Fund of South Africa, which was, in her view, her tax money. This grateful attitude characterised the lives of many black students on campus and solidified the feeling that they existed in this space because of the generosity of the superior race – and not because they were citizens in this country who were entitled to its rights and privileges, one of which was the right to access education. These, I believe, were mechanisms used to silence and minimise the existence and experience of black students in this institution during the 1990s – you had to be voiceless to exist in this place.

It was in my first-year sociology lecture where my enduring questions about an unjust society were answered. Professor Jon Hyslop covered a section on education in apartheid South Africa, and this included how Bantu education was conceptualised and how much the nationalist government spent on the education of children in South Africa according to their racial groups. That lecture was as if someone dropped a bomb on my head; it was as though a big family secret had been disclosed. I didn’t know this part of history. This was the part of history that was not been covered in my schooling curriculum. For the first time I understood, in great detail, what was going on in this country. The Bantu education system was a highly coordinated education system with a clear agenda of turning black African children into drawers of water and hewers of wood for a white-run economy and society – regardless of an individual’s abilities and aspirations. This was a turning point in my life and everything about the schools in townships made perfect sense for the first time – from the empty laboratories with no materials and apparatus, school libraries with empty shelves, shortage of textbooks and no sports fields or equipment. Everything suddenly made impeccable sense. I still have memories of my physics teacher drawing different sketches on the board, illustrating different stages of experiments and chemical reactions. We visualised these experiments in the labs and shared one textbook in class. This was our form of learning with outcomes clearly articulated by Hendrik Verwoerd:

There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour...What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live. (in Frances & Schreiner 1986: 37)

I began to understand the blatant, remarkable differences between my school and the schools for white children that we often passed on a bus ride to work with my mother. I have always strongly felt that one unforgivable atrocity perpetrated by apartheid against black South Africans was in masterminding an education system that made black people think less of themselves, and instilled a persistent sense of inferiority. This is an education system that today, in some corners, people still feel was better than the current education system – possibly further evidence of the negative effects it had on black people’s minds.
I abhor admitting this, but it was Verwoerd’s further assertion about the position of a black child that made me more resolute to be part of a space that he maintained was reserved for the European community. I was determined to achieve this, despite the fact that my schooling had not prepared me to be in this space.

There is no space for him [the Native] in the European Community above certain forms of labor. For this reason, it is of no avail for him to receive training which has its aim in the absorption of the European Community, where he cannot be absorbed. Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his community and misled him by showing him the greener pastures of European Society where he is not allowed to graze. (as quoted in Kallaway 1984: 92)

This space opened for me in December of 2006, after I obtained my Master of Arts degree, despite the fact that Verwoerd described this community as a space not meant for black Africans. Nothing in this world could ever have prepared me for the next step of my journey in academia. My lived experience of this community as a black African woman has, for the past few years, made me realise that I was inexperienced and perhaps naive in the pursuit of my childhood dream to be in academia. I have often experienced this community as hostile and have felt that I do not belong. I was told by one powerful individual within this community that if I did not meet certain criteria for my three-year probation requirements, I would be asked to leave the community. It is because of such statements that I have, for many years, felt I was sitting on the edge of the chair in this community.

Academia is generally a contested and safeguarded space in South Africa (Phakeng 2015). Historically, it is also a space that excludes black people in general, and black women in particular, something that for a majority of black women is the norm – being on the margins of society for all of their lives. Not only is academia a disputed space, it also has a strong element of foreignness. The institutional culture is foreign and estranging in many ways. It is particularly so for me, a black African woman who was born and lived the first 21 years of her life in apartheid South Africa, and schooled in the Bantu education system. This space has always looked at me in terms of deficit; it has treated me as though I was and am lacking, and not as someone who brings to the space something of worth. Academia is also a space where I constantly have to prove myself by meeting certain standards – standards that are top-down and authoritative in nature. I have often failed to meet some of these standards and have experienced them as an exclusion mechanism to ensure I don’t succeed within this space. My struggle in academia emanated mainly from my challenge with meeting employment probation requirements. Many of these requirements did not exist in the past when these institutions were exclusively a safe and comfortable space for the advantaged group. The publication record of many of these institutions was relatively low, particularly in the international arena. I have heard the nostalgic narratives of individuals who were in this space for many years: how this was a safe space for
many. I have listened to these narratives in awe, and have longed to experience this place as a comfortable space too.

Unlike many conditions of employment and contractual obligations for three-month probations, in academia, a 3-year probation period is obligatory for all academic staff members. There are probation requirements and targets adopted, often not by the individual. There is an annual probation review set to monitor your progress in meeting these requirements. These probation review meetings were anxiety inducing for me, to the point that I would be unsettled days prior to them and would be physically sick on the day of the meeting. These review meetings often left me feeling that I had been on a high court trial for some treason I had committed. I struggled in meeting the probation requirements and had not met half of them by the end of the three-year probation period. A number of factors delayed my progress in meeting these probation targets, which included the heavy teaching load and course coordination role assigned to new lecturers as well as settling into my role in pedagogy: a gigantic task that I wanted to perfect. I also chose to exercise my reproductive rights and became a mother during this period, something that was imperative to me at my age and stage in life. Being pregnant while on probation was something that was frowned upon. There was this inaudible but clear message: ‘You are given an opportunity to be in this great place and you fall pregnant!!?’

My strength and pride in these probation meetings was that I walked in with excellent teaching evaluations from my students who experienced me as an excellent and dedicated lecturer; and a good service record of my contribution to the academic community. In one of these meetings, I was told that those excellent teaching evaluations did not actually mean much because they were subjective in nature with questionable reliability. That was like a slap to my face – and a rude awakening. For a long time, I had thought teaching was the core function of a university; but, in these meetings, I was told the opposite. I was told that publishing journal articles was how you were valued and rated as an academic – not through excellent teaching reviews from students. This was a startling and unexpected realisation of the little recognition and insignificant value placed on teaching when assessing the contribution that one was making in the institution. The message was clear: while teaching is a core function of the university that it values, it is not as valued as published articles, which carry ‘real’ value. Divala (2014: 2080) argues that an individual’s journey through the terrains of academic life has the marks of ‘startling unexpectedness,’ both in terms of the process of becoming an academic as well as achieving it. Therefore, the mark of startling unexpectedness in this case was realising what was really valued, and considered real progress, in this space is mainly one’s contribution in research outputs. This presented a grim clash of values between the individual careerist approach, which epitomises the individualist progress in achieving own goals, against the value I dearly embrace – the progress and development of the collective.
I have always felt like I have been sitting on one bum for the greater part of my academic life. I felt I didn't belong. For a long time, I felt like an outsider looking in: a stranger in a land that was not my own. I struggled with belonging and fitting in in academia at different levels. I also realised that academia can be a lonely place, particularly when you are a first-generation university graduate. Unlike the experience of other groups bringing a cultural capital of privileges, as a black African you are not walking into networks of relationships where you can be groomed and guided to do certain things, like writing your first academic journal article. It is, basically, the survival of the fittest for us. As a new lecturer, you are given a list of demands and targets that you need to meet over and above your teaching and research supervision. In many instances when I was given a task, for instance, when I was told that I needed to produce a journal article as part of my probation requirements, I wanted to ask: ‘How do I write a journal article...where do I even begin?’ However, I could never bring myself to ask these questions because I thought the professor I was talking to would think I was not smart. Yes, I had read many articles before; but I was still stuck and I didn't know where to begin.

