“We weren’t meant to be here”: An autoethnographic exploration of becoming and belonging for Coloured women in STEM in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Despite more than three decades of South African democracy, higher education in the country remains shaped by colonial legacies that influence who is seen, supported and legitimised in academia. While transformation is a policy priority, the lived experiences of women of colour in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) reveal persistent inequities in access, induction, belonging, and epistemic recognition. Using collaborative autoethnography, we – three Coloured women academics from the same working-class community – trace our journeys into STEM and academia, examining what it means to enter and remain in spaces not designed for people like us. Drawing on a decolonial methodology and critical incident analysis, we reflect on schooling characterised by inequality, entry into STEM spaces dominated by different demographics, and induction into academia marked by uncertainty and structural exclusion. Our experiences reveal that becoming an academic is an embodied process influenced by race, gender, class, geography and disciplinary culture. We show that induction often reproduces inequality through silence, assumed knowledge and limited support, while we also highlighting the importance of mentorship and relational networks. We conclude that decolonial academic induction must move beyond formal programmes to recognise unequal starting points and support diverse ways of knowing and becoming in academia in South Africa.

Keywords: academic induction, collaborative autoethnography, STEM higher education, decoloniality, intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

> "We sat in spaces that were not built for us, learning quickly that becoming an academic required more than knowledge or competence – it required learning how to belong." – an author's reflection.

Despite more than three decades of South African democracy, higher education in the country remains shaped by colonial and apartheid legacies, with transformation efforts often failing to unsettle the Eurocentric norms that continue to structure academic belonging and legitimacy (Fomunyam 2017). For women of colour in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), these dynamics are particularly evident in the uneven terrain of access, induction, belonging, and epistemic recognition. Research on Black women academics at South African universities has repeatedly shown that academic spaces are not neutral, but are often experienced as exclusionary, alienating, and structured by race and gendered power relations (Maseti 2018; Mokhele 2013; Ramohai 2019; Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo 2023). The problem is not only underrepresentation, but also the ways in which institutional cultures continue to define who is seen as legitimate in academia.

This article focuses on the experiences of three Coloured women academics from the same working-class community in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The term "Coloured" is a historically and socially constructed Southern African racial category, commonly used to refer to people of mixed ancestry and their related community identities. In South Africa, the term denotes a complex and heterogeneous identity that has been shaped by the country's racial classification history; it is not simply interchangeable with "Black" or "White" (Isaacs-Martin 2014; Tewolde 2024). While the apartheid state imposed the category as a racial classification and, in doing so, essentialised diverse people and communities under a single label, contemporary Coloured identities are heterogeneous and cannot be understood as a uniform experience of marginalisation. In this study, we use the term "Coloured" intentionally, as this is how we self-identify in terms of ethnicity and community identity. At the same time, we recognise that South African scholarship often places Coloured people within the broader category of racialised Black (African, Coloured and Indian) experience in relation to exclusion, marginalisation and unequal access in higher education. While we acknowledge that many Black South Africans have similar experiences, this research foregrounds the specific and often overlooked experiences of Coloured women in the higher education space.

KwaZulu-Natal is characterised by a significantly smaller Coloured population compared to other provinces in South Africa. According to Stats SA (2022), Coloured people constitute

approximately 8,2 per cent of the national population, but only around 1,5 per cent of the population in KwaZulu-Natal, with less than 4 per cent of the country's Coloured population residing in the province. This demographic context is important because it influences how Coloured identity is recognised, interpreted and often misinterpreted in educational and institutional spaces. In a province where Coloured presence is numerically limited, our participation in higher education and STEM is uncommon, and sometimes even perceived as unexpected, contributing to assumptions about who belongs in these spaces.

