Are we there yet? An intersectional take on Black women academics' experiences in a South African university

Mlamuli Nkosingphile Hlatshwayo

Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa
mhlatshwayo@uj.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9180-8803

Bongiwe Mayibongwe Ngcobo

Curriculum Studies, School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
208505717@stu.ukzn.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1950-5952

Abstract

In this paper, we adopt an intersectional lens to explore and theorise the complex experiences of Black women academics in a research-intensive university in South Africa. We purposively recruited 10 Black women academics, ranging from early career academics, lecturers, to senior professors in the field. We relied on intersectionality to theorise Black women academics' challenges in navigating and negotiating their being and belonging in the university. We used semi-structured interviews as a data generation method to elicit the narratives/ stories/experiences of the Black women academics. The findings revealed two things. Firstly, they revealed that a large number of the research participants were "accidental academics" in higher education due to the nature of their entry and access to the university. Secondly, the findings also showed the important role that formal and informal mentoring plays in higher education as a catalyst for helping Black women academics access, negotiate, and succeed at university. We conclude this paper with some thoughts on the need for formalised and well-structured mentoring systems in higher education to support Black women academics' access, being, and belonging in the university.

Keywords: Black women academics, intersectionality, higher education, transformation

Introduction

The South African higher education system is in a crisis. This crisis manifests itself through ongoing calls for structural reform and reconfiguration of the public higher education system (Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Littlejohn, 2022; Pattman & Carolissen, 2018). It was the students,

through the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall national protests, who mobilised and organised around the issues of access, fees, curriculum design, the political economy of teaching and learning, as well as making the public university a democratic, inclusive, and socially just space (Mbembe, 2016; Naicker, 2016; Ngcobozi, 2015). The issues of gender inclusivity and representation were also part of the decolonial struggles, with students and Black academics correctly arguing the urgent need for higher education in the country to be representative of the demographic profile of South Africa. This is seen in how, of the 26 public higher education institutions in the country, only six have women as the principal and vice chancellor of the university (that is, Walter Sisulu University, Central University of Technology, University of South Africa, University of Mpumalanga, Nelson Mandela University, and University of Zululand). This gender inequality and divide is also represented amongst the senior academic rankings of the universities themselves (see Maphalala et al., 2022). Of the 2,601 professors in the country in 2010, men constituted 86% while women constituted 14%. By 2018, the sector had 3,125 professors. Of those, women constituted 30% while men were 70% (see Maphalala et al., 2022, p. 147). Although the increase in the women's representation is a significant improvement, more work is still required in the sector to achieve gender parity for senior women academics.

With respect to the larger project of transforming the public university, Black[1] women academics continue to feel and experience the higher education system as alienating, exclusionary, and marginalising. This, for us, reveals what we call the "nervous conditions" of the public university as increasing access and number of women academics in the sector have simultaneously resulted in an emergent plethora of literature showing some of the gendered and patriarchal challenges they must confront and navigate (see, for example, Khunou et al., 2019; Mahabeer et al., 2018; Nyoni & Agbaje, 2022). In this paper, we focus on Black women academics' complex experiences of navigating and negotiating their being, belonging, and becoming in a research-intensive university in South Africa. We now turn to outlining the theoretical perspectives of this paper.

Theoretical insights: Intersectionality

In her book, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Patricia Collins (2019) argued that intersectionality is concerned about the intersecting roles that race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion, among others, play to shape and influence each other in our lives. Intersectionality is a useful theoretical and conceptual framework to explain the world and the different structural oppressions that underlie it. Put differently, the issues of race, class, and sexuality cannot be neatly isolated and separated from one another. They all constitute a dialectical and intersectional effect on one's lifeworld.

---

[1]   It should be noted that Black is deliberately capitalised to recognise the real and material conditions of race and racism in the Global South. Even though I note the emergent literature that suggests that race as a biological category and classification does not exist (Bamshad & Olson, 2004; Cooper & David, 1986; Wade, 2014), I argue nonetheless that politically, sociologically, and economically, race does in essence exist, and is experienced by the subalterns.