My main struggle in academia was an internal one – being black and having grown up under a system that treated me with contempt and reminded me at all different levels that I was not good enough. This meant that I carried a heavy burden of internalised self-limiting, even though my father constantly reminded us as children to never believe anything negative about ourselves and to not believe that we have any deficit because of the colour of our skin. My father taught me never to allow people to dehumanise me, but to believe that I am good, worthy and that I can achieve anything through hard work. The space in academia was the direct opposite of what I believed about myself. I was shattered every time someone made a negative comment about my writing. I took every rejection of my manuscript submissions very personally, and thought it was a reflection of my incompetence. I vividly remember a comment I received on one of my first submissions that said, 'You cannot write; your writing lacks academic depth.' I realised, much later, that the reason I was shattered every time I got negative feedback was because a part of me actually believed that I was not worthy to be in this space, that I did not have what it takes to survive this space, and that no matter how hard I tried my work would never withstand academic scrutiny. Even though my students gave me excellent appraisals about my teaching, and often reminded me of the inspiration I was to them, there was the opposite reminder in the form of constantly rejected manuscript submissions and negative reviews of my writing. The pressure of producing articles was debilitating and I was moving at a snail’s pace towards achieving the set targets. I soon realised that this was a different world than what I had imagined and was captivated by at the graduation event in my community. While there have been people who have been kind to me and offered support, guidance and some opportunities, there are also people in this space who took pride in mystifying knowledge and making simple concepts very complicated. I have often attended seminars and presentations where, at the end, I
had no idea what they were about. This uncertainty made me feel like I sat on the edge of my chair and definitely did not belong.

My experience of the academic world is that it can be an unfriendly space where there are entrenched practices that are not in the policies of the universities, but reside with certain individuals. Generally speaking, at macro level, the policies of this institution are in line with the non-discriminatory spirit of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. However, the real power lies with micro-individuals and not necessarily within the structure of the institution. These individuals are also known as part of the Big Five in certain corners, and are located in different structures of the institution. The same individuals also serve as gatekeepers, creating zones of comfort for others based on clearly stated criteria known only by a few – it is a type of pact and agenda that aims to exclude. The fact that there are powerful untouchable individuals became very clear during a trying time in my academic life. I went to a particular unit with the confidence of getting help about a situation where I felt I was treated unfairly, and had the backing of the labour laws and university policies. The official who analysed my case advised me not to fight the issues; he explained that I wanted to take on a giant who was a well published and rated researcher who had brought millions to the university. This officer had dealt with many cases like mine for many years and assured me that I wanted to take on the untouchable and that I would not win. This officer pointed out that I stood no chance against an individual who was highly valued and certainly an asset to the institution. I left that office feeling that I was a grasshopper compared with this giant individual. I voluntarily reverted to my position of submission and silence.

Through the years, I learnt ways of navigating the system. This was not through fighting battles, but through taking my power back. It was through a mental shift that started in my head and connected to my heart that I reached some internal resolution. The battle I had fought all those years was a battle against my own internalised oppression. I have since made peace with the fact that we all have different trajectories in life; but that does not make any of us a lesser person. I embraced the fact that I cannot change much about my past. Although it has shaped me in many ways, it does not have to define me. I know that irrespective of an educational background that did not give me the necessary tools to pave my path into this space, I have worked very hard to be here – and I applaud my courage to persevere. I know for sure that I am needed in this space and I have what it takes to be in this space, and there is a unique contribution that I am making. While I strive to be a balanced academic who excels in teaching and learning, research and knowledge production and actively participates in academic citizenship, this will certainly not be at the expense of the development of the collective body of students I teach and who come from the same background and circumstances I come from. I choose to see the burdens of hunger, pain and anxiety carried by many of my students from impoverished backgrounds and who come into this space with a dream of getting a degree to escape the cycle of poverty. I bring something of worth,
which made me overcome the limitations of my background. I have a story to tell and that is a story of survival and resilience. This is a story of hope that I want to share with all the students who cross my path.

Today, I am sitting with two bums on my chair and I did not ask anyone for permission. I am owning and claiming this space, and no longer operating from the position of being a minority. I have embraced the attitude of a black woman academic whom I admire, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, to ‘Stay the course, stay the course, no matter what the challenges might be.’ I have resolved that Ek gaan nerens, ek daak nie maar ek phola hierso. Ek phola hierso because there is a significant contribution and role that I have played and continue to play in the creation and dissemination of knowledge that is inclusive to all. Ek daak nie because I am not afraid anymore, and I am not a timid 9-year-old girl stuck in a tiny backroom in a place where I was not wanted. I am a woman, a black South African woman. No one better understands or knows my story better; this is my story and I am holding the pen. I am the expert of my own experiences. I strongly believe that if I made it here I can make it anywhere. I will blossom wherever I am planted. I am now sitting firmly with two bums on my chair.

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Belonging to oneself
Allison Geduld

Jacob Dlamini (2009) once wrote that remembering is a political act. I always wondered why. Lately I have started to think that perhaps how you remember tells a story, and the telling of a story liberates. I hope that the story I will tell will liberate not only me but the people who read it. I hope it will be a political act.

I do not think that I planned on being an academic but, from a young age, knowledge and books resonated with me. I remember the first book I read, some little red book about animals. When I read this little book to my mother, she reacted as if I had cured cancer. Her face lit up and I could sense that she was really proud of me. She was so excited. We all got in the car and we drove to my aunt and grandmother’s house that evening. She announced to them that I could read my first book. And so the family sat there, they listened as I nervously read those few lines and they gave me applause. I felt very special then.