South African higher education data show that transformation in the academic staffing profile has been slow and uneven. In 2018, White academics still accounted for approximately 40 per cent of the academic workforce, compared with 44 per cent African, 8 per cent Indian and 6 per cent Coloured academics. Women made up 50,4 per cent of academic staff overall, but remained unevenly distributed across fields, ranks and population groups. The academic career pipeline remains inequitable, with persistent obstacles in recruitment, retention, qualification attainment as well as progression for Black South African academics (DHET 2019). Cloete, Bunting and Van Schalkwyk (2022) further highlight structural constraints in the academic workforce, including insufficient proportions of senior academics, and weak progression pathways, underscoring systemic challenges in developing a sustainable and equitable academic pipeline. More recent critiques of the Department of Higher Education and Training's *Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework* argue that although staffing policy aims to improve representation and support the next generation of academics, important blind spots remain in how early-career academics, postdoctoral fellows and emerging scholars are conceptualised and supported (Hlatshwayo 2024). Coloured women remain a small and often invisible group within the academic staffing profile, particularly in senior ranks and on pathways into sustained academic careers (DHET 2019).

Our shared trajectory into STEM and later into academia is rare in our social context, where advanced study, in general, is not commonly expected or imagined as possible. Our presence in higher education, therefore, is shaped not only by perseverance, but by structural improbability and collective resilience. In this article, we draw on collaborative autoethnography to examine what it means to enter and remain at institutions that were not historically designed for people like us. Autoethnographic and collaborative forms of inquiry have become increasingly important for understanding the lived experiences of marginalised women in higher education because they allow personal narrative to function as a legitimate site of knowledge production (Shabalala 2022; Warren-Gordon and Mayes 2017; Watson, Smith and Gooden 2024).

We conceptualise academic induction not as a single orientation event, but as an ongoing process of becoming an academic. In this article, induction is understood to include formal onboarding, informal socialisation, performance expectations, as well as the unspoken rules that govern legitimacy and belonging. Seen this way, induction is not neutral; it is a site where institutional culture is transmitted, power is exercised, and colonial logics may be reproduced or resisted. Recent work on academic induction in South Africa underscores the need for contextualised, critical support for new academics rather than generic programmes that assume equal starting points (Behari-Leak et al. 2024). This is especially important in a sector still marked by deep inequalities and uneven access to support structures (Fomunyam 2017; Mudavanhu and Batisai 2023).

Using collaborative autoethnography, we position our lived experiences as counter-stories that challenge dominant assumptions about merit, professionalism and academic success. We reflect on critical incidents across our schooling, our entry into STEM, and our induction into academia, tracing the emotional, cognitive and relational labour involved in navigating spaces that were not built for us. This approach aligns with scholarship that emphasises how Black women's narratives reveal the everyday workings of exclusion, and the need to centre embodied experience in accounts of transformation (Maseti 2018; Paulse 2025; Ramohai 2019).

This study is guided by the following question: How do the lived experiences of Coloured women in STEM illuminate the ways in which academic induction practices reproduce or disrupt coloniality in South African higher education?

In exploring this question, the article makes three contributions: First, it reconceptualises academic induction as a relational, embodied and epistemic process rather than a purely administrative one. Second, it shows how race, gender, class and disciplinary cultures intersect to influence the experiences of early-career academics in STEM. Third, it contributes to decolonial debates on higher education by proposing more humane, contextualised and pluriversal approaches to induction praxis that centre lived experience and belonging.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on decoloniality, critical race theory and intersectionality, this study uses collaborative autoethnography and critical incident methodology to explore academic induction as a site where race, gender, class and institutional norms shape belonging, legitimacy, exclusion and academic becoming in South African higher education. The choice of theoretical framework is informed by the recognition that academia in South Africa remains structured along colonial

and apartheid legacy lines, which continue to influence who is seen, supported and valued in these institutional spaces. Although transformation has become a central policy commitment, recent scholarship shows that change has often remained partial, with subtle forms of coloniality persisting in academic culture, professional expectations, and access to senior positions (Fomunyam 2017; Mudavanhu and Batisai 2023; Shabalala 2022).

Decoloniality and the South African university

Fomunyam (2017) argues that despite formal democracy, higher education remains largely "untransformed" because institutional reform has often focused on numerical change rather than the deeper reworking of epistemic and cultural structures. Similarly, Shabalala (2022) shows that Black women academics continue to experience academia as a space marked by subtle inequalities, even where transformation is openly discussed. These insights help us understand academic induction not as a neutral process of onboarding, but as part of the broader institutional machinery through which new academics are socialised into norms of behaviour, productivity and legitimacy.