Collins further argued that there are four distinct yet interconnected domains of power that we should think about when theorising intersectionality: 1) the structural domain, 2) the cultural domain, 3) the disciplinary domain, and 4) the interpersonal domain (2019, pp. 6–17). The structural domain includes the fundamental structures of social institutions such as organisations, companies, academies, departments, and others, which Vincent (2018) suggested have the new materialism agency to include/exclude, legitimate/delegitimate, and recognise/misrecognise. In this paper, the structural domain largely speaks to the untransformed public university in South Africa and its colonising institutional cultures for Black academics through racism, sexism, ageism, and the deeply entrenched coloniality that render Black academics (and Black students) the pariahs of higher education system in the country (Hlatshwayo, 2020; Kumalo, 2018; Maluleka, 2021). The cultural domain focuses on the values, norms, beliefs, and ideologies in the organisation of power relations. Here, it is the power of ideas, images, and influences that hide marginality, inequality, and oppression. The disciplinary domain largely focuses on rules and regulations, and the extent to which they can (fairly or unfairly) be applied to people based on race, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other categories. According to Collins (2019), the disciplinary domain focuses on the manner in which individuals and groups are "disciplined" to fit into society. The final domain of intersectional power, the interpersonal domain, refers to the complex manner in which individuals experience the convergence of structural, cultural, and disciplinary power—thereby making people vulnerable to many levels of oppressions ranging across race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, often simultaneously. Thus, intersectionality is a useful theoretical tool to explore and to theorise the complex positionalities that Black women have to grapple with as they navigate their access, being, and belonging in the university. We now turn to discussing the emergent literature on Black women academics' experiences in higher education.

On Black women academics in higher education

The emergent literature on Black women academics' experiences in higher education largely reveals the complex and intersectional environment that Black women have to navigate and negotiate in terms of race, racism, sexual harassment, misrecognition, and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures in higher education (Blell et al. 2022; Thun, 2020; Timperley et al., 2020). Dominant in this literature, are the absence and erasure that Black women academics have had to navigate, including being deliberately and politically unseen, misrecognised, and un-valued. In their paper titled, "Strange Faces in the Academy: Experiences of Racialized and Indigenous Faculty in Canadian Universities," Mohamed and Beagan (2019) wrote about the experiences of racialised and Indigenous academics in Canadian universities, and how they grappled with the culture of Whiteness, lack of representation, tokenism, and existential non-belonging. For those two women academics, it was the "power of everyday racism [that] lies in its repetition, the accumulation of messages of not belonging" (Mohamed & Beagan, 2019, pp. 344–345) that socially constructed this marginality. This is what Ngcobozi (2015) called the very *methodology of racism*, that is, the operational functioning that seeks to racially include/exclude, and to demarcate the abyssal line for us regarding those who live in the zone of being and those who belong in the zone of nonbeing (Santos, 2007). Dominated

by words such as "burdened," "hidden," "unnamed," "presence," and "resistance," women academics' experiences in higher education remain complex, contested, and precarious (Kelly et al., 2021; Magoqwana et al., 2019; Mahabeer et al., 2018; Smith & Garrett-Scott, 2021).

In the South African context, Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997) was clear in its ambitious attempt to restructure the higher education sector away from the racist logic of the apartheid regime, and to ensure that institutions of higher learning became inclusive, democratic, and tolerant spaces. Part of this bigger agenda was to tackle the challenge of demographic composition of staff in higher education so that it truly reflected the demographic realities of the country. White Paper 3 conceded that "Black people and women are severely underrepresented, especially in senior academic and management positions" (Department of Education, 1997, Section 2.94). Between 2000 and 2018, African academic staff members in South African higher education increased from 6,291 in 2000 to 25,252 in 2018 (Maphalala et al., 2022, p. 144). Overall, women academics numbered 15,123 in 2000 and increased to 28,729 in 2018, and of these, Black women academics, numbered 2,310 in 2000, increasing to 11,421 in 2018 (Maphalala et al., 2022, p. 144). Although the demographic numbers for women academics in general, and Black women in particular, appear to be increasing and showing a "demographic revolution" in the staffing of higher education, we ought to treat these numbers with suspicion because they do not reveal the complex social experiences that Black women academics are still navigating in the sector. Reading these numbers by rank and gender, there were 641 women employed at either associate or full professor level in 2000 and, in 2018, that number had increased to 2,027. The interesting story in these numbers is how the majority of women academics remain within the lowest level rankings of lecturer, junior lecturer, and below junior lecturer. In 2000, there were 12,536 women academics at lecturer or below in the system and, by 2018, this number had increased to 23,661 of women academics being stuck at the bottom of higher education rankings, an increase of some 89% in 18 years—compared to an only 49% increase in total higher education academics in the same period (Maphalala et al., 2022, p. 147).