Such was paradise
As I grew older my love for books intensified. It was no longer limited to the theme of animals of course. I became particularly interested in philosophical and ethical questions. One incident I remember fondly was when I was thirteen years old. The school I went to had a fundraising event. With my mother’s help, I had managed to raise the most funds and as a reward I got R500. I grew up in a small town with no bookshops. There was a local library with limited books to read. The following weekend my parents drove to Port Elizabeth where I announced that I wanted to buy a book. We walked through the bookshop and I decided on Denial of the Soul: Spiritual and Medical Perspectives on Euthanasia and Mortality by M Scott Peck. My parents raised a few eyebrows but allowed me to buy the book. I greatly enjoyed reading the book and, to this day, I am perplexed by the ethical issue of euthanasia, amongst other issues. I was so engulfed by this topic that I asked the debate teacher if we could arrange a debate on euthanasia with another school. I was excited and convinced by the ideas elucidated in this book, even though the Allison I am today knows that there are many more sides to the euthanasia debate. But there I was – thirteen, in a pumpkin-yellow uniform – arguing that euthanasia should not be legalised. Why? Because, as M Scott Peck also believed, the suffering in the last stages of death allows us an opportunity to connect with God and to grow spiritually (Peck 1997). I was not a particularly religious child but I had a commitment to understand religion and to understand God. I would later become very critical of organised
religion. I continued to read many other books. I enjoyed encyclopaedias. In my parents’ bookshelf there was one called *Understanding Human Behaviour*. It was an illustrated guide to theories of psychology including Jung, Freud, Skinner and others. It came with pictures as well. I admit I read many things that I was too young to understand for lack of experience, for example, a chapter with the title ‘The Frigid Wife.’ Nevertheless, I was informed. Other books included Iyanla Vazant’s *Yesterday I Cried*, a few of René Descartes’ and Plato’s writings, some Nietzsche and a whole lot of self-help books. Somehow, I was drawn to books about people who suffered greatly and I liked a version of the world where our suffering could be so divine that we could find God. Having read all those self-help books I dreamed of becoming a psychiatrist or psychologist one day.

**The tragedy of once being a child**

I do not know where I lost that dream. I had been accepted as a law student and started studying towards my Bachelor of Law degree in 2007. It was then that I really became aware of my skin colour, and that it created a certain perception: a perception of difference and otherness. I think it came with studying at a predominantly white and Afrikaans university. My parents were not really political, and did not speak of race often. I also attended a school with only black and coloured students. My school and family experiences prior to entering university never made me feel different, at least not in terms of my race. But on entering university, I became aware of the colour of my skin and the social constructions it came with. I was a loner throughout my undergraduate career. I spent most of my time in the library. I became curious about my race. When I was not preparing for classes, I would read the likes of Mamphela Ramphele, Steve Biko, WEB Du Bois and Booker T Washington. Slowly, I came to understand that there was a history. Looking back, I realise that there were parts of me that very strongly wanted to become conscious of my race, to understand it, to own it, and thereby transcend it. I could never turn back. The world of books and knowledge was always my safe place. Books had a certain generosity and patience that I felt people lacked. In those first years I spent at university, I felt like Adam and Eve who could no longer return to the garden of Eden. They had now become aware of themselves and were filled with shame. They would never again return to paradise. Of course, I had not known that then; if I had, I would have enjoyed my childhood reading a lot more. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon quotes Nietzsche saying ‘Man’s tragedy is that he was once a child’ (Fanon 1986).

**The start of a journey**

On starting my Master’s degree, I was appointed as a junior lecturer. I was optimistic but I was also scared and naive. I was the youngest member of the faculty and it felt as if everyone knew more than I did. And yet I had to stand in front of 200 students and I wanted them to believe that I knew what I was talking about. The problem
at that point was that I did not believe that I deserved to be there. It is difficult to say what I was scared of. Of course it is perfectly natural for any newcomer to feel anxious. I do think that my age played a big role, but so did my race. Even now this is one of the most difficult feelings to explain to people. Usually, when I tell people that one of my greatest fears is that people will think I am incompetent because I am black, I am met with the response of ‘Ag that's nonsense, no one thinks that.’ But I thought so. Why did I think that? Perhaps I thought that because I was a young black person being appointed that I was an incompetent affirmative action appointee. It is not strange that I felt this way as a black person; many black people fear the stigma of being perceived as being incompetent when appointed in an affirmative action position, or any position for that matter, and therefore are not in favour of the policy (Canham 2015; Durrheim et al. 2007).

I had heard people talk about incompetent black people so many times as a student and lecturer. It was really not strange that I was afraid that I would conform to this perception. It is often assumed that when one starts talking of affirmative action that merit and technical competence will go out the window (Canham 2015). The opponents of affirmative action will claim that society should be based on meritocracy. I wonder if we can really say that we live in a meritocracy? Recent research has found that, despite the fact that many organisations are proponents of meritocracy, they ironically show a bias towards men when rewarding outcomes (Castillia & Benard 2010).

**Teaching jurisprudence**

During my first semester I taught Introduction to Jurisprudence. I remember the director of teaching calling me into his office to talk about the modules I would teach. He told me that the person who usually taught that jurisprudence class was going on sabbatical and that he immediately thought of me to replace him for the semester. He continued, telling me that he always knew that I had an inclination for philosophy. I felt affirmed in that moment. I had always thought that my love for philosophy made me a little odd. It was never met with acceptance and praise. Many people told me that philosophy is boring and useless. Useless questions about useless things. I just felt that I wondered about things that most people do not wonder about. As I grew older I kept my love for philosophy more of a secret. After all, I started studying law and maybe I believed that it really was useless. I thought that lawyers did not want to know about who said what 100 years ago. But when I started teaching jurisprudence, a fire started in me, and I will always be thankful to the director for kindling that fire. That fire still burns in me.

The first few classes were quite an initiation. I reconnected with my love for philosophy and I thought that the students would be equally excited. I saw it as an opportunity to catch a glimpse of paradise again. I honestly thought that they would enter the class, sit at my feet and want to learn. In retrospect that was naive. Most
(law) students do not have a deep desire to learn philosophy. This came as a great shock. What came as an even greater shock was that reading philosophy, and the internal arguments I had in my own head about what was wrong and right, was not the same as teaching philosophy. It was not just about me anymore. It was only later that I realised that my need for recognition and their need to learn would sometimes clash. The module dealt with works of legal philosophers, largely from a historical perspective. However, there were a few controversial topics to be debated such as farm murders, racism, feminism and the legalisation of marijuana and prostitution. These matters made for quite a debate. They are also matters that strike at the heart of people’s personal convictions.