A decolonial framework allows us to see induction as a site where colonial logics may be reproduced through seemingly ordinary practices. Expectations around professionalism, academic writing, communication style, confidence and institutional fit are not neutral. They reflect historically privileged ways of being in academia. For this reason, our analysis treats induction as a process of academic becoming that is influenced by wider structures.

Critical race theory

Critical race theory (Crenshaw et al. 1995) helps explain how race is embedded in the ordinary workings of institutions rather than appearing only in explicit acts of prejudice. In this study, it allows us to read our experiences as counter-stories that expose how academic norms can reproduce racialised exclusion and unequal belonging in higher education.

Intersectionality and the lived experiences of Black women in STEM

Intersectionality shows that our experiences cannot be reduced to race, gender or class alone. Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023) demonstrate that Black women academics in South African universities experience academia through intersecting forms of marginalisation, where race and gender are inseparable from institutional culture, mentoring and progression. Likewise, Maseti (2018) shows how "Blackness" is lived in academic spaces as a condition of vulnerability, doubt and constant negotiation. Mokhele (2013), in turn, highlights the isolation and burden

often carried by Black women academics in South African universities. All of these studies show that academic experiences are shaped by overlapping structures of power rather than by a single identity category.

In this study, intersectionality helps us theorise our positionality as Coloured women from a working-class community in STEM. Our experiences are moulded not only by gender and race, but also by class background, discipline, geography, and the rarity of our educational trajectories within our own community. The concept of intersectionality, therefore, enables us to read our stories as socially structured rather than purely individual.

METHODOLOGY

Collaborative autoethnography

Collaborative autoethnography provides the methodological and epistemological space for this research. It allows us to treat lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge, and to analyse our stories as counter-stories that challenge dominant assumptions about academia. In the South African higher education context, autoethnography is increasingly being used to explore the lived experiences of academics and elucidate the everyday workings of inequality, belonging and institutional culture (Van Wyk and Engelbrecht 2024; Paulse 2025; Shabalala 2022; Govender, Khumalo and Agbede 2024).

As authors and research participants, we are uniquely positioned to critically examine the lived realities of Coloured women navigating academic spaces in post-apartheid South Africa. Using collaborative autoethnography alongside critical incident methodology (Flanagan 1954), we treat our personal narratives as legitimate evidence for interrogating systemic inequities and understanding how particular moments informed our sense of belonging, exclusion and becoming in academia. Autoethnography is a particularly appropriate choice for this study, as it enables us to bring together personal narrative, collective reflection and structural critique. Rather than treating our stories as anecdotal, we use them to illuminate how institutional cultures are lived and felt. Our collaborative process allows us to move beyond individual testimony towards shared analysis, while still acknowledging the differences in our experiences. This makes the method both reflexive and dialogic.

Data and sources

The study draws on collaborative autoethnographic reflections produced by the three authors through a structured questionnaire and subsequent collective discussion. The questionnaire prompted each author to reflect on key moments across their trajectories, including early

schooling, entry into STEM, and induction into academia. These written reflections were treated as the primary data source, while dialogue enabled us to identify recurring patterns, critical incidents as well as points of convergence and divergence across our experiences. This approach allowed us to combine individual memory with collective interpretation, and to read our narratives as both personal accounts and social critique.

Validity

Concerns frequently raised about autoethnography, including questions of subjectivity and rigour, are mitigated in this study through reflexivity, collaborative analysis, critical incident reflection, and engagement with the literature.

We analyse our narratives to identify shared patterns, strengthening credibility and dependability. Drawing on the approach by Ellis and Bochner (2000), we combine personal narrative with theory to produce accounts that link individual experience to broader institutional and cultural contexts. This approach recognises subjectivity while using careful documentation and analysis to generate meaningful insights on academic induction and becoming.

Ethical considerations

As the study is based on our own lived experiences, no external participants were involved, and formal ethics clearance was not required. However, we approached the research with ethical care by deciding collectively what to include, how to represent ourselves and others, and how to minimise the risk of identification. We also anonymised institutions and individuals where necessary. In this way, we maintained respect, reflexivity and confidentiality throughout the writing process.