As mentioned earlier, the above numbers appear to show a system that is changing for the better for women because more women academics are accessing the sector and changing the demographic profile. What remain prevalent, are the racist, sexist, and patriarchal narratives for women academics that shine a spotlight on the coloniality that remains in higher education. In their book, *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*, Grace Khunou, Edith Phaswana, Katijah Khoza-Shangase, and Hugo Canham (2019) detailed the anguish and brutalities of navigating institutional racism, Whiteness, and oppression in research-intensive universities, and the personal cost to one's mental health and psychological well-being. More recently, literature on Black women academics' experiences at university has looked at the invisible labour that Black women academics often take on, and that is often unrecognised, unseen, and under-valued in the academy. The literature has explored the resilience shown by Black women academics in senior leadership; the racism, sexism, and disconnection experienced by Black women in STEM fields; Black women's efforts at challenging and confronting anti-Blackness and White supremacy in academia; and

more (see Blell et al., 2022; Muradoglu et al., 2022; Vohlídalová, 2021). In this paper, we contribute to this emerging body of research that looks at, and theorises, Black women academics' experiences in navigating their being and belonging in a South African university. We now turn to the methodological decisions of this paper.

Research methods: The tools

In this paper, we adopted a qualitative interpretivist case study to explore and theorise Black women academics' experiences in negotiating their being, belonging, and becoming at university (Berger, 2015; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The interpretivist paradigm suggests that our reality is socially constructed, unstable, malleable, subjective, and is experienced differently by each of us (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This aligns with our focus of recentring the voices, narratives, and experiences of Black women academics and their complex experiences in navigating a research-intensive university. We purposively selected 10 Black women academics from one research university in South Africa. As per Alharahsheh and Pius' (2020) suggestion that interpretivist research focuses largely on achieving in-depth understanding of the complex and subjective realities of the research participants, 10 participants were chosen to gain some insight into how Black women negotiate their being, belonging, and becoming in a South African university.

To give a sense of who the research participants were, all 10 were Black women academics, and all of them held doctoral qualifications. Furthermore, the participants were at different stages of their academic careers, with some being contract lecturers and others being associate professors. We used semi-structured interviews as a main data generation tool for this paper. In light of the then Covid-19 regulations and social distancing guidelines, all interviews with the research participants were held through various online platforms such as the Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp's video call. The interviews ranged between 45 minutes to around 90 minutes in length. We strongly believe that semi-structured interviews were a powerful methodological tool to access the stories, narratives, and voices of women academics as they navigated and negotiated their belonging in the university.

This paper forms part of a larger project on higher education transformation and decolonisation that was a research hub for academics and postgraduate students in a research-intensive university, in South Africa. In this project, we explored different aspects of institutional cultures in a South African higher education institution, ranging from Black early career academics' (ECAs) experiences, Black women academics' negotiation of entry and success at university, the growing massification in higher education, decolonising the curricula, and the complex student/staff challenges of the emergency remote teaching and its implication for transforming the higher education sector. We obtained the necessary ethical clearance (Ethical clearance number HSS/0240/019) as well as gatekeeper permissions. We also provided, both in writing and in digital/audio recordings, informed consent from the research participants who took part in this paper. All names used below are pseudonyms.

It is also important to be self-reflexive about our own positionality in the research, as well as the research power dynamics that may be involved. The first author was a former staff member in the data generation site. This made it convenient to access, not only the research site, but also willing research participants who did not decline when invited to take part in the study because of the prior relationships, access, trust, and collegiality between them and one of the authors. This meant that the positionality of one of the two authors of this paper played an instrumental role in aiding us to generate data more easily than it would have been for outsiders. In an earlier research article (Hlatshwayo, 2019), the first author of this paper proposed two types of positionalities that we should contend with when it comes to educational research, namely, 1) physical positionality in relation to location/geography/physical standing of the researchers, and 2) epistemic positionality in relation to one's scholarly or intellectual standing in relation to what is being researched. In this paper, the epistemic positionality largely speaks to our interests as decolonial scholars who see and read higher education in South Africa as an imperial, colonial, apartheid, and hetero-patriarchal institution. Therefore, exploring and theorising Black women academics' experiences fundamentally helps the pursuit of the transformation agenda in the sector.

In this paper, data were analysed in two ways. Firstly, we adopted a thematic analysis in an effort to transcribe the data ourselves, reread the transcripts to gain familiarity and in-depth understanding, code it, and create themes (Darbyshire & Baker, 2012; Kilgore, 2017; Peel, 2020). Secondly, we relied on intersectionality to theorise the data and to see to what extent the findings could be broadly reflective of the issues of power, marginality, and intersectional forms of oppression for women academics. We now turn to the findings and discussions of the paper.

The findings and discussions

The findings in this paper are divided into two sets of themes that emerged from the data, that is, 1) the idea of being an accidental academic for Black women academics, and 2) the crucial role played by formal and informal mentoring in the success of Black women academics.