During one class, a group of students did a presentation on farm murders as a form of genocide. A black student in the class put his hand up and asked, with a lot of emotion in his voice, ‘What about 16 June 1976?’ One of the students doing the presentation looked at me with a confused expression in her eyes and asked me: ‘What happened on 16 June 1976?’ It was a sobering moment to realise that a third-year law student did not know this important part of our history. I told her that it was the day of the Soweto Uprisings. It was the day that Hector Pieterson, a 13-year-old boy, was shot and killed by the police. I could feel the tension in the class that day. It was the first time that I saw so much anger and sadness in students’ eyes. I went home questioning myself and what I was doing. I remember asking myself whether these discussions were really necessary; did they perhaps not do more harm than good? This was a question that would later also be asked by some colleagues. The dialogue inside me was vigorous. One part of me tried to convince myself that the discussions stimulated critical thinking and would help students to practise the art of arguing. All this was important for a law student. The other part internalised all the doubt that has ever come my way. Was I asking useless questions about useless things once again? I needed advice.

A friend of mine thought I should speak to some colleagues with experience in teaching jurisprudence. The first person I went to was Professor P. This professor had been appointed earlier that year as a research professor. Although he started his academic career at what was then Potchefstroom University, he had spent most of his career at Stellenbosch University lecturing jurisprudence. He was also known for activism against apartheid, although I did not know that at the time. I sent him an email and said that I wanted his opinion on a matter. He called me on my cellphone to say he would be in Potchefstroom a week later. I was scared and started to wonder whether it would be a good idea to go and speak to him. What would he think of me? What if I made a total fool of myself? I was not even sure what I wanted to ask him. The week was long. In the meantime, I approached another colleague. I told her I was not sure if I was the right person to teach jurisprudence, that I struggled with the subject and all the questions that it brought up in me and that I felt incompetent because I was still busy with my Master’s degree. Part of me could not believe I was telling her all that. As I spoke I felt relieved that finally someone was listening. She
empathised with my feelings of being lost and confused. She also assured me that I was competent for the position I was in. I felt a little less crazy after speaking with her. It was a strange stroke of fate that she went on sabbatical the next semester and would need someone to teach her jurisprudence and ethics classes. She asked if I would and, of course, I said yes. I took it as a huge compliment. The conversation helped and the trust she had in me helped me even more. But I was still stuck with the philosophical questions and my feelings of incompetence were far from cured. I made it till the end of the week when I would talk to Prof. P.

The day came. I walked to Prof. P’s office not entirely sure what I would say. By the look of his office he had not yet settled in entirely. It was cold and he was trying to switch on his air-conditioner and he asked if I could help, which I could not. This made me feel even more stupid. I sat down in the cold office and still I was not sure what I would say. ‘How can I help you, Allison?’ he asked. ‘Well, Professor, I just have a few questions. I have been having some difficulty with the jurisprudence classes. I’m not sure if I am doing the right thing. You said you taught jurisprudence for 30 years so perhaps you could give me some advice.’ He took a breath as if to say, ‘Ah, I see.’ Then he asked where I came from. We spoke about the Eastern Cape for a while and a few other matters, the relevance of which I did not understand, and he told me about some experiences he had had with students in his earlier years.

My main concern was that I was unlocking too much emotion in the students. I told him this, and he replied, ‘What’s wrong with emotion?’ I was so relieved to hear him say that. I continued to tell him that I was scared that my race made me biased. He said, ‘I can’t stand it when people are so afraid of being absolutist that they can’t even give their own opinion. You are coloured, and that is a part of you, but it is not all of you.’ Finally, he said:

I don’t know you but when I look at you I see no reason why you can’t teach this subject; you like the subject, which is why it hurts so much when people talk it down. You have to understand that sometimes, no matter how hard you work, some people will never accept you and you can’t spend your life trying to please them.

I said thank you. When I got to the door he said, ‘One day, you will be so sure of yourself and what you are doing that people won’t have to ask you – they will just know what you are about. It’s going to be difficult, good luck!’

I did not know it then but it was the best thing he could have told me. He affirmed me. That affirmation still keeps me going today. In the weeks that followed, I kept going over those words in my head. It touched me that he did not need to belittle or negate my version of reality. I was a young and insecure lecturer who felt lost. He was not. Yet he did not feel the need to make me enter his reality and his truth. He knew I was not there yet, but believed that one day I would be. I tried to speak to my colleagues a few times. Many were cold. Was it the law? Was it academia? Many would respond by simply telling me that I had to toughen up and grow a thick skin.
Did they know what it was like for me, a young coloured woman to stand in front of a large number of students? Did they know that I had this voice in my head that said I was an affirmative action appointee and that most people saw that as only getting a job because you are of a certain race? Many affirmative action beneficiaries have perceived themselves as having been given a handout based on their race (Adam 2000). I had the same perception. Did they know that I needed to prove myself every second of the way? I don't think they did. How could they? Reflecting on this incident today, I realise how many minority group's experiences are not recognised. I suppose one could call it a gaslighting of sorts. Many a time a black person, gay person, disabled person would share an experience and very often the person who hears it would want to change the experience or act as if it isn't so, as if that person did not really experience what they said they had.

**Colour-blind**

Today I wonder why I thought my race made me biased if, in fact, everyone has a race. Would that not mean that I am no more or no less biased than everyone else? Perhaps I was under some illusion that if I worked hard enough I could get rid of not only my own race but the concept of race in general. Is this not what we all aspire to? A colourless society where we can be judged on the content of our character and not the colour of our skin – in the words of Martin Luther King Jr (1963). The notion of colour-blindness and a raceless society is a myth – and a convenient myth. This concept is also known as racial eliminativism (Hardimon 2003; Modiri 2012). One of the main tenets of the school of critical race theory is that racial eliminativism maintains the status quo and does not give us the opportunity to address the institutional and structural causes of racism (Modiri 2012). Instead, racism is seen as isolated incidents that are committed by a few racists. Racial eliminativism ignores the pervasiveness of race and the role of white privilege (Modiri 2012). It need not be the end of the world if we did see each other’s differences; it might just be a better world. Many parts of our identity are different and it is important that we mention those differences whether it is a site of struggle or not. Andre Lorde states:

> Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (1984: 115)

It is all too tempting to ignore our differences. Somehow it even seems easier. It does not seem right though. Our differences can be a source of creativity and energy (Lorde 1984). And we need not see our differences as being superior to others. At times our differences are also a site of struggle. Very often we, as people, want to be recognised not only for what we contribute but also the struggles we have to overcome daily as a result of our differences.
Dwindling confidence and perceptions of failure

With the powerful words of Prof. P and the trust of my colleague I felt that I stood a chance. I finished the first semester of Introduction to Jurisprudence. I was over the moon to make it through my first semester. On the day of my last class, I walked out the class with a smile on my face. A student of mine approached me. He thanked me for the semester and told me that he had not expected it from a coloured lecturer. He went on to tell me that all the coloured people he knew sat on the sides of the road and drank *papsak* (cheap wine). I was not sure how to react so I did not say anything. It would not be the first time someone told me I was not like other coloured people. Coloured people are stereotyped as people who drink copious amounts of alcohol, have no front teeth and are prone to violence and gangsterism (Petrus & Isaacs-Martin 2012). Somehow people think it is okay to say this. It took me quite some time to realise it is not acceptable to say this.

