Academic pipelines of precarity: Employing a decolonial ontological perspective for unpacking black tutors' experiences at a historically white university

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ABSTRACT

After thirty years of South African democracy, black tutors' experiences within the academic pipeline at historically white universities (HWUs) suggest a loss of belonging and a silencing of their authentic sense of "Being" in the world. Given tutors' location as staff and students, they inhabit the in-between spaces of academia and are ideally situated to provide an appraisal of the decolonial project underway at HWUs. This article pays particular attention to how various forms of othering usher in deficit discourses of blackness, securely framed within an ambit of coloniality, that seeks to hamper deep transformation efforts. This qualitative study adopts a constructivist ontological perspective and employs Maldonado-Torres' (2007) "coloniality of Being" framework alongside decolonial African scholarship and argues for confronting enduring colonial matrices within the academic pipeline. This article draws on data from a Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) funded tutor project aimed at reconceptualising tutor development. Findings suggest that black tutors at HWUs exist in a liminal state of precarity, where their ontologies represent colonised beings. Recommendations are made that universities take seriously the call to decolonise if they wish to address the leaky academic pipeline.

Keywords: black tutor identities, historically white universities, coloniality of Being; academic pipeline, decolonisation, precarity

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread recognition of the contributions made by postgraduate tutors and teaching assistants (TAs) within the academic pipeline (Clarence 2018; Maccabe and Fonseca 2021; Ravhuhali et al 2024). Tutors within the university space, however, often fall victim to serving only the mechanical processes required to achieve quantifiable throughputs demanded by the current academic pipeline. These discourses of production continue to marginalise these tutors' sense of worth and legitimacy within academia. They are forced to inhabit a liminal, precarious state of existence, navigating tensions between their authentic identities and the dominant institutional identities into which they are *expected* to assimilate. While many black tutors continue to engage in this struggle for recognition and acceptance, others opt to exit the space,

resulting in a leaking academic pipeline. While attempts are being made in South Africa (SA) to address these leaks and to improve retention rates amongst postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows (Anstey 2023; Hlatshwayo 2024b), these efforts need to be complemented by a renewed, holistic focus on tutors' well-being.

Despite the watershed moment of the 2015/2016 fallist movements to decolonise universities (Ahmed 2019), the plight of those who are *still experiencing* the backlash of colonial legacies, persist. Increasing black postgraduate students' access to funding and employment opportunities, and renaming buildings at HWUs are not the only things at stake here. Beyond these observable and quantifiable changes lie the deeper challenges of creating institutional cultures where black students can experience a stronger sense of belonging and equity that validates their values and sense of worth. Black tutors who form part of the academic pipeline at HWUs are an integral part of the academic machinery, and the nature of the challenges they encounter while progressing through the pipeline is a good indication of how far we have come as a higher education (HE) sector in SA, after thirty years of democracy. Examining black tutors' affective experiences within the HWU academic pipeline and how these experiences (re)constitute their *sense of being* in the world, serves as a litmus test for evaluating the progression of the decolonial project to date.

In this article, I foreground the ongoing sense of marginalisation, alienation, and dislocation that many black tutors within the academic pipeline at an HWU in SA continue to experience since achieving democracy. I pay particular attention to how various forms of marginalisation, framed securely within the ambit of coloniality, usher in deficit discourses of blackness that hamper transformation in HE. It has been noted that an understanding of transformation that is focused solely on increasing access for black students and black academics in HWUs "has problematically trapped transformation in a discourse of representation" (Davids 2024, 192). In this regard, HWUs purporting to have started to engage in "deep transformation" (Luescher et al 2023 cited in Heleta and Dilraj 2024, 8) after 2015, have *not really* been purposefully engaged with the challenges brought about by mass diversification of student identities, cultural values, and epistemologies, and have defaulted to retaining traditional outlooks and untransformed practices (Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Jansen and Walters 2022; Hlatshwayo 2022; Albertus 2019). Within these contexts of superficial change, "universities remained spaces where black students were "trained to assimilate" to whiteness, capitalism and neoliberalism" (Fikeni 2016, cited in Heleta and Dilraj 2024, 2). Heleta and Dilraj (2024, 7) claim that "decolonisation is mentioned only once" in DHET's 2020 Strategic Plan, and that this lack of engagement with the concept leaves little guidance for institutions.