The accidental academics

In her paper, "The Theatrical and the Accidental Academic: An Autoethnographic Case Study," Jo Franklin (2019) wrote about herself as an accidental academic who had not originally intended to become an academic. She was only interested in theatre and the performance arts. Through the use of autoethnographic research, she theorised her own existential insecurities and academic imposter syndrome as largely emanating from feeling that she was a perpetual outsider, forever dislocated, and dispossessed from the academy. A large number of our research participants expressed similar thoughts—that they had not originally intended to become academics. For most of them, their frustration with basic education had forced them to apply for jobs outside of schooling, with most of them landing in university accidentally, and ultimately deciding to stay. Thembi and Mandlakazi narrated:

> I would be very honest with you. I didn't choose to be an academic. I just applied for a job. It was not my intention to become an academic or what. I just saw a job and wanted a change of scenario from the Department of Education, with its frustrations, to a different environment. So, I didn't aspire to be an academic whatsoever. I just find my way. I'm learning to be an academic and I am still adapting. (Interview, Thembi)

> Let me say, I just happen to land in the academia by chance or by default. I was in basic education for several years, but the thing is, I was studying. So, you know, when, I don't know if you have taught in basic education. With basic education, there is nothing much about studying, you know. They are not really interested in you studying in terms of career growth. So, at some stage when I submitted one of my completed degree certificates, you know, for cash back. And then they told me that, you see, this is the last time we are giving you cash. For any qualification that you will do now, you won't get anything. So, I was like okay, and at that time, I was studying again. (Interview, Mandlakazi).

Thembi and Mandlakazi commented on how their entry and access to higher education in a South African institution was largely accidental in that they did not purposively plan to be academics. This is largely reflective of the broader literature on Black academics—how they either changed jobs to head on into higher education or, alternatively, stayed in university through various student and part-time employment contract posts (see, for example, Blell et al., 2022; Muradoglu et al., 2022; Vohlídalová, 2021). Thembi above, who was still "learning to be an academic," reflected Franklin's (2019) deliberative term of *emerging academic* to denote the struggles that women academics have to navigate and negotiate in order to find themselves and their places in the university. For Mbali, another research participant, what inspired her to become an academic was seeing a red doctoral gown during the graduation ceremonies. That triggered Mbali to stay in the academy, and to pursue a career in higher education:

> I came into higher education as a student and the plan was to just get a degree and go but in my first year, I heard that people who sing at a choir boom into graduation ceremonies. Then I said, although I can't sing but I need to be in a choir now so that I will be able to see what happens there. So, I joined the choir because of that. While I was there, there were a lot of black gowns, I think there was only one red, and I was like "How come we have so many black and only one red?" So, I fell in love with that gown. I said, Oh! Okay so, black is for everyone so now I just need to have the red one mmmmh. But I didn't know that by pursuing the red gown now it will lead me into higher education in becoming an academic.

One can deduce that Mbali's experience of being inspired by the choir, the singing, and the beautiful red grown was symbolic of Vincent's (2015) new materialism argument that objects, pictures, floors, and buildings, among others—together with our bodies—have agency, and collectively shape and affect us. Taking this idea further, the choir, buildings, graduation ceremony, the beautiful bright red grown, all had a material effect on Mbali's

decision to stay on and become an academic. Decolonial scholars often see and recognise these as imperial and colonial architectures (Heleta, 2016, 2018) and, for Mbali, it was the very same materiality that made her decide to stay in the academy and pursue a career in higher education.

Another important theme that came from the data was around the importance of formal and informal networks and connections of mentoring in the academy, and the role they played in helping Black women academics navigate their belonging and success in university. We now turn to this theme.

Formal and informal mentoring

For the Black women academics who took part in this study, mentoring (both formal and informal) played a significant role in helping them access and, to some extent, succeed at university. Mentors, who are often Black academics themselves, are instrumental in the growth and progress of Black women ECAs who are often new to academia and overwhelmed by the challenges such as an intensive teaching load, the neoliberal demands of publishing, starting a community engagement project, or being able to supervise postgraduate students effectively and successfully. For Nandipha, her ECA journey was relatively enjoyable and productive because of how her mentor helped her with teaching, research, and even conference presentations.

> When I completed my master's and I was going to start my PhD, my supervisor was my mentor, right. She has been like, even when it comes to teaching, she was my mentor there. She was there. She let me observe her lectures. She showed me the channels where I can get help, how to assess, how to teach in a university . . . so, to navigate. Even in research, you know how, like a student, you are not sure about something. I could always go to her and ask. I am always curious. I had questions related to research and she was willing to answer me, my go-to person. Even in my first conference, she was there, like how to write an abstract, presenting, and progression of the presentation. Because she had been to conferences.