In July of that year, I had a chance to attend my first law teachers’ conference. I was awed to meet all the people whose textbooks I had studied as an undergraduate. I started picturing myself as one of them one day, as an expert. One evening we attended a gala dinner. I sat next to a dean of a university somewhere to the south of the country. When introducing herself she also made it clear that she was the dean of a law faculty. She asked me if I was doing my PhD. I said, ‘No, I am still busy with my Master’s but I am teaching.’ To which she replied, ‘How can you teach when you don’t even have a Master’s degree? At our university, you must at least have a Master’s degree. You must be a step ahead of the students.’ She did not even know my name. The only thing she heard was Master’s and teaching and that was enough for her to cut me down to size. At that moment I swear I heard the sound that those hospital monitors make when a person’s heart stops. Flat line. I saw the glass of white wine in front of me and took a big gulp. I was surely living up to the coloured stereotype at that moment. I tried to salvage my self-esteem by telling her about the honours in Latin that I had completed, and that one only needs to have the qualification that you are teaching. It did not matter. To her, I was just a kid who did not know what she was doing. It took me a while to get over what she said and to understand why she might have done that. But at that moment all my insecurities and doubts came jumping up again. Am I just another incompetent black person who should not be in the position they are in? With these new found insecurities, I flew back to Potchefstroom to start the new semester.

Transforming as a teacher

Soon the second semester began. I felt excited to teach this module, Jurisprudence and Ethics, that I was entrusted with. Ethics turned out to be an even bigger challenge. The legal ethical topics in the module were relevant and interesting. I did not realise at that point that these topics would challenge my assumptions as much as
they challenged the students’ assumptions. I also did not realise that a great amount of vulnerability would be needed from both our sides.

I was now teaching fourth-year students. As a group they were very different to third-year students. They were more mature. They had also already completed most of the curriculum, which meant that we could discuss more issues in class. The first theme we dealt with was transformation of the judiciary. Among the questions posed were: Does the judiciary need to be diverse? Should gender transformation take place? Do personal factors play a role during adjudication? I could tell that the students were excited. They were eager to give their opinion on matters. This was what I wanted. But the more we discussed these issues, and the deeper we went, the more it became apparent that most students held very conservative views about transformation and race issues in general. Many believed that appointing a black person meant that standards would be lowered. I started to wonder whether I wanted to hear all this. They were honest. They were sharing. I did not know if I really wanted to see what was going on inside their heads. The first test was about transformation. I started marking the scripts. I remember sitting in my office one Sunday evening and just bursting into tears as I marked the scripts. I read, over and over again, how diversity and transformation might make standards drop. Was it because I thought about myself? About what that dean at the conference had said? It was if I had a wound and it was being scratched open. And I had to keep an open mind, be fair and not let my issues interfere. I think it was a mistake to believe I could be a blank slate. In her 1969 article, Carol Hanisch wrote that it is the personal that is political. In this article, Hanisch responds to a critic who contended that feminist groups only came together to discuss personal matters thus resulting in a therapy group. Hanisch replied by saying that the personal problems women were facing were political. It felt the same for me; the personal problems I faced were the ethical dilemmas we discussed in class. It was difficult. Actually, difficult is an understatement. It was excruciating. Once again, I was split in two; the classes had gone in the direction that I wanted but what I wanted was not easy.

The ethics classes consisted of a two-hour theory class, including some discussion, and another four hours on a Thursday where students took part in a debate. At the beginning of the semester I would assign a topic to each student, which they had to argue. The topics were assigned according to an alphabetical class list. Students could thus not choose which topics they wanted. Those Thursdays made for some interesting afternoons. In that first year, by Thursday night, I felt like I wanted to pass out.

The debates on Thursdays got quite emotional. One topic was whether or not the death penalty should be reinstated. I remember students often saying that white people got murdered and therefore the death penalty should be reinstated. While engaged in a debate regarding the death penalty, two girls started to get rather angry. Suddenly one of them threw her book on the table and said: ‘Those black people
would have killed us if we didn't get that Constitution.’ I don't know if it was the 'black' or the 'us' that bothered me more. When those words came out of her mouth, she had a shocked look on her face.

Sara Ahmed (2012) has written about the emotional labour of diversity work. She describes diversity work as either the explicit aim of transforming an institution or what we do when we do not conform to the norms of an institution. I think I fall into both categories. My work deals with diversity but as a gay, coloured lesbian I do not conform to the norm. Ahmed explains the sense of depletion from doing diversity work. She says:

When diversity becomes an invitation perhaps what is at stake is not so much who you are but who you are not: not white, not male, not straight, not able-bodied. If you are more than one of these ‘nots’ you might end up on more than one committee! Embodying diversity can thus require additional work; the depletion of the energy of diversity workers is part of the embodied and institutional history of diversity. (2013)

I realise now that the exhaustion was not only from the debates in the class but from the fact that I embodied these topics.

**The wounds within**

In that year I became even more aware of how uncomfortable I had been with being coloured. During the year there was a coloured woman in my class. This student had quite an attitude. She also had a more masculine look to her and a very heavy Cape-coloured accent. When I heard her speak it was as if something was scratching on my skin. It was as if I wanted to say to her: ‘Just speak properly.’ This incident bothered me and I knew I had to do some introspection. After thinking about it for a while, I realised that I could not permit the things that were ‘coloured’ in her because I could not permit it within myself. I wondered where all of this shame of being coloured came from. Being a junior lecturer without a Master’s degree was not a very secure place for me to be in. Until I completed my Master’s I always felt that I did not belong here – it was a combination of comments by people who did not get positions at the faculty, the dean at the dinner’s comments and my feelings of inferiority. Feeling that you are not good enough and have something to prove is common for black people who are appointed. Some people will say that it is all in your head but I do not know if it really is. Someone once told me that we all have a racist part in us. Perhaps this is true but the effects of our racism are not always the same.

We grow up in a world where we see many white privileged people. Yes, there are poor white people and, yes, there are black rich people but we still see whiteness as the norm. At my university most of the people I studied with were white, most of the students I teach are white and almost all of my colleagues are white. The white person sees whiteness as the norm – but I do too. What it means for me is not what
it means for the white person. White people are not alienated from themselves. When the white person sees whiteness as something good, that person sees himself or herself. When the black person aspires to whiteness as a norm, he or she can get really close to convincing themselves that they are white. With these white norms inside a black person’s head, they get a shock when they look in the mirror. All this time they have convinced themselves that they are white. But they never can be. So they must pretend that they are not black. They live in two worlds. This is a concept that Fanon too, touched upon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1986).