In light of the above, this article employs a "coloniality of Being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007) framework alongside decolonial African scholarship to illustrate how confronting the discomfort of enduring coloniality is an important step towards realising deep and systemic transformation (Heleta and Dilraj 2024, 8). Employing a "coloniality of Being" lens for engaging with black tutor experiences within HWUs is an important step towards dismantling the matrices of coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano 2000) that will allow us to redefine "the meaning of what constitutes "human"" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022a). Engaging holistically with black tutors' experiences, includes paying attention to the intersections of race, class, gender, and nationality, and how these inform the nature and location of social relationships within the academic pipeline. The call here is to engage with the affective, philosophical nature of being, alongside notions of equity, belonging, and social justice that underpin the decolonial project. This includes confronting discomfort, dislocation, and emotional trauma (Albertus 2019) in the SA HE context. Davids (2024, 194) sums up the problem as follows:

> "Hence, it is not just a matter of 'black' students coming up against curricula… Instead, it extends into an alienation of separateness, isolation, and estrangement — an alienation which prevents students from finding meaningful connections with their studies, and with themselves."

This article seeks to complement existing literature on black university students and tutors' experiences within the South African HE sector, more particularly in the academic pipeline of HWU contexts (Pym and Paxton 2013; Nomdo 2015 and 2017; Clarence 2018; Maccabe and Fonseca 2021; Msimango and Motala 2023; Hlatshwayo 2024c). The concern here, is on the subjective experiences of black students at HWUs and the ways in which colonial discourses continue to restrict their sense of self. As a result of such restrictive practices:

> "Most 'black' students cannot be fully present in their own world. They have to find ways of navigating a world which has seemingly not been constructed for them, and, depending on their contexts, check themselves in terms of how much of themselves…they can present or bring into the world" (Davids 2024, 200).

As a decolonial imperative, employing a "coloniality of Being" lens provides insights into how we can work towards a more vibrant, inclusive, and responsive HE sectors.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This article forms part of a larger collaborative project funded by DHET and located at a HWU. I was one of the project leaders, all of whom were from the Academic Development Programme (ADP). Since 2004, DHET has funded ADPs within South African universities, as per the

stipulations set out in the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997) which entails promoting equity of access for non-traditional students (see Boughey 2010) within disciplinary discourses. ADP staff involved in this project, work collaboratively alongside academic staff in various faculties to provide specialised educational expertise. We also develop and teach on our own academic literacies courses, located within Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECPs) within the faculties. ECPs fall under the ambit of ADPs and are funded by DHET Foundation Grants. ECPs provide foundational support to under-prepared students by extending the first year of study over two years to facilitate their transition into the academic demands of university. At the HWU in question here, the Writing Centre also formed part of ADP. The ADP project leaders, taught and convened academic literacies courses and were involved in Writing Centre coordination. The brief for the collaborative DHET project was to design a postgraduate tutor development and training programme to improve the quality of university tutoring and Writing Centre consultancy practices. Tutors targeted for the project were Writing Centre consultants and tutors on undergraduate and postgraduate academic literacies courses convened by aforementioned ADP staff. The participating tutors were Masters and PhD students, with some also tutoring within their respective home departments. As project leaders, the lecturers were tasked with adopting a critical stance towards the tutor training and development structures that were currently in place. This set the ground for a series of frank discussions with tutors about their work and study experiences within the HWU setting. While the DHET tutor project was a collaborative one, the current research presented here is an offshoot of that process, in the form of a sole-authored article focussed on decoloniality.

The impact of the neoliberal colonisation: a leaky academic pipeline

The DHET research brief also considered how tutor training spaces aligned with the ideals of inclusivity, transformation, and diversity, foregrounded by the home institution. An important observation was the way in which mechanistic approaches to tutor training (Clarence 2018) seem to have evolved out of the rising influence of a marketised economy, where students are viewed as customers and where education is a service, with the emphasis being placed purely on measurable and quantifiable outcomes. This outlook influences the nature of the academic pipeline, making it a rigid structure using narrowly defined meanings of success at the expense of holistic teaching and learning. Platow et al (2025, 24) oppose this, asserting: “In a university context, social identification as a student offers far better learning and psychological well-being outcomes than social identification as a customer.” It became apparent that the need for incorporating change that would enrich tutoring experiences and tutor development programmes, should also be placed in relation to the impact of the neo liberalisation of HE in

the Global South, which has shifted attention away from education as a "public good" (Hlatshwayo 2024a, b; Hlatshwayo, 2022). The latter has applied further pressure on the academic pipeline.