For Nandipha, her mentor became her social capital network and connection that allowed her to navigate the challenges of teaching and learning, how to cope with the demands of master's, doctorate, as well as delivering a conference presentation. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) remind us that ECAs are often left to "sink or swim" in the university. And Miller (2014) conceded that senior academics, who themselves may have been left alone to navigate the difficult terrains of academia, could very well be testing ECAs' ability to survive the challenges of higher education. It was Hollywood et al. (2020) and Bosanquet et al. (2017) who revealed how ECAs' workload is often disturbingly too high, resulting in them feeling shattered, stressed, swamped, and constantly feeling under pressure to perform—and yet so unable to. For Nandipha, the support, mentoring, and care she received from her mentor enabled her to avoid such pitfalls and challenges in her academic life. For another research participant, Sinenhlanhla, it was the recognition, and being seen by one of the academic staff

members in the department, that made a difference for her academic career and gave her an opportunity to tutor and to teach at university:

> I remember it was Dr X who said, "you have a potential, so you should come and teach here in education studies." I went to teach in Ed studies, and I have been lecturing since 2013 till up until today, I've never stopped. . . . Because I was called in by Dr X, I stuck to him. So, I wanted to understand how he taught in class because everybody was raving about this man. He is such a human being. He understands us as students. . . . He is passionate and he understands where each person is coming from.

In "Ubuntu Philosophy and the Gender Crisis Within South Africa's Higher Education Sector," Nyoni and Agbaje (2022) wrote about women academics' experiences grappling with the deeply entrenched prejudicial hegemonic patriarchal practices in higher education. Often insidious, implicit, assumed, and taken for granted, these sexist, heteronormative, and patriarchal tendencies often present themselves through inside jokes, departmental traditions, doubting the competence/calibre/performance of the women academics, and other forms of gender harassment and discrimination (Nyoni & Agbaje, 2022). These concerns were also reflected on, and theorised by, feminist intellectual Donaldson (2015) in her chapter titled, "What About the Queers? The Institutional Culture of Heteronormativity and its Implications for Queer Staff and Students." There, Donaldson (2015) argued that universities are heteronormative spaces that tend to marginalise and ostracise non-normative genders and sexualities, with this exclusion presenting itself through various institutional policies, curricula, practices, and traditions that continue to show that those who do not conform to hegemonic gender and sexual identities end up being excluded. For the Black women academics who took part in this study, the implicit and insidious gender-based harassment and patriarchal practices were also apparent through "mentoring" and "support" from a large number of mentors who were male colleagues who often make them feel uncomfortable. Mbali comments below on how she was often made to feel uncomfortable by male academic mentors, especially in the manner in which they spoke to her, touched her, and monitored her behaviour on campus. This was similar to how she was treated by the male security staff on campus as well as her male students:

> Those things would be making you feel uncomfortable because sometimes like okay, I do need the help, but I don't like the way that you are touching me. Am I supposed to speak up or if I do speak up, what is going to happen to our working relationship? So, I need to tread carefully to say that I don't upset you, at the same time I am feeling uncomfortable; and then you get the same vibe from the security guards as you are entering campus. They are friendly, others are even at some point like, "your car is dirty. Can we wash your car?" So, you wonder if your male colleagues are getting the same treatment. Others would be delivering fruits to your office but then you wonder how you know that I'm in my office now for you to be able to deliver fruits? So, now am I under surveillance when I'm on campus? Then, you get students too, who as especially as a young academic, who are behaving in a strange manner. You can't tell

for real to put your hand on it, to put your feet down, asking myself, "Is he hitting on me or it's just me?"

Mbali's comments on existential tensions in grappling with, and responding to, the sexual harassment, surveillance, and mentoring that she was subjected to, talks to the intersectional complexities of mentoring for women academics, and how that is often a site for power, harassment, discrimination, and abuse. For Mbali, this became an existential crisis because she did not know whether she was overthinking things, whether she was really feeling that discomfort, and what the possibilities might be if she articulated her frustrations and reported them to the university.

In a paper titled, "Mentoring, Sexual Harassment, and Black Women Academics," Brown (2019) wrote about male colleagues asking her if she wanted to be mentored. This often resulted in the following:

> Invitations to talk were often located at off-campus bars. In hindsight, these Black male would-be mentors wanted to be as far away from the watchful eye of the university personnel and used the guise that they could only be free to speak their minds and offer sage advice off campus. (Brown, 2019, p. 167)

These mentoring sessions become sexual sites for predators to hunt, isolate, and prey on Black women academics. Often under the operational discourse of "sistahs understand the culture and the plight of being a Black man on a majority-white campus," these male colleagues use the progressive language of Black radical solidarity to recruit, pursue, hunt, and prey on Black women academics, knowing that Black solidarity could potentially save and shield them from scrutiny, blame, and accountability. There are a number of implications for this gender harassment, exclusion, and oppression. Firstly, it corrupts and undermines the very purpose of mentoring, especially for Black ECAs struggling to negotiate their entry, access, and success at university. Secondly, it creates a perpetual system of self-doubt, self-policing, and self-monitoring for Black women academics who eventually become the typical "angry Black women" in academia, who do not have the needed support and protection. Thirdly, it maintains and reinforces higher education, as Donaldson (2015) correctly diagnosed it, as a heteronormative and patriarchal space that protects sexual predators who prey on the vulnerable without accountability. We now turn to a theoretical discussion of the findings.