I did this too. Unconsciously I hated certain coloured parts about me. I wanted to speak proper Afrikaans with the correct pronunciation. I did not want to sound stupid. I wonder when I learnt this? I can’t remember anyone ever telling me. Maybe I just saw it in the world around me. This makes the problem of ‘whiteness and blackness’ so difficult. It is normalised. It is everywhere and you don’t have to do anything explicitly wrong to take part in it. This is the type of racism we sit with today. Not the in-your-face kind. It is the subtle kind. The kind where you can think you are losing your mind because you keep on wondering, ‘Is it because I am black?’ That is the privilege. The privilege of not having to ask those questions all the time.

Despite the emotional rollercoaster that I was on, and how hard I was on myself, I was asked to lecture Jurisprudence and Ethics again. I considered the possibility that I was doing a better job than I thought. The second time around was slightly easier but no less emotional. The second time around I had a better idea of what to expect and I had also realised the importance of the module. Each week I would engage in discussions with the students. I learnt that trust was very important if we were to have a meaningful learning experience. So, occasionally, I would share some of my own experiences of race and racism and some of my own naiveté as well. I shared one experience of when I studied as an exchange student in the Netherlands. I lived in a flat with other exchange students and I told my students about my surprise when I saw that white men were the cleaners. A story like this made them feel less intimidated and less embarrassed about their own ideas about whiteness. Slowly but surely I came to see that the students sitting in front of me had questions and issues that they wanted to discuss. What is more, they had stories and they were people. Being able to practise empathy is important to me. Empathy is defined as the ‘ability to comprehend the emotional states of others by vicarious experience of the same emotions as them, while remaining aware of the source of these emotions’ (Eisenberg 2000).

Over the years, I have started to acknowledge my own feelings. The class was not an appropriate place for me to acknowledge my feelings but I found my own space to do so. This was after all my own issue and not theirs. Perhaps my objectivity and professionalism came from being able to distinguish my issues from theirs. If I took the time to do introspection and work on my emotions and at least try to understand them, I could walk into the class the next day and be open for anything that might happen. I did not have to freak out about anything. I could be present.
I experienced a transcendental moment one Friday morning a year ago. It was the last debate session of the year. The topic was on euthanasia – that old favourite of mine. I felt particularly free and happy that morning. I remember the morning chill as I walked to class. I love that refreshing feeling. I got the same feeling from the students. There was an openness and a cheerfulness. As usual the students did not pick their topic. It was assigned to them. The third student to walk up to the front of the class was a rather shy and nervous young woman. She began to present her argument for the legalisation of euthanasia. Her hands and voice were shaky. She finished her presentation and just stood there, looking down. She started to cry. She said, 'I'm sorry, my aunt died last night, she was suffering from cancer for the last few years. I just kept thinking about her. I kept thinking about the moments we would have lost out on had she decided to die a few years earlier.' There was a silence in the classroom. I looked to the other students and almost all of them had tears in their eyes. For the first time in a class, I felt like crying too. Even though I did not cry, I could empathise with her feeling and loss. And all of us in that class could contain it for her. Even writing this brings tears to my eyes. Of course I had to comment on her legal argument, but I am glad I could do that without dismissing her feelings, without dismissing her humanity. Perhaps she showed us all that morning how real and relevant the euthanasia debate is. I do not think I could have acted as I did that morning if I was not willing to face my own emotions. The Allison I was four years ago would have dismissed her emotions, because she dismissed her own – believing there was no place for them in the law.

One of my favourite moments happened during that second semester of teaching Ethics and Jurisprudence. A student had been in my class and, as far as I could tell, she was hardworking. She attended classes regularly and got above-average scores on her tests. Yet it seemed as if she despised the classes. The few times that she did give an opinion, it was rather conservative and she always frowned as if she was angry at something. I was always aware of her angry presence in class. One Thursday she attended the debate sessions. The motion for the debate was that the death penalty should be reinstated for Schedule 6 offences. There she was again, looking very irritated. At some point she said, 'What is the point to all of this? There is no point.' I said, 'Excuse me?' She replied: 'We will never solve anything and I guess I can't be a Christian.' This comment was directed at me because I was very critical of legal arguments based on Bible verses. Many students interpreted this as me being an atheist. I am not – I usually pray before I go to class. She seemed very emotional and then said: 'We can't talk about this. I get too emotional.' She shook her head as if she had given up. There was a heavy silence. I took a deep breath and said,

You are right – many of these questions repeat themselves throughout history, and it seems as if we never get to an answer. We never get to a final answer about most things. But it is important that you get the opportunity to think about these issues and find and live your answer. It does get emotional and that's okay. But we know that is what we have to work on and
in the process we can try and understand why we get so emotional and try to see things as they are.

She seemed comforted. She nodded her head and smiled. And as I looked to the rest of the class, it seemed that they were comforted too. At that moment I did not know I had it in me to say that. In that moment I could put aside my own issues and see that student as human being. That moment was divine. It was a pivotal moment for me.

This has been a site of struggle for me. I am aware of how devoid of emotions the legal world can be, and I suppose it is that way for specific reasons. On the other hand, I know that many of the discussions in class are very emotional and that listening to one’s emotions can be conducive to learning. Interestingly enough, a new approach to law has been developed called law and emotion (Maroney 2006). In truth, certain emotions are relevant in law, for example, remorse in criminal cases or having committed a crime with anger or hatred when one deals with hate crimes (Maroney 2006). Emotion and law has become particularly relevant with the law being influenced by various other fields such as feminism, psychology, economics and politics. Since the new constitutional dispensation in South Africa, many judgements have displayed some empathy for the plight of many South Africans – using phrases such as ubuntu, humaneness and social justice. Although I do believe it is important that law students should be up to date with legal principles I also believe that there is a place for the discussion, expressing, of emotions around ethical issues and how we interconnect as human beings in the law and in society – even if it is just in the ethics class. I have come to the realisation that these discussions are relevant to a post-liberal era where individual autonomy and the protection of rights and freedoms are not the only thing that matters (Goodheart 2014). Supplementary to liberal freedoms are the nature of our relationships with each other.