FINDINGS

Becoming "Out of Place" – Early disruptions of belonging

A recurring pattern across our narratives was the sense of being out of place in STEM from the earliest stages of our educational journeys. This process did not begin in academia; it emerged much earlier, in schooling contexts where our aspirations were not always recognised or supported, and where science and engineering were not imagined as natural pathways for learners from our community. Even interest in mathematics and science and striving for academic achievement at school were frowned upon by peers: "Why are you trying to be better than us?" This was not simply about being underrepresented; it was about the quiet but

persistent message that STEM was not a natural space for Coloured women from our background. Therefore, apart from academic capability, entering STEM also required a reorientation of what was socially expected and possible.

Our stories show how belonging is produced through institutional norms, peer demographics, and everyday expectations about who is presumed to fit. In this sense, our experiences echo critical race scholarship that treats counter-storytelling as a way of exposing the deficit narratives that often frame people of colour as exceptions rather than legitimate participants in knowledge production (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). One author reflects: "I was typically one of only three Coloured students in a class made up mostly of white peers, never feeling fully embraced by any of them." Another describes entering university and feeling "completely invisible, lost and confused … I tried to join but was clearly not included". These accounts reveal that access alone does not ensure belonging. From a critical race perspective, these experiences are not incidental, but structural. They reflect how institutional cultures construct implicit norms about who belongs in STEM, often privileging racialised and classed identities.

The critical incidents under this theme – those of being the only one, feeling invisible, being excluded – are not isolated. Our reflections consistently include moments of being one of very few Coloured female students – if not the only one – in university classrooms, laboratories, and later also postgraduate spaces. Being seen in these contexts did not translate into belonging; rather, it often meant being implicitly positioned as different and unexpected. These moments made difference visible, and this visibility often came with scrutiny, self-consciousness, and the need to overperform. This aligns with scholarship that shows how academic spaces can render marginalised bodies hyper-visible, while simultaneously excluding them from normative belonging (Maseti 2018). From a decolonial perspective, this reflects the way in which universities continue to privilege inherited norms of race, language, speech and competence (Shabalala 2022). Our narratives, therefore, show STEM as a field where academic identity had to be negotiated in relation to exclusion rather than simply be acquired through achievement.

Racial ambiguity and in-betweenness: The invisibility of Coloured identity

A defining feature of our narratives is the experience of racial ambiguity associated with Coloured identity. Although Coloured identity has historically been constructed through South Africa's racial classification system, its positioning within contemporary racial discourse can produce experiences of ambiguity and misrecognition, in which identity may be simultaneously

hypervisible and overlooked. This sometimes created a sense of not fully belonging in predominantly White academic spaces and uncertainty about how our Coloured identities were positioned within broader transformation discourse. One author explains: "As a Coloured woman in South Africa, I exist in a complex space – often too 'other' to be fully embraced in predominantly White environments, yet not always recognised within broader transformation narratives either." Another reflects on the everyday nature of this ambiguity, noting: "People keep asking 'What are you?' because they have never seen someone who looks like me in this space." These incidents reveal how identity is not only self-defined, but externally imposed and negotiated. The repeated questioning of identity signals a lack of stable recognition, which has implications for belonging and access. Importantly, this ambiguity extends to institutional processes. Here, transformation policies themselves become sites of exclusion, highlighting how race operates bureaucratically as well as socially, with Coloured people often considered not "Black enough". We interpret this as a structural issue, where categories of inclusion are rigid and fail to account for lived complexity.

Intersectionality deepens this analysis by showing how race interacts with gender and class to produce a layered experience of marginalisation. Our experiences as working-class Coloured women demonstrate how the historical and contemporary positioning of Coloured identity can shape experiences of race, belonging, and marginalisation in ways that are not always captured by broader accounts of Black experience. We were often unsure how we were being read racially, or whether our identity was being simplified, misunderstood or rendered invisible. In some instances, this ambiguity translated into a lack of targeted support, as institutional transformation efforts did not always account for the specific experiences of Coloured women. In other cases, it produced internal tension around how we located ourselves within broader struggles for equity and representation.

Our narratives, therefore, complicate binary understandings of race in higher education by showing that racial in-betweenness has material consequences, shaping access to opportunities, support and recognition. This highlights the need for more nuanced approaches to transformation in the higher education landscape that recognise differentiated experiences within marginalised groups, noting that marginalised academics often experience institutional spaces as unwelcoming or misaligned with their identities (Paulse 2025).