Returning to intersectionality . . .

As mentioned earlier, Collins (2019) suggested that there are at least four overlapping intersectional and interconnected domains of power that operate in our lives, that is, the structural domain, the cultural domain, disciplinary domain, and the interpersonal domain. In this paper, the structural domain includes the university, departments, offices, and other institutions in higher education that serve as imperial/colonial/apartheid inventions that continue to render Black women academics (and students) as non-beings who do not possess "the right kind" of ontological and epistemic orientation to be recognised as (legitimate)

human beings in the academy. Heleta's (2016), Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018), and Kumalo's (2018) argument remains valid, that the university in South Africa is a colonial outpost reflecting nothing of the local, indigenous communities who live, breathe, and walk the land. In the cultural domains, and in relation to this paper, we see two things. Firstly, we see the growing communities of practice (Bolisani et al., 2020; Ching, 2021; Ulla & Perales, 2021) amongst both senior and junior academics through formal and informal networks that are meant to help ECAs negotiate their entry, access, and success in higher education. These networks (what could be seen as rich and well-resourced social capital networks and connections) are instrumental to the growth, development, and progress of Black women academics because they help them manage teaching and learning, research, and conference presentations. Although Six (1997), Tonts (2005), and Huschke (2014) cautioned against informal networks and connections as being fragile, unstable, unreliable, and unsustainable in that they tend not to provide the right kind of information, protection, and safety, our participants revealed that they largely benefited from these informal networks because they allowed them to choose their own mentors who knew, saw, and understood them.

Furthermore, the cultural domains, together with the disciplinary and interpersonal domains, seem to align to produce new forms of marginality for Black women academics in relation to the ever-prevailing and deeply ingrained or institutionalised heteronormative and patriarchal structures in higher education that continue to oppress, alienate, and colonise them. Failure to tackle these heteronormative, patriarchal, and predatory practices through the disciplinary domains will render any meaningful attempts at decolonial and transformative interventions in higher education void.

In lieu of a conclusion

The public university in South Africa continues to struggle to respond adequately and systematically to the growing calls for transformation and decolonisation in the sector. Largely shaped and impacted by two movements, that is, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall protests of 2015–2016, as well as the emergent Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the university in South Africa remains an untransformed colonial outpost. In this paper, we have explored and theorised Black women academics' experiences at university. Through the use of a qualitative interpretivist case study, the findings of the paper reveal that Black women academics tend to be accidental academics whose journey into academia has been characterised by career breaks, resulting in later return to a career in higher education. The second finding reveals the important role played by both formal and informal networks in the growth, development, and success of Black women academics in higher education, with senior academics often mentoring Black ECAs to cope with their teaching and learning, research, and conference presentation commitments. Perhaps more troubling for us, Black women academics have to navigate and negotiate the patriarchal, sexist, and gender-based harassment that often presents itself through mentoring and support. This predatory behaviour is often designed to hunt, prey upon, and take advantage of Black ECAs. The behaviour results in Black ECAs constantly and existentially questioning

themselves and wondering to whether they can report such behaviour, and the implications that might have for their employment, safety, and working conditions.

Thus, based on the above discussions, we recommend that higher education institutions enact formalised mentoring support systems for Black ECAs to ensure that such forums have monitoring and accountability mechanisms. These could be built into promotions policies to incentivise senior academics into playing an active role in such institutional programmes. Furthermore, gender-based discrimination, harassment, and predatory behaviour are real for ECAs. Universities should put better systems in place to make sure that academics can anonymously and confidently report such incidences without repercussions for them or their well-being. Finally, higher education institutions remain heteronormative spaces that exist on the racial, gender, and sexual differences (Donaldson, 2015). This is indicative of the racist, sexist, patriarchal, and classist forms of abuse that Black academics continue to experience in higher education. Decolonial scholars who are rethinking, reimagining, and reconsidering the public university in the Global South can help us to consider what an inclusive, socially just, democratic, and non-heteronormative university might look like for us. Many of these decolonial conversations often have the gender question missing from them. Future research could help us think through how the decolonial university, or what Mbembe (2016) called the *pluriversity*, might look and feel like for all the different modes of being, seeing, and living in the academy.