**Coming out**

It was one thing discussing race in class. I could not hide it. It was different with my sexual orientation. The day I came out of the closet, I thought that would be it. I thought if you told your parents that you are gay, and they were fine with it, everything would be fine. I came out when I was 20 years old. It took my parents a while to accept my sexual orientation but I think they have accepted it now. Honestly, I did not think that I would have to come out so many times, or at least it felt that way every time I told a new friend. I think I was always just scared that someone would get to know me and that would make them run. For a long while, I thought I should be scared that students would find out my sexual orientation. This would also explain my irritation at the masculine, coloured female student in my class. Thus, in the beginning, discussing issues of sexual orientation was a bit tricky in class. Yet I recognised the need to talk about these issues in a space such as the lecture hall. I was surprised at how deeply entrenched religious views are among the students. The issue of religion came up many times during the class. Many students spoke out
about their views of homosexuality as a sin, or that homosexuals would go to hell and burn. That was difficult, and I am almost sure those students did not know I was gay. I think I thought that the fact that I was the lecturer meant that I was not allowed to feel anything. For two years I thought it was an achievement that I could pretend that it did not hurt me when I heard homophobic statements. Maybe the best thing I learned was to be human. For me, a huge part of being human is being able to feel and being able not to pretend. I realise now that perhaps I did not want the students to become too emotional because I was afraid of becoming too emotional, afraid that I actually had to admit that words could hurt me while I had to be the all-knowing, objective, blank-slate lecturer with no opinion. How was I going to acknowledge those feelings and still be a good lecturer?

People have asked me what is worse, being coloured or being gay? I thought about this quite a bit and it has always been difficult to answer. My first thought was neither – neither of them should be bad. But when you are coloured you at least have other coloured people you can speak to. You can suffer but you know you are not the only one suffering. What makes being in the closet so excruciating is that there is no ‘we’ to speak of. Sexual orientation can be hidden and you are isolated. Indeed many LGBTIQ youths feel isolated (Johnson & Amella 2014). You are not aware of all the other people who are with you in the dark. I have heard so many people say they thought they were the only gay person. Even when you do come out, there are still countless homophobic statements coming your way at any given time.

I remember sitting in the faculty staff room; we spoke about the Oscars and the coming out speech that Jodie Foster had made. One of the women in the staff room expressed her disgust at women ‘being like that’ and having children. What saddened me was not so much that she said it, but that the other people there did not say anything. Afterwards a colleague told me that I should not really be bothered by those statements because that woman says thoughtless things. It was not okay. It was not okay for that to be excused. Even when people say mindless things, they should be told that they have offended someone – how else will they become mindful? And still I wonder whether it is my job to educate her. Lorde expresses a similar concern when she says:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women – in the face of tremendous resistance – as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. (1984: 113)

And so I wondered if it was my job to educate people on what they should or should not say. If it is, then it is a difficult and tiring job. It is difficult to explain the complexity
of the intersectionality of discrimination to people. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) has indicated that viewing women’s experiences from a single perspective distorts their experiences. The discrimination faced by a white woman is different from that which a black woman faces, for example. In this way, black women become marginalised from the feminist debate when, in fact, they have a particularly complex burden to carry in terms of race and gender (Crenshaw 1989). This intersectionality takes place when you are a gay, coloured woman. It cannot be seen as separate. The experience of a gay coloured woman is a particular type of burden, a particular type of experience.

I was scared that my colleagues and students would find out that I was gay even though I was not in the closet. Reading the previous sentence, I realise how ludicrous it sounds. One foot was in the closet and one foot on the outside. Slowly I would test this information on some people, their reactions were mostly good. Usually, when people did not know my orientation they would sometimes let a few homophobic comments slip. I am convinced that most people who make these comments have never really interacted with or talked to gay people. They have never really seen the human side. Once, after a Thursday debate session, a student told me, ‘It’s just so unnatural – can you imagine?’ I wanted to say, ‘Yes I can, it feels quite natural to me.’ That was not my job though. My job was to ask her some questions that would make her revise her beliefs and assumptions – and what she did with those revised assumptions was up to her. I often wondered where my shame of being gay came from. My parents never took me aside as a child and told me that being gay was an abomination. I grew up Catholic and it was never explicitly talked about. Yet I felt it was wrong for a large part of my life – why else would there be the struggle? Maybe it was that I never saw any gay people, I mean gay role models, gay teachers or gay presidents. That is the thing; we do not need to be told what is right and wrong. We look at this world and we see what is accepted and what is not. The South African society is to a large extent still heteronormative (Henderson 2015).

When you find out that you are gay, and you do not see yourself out there in the world, you might just think there is something wrong with you. Gradually, then, you begin to lock yourself into a cage of hate that has no bars. Talking gets you out of that cage. The class discussions and debates that I have had with students have been some of the most enriching experiences I have had. I remember one student telling me that she grew up on a farm and that she had never met a gay person in her whole life, and how coming to university and meeting gay people showed her an entirely different perspective. It is not always easy for me to challenge students, these things go to the bone, but I know I have to. The male students always had the worst reactions to issues of sexual orientation. I think it must be hard to be a man, to have to protect and constantly defend your masculinity. Usually when a male student gives an opinion on issues of sexual orientation he will say, ‘I just want to say I am not gay.’ Many times I have seen the layers of hegemonic masculinity come off as male students revealed that they too have deep feelings and emotions. They too are just people. Sometimes I get angry at the gender roles prescribed by society.
The joker

I have noticed that people often joke about issues of race and sexual orientation. I too have done this a few times. It makes me think of a poem entitled ‘The Mask’ by Maya Angelou in which she speaks of the invisible mask that African American people have to wear: they smile and hide their true feelings. Underneath their smiles lies hidden conflict and pain. Angelou points to the fact that these people put on this mask in order to survive. They have to pretend to deal with the subjection.

We make jokes about our race, maybe because we think it is okay if we do this. The times I did so, I never really thought about it. About two years ago, I started going to therapy. One day my therapist, a white woman, was a few minutes late. When I went in she apologised that I had to wait and I said in a joking manner, ‘Is it because I am black?’ She looked at me with a confused look on her face and asked me if I was angry at her. I said, ‘No, I am just being difficult.’ Why would I have said something like that? Perhaps I really just wanted to ask her, ‘What does it mean to you that I am not white?’ It was a relief to get that topic out. I discovered in the process that I felt inferior. I wondered what people thought about the fact that I was coloured. Since my first year as a student, I felt that people treated me differently. They were apprehensive, cautious, thoughtless and insensitive. If I was hurt by something that was said, then it was I who was oversensitive or there was something wrong with me. At some point I guess you stop complaining and start making jokes. Maybe that is the only way you can remind someone of who you are – unconsciously you are trying to tell them, ‘I am over here, and you hurt me!’ Our hurts and fears come out in strange ways. They do not only manifest in humour but also in anger and hatred. James Baldwin (1955) once wrote that maybe the reason people cling so strongly to their hate is because once they know that is gone, they will be faced only with pain. And then of course you think, maybe people will not like you if you are someone who takes them on about every offensive statement. You want to be liked. I wanted to be liked. Maybe that is why I made the jokes. Some part of me wanted to remind people about my race without alienating them. Nowadays I do not know if joking is such a good idea.