First-generation trajectories and unequal starting points

A significant but often implicit dimension across our narratives is that we are first-generation university students and academics, and the first to pursue doctoral studies. Our parents' and

grandparents' limited access to formal education often made higher education feel exceptional instead of expected, which shaped both our sense of responsibility and the feeling that our presence in STEM and academia was rare.

Our reflections show that individual determination was only part of what defined our journeys into higher education; family histories marked by limited formal schooling, working-class labour and strong values of perseverance also played a significant role. One of us was raised primarily by a grandmother who had completed only Grade 3 and worked as a cleaner, while the mother with a Nursing diploma worked abroad in constrained circumstances to provide better opportunities for the family. Another reflection points to a family environment in which academic aspiration was not absent, but was unusual and socially rare, especially given the expectation that young people would enter work quickly rather than pursue university studies. One author was raised by a single mother whose commitment and sacrifices provided an important foundation for her educational journey and her understanding of resilience and possibility. These backgrounds matter because they show that our academic trajectories were not simply personal achievements; they were intergenerational shifts across classed and educational boundaries. In this sense, becoming an academic involved carrying the hopes, sacrifices and limited opportunities of our families, while also learning to navigate institutions that assumed a far more privileged starting point.

Though we entered university at different times and had never met, despite our shared community background, our paths eventually crossed as early-career academics, where lived experience connected us across different disciplines. Our entry into higher education, and later into academia, was not supported by inherited academic knowledge, networks, or familiarity with institutional systems. Instead, it required navigating unfamiliar terrain without the cultural and social capital often assumed by universities. This lack of prior access moulded not only our academic journeys, but also how we understood ourselves within these spaces. Entering university was a rupture from familiar social contexts. As one participant describes: "Entering university caused an identity crisis. I did not know who I was or where I fit in." Our family backgrounds further contextualise this experience. Coming from working-class families where higher education, particularly in STEM, was rare, our academic trajectories were often perceived as unexpected or even incomprehensible. As a result, we were simultaneously navigating institutional spaces and negotiating our positions in our own community. This highlights how class intersects with race and gender to produce layered forms of marginalisation (Crenshaw et al 1995). From a decolonial perspective, it exposes how higher

education continues to privilege inherited forms of knowledge and belonging, reproducing inequality across generations.

The assumption that new academics already understand institutional norms disproportionately disadvantages those without prior exposure. Rather than facilitating a professional transition, therefore, induction becomes a continuation of earlier inequalities. This emphasises that academic induction cannot be understood without considering the generational and classed histories that have shaped both the person and professional positioning of those who enter academia.

Induction as epistemic silence: Learning academia without being taught

From our data, academic induction emerged not as a structured or supportive process, but as a space of uncertainty and self-navigation. While formal induction programmes existed in some form, they were often insufficient in preparing us for the realities of academic work. Instead, much of what we learned came through trial and error, observation, and informal interactions. We experienced academic induction as a process of proving oneself rather than being welcomed into the profession. Although induction is often framed as orientation or support, our experiences suggest that it functioned more as an implicit test of adaptability, competence and legitimacy. One author states: "I did not receive a formal induction … nothing quite prepared me for the reality."

Critical incidents under this theme include moments of confusion about institutional processes, unclear expectations regarding administrative tasks, teaching loads and research productivity, as well as the absence of explicit guidance on how to be a successful academic. Our reflections also reveal how early academic labour could become exploitative, with one author recalling being told, sarcastically, that she was "paid to do nothing", despite having carried substantial responsibilities from the outset. We realised that support often depended on already knowing what to ask and how to ask for it. One author notes: "I did not have the networks or confidence. I was largely navigating the system on my own." Another remarks: "I blindly did what I was told, thinking I was being guided in the right direction." We describe learning through mistakes, piecing together information, and relying on informal networks where available. This lack of clarity did not affect all newcomers in the same way; it disproportionately affected those of us who did not have prior exposure to academic environments or access to insider knowledge.