The academic pipeline, loosely defined as a structure that provides opportunities for the development and training of postgraduate and postdoctoral students for careers in academia, has come under criticism in South African HE contexts, for not delivering (see Kerr 2022, 73). The current pipeline is traditionally linear, with one entry point and one exit point, and was historically designed by an apartheid apparatus that catered exclusively for an elite white minority whose social capital aligned with university curricula and institutional culture. In the post-apartheid era, such restrictive and exclusionary alignment, persists, and has, in part, translated into what many now call a "leaky pipeline" (Kerr 2022; Ysseldyk et al 2019; Msimango and Motala 2023; Maluleka 2024; Hlatshwayo 2024c), a symptom of the neoliberal endeavour.

A neoliberal focus within African universities has been criticised for perpetuating colonised spaces that continue to disregard black experiences and black intellectual contributions (Hlatshwayo 2023; Heleta and Dilraj 2024; Albertus 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Hlatshwayo (2024a, 2) cites research conducted by Khunou et al (2019) and Mahabeer, Nzimande, Shoba (2018) on the disregard for black academic experiences within South African HE and asserts that under these conditions' blackness comes to be conceived as "bodies out of place and space, and invaders in the universities of their land." Contestations of this nature surface tensions around issues of access and belonging, institutional culture and policy, curriculum design and assessment, pedagogy, and professional development. It also foregrounds how dominant practices and ideologies continue to inform black tutors' perceptions of a HE sector focussed on assimilating tutors into "the way we do things around here" (Jansen 2004, 1).

The need to decolonise HE in the Global South is clear, particularly in relation to those Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies that continue to subordinate and exclude knowledges of the South and the ways of *being* that uphold such knowledges (Jansen and Walters 2022, 4-5). The need for such transformational agendas has come to be epitomised by the Fallist Movements (Rhodes Must Fall; Fees Must Fall) (see Ahmed 2019). However, given the insidious nature of coloniality within HE and the covert manner in which it continues to hamper deep, systemic transformation, the impetus for change is often reduced to mere rhetoric that fails to translate into observable and definitive action on the ground (see, for example, Luescher et al 2023). This slowing down of transformative change carries over into academic pipelines, impacting the training of the next generation of academics.

The marketisation of HE erroneously treats tutors as a homogenous grouping, devoid of context, thereby ignoring the enduring impact of South Africa's colonial legacy in a post-apartheid setting. The narrow focus on quantifiable deliverables neglects the crucial influence played by the home and schooling contexts out of which our black tutors come, contexts which have shaped their perceptions, and which speak to their displacement within the HWU setting (Platow et al 2025; Hlatshwayo 2024a). Black postgraduate students, who take on tutorships with the intention of learning the practices associated with being and becoming an academic, will be the focus of this article.

Thinking through the research questions

With the understanding that the lecturers involved in the larger DHET project would also explore individual research interests, my attention turned to exploring how black tutors come to take ownership of their roles within the HWU context. A starting point for the current article was to consider how black tutors become aware of their own sense of alienation and dislocation within the HE spaces. This was linked to identifying the markers of exclusion that signalled an imposter status. The idea of taking ownership hinted at something in process; the process of *becoming* fully legitimate beings.

Questions framing my research included the following: "What does being legitimate and having a sense of belonging feel like in a HWU?" "How is this sense of belonging constituted within the self?" "How is self-worth, or the lack thereof, manifested in the reflexivity that tutors are asked to engage in?" "How does the struggle to maintain an authentic sense of self play out in contexts of coloniality that seek to render blackness invisible?"

The big question was deciding on a particular theoretical concept that could provide a particular decolonial orientation for unpacking black students' experiences, a concept that would allow for strong alignment between my research questions and would enable meaningful access with which to engage with notions of "being." Maldonado-Torres' (2007) concept of "coloniality of Being" presented itself as a strong contender in this regard, and it is to this concept that I now turn.