Tearoom chatter

In talks about otherness and inclusion, reference is often made to the tearoom and the sense that one would get from being there. For me, and I think many other people who are new to a workplace, it can be daunting to step into the tearoom, or staff room. I was sitting in the staff room once when a senior white male colleague mentioned the Bruin Bemagtiging Beweging (Brown Empowerment Movement). These were a group of coloured people who wanted to be called bruin (brown) rather than kleurling (coloured). He said he could not understand why people made such a big fuss about it. I was the only coloured person in the room. They acted as if I...
was not there. I had to say something. I tried to explain why some coloured people would prefer the term bruin, that kleurling was a derogatory word that originated from the apartheid era. They just looked at me and went on speaking. This type of misrecognition has happened many a time. I wish someone else had said something that day.

I have come a long way in terms of my relationships with my colleagues. Most of them were once my lecturers. On my first day, people looked at me apprehensively, perhaps because I was shy then too. What I appreciated was when one professor, who is now the supervisor for my doctorate, came up to me to welcome me. I think people underestimate the power of these simple acts of kindness. In actual fact, they are not just acts of kindness, they are acts of recognition. Perhaps they thought, ‘Who is this young kid?’ There was a period when I felt it important for me to give my opinion on matters. During my interview, the previous dean of the faculty asked me if I would fit in because I was so reserved. I was determined to prove that I would fit in and stand my ground. During our yearly faculty lectures I would often put up my hand and either give my opinion or ask questions. After I had voiced my opinion regularly, I got the sense that senior colleagues were willing to approach me. This felt good, but I wish I did not have to do all these things just to be recognised. Some would argue that it had nothing to do with my race or even my age. Others would even argue that that is just the way things are. This answer is not good enough.

My mother

One strong guiding force throughout my life and my short academic career has been my mother. She too, is an academic. I often think about what she had to go through and what she had to overcome as a young black woman. She grew up during apartheid and went to a teaching college. She became a school teacher. She and my father completed their BA and BA honours degrees while we were still young (by then she had three children). She was married and she was working. While still a high school teacher, she decided to complete her MPhil. When I was in Grade 11 she got a position at a university as a lecturer. A few years later, she completed her PhD. It is only since I have started teaching and doing postgraduate studies that I realise how difficult it must have been for her. I did not always like having a mother who was an academic. Many a time I would complain about the amount of work that I had to study and the parts of my Master’s that I had to write over again. She would tell me that is the way it goes; you are not the only one. With time, perhaps when she realised that I was all grown up, she became more sympathetic to my academic lamentations. I see her struggling with hegemonic power as well, but she speaks truth to this power. A few days ago, I went to function with her hosted by her faculty. She was kind to everyone at the table and she could make people laugh. She made them feel welcome. While we were sitting at the table, one of her senior colleagues, with whom she has a close working relationship, approached the table and only greeted and congratulated
one white male colleague – one person at the table – and ignored her and the rest of the table. I could see she was hurt. This was a man she had great respect for. I wanted to go to him and tell him that he should not have done that. I wanted to tell him: ‘That’s my mom, you know.’

My mother still has big academic dreams for me. Her hard work has made it possible for me to be where I am. Despite the bumps that my mother and I have been through, she has contributed to my sense of belonging in the academia. Two years ago I presented a paper on legal education at a conference. I did not know that my mother would not only present at this conference but that we would present in the same session. As I got ready and walked to the front of room she took my hand and, while moving her hand from her throat to her mouth, she said, ‘Remember... speak up.’ I walked away saying, ‘Yes’ with a bit of irritation. I was reminded of that moment when you ask your parents to drop you off just a little way from the school so that you can feel you have some independence. I started my presentation, careful not to look her way. As I continued I forgot that she was there. Near the end, my eyes caught hers. Suddenly I felt nervous and aware that my mother was looking at me. She smiled and nodded her head. It was as if to say, ‘You are doing just fine – not just fine with the presentation but fine as a woman, as a person and seeing you up there has made this long road that I have walked worth the while.’ In that moment I was that little 5-year-old girl again. I felt special again. I was special again.

The relationship between my mother and me has been quite complex as, I imagine, between all mother and daughters. She has given me sense of belonging in academia. At the same time there is a need for me to create a space that she did not create. But I know my mother will always be a part of me. There is something beautiful and sad about that. It reminds me of a passage from the book *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid:

> Out of the corner of one eye, I could see my mother. Out of the corner of the other eye, I could see her shadow on the wall, cast there by the lamplight. It was a big and solid shadow, and it looked so much like my mother that I became frightened. For I could not be sure whether for the rest of my life I would be able to tell when it was really my mother and when it was really her shadow standing between me and the rest of the world. (1985: 106–107)

**I have miles to go**

I’ve touched upon various issues and I have asked myself what the answer to all of this is. As I told that student, I don’t think there is one final answer that will solve everything. I do however think that it is important to interrupt (not destroy) dominant discourse and have safe places to do so. I have seen that the university lecture hall and universities in general can be the perfect places for this. As academics we need to start with ourselves. We must realise that racism (and many other forms of discrimination) is not something of the past, it might appear in a different form,
but it is still there. Many battles have been won in terms of equality: the right to vote, non-discrimination laws, access to basic services and institutions have generally improved. But the highest freedom is to be part of the discourse. It is to sit at the table and know that your voice is heard, to know that you belong.

I am inclined to think that my story is not very long since because this is only my fourth year of teaching. I am 26 years old and if I think of everything that I have learned in the last four years, especially, I know that I have tons to learn still. My worry is that I will look at this chapter in 10 years’ time and think, ‘Was that me?’ Still, we cannot escape who we were yesterday.

It is hard to think that I was the person I was when I started as a junior lecturer. The way I see myself, and the world around me, has changed. One thing I know for sure is that it does not just come with time and age. It is a conscious decision. In many ways it has been a painful process. I still have challenges every day. The support from the people in my personal and professional life has helped tremendously. I have only now started with my doctorate and the road ahead will be difficult. The past few years have been filled with moments of exclusion and inclusion. Moments of not really knowing where I belonged. My self-worth was given to others to be judged. But now I know that I belong to myself. I now know that recognition must be given and received but before any of that can happen, I need to be comfortable in this skin that I am in. Many struggles also lie ahead and I pray for enough courage. Sometimes I get scared but then I think of that little girl reading that little red book, and once again she fills me with hope. I hope I make her proud. I do not know if there will ever be a time in my life when so much possibility lies before me. Whatever the challenges ahead, I will strive to always speak the truth and to be committed to the good life and to have an openness to this world. Martha Nussbaum (1986) says it best:

To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the condition of the ethical life: that it is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it’s based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from that fragility.

Note

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