Rather than a structured transition, induction became a site of uncertainty and self-monitoring. In many respects, academia remains a space of subtle exclusion, where formal

access does not guarantee meaningful inclusion (Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo 2023). From a decolonial perspective, this reflects how institutional practices can reproduce exclusion by assuming a universal starting point for all academics (Fomunyam 2017). Knowledge about how to succeed in academia is not made accessible, but is inherited. This inheritance is racialised and classed, privileging those who already possess the cultural capital required to navigate these spaces. In this sense, induction becomes a site where inequality is reproduced through silence rather than explicit exclusion. Academic induction also takes place within broader institutional cultures shaped by Eurocentric and neoliberal understandings of academic work, where expectations around productivity, performance, and professionalism can reproduce existing inequalities instead of simply supporting new academics (Fomunyam 2017).

The burden of proving: Performance, pressure and legitimacy

A recurring theme across our narratives is the burden of legitimacy – the constant need to prove that we belong. This burden of legitimacy was experienced across multiple stages of our journeys – undergraduate, postgraduate and academic – and was influenced by intersecting dynamics of race, gender and class. We describe feeling that our competence was not assumed, but had to be demonstrated repeatedly, often through overpreparation, overperformance and self-monitoring. Our narratives show that race and class never functioned separately in defining our experiences: Together, they affected how others read our presence, how we interpreted our own advancement, and how much labour we had to invest to be taken seriously. One author reflects: "I felt as if I didn't deserve the job; I should be grateful to even have the job." Another states: "I felt many times that I had to demonstrate my competence more strongly than others." Critical race theory helps us understand that implicit or unintentional racism is embedded in institutional culture rather than only in explicit acts of discrimination (Miller, Lui and Ball 2020). Indeed, our burden of legitimacy was not always expressed through overt racism. More often, it manifested as subtle doubts, assumptions of incompetence, and the need to repeatedly justify our right to occupy academic space. These incidents underscore how race operates in complex and sometimes contradictory ways: The burden of legitimacy results in overperformance, self-surveillance and emotional strain, and determines how we engage with our work, often leading to perfectionism and fear of failure. At the same time, it reveals resilience and determination. This is not simply an individual response, but a structural condition produced by unequal recognition.

The burden of legitimacy also connected to class mobility. Becoming academics meant crossing social boundaries that were rare in our community. This made achievement deeply

meaningful, but also emotionally heavy, because success carried the responsibility of representation. These findings align with studies showing that Black women academics often experience academia as a place where they must constantly prove themselves while carrying the expectations of both institution and community (Mokhele 2013). Our stories confirm that legitimacy is not simply earned once, but is continuously negotiated in relation to race, class and gender.

Mentorship, community, and the role of relational support

Despite these challenges, however, our narratives also reveal the critical role of mentorship, community, and relational support. These moments of connection were often informal and uneven, but they were deeply impactful. They mattered because they interrupted the isolation that so often accompanied our journeys. Academic mentors who took the time to guide, affirm or simply acknowledge our presence made a significant difference in how we experienced our journeys. Support came from lecturers, colleagues, family members and community ties that affirmed our capacity, even when institutional structures did not. These experiences remind us that, while academic survival is partly an individual accomplishment, it is sustained through relationships and collective resilience. These relationships function as counter-spaces, spaces where dominant norms are suspended and alternative forms of belonging – critical for resisting marginalisation and challenging dominant narratives – are possible. These forms of resistance do not erase exclusion, but they challenge the idea that academia is unchanged or unchangeable. They also open space for reimagining induction as a more relational, context-sensitive and humane process. In this sense, our stories echo other collaborative autoethnographic work that shows how shared reflection can illuminate both struggle and possibility in higher education (Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown 2021).

For us, pursuing higher education and entering academia was not only a personal achievement, but also a collective one because of the sacrifices and support of those around us. These relational dimensions are often invisible in dominant accounts of academic success, which tend to emphasise individual accomplishment.

Also emerging from this theme are forms of resistance. By persisting, seeking support, and supporting others, we actively disrupt narratives that position Coloured women as marginal or absent in STEM and academia. Our experiences emphasise the importance of centring marginalised voices as a way of challenging dominant assumptions and reimagining more inclusive academic futures.

Emotional and identity labour: Becoming and unbecoming

Finally, our analysis reveals that becoming an academic is both a professional process and an emotional and identity-shaping one. Across our narratives, we describe moments of questioning who we are, where we belong, and how we reconcile our academic identities with our personal and community identities. This process involves both becoming – growing into new roles – and unbecoming – letting go of previous assumptions, expectations, or ways of being.

This labour is often invisible yet it is central to our experiences. It includes managing emotions, navigating conflicting expectations, and continuously negotiating identity across different spaces. As Shabalala (2022) suggests, academia is a site of both intellectual work and affective and psychological negotiation. One author reflects: "Questioning whether I truly belong is something I still experience today." Becoming an academic involves acquiring knowledge as well as reshaping identity. It is a process of becoming and unbecoming, where individuals must reconcile multiple selves across different contexts (Paulse 2025).

DISCUSSION

This study shows that becoming and belonging as Coloured women in STEM is not a straightforward professional transition. It is a layered and unequal process, influenced by race, gender, class and institutional culture. In our experience, academic induction, rather than functioning as a neutral welcome into academia, often reproduced coloniality through silence, unclear expectations, and assumptions of prior knowledge. In this way, academia continues to reward those already familiar with its norms, while placing greater burdens on those entering from historically marginalised backgrounds.

Our reflections also show that Coloured identity matters in specific ways that are often obscured within broader transformation narratives. We experienced a strong sense of in-betweenness: too visible to disappear, yet not always fully recognised in spaces shaped by dominant racial categories. Our first-generation status and working-class backgrounds further complicated belonging, as academic life demanded forms of cultural capital and insider knowledge that had not been inherited. This made induction an academic transition from unequal starting points.

Moreover, the challenge of being a Coloured woman in STEM in KwaZulu-Natal is not only about racial identity, but also numerical marginality. Our presence in university spaces occurs against the backdrop of a statistical underrepresentation of Coloured people in the province, which contributes to experiences of being read as "out of place", questioned or

misrecognised. This demographic positioning helps explain the heightened visibility, ambiguity and assumptions reflected in our narratives.

At the same time, the data show that exclusion was, thankfully, only part of the story. Mentorship, family support and informal solidarity created small but meaningful counter-spaces that made persistence possible. These experiences point to the need for academic induction to move beyond generic orientation and, instead, become relational, context-sensitive, and attentive to the lived realities of new academics in South Africa. These findings, therefore, reinforce the need for decolonial induction praxis that recognises unequal starting points, values relational support, and creates space for alternative ways of knowing and becoming in academia.

In practice, this could involve induction that extends beyond initial orientation to include sustained mentorship, peer networks, regular reflective check-ins, and explicit guidance on institutional expectations and academic progression. In the South African context, staff development could also incorporate context-specific conversations around race, class, gender, disciplinary cultures, and the different starting points of new academics. Such approaches would shift induction from the transmission of institutional norms towards a more relational process in which new academics are supported to navigate, question, and contribute to the institution.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the journey into STEM and academia for Coloured women from a working-class community in KwaZulu-Natal is influenced by racialised and gendered institutional cultures, first-generation trajectories, and the uneven ways in which higher education recognises those who enter it. Induction often perpetuates the legacy of coloniality through silence, uncertainty and unequal expectations rather than offering a neutral welcome and guidance into academia. For the authors of this study, becoming academics involved learning how to navigate spaces that had not been designed with their histories, languages, cultures or communities in mind.

At the same time, the reflections show that these journeys were not defined entirely by exclusion. They were also shaped by mentorship, family support, persistence and collective resilience. These experiences matter because they show that belonging is not granted automatically, but built relationally, often in the face of institutional indifference. Therefore, the article argues that decolonial academic induction must move beyond generic orientation

and towards support that is context-sensitive, relational, and attentive to the unique lived realities of marginalised scholars in South Africa.

By centring the stories of three Coloured women in STEM, this study contributes to broader conversations about transformation in South African higher education. It shows that transformation cannot be reduced to representation alone; it must also attend to the everyday practices through which recognition, legitimacy and academic belonging are produced. It is in this context that this study is not only about exclusion, but also refusal: refusal to remain invisible, refusal to accept narrow definitions of merit, and refusal to let academia define whose presence matters.

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