Acknowledgement

References

Alharahsheh, H. H., & Pius, A. (2020). A review of key paradigms: Positivism vs interpretivism. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2*(3), 39–43. doi:10.36348/gajhss.2020.v02i03.001

Bamshad, M. J., & Olson, S. E. (2004). Does race exist? *Scientific American, 289*(6), 78–85. http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1203-78

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative research, 15*(2), 219–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Blell, M., Liu, S.-J. S., & Verma, A. (2022). A one-sided view of the world: Women of colour at the intersections of academic freedom. *The International Journal of Human Rights, 26*(10), 1822–1841. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2022.2041601

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research methods for education*. Allyn & Bacon.

Bolisani, E., Fedeli, M., De Marchi, V., & Bierema, L. (2020, October 15–16). *Together we win: Communities of practice to face the Covid crisis in higher education* [Paper presentation]. 17th International Conference on Intellectual Capital, Knowledge Management & Organisational Learning: Virtual conference hosted by University of Toronto, Canada. https://dx.doi.org/10.34190/IKM.20.055

Bosanquet, A., Mailey, A., Matthews, K. E., & Lodge, J. M. (2017). Redefining "early career"in academia: A collective narrative approach. *Higher Education Research & Development, 36*(5), 890–902. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1263934

Brown, N. E. (2019). Mentoring, sexual harassment, and Black women academics. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, 40*(1), 166–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2019.1565455

Ching, G. S. (2021). Academic identity and communities of practice: Narratives of social science academics career decisions in Taiwan. *Education Sciences, 11*(8), 388. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080388

Collins, P. H. (2019). *Intersectionality as critical social theory*. Duke University Press.

Cooper, R., & David, R. (1986). The biological concept of race and its application to public health and epidemiology. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law, 11*(1), 97–116. https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-11-1-97

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research*. SAGE.

Cornell, J., & Kessi, S. (2017). Black students' experiences of transformation at a previously "white only" South African university: A photovoice study. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 40*(11), 1882–1899. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1206586

Darbyshire, D., & Baker, P. (2012). A systematic review and thematic analysis of cinema in medical education. *Medical Humanities, 38*(1), 28–33. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2011-010026

Department of Education. (1997). *Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education*. http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/White_Paper3.pdf

Donaldson, N. (2015). What about the queers? The institutional culture of heteronormativity and its implications for queer staff and students. In P. Tabensky & S. Matthews (Eds.), *Being at home: Race, institutional culture, and transformation at South African higher education institutions* (pp. 130–146). UKZN Press.

Franklin, J. (2019). The theatrical and the accidental academic: An autoethnographic case study. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 18*(4), 281–295. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022217731543

Heleta, S. (2016). Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education, 1*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v1i1.9

Heleta, S. (2018). Decolonizing knowledge in South Africa: Dismantling the "pedagogy of big lies." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 40*(2). http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/F7402040942

Hlatshwayo, M. N. (2019). *I want them to be confident, to build an argument: An exploration of the structure of knowledge and knowers in political studies* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Rhodes University, South Africa.

Hlatshwayo, M. N. (2020). Being Black in South African higher education: An intersectional insight. *Acta Academica, 52*(2), 163–180. http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa52i2/9

Hollywood, A., McCarthy, D., Spencely, C., & Winstone, N. (2020). "Overwhelmed at first": The experience of career development in early career academics. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 44*(7), 998–1012. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1636213

Huschke, S. (2014). Fragile fabric: Illegality knowledge, social capital and health-seeking of undocumented Latin American migrants in Berlin. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 40*(12), 2010–2029. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.907740

Kelly, B. T., Gardner, P. J., Stone, J., Hixson, A., & Dissassa, D.-T. (2021). Hidden in plain sight: Uncovering the emotional labor of Black women students at historically White colleges and universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 14*(2), 203. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000161

Khunou, G., Phaswana, E. D., Khoza-Shangase, K., & Canham, H. (2019). *Black academic voices: The South African Experience.* HSRC Press.

Kilgore, L, (2017). *"I knew college was in the cards for me": A thematic analysis of the communicative messages foster youth receive about post-secondary education.* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Illinois State University, USA. https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/687/

Kumalo, S. H. (2018). Explicating abjection: Historically White universities creating Natives of Nowhere? *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning, 6*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v6i1.132

Littlejohn, A. (2022). Transforming educators' practice: How university educators learned to teach online from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Higher Education Research & Development, 42*(2), 366–381. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2073982

Magoqwana, B., Maqabuka, Q., & Tshoaedi, M. (2019). "Forced to care" at the neoliberal university: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by Black women academics in the South African university. *South African Review of Sociology, 50*(3/4), 6–21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2020.1730947

Mahabeer, P., Nzimande, N., & Shoba, M. (2018). Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging Black women academics in curriculum studies at a university in South Africa. *Agenda, 32*(2), 28–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1460139

Maluleka, P. (2021). Teaching in the time of crisis: A decolonial take of my experiences of online teaching at a rural university in South Africa. *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning, 5*(1), 78–94. https://www.academia.edu/59102617/TEACHING_IN_THE_TIME_OF_CRISIS_A_ DECOLONIAL_TAKE_OF_MY_EXPERIENCES_OF_ONLINE_TEACHING_AT _A_RURAL_UNIVERSITY_IN_SOUTH_AFRICA

Maphalala, M., Ralarala, M., & Mpofu, N. (2022). The staffing situation in public higher education institutions. In *Review of higher education in South Africa 25 years into democracy* (pp. 134–152). Council on Higher Education. https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/flipbooks/2023/che_review/index.html

Mbembe, A. (2016). Decolonizing the university: New directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 15*(1), 29–45. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022215618513

Miller, F. (2014). Knowledge ecosystems of early career academics: A grounded theory of experiencing information use for learning in developmental networks [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

Mohamed, T., & Beagan, B. L. (2019). "Strange faces" in the academy: Experiences of racialized and Indigenous faculty in Canadian universities. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 22*(3), 338–354. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1511532

Muradoglu, M., Horne, Z., Hammond, M. D., Leslie, S.-J., & Cimpian, A. (2022). Women— particularly underrepresented minority women—and early-career academics feel like impostors in fields that value brilliance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 114*(5), 1086. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/edu0000669

Naicker, C. (2016). From Marikana to #Feesmustfall: The praxis of popular politics in South Africa. *Urbanisation, 1*(1), 53–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/2455747116640434

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. (2018). *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*: Routledge.

Ngcobozi, L. (2015, March 27). #RhodesSoWhite: An insight. *Daily Maverick.* http://www.theconmag.co.za/2015/03/27/rhodessowhite-an-insight/

Nyoni, P., & Agbaje, O. (2022). Ubuntu philosophy and the gender crisis within South Africa's higher education sector. In N. T. Assié-Lumumba, M. Cross, K. Bedi, & S. Ekanayake (Eds.), *Comparative education for global citizenship, peace and shared living through ubuntu* (pp. 136–152). Brill.

Pattman, R., & Carolissen, R. (2018). *Transforming transformation in research and teaching at South African universities*: African Sun Media.

Peel, K. (2020). A beginner's guide to applied educational research using thematic analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation, 25*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.7275/ryr5-k983

Pithouse-Morgan, K., Naicker, I., Pillay, D., Masinga, L., & Hlao, T. (2016). "Sink or swim?": Learning from stories of becoming academics within a transforming university terrain. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 30*(1), 224–244. http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/30-1-561

Santos, B. de S. (2007). Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges. *Binghamton University Review, 30*(1), 45–89. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241505428_Beyond_Abyssal_Thinking_From_Global_Lines_to_Ecologies_of_Knowledges

Six, P. (1997). *Holistic government.* Demos.

Smith, C. A., & Garrett-Scott, D. (2021). "We are not named": Black women and the politics of citation in anthropology. *Feminist Anthropology, 2*(1), 18–37. https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12038

Thun, C. (2020). Excellent and gender equal? Academic motherhood and "gender blindness" in Norwegian academia. *Gender, Work & Organization, 27*(2), 166–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12368

Timperley, C., Sutherland, K. A., Wilson, M., & Hall, M. (2020). He moana pukepuke: Navigating gender and ethnic inequality in early career academics' conference attendance. *Gender and Education, 32*(1), 11–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1633464

Tonts, M. (2005). Competitive sport and social capital in rural Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies, 21*(2), 137–149. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.03.001

Ulla, M. B., & Perales, W. F. (2021). Emergency remote teaching during Covid-19: The role of teachers' online community of practice (CoP) in times of crisis. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education, 2021*(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/jime.617

Vincent, L. D. (2015). "Tell us a new story": A proposal for the transformatory potential of collective memory projects. In P. Tabensky & S. Matthews (Eds.), *Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transfromation at South African higher education institutions* (pp. 1–23). UKZN Press.

Vincent, L. (2018). Tell us a new story: A proposal for the transformatory potential of collective memory projects. In P. Tabensky & S. Tabensky (Eds.), *Being at home: Race, institutioanl culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions* (pp. 19–44*).* UKZN Press.

Vohlídalová, M. (2021). Early-career women academics: Between neoliberalism and gender conservatism. *Sociological Research Online, 26*(1), 27–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780420914468

Wade, P. (2014). Race in Latin America. In W. Swanson (Ed.), *The companion to Latin American studies* (pp. 185–199): Routledge.