Insights into "the coloniality of being"

Maldonado-Torres' (2007) philosophical construction of the "coloniality of Being," offers an insightful foothold into the persistent presence of coloniality and its impact on black students' sense of being within HWUs in SA. Coloniality is defined as "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations"

(Maldonado-Torres 2007, 253). In terms of its impact on the subjugated in creating a precarious existence, Maldonado-Torres (2007, 256–257) asserts that:

> "Invisibility and dehumanisation are the primary expressions of the coloniality of Being… The coloniality of Being…becomes concrete in the appearance of liminal subjects, which mark, as it were, the limit of Being…the point at which Being distorts meaning and evidence to the point of dehumanisation."

Coloniality persists in prescribed readings, hiring practices, representations of the self, classroom pedagogies, and in the replication of curricula, and, therefore, informs academic pipelines. The social construction of a racial hierarchy that legitimated conquest and domination and reorganised and controlled labour practices, encapsulates the concept of coloniality (Quijano 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2007; see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022a, b). Grosfoguel (2007, 217) reminds us that:

> "The idea of race organises the world's population into a hierarchical order of superior and inferior people…race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and epistemology are not additive elements to the economic and political structures of the capitalist world-system, but an integral, entangled and constitutive part."

The reproduction of coloniality, therefore, ensures its prominence as a global phenomenon (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 244), where it represents "a vertical global power structure, whereby some…enjoy the privileges…of living under modernity, and others suffer the negative consequences of the "darker side" of the same modern world" (Ndlovu 2018, 97).

The Cartesian formulation "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"), and Heidegger's (1962) critique of this formulation, is a central starting point for conceptualising Maldonado-Torres' (2007) "coloniality of Being." Heidegger criticised the existence of a separate mind and body dualism within the Cartesian formulation, which proposes that "'I think', exists absolutely distinct from the external world" (Çüçen 1998). Heidegger refuted this duality, and postulated that "being-in-the-world" takes precedence over constructing knowledge about the world, since human existence is defined by the engagement between subject and object and by being present in the world they inhabit. The Cartesian formulation "Cogito, ergo sum," is reformulated by Heidegger to emphasise the "I am" portion as the core, as in: "I think, therefore *I AM'* (author's emphasis; Maldonado-Torres 2007, 252). Heidegger's (1962) notion of "Dasein," captures this idea of "there-being," of "being-in-the-world," and signals the understanding that "I am in the world" precedes the "cogito sum" (Çüçen 1998). Heidegger's "Being" is ontological and relates to humans' ability to be self-aware of their "Being" and to engage in self-reflection about the nature of that "Being" (Heidegger cited in Wheeler 2024, 2.2.1). Of importance here is that this

awareness of one's "Being," which for example, can translate into experiencing a profound sense of contentment and belonging in the world on the one hand, but can also translate into one's awareness of "non-being" on the other hand, exemplified for example, by feelings of alienation and dislocation in a world "I am no longer at home in" (Wheeler 2024, 2.3.1).

Maldonado-Torres (2007, 251) concludes from his critical analyses of Heidegger's notion of "Being-in-the-world," that Heidegger neglected the "colonial side" of "Being" within modernity, a colonial side that "sustains the colour-line." Since Heidegger bases his concept of Dasein on "European Man," his notion of "primitive Dasein," according to Maldonado-Torres, comes to be associated with the colonised, a "colonised Dasein" (Heidegger 1962 cited in Maldonado-Torres 2007, 251), which sets up "relations of power" between humans. To support this stance, Maldonado-Torres (2007) draws on the work of the Lithuanian Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas and the liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel. Since Heidegger was a Nazi supporter, Levinas critiqued Heidegger's philosophy as being "complicit with violence," resulting in Levinas adopting a central shift towards "ethics and the face-to-face…encounter" to elucidate the experiences of the Jewish Holocaust (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 242). Levinas' discovery of using marginalised Jewish sources to create alternative possibilities for being human, paved the way for Enrique Dussel to extend the concept of "a critical philosophy of Being as Totality" to "colonized peoples in other parts of the world" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 242-243). These important shifts in philosophical orientation from Levinas to Dussel are captured by Maldonado-Torres (2007, 242) as follows:

> "If Levinas linked ontology and power, Dussel made the connection between Being and the history of colonial enterprises, thus leading to the door of the coloniality of Being."

This reframing of "coloniality of Being" was concretised in Fanon's examination of the racial dimensions underpinning experiences of colonialism, and firmly steered the conversation about the "effects of coloniality" from the realm of "the mind" to actual "lived experience" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 242). Importantly, this shift to the *lived experience* leads to another reconceptualisation