

**Mlamuli Nkosingphile  
Hlatshwayo**

Dr Mlamuli Nkosingphile  
Hlatshwayo, School of  
Education, University of  
KwaZulu-Natal

**E-mail:**  
HlatshwayoM@ukzn.ac.za

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# *Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight*

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South African higher education continues to struggle to make sense of the post 2015-2016 student movements in calling for institutional transformation and decolonisation of the academy (Heleta 2016; Mbembe 2016; Naicker 2015). In this article, I contribute to the emerging body of work that looks at transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education. I draw from the American feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical tools of intersectionality and Nat Nakasa's and, more recently, Siseko Kumalo's (2018) conceptual notion of the "natives of nowhere" to do two things. I firstly use the theoretical tools to map the fragmented and differentiated nature of South African higher education, and the implications this has for decoloniality to emerge. Secondly, I trace the intersectional struggles that Black students and progressive Black academics continue to face in the South African academy, and the discursive struggles operating at different levels, ranging from alienation; marginality; epistemic violence in the academy; institutional culture(s); an alienating and marginalising curricula; and others, that all intersectionally align to produce the postcolonial "natives of nowhere" in the South African academy.

**Keywords:** South African higher education; intersectionality; natives of nowhere; decolonisation; epistemic violence

One of my friends told 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 (Khunou 2019: 25).

## Introduction

Universities in the global South are in an existential crisis. Emergent protest actions across the different universities have foregrounded the need to tackle the deeply embedded coloniality and marginality still prevalent in institutions of higher learning (see for example Chattarji 2019; Dey 2019; Mukherjee 2017). Underpinning this critique is the prevailing question regarding what is the role of the university in a postcolonial society? What are some of its philosophical underpinnings? And who belongs in this university? Who, according to Kumalo (2018), continue to be socially constructed as “natives of nowhere” in the teaching machine (Spivak 2012)? In this article, I contribute to this emerging body of work that looks at the transformation and decolonisation challenges with which universities in the global South are currently grappling. I focus on the intricate, complex and dialectical challenges of being Black in South African higher education, by relying on the theoretical lens offered by American feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality and S.H. Kumalo’s notion of “natives of nowhere”. I begin by locating the calls for transformation and decolonisation in the South African academy to the broader calls for reform in universities in the global South. I then introduce the concept of intersectionality as offering a useful framework to explore the complex challenges of being Black in an alienating and colonising academy. I then move to the core of the article, that is, exploring the challenges, structures, constraints and some successes that come with the ontology of being Black and Blackness in South African higher education. I not only focus on the 2015-2016 student movements and progressive academics in calling for *structural* decolonisation and reform of the university

itself, I also implicate myself and my experiences in navigating the hegemonic institutional culture of a historically white university and the implications this has had on myself, my identity, being and belonging in the academy. I end the article with some empirical and theoretical conclusions and recommendations regarding the pitfalls, challenges and opportunities for Black ontological belonging in the academy.

## Transformation discourses: global and local perspectives

The calls for transformation and decolonisation of higher education are not particular to the South African experience (see Grosfoguel 2007; Smith 2013; Torres 2007). Universities in India, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong, Latin America, and elsewhere have all been confronted with challenging the colonial and commodified role that universities play in society, particularly in acting as institutions that produce and reproduce inequality, epistemic racism and hegemonic identities (Dey 2019). We see this in India with the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) becoming the intellectual hub of leftwing anti-nationalism and resistance against what is increasingly seen as the emergence of Hindu nationalism, threats against free speech, violence in the academy, “sedition” protests and democratic intolerance (Chattarji 2019; Mukherjee 2017; Singh and Dasgupta 2019). Similar protests actions are also occurring in Hong Kong with student movements using the university as a bulwark against what is seen as the growing influence of mainland China’s gradual encroachment on Hong Kong’s domestic affairs and the suppression of liberal democratic rights in a fragile one country/two systems coalition (see Cantoni, Yang, Yuchtman, and Zhang 2019). Perhaps more prominently, universities in the United Kingdom, in particular Cambridge University and the University of Oxford, have also experienced protest actions with students and academics, though not so much commenting on the colonial and imperial history of the institutions themselves, and the role they played during those years, as focusing mainly on curriculum decisions and the need to take curricula away from the “dead white men” who dominate it (Kennedy 2017; Pett 2015). For Pett (2015), one of the central focus areas is on tackling the political economy of curricula in higher education in being critical of the intersectional challenges of the colonial role of the English language as an imperial linguistic tool of oppression that constructed and enabled the structures of oppression that sought to include some scholars and marginalise others. Thus the field of English literature in the United Kingdom has become a deeply contested site of struggle and epistemic legitimacy. To what extent can one continue to privilege Malory, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Eliot, Sophocles, Ovid, Homer, Beckett, Joyce, Hopkins, Heaney, Anouilh and others (see Pett 2015) in

curricula at the expense of the poets, writers and thinkers from the historically colonised global South.

Maori intellectual Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) problematise the notion of “re-search” in the academy as fundamentally being preoccupied about knowing, understanding, owning and controlling the colonial Other and its imaginations. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017), Santos (2007) and Grosfoguel (2007), the Cartesian duality premised on the philosophical statement, *Cogito, ergo sum* [I think therefore I am] is colonising in nature in that the “I” constitutes the European subject who has access to human reason and whose humanity is recognised and legitimated. The historically colonized is not recognized in that humanity. This echoes Santos (2007)’s notion of those living in the “zone of being”, whose self, humanity and ontology is well recognised and regulated by the state through operational discourses such as human rights and other legal frameworks. Implicating research in the academy and the need to be critical of its role in its perpetual re-searching of the colonial Other, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) suggests that

*[r]esearch methodology [is] a process of seeking to know the “Other”, who becomes the object rather than the subject of research and what is means to be known by others. That is why methodology needs to be decolonised. The process of its decolonisation is an ethical, ontological and political exercise rather than simply one of approach and ways to produce knowledge [...] Decolonising methodology, therefore, entails unmasking its role and purpose in research. It is also about rebelling against it; shifting the identity of its object so as to re-position those who have been objects of research into questioners, critics, theorists, knowers and communicators. And, finally, it means recasting research into what Europe has done to humanity and nature rather than following Europe as a teacher to the rest of the world [emphasis added] (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017).*

In the South African context, higher education is profoundly and structurally shaped by the colonising logic of apartheid and racialised segregation (Badat 1994, 2009, 2017). The apartheid regime saw higher education as an extension of the broader state apparatus designed to racially separate and reinforce white supremacy across the country. The early 1990s democratic government was thus presented with the ethical challenge of attempting to transform and reform the academy while ensuring that through the “Better Life for All” call the higher education system was opened to the then historically excluded Black majority (see Heleta 2016; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam 2019; Jansen 2004). Various policy

documents and reports such as the *Education white paper 3: A programme for higher education transformation* (Department of Education 1997) (hereafter the *White paper 3*), the *Draft National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa* (Department of Education 2001) as well as the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (hereafter referred to as the *Soudien Report*) although seeking to re-centre transformation and reform in the academy, failed to sufficiently respond to the implicit and deeply structural racism and marginality still prevalent in South African higher education, experienced by Black students and Black academics.

More recently, progressive academics, civil society organisations, media groups and others joined #RhodesMustFall, the Black Student Movement, #OpenStellenboschCollective and other student movement formations to shut down public higher education institutions in showing the dialectical and intersectional relationship between the fees increases, alienating language policies, continuing institutional racism and lack of spatial justice as all continuing to reinforce Black students' and academics' exclusion and non-belonging in a university that constantly renders them as "bodies out of place" and "space invaders" in the academy (Puwar 2004). In this article, I build on the work of Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase, and Canham (2019), Case, Marshall, McKenna, and Mogashana (2018) and Swartz et al. (2018) to not only theorise Black students' and Black academic staff's experiences on their belonging in a colonising higher education – I also theorise myself and my experiences in struggling to navigate the institutional culture in a historically white university. I argue that to be Black in the South African academy is to a "native of nowhere" (Kumalo 2018), perpetually struggling for ontological and epistemic belonging, acceptance and recognition.

I now move to outlining the theoretical tools of the study, that is, intersectionality theory and the concept of the "natives of nowhere" as offering useful theoretical categories to critically reflect on the challenges of being Black in the South African academy.

## Theoretical insights: intersectionality and the natives of nowhere

Intersectionality has traditionally been understood as a Black feminist theory that looks at the various ways in which race, gender and class intersect to oppress and marginalise Black women (Collins 2012; Crenshaw 1991). The theory enables us to analyse the operational structures of power, inequality and oppression that often occur in society in general and in the academy in particular. Intersectionality

theory gives us insight into what Maton (2013) refers to as the “languages of descriptions” to not only theorise and diagnose these intersectional and dialectical structures of oppression, but it also gives us an opportunity to begin to think seriously around our responses to this marginality and oppression. Collins (2012) writes that:

*Intersectional knowledge projects acknowledge that the distinctive social locations of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations have important epistemological implications. Intersectional scholarship suggests that all knowledge, including its own, cannot be separated from the power relations in which it participates and which shape it. Because intersectional scholarship originated in a stance of critique, its practitioners often initiate intersectional projects by examining patterns of bias, exclusion, and distortion within recognized fields of study. All knowledge is constructed within and helps to construct intersecting power relations; notably, this includes the construct of intersectionality itself [emphasis added] (Collins 2012: 445-446).*

Intersectionality offers a multidimensional understanding of the different levels of oppression and bias, and of social and political structures, and how they operate to exclude, marginalise and Other. The theory enables us to move beyond conceptualising of oppressions as separate analytical categories and classifications and to create a multidimensional framework to look at the different oppressions on one’s complex identities. There has been growing criticism levelled at intersectional theory as too theoretical and, at times, too complex and impractical in mapping the overlaps and intersections of these different dialectical struggles (see Mahabeer, Nzimande and Shoba 2018). However, intersectionality can still be theoretically and conceptually stretched beyond the “race-class-gender” dynamic to also include language, age, height, qualifications, moral and ethical imperatives, religious background, cultural background, ethnic affiliations, political affiliations, ideologies, and others; writing about the different forms of oppression can thereby create political, structural and representational intersectionalities that need to be tackled. In this article, I draw on the intersectionality theory to not only think through the deep and structural challenges that currently confront the South African higher education system, but I also see intersectionality as a useful framework to theorise the ontological complexities of being Black in South African higher education.

I draw on Nakasa’s existential dislocation through the notion of the “native of nowhere” to extend Kumalo’s (2018) argument that the South African academy continues to socially construct and produce “natives of nowhere”

who are negotiating ontological and epistemic Othering in the academy. Black students have to assimilate through various “adjustment”, “orientation” and decontextualised “academic development” mechanisms that are designed to instil the operations of a historically white university and its colonising institutional culture. As a result, for Kumalo (2018), these institutions are deeply implicated in the ontological and epistemic erasure (and negation) of Black students’ lived experiences.

In this article, intersectionality and the natives of nowhere framings serve to operate in different epistemic domains, enabling me to not only see how structurally and deeply connected are the different levels of oppression in the South African academy, but the two frameworks also enable me to understand the discursive nature of being this native of nowhere in continuously having to negotiate, confront and challenge the institutional racism and marginality in the academy. I now turn to exploring this idea more closely.

## Being Black in the South African academy

South African higher education is profoundly and structurally shaped by the very logic of racialised apartheid and colonialism. The purpose of higher education during the apartheid regime was premised on the epistemic, social, economic, and cultural reproduction of the regime’s racialised norms. To be Black for the regime was to be seen as being ontologically useful for the maintenance, production and reproduction of the then homeland system that sought to categorise and classify Black people in general and the educated Black youth in particular as “educated” *tribal* beings who did not have access to recognised citizenship. Commenting on the extent to which the apartheid order saw higher education as a necessary state apparatus to reinforce white supremacy, inequality and fragmentation in society, Badat (2004) writes about the social productive nature of higher education in maintaining the colonising white, male gaze in the academy:

The inherited higher education system was designed, in the main, to reproduce, through teaching and research, white and male privilege and black and female subordination in all spheres of society. All higher institutions were, in differing ways and to differing extents, deeply implicated in this. The higher education ‘system’ was fragmented and institutions were differentiated along the lines of race and ethnicity. This was accompanied by the advantage of ‘historically white institutions’ and the disadvantage of ‘historically black institutions’, in terms of the financial resources that were made available and the social and academic roles that were allocated to each (Badat 2004: 3-4).

For Badat above, the institutional differentiation and inequality during the apartheid period between the historically white universities – better resourced, well-staffed and financially capacitated – and historically Black universities – under-resourced, and whose resources, academic freedom and institutional autonomy were tightly controlled by the apartheid regime – have had significant implications for the current structural design of the academy in South Africa. This institutional differentiation had *other* implications in the higher education system. Firstly, it constructed an inequality in the system between those who had access to and attended historically white universities and those who were seen as the marginalised Others and who attended historically Black universities, then referred to as the “Bush colleges” (see Hlatshwayo and Shawa 2020). Secondly, it tended to shape the public discourse and media attention with those in historically Black universities feeling that their struggles were not legitimate unless they were shared with and echoed by those in historically white universities as well. Third, this institutional differentiation and inequality had lasting implications for Black students and academics in historically white universities, who continue to experience a double consciousness of accessing privilege in historically white universities while at the same time feeling isolated, depressed, gendered, racialised and excluded in the academy (Alasow 2015; Naicker 2016; Ngcobozi 2015).

Post the 1994 political dispensation, higher education institutions in South Africa have done very little to transform the epistemic identity and assumptions of the modern South African university itself (Badat 2017; Booysen 2016; Heleta 2016). This has meant that the natives of nowhere produced by the apartheid system continued after the democratic dispensation to linger in the academy and to feel isolated, excluded and institutionally segregated (Heleta 2018; Hlatshwayo and Fomunyan 2019; Hlatshwayo and Shawa 2020). As mentioned earlier, policy documents and reports such as the *Education white paper 3* (Department of Education 1997), the *National plan for higher education in South Africa* (Department of Education 2001) as well as the *Soudien Report* (Ministerial Committee 2008) have all sought to re-centre “transformation”, “change”, “reform” and “social justice” in their orientations. However they have substantively failed to sufficiently dismantle the underlying epistemic logic of apartheid in South African higher education. Furthermore, these policy and legislative frameworks have not sufficiently responded to the implicit and deeply structural racism and marginality prevalent in South African higher education that is still experienced by Black students and Black academics. Scholars such as Case et al. (2018), Swartz et al. (2018) and Khunou et al. (2019) detail the often painful experiences of Black students and Black staff in historically white universities regarding the continuing pressures and demands of navigating and negotiating an institutional culture that continues to render them as “space invaders” who



are “bodies out of place” in the academy. Commenting on her experiences in a historically white university, Mariah – a first generation Black working class student who is the first in her family to attend university – reflects that for her, the Foundation Phase programme became an epistemic and ontological site for people “who don’t feel like they belong”, and who “don’t speak better English” than her:

The friends [Foundation Phase programme], it’s family. People think that, like you get there and you find people in the same situation. Like people who also don’t feel they belong. You find people who’ve been to public school. They don’t speak better English. They don’t write academically. Their academic writing is poor. And the struggle is the same. You kinda blend with them because you understand, “okay I’m not alone”. I’m not the only one. And, there was never a point where we judged each other. We were just there for each other. We would just a crazy bunch together. We always walked together from class to class (Mariah, in Hlatshwayo 2015: 52).

For Mariah above, the pitfalls, challenges and successes of attempting to negotiate one’s ontological belonging in a historically white university were negotiated when she recognised, and was recognised in return, by those in the Foundation Phase programme. The Foundation Phase programme, institutional alienation, language, historically white university, institutional culture and others all dialectically played a role in the marginality and quest for acceptance, recognition, being and belonging in the university. Perhaps more troubling, the Foundation Phase programme, although aimed at assisting struggling and “at risk” students who are in danger of dropping out (see Mngomezulu and Ramrathan 2015), appears to socially construct an alternative site for Black working class students outside the “traditional mainstream” programme. Put differently, the programme appears to be constructing bifurcated experiences for Black working class students by socially constructing for them an alternative socio-economic and academic space where they “belong” and separating (or segregating) them from the broader university community. This tends to reinforce their marginality and non-belonging and social injustice in the university. Being a first-generation student myself, I often struggled with adjustment challenges at a historically white university, particularly in terms of feeling like I did not belong, and that perhaps I could have considered a historically Black university that enrolled people who looked like me, spoke *broken Soweto English* like me and tended to think like me. Seeing many of my friends academically and financially excluded over the years, presented me with depressing and at times existential challenges of sometimes blaming them, and not the colonising system itself, for not being “strong enough”

and *remembering the poverty back home* to sustain and help them to fight harder in the academy. Like Mariah, I relied on friends who were similarly Black working class students, and first generation too, to navigate the university, motivating one another, helping each other financially, supporting each other with food, passing on information and coping with the daily challenges of not having enough money for toiletries and borrowing from one another, and still being expected to leave a bit to send back home. Bourdieu (2011) and Putnam (2000) refer to these fragile networks and connections as “social capital” whereby individuals form a network and support one another to negotiate their belonging and marginality is what is a colonising, foreign space. Perhaps more aptly, Perri 6 (1997) refers to such fragile networks, connections and associations as “networks of poverty” that tend to be inward-looking, not well resourced in terms of the members who are associated, and are the networks and connections that do not substantively help their members in negotiating their belonging, acceptance or survival.

Kumalo (2018) locates these struggles in historically white universities as reflecting the broader challenges of Black students and Black academics attempting to respond to the strategies of erasure, silencing and negation as struggles for legitimacy, with Blacks ontologically imposing themselves in the academy and staking their positionality beyond tokenism and the quiet violence of neoliberal tolerance and understanding. For Kumalo (2018), the natives of nowhere are not necessarily struggling to belong and be accepted into the university through affirmative action, employment quotas and other neoliberal methods of “fixing” Black ontological subjectivities “neatly” and “cleanly” into predetermined and well-established institutional cultures and their practices. Rather, the purpose of transforming and decolonising the academy, as Heleta (2016) and Mbembe (2016) have suggested, is to dismantle the very logic of the higher education system itself, and bring about a much more socially just system:

The tensions witnessed in the protests of 2016 in Higher Education, with students divided along racial lines, indicates the dire need to recognise Black/Indigenous ontologies or await the implosion of the South African Higher Education sector in its entirety. *The claim that the continued impositions that manifest through strategies of silencing, erasure, and negation will lead to the destruction of the academe is substantiated by how I conceptualise the contemporary student movements actions as an attempt at asserting its ontological legitimacy in the academe. [...] What can be deduced from the student protests is the rejection of the expected and authorised mimesis, through tokenistic inclusion and belonging within [historically white universities]. The recognition of Black/Indigenous ontology advanced here is intrinsically linked to a fundamental paradigm*

shift which ought to occur to foster epistemic justice in the contemporary academe (Kumalo 2018: 7-8).

I support Kumalo's (2018) argument in suggesting that the 2015-2016 student movement protests were largely focusing on the ontological and epistemic struggles for Black students and Black academics, who were staking their claim to the academy. Ranging from the exorbitant fees increases at university; the need to tackle the hegemonic institutional culture at university; the role of language in general and Afrikaans in particular as an entrenched system of linguistic oppression for those with Black ontologies; the importance of epistemic freedom in the academy and re-centring Black ontological ways of being, seeing and thinking; the experiences of those who are differently abled/disabled in the academy as being forgotten – all these struggles symbolise the need for epistemic justice in South African higher education. Epistemic justice, in this context, denotes the structural and deep-rooted attempts at re-centring Black epistemic traditions particularly in highlighting knowledges from the historically colonised global South and giving them priority in curricula, institutional culture, assessment practices and others.

In *Black academic voices: the South African experience*, Black academics from historically white universities continue to reflect on the painful experiences of negotiating and navigating subtle and overt racism in teaching, research seminars, staff meetings and being expected to justify their employment and belonging. Diagnosing herself as suffering from “intellectual and emotional toxicity” as a result of navigating an oppressive institutional culture at a historically white university, Khoza-Shangase (2019) writes about the challenges of being a Black female professor in a historically white university. She writes:

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 its culture, systems and policies – this substance. My journey through higher education, through a black female student to associate professor in a historically white

university, resonates and mirrors this phenomenon of toxicity exceptionally well (Khoza-Shangase 2019: 42).

In the above quotation, Khoza-Shangase (2019) comments on the pathological effects of institutional racism, marginality and oppression in a historically white university. She reflects on her intellectual and personal development from being a female student to now being an associate professor in a university that constantly traps her in a protracted existential struggle for belonging. What is interesting with Khoza-Shangase (2019) is that even though she has access to the epistemic and ontological traditions of the university itself, she is nonetheless still experiencing this ontological “poisoning” in being reminded that she is a pariah in the academy. This suggests a few things. Firstly, it offers a critique of the “grow your own timber” discourse and other policy measures such as the accelerated academic development programmes geared towards developing the next generation of academics in South African higher education, in how they are essential operational mechanisms for the universities, particularly historically white universities, to reproduce their own institutional cultures, practices and norms (see Booï, Vincent, and Liccardo 2017; Hlengwa 2019; Tabensky and Matthews 2015). This is done through the appointment of academics who conform to the dominant cultures of the institution and play a significant role in reinforcing it and consolidating for their own survival, progress and success in the university. Thus, I suggest that this “grow your own timber” becomes a colonising induction programme into structures of whiteness and white modes of being in the academy, with Black academics being expected to reciprocate that coloniality in return.

Secondly, Khoza-Shangase’s (2019) institutional alienation also reveals the operational contradictions of the structures of whiteness in how the academy remains a priori, decontextualised and untouched, and the Black academics are expected to assimilate and adapt to the colonial structures of the university. This reflects Gordon’s (2002) notion of “theodicy”, that is, looking at God as all knowing, powerful, innocent and just, and human beings as inherently fallible, weak, sin-prone and deficient. Thus, a theodicy conception of transforming South African higher education demands that we blame the individuals themselves for their inability to withstand the colonising abuse, marginality, depression and financial challenges that come with attending a historically white university – as I did when I blamed my undergraduate friends for being academically and financially excluded at a historically white university and not being “strong enough” – with the academy itself remaining “innocent”, “just” and, more recently, “meritocratic” in nature (see Sobuwa and McKenna 2019). Writing about the “right kind of Black” academic that needs to be appointed in the historically white university and its gatekeeping function, Booï et al. (2017) suggest that:

The gatekeeping role, which is performed by white senior academics, could be viewed as a form of policing in which the identity of an academic network comes to embody the dispositions and practices of its most influential members. As these dispositions and practices have been normalised, this 'approval' is based on the condition that black people become assimilated into the white middle-class institutional culture. The university's identity is sustained through networks of connections which retain the 'right type' of black graduate students who are familiar with the rules of the field that govern a 'HWU way of doing things'. The highly valued currency of social capital possessed by dominant actors in the form of white-middle-class habitus thus comprises the Gold Standard at HWUs. [...] The 'right kind' of black candidates are carefully identified by their familiarity with the university's existing 'way of doing things' and whether their embodied dispositions reflect the dominant white middle-class institutional cultures. These individuals are recognised or approved by white senior academics as legitimate candidates for their inclusion into academia. [...] individuals who do not possess these characteristics or do not want to be the 'right kind' of black candidates are alienated by the institutional culture (Booi et al. 2017: 503-504).

In the above quotation, Booi et al. (2017) write about the complex nature of historically white universities in how senior white academics act as gatekeepers in ensuring that those who enter the academy have the "educated language", habitus, attributes, values and dispositions that would enable them to successfully participate and survive in the university. As mentioned earlier, this becomes an opportunity to ensure that although racially the institution could be seen to be transforming at least in the demographic sense, the epistemic, ontological and normative traditions of the university remain intact and unchallenged. Hlengwa (2019) refers to the institutional practice of appointing like-minded academics who are there to protect and reinforce the institutional culture as "safe bets" – that is, academics who will not dare challenge the status quo and in fact thrive at times in the very same colonial institution. Thus like Khoza-Shangase (2019), Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam (2019) and others, those who fail to live up to the colonising institutional cultures and its normative practices are rendered pariahs and natives of nowhere in the academy.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Universities in the global South continue to grapple with the existential crisis of responding to the pressing demands for structural reform, transformation and decolonisation. Sparked by the 2015–2016 student movements, South African universities have struggled to tackle and dismantle the colonial and apartheid logic that continues to underpin and anchor the academy. Historically white universities have been at the heart of socially constructing Black students and Black academics as pariahs and “natives of nowhere” who either conform as “safe bets” in the academy and reinforce the colonising institutional culture and its normative epistemic practices, or are Othered. This is seen in our historically white universities that continue to render Black ontological experiences as inferior, deficient and a threat, thereby forcing us to conform to the normative practices of a historically white university and its colonising and alienating institutional culture. Thus, based on the above conclusions, I make the following recommendations:

- Historically white universities continue to construct “orientation”, “welcoming” and “induction” programmes for first-year students. Future research could be done to explicate the underpinning philosophies of this orientation and to see to what extent they can re-conceptualise them in ways that facilitate social justice.
- Proper policy coherence and articulation is still required to respond to the institutional differentiation and fragmentation across the South African higher education system particularly between historically white universities and historically Black universities. There is a growing gap between the different kinds of higher education institution in the system and there is a need to ensure that those who are studying in the different academies have the same institutional/epistemic/curriculum experience and are not disadvantaged.
- Further research and theorisation is still required in helping critique and make sense of the different institutional accelerated development programmes, such as “grow your own timber”, that are increasingly opportunities for historically white universities to train, attract and retain academics who share cultural identities with the university and therefore who will not challenge the status quo. Further research could explore the experiences of these “safe bets” while offering new insights into helping us reimagine how internal university programmes for developing new generations of academics could move beyond social reproduction to social justice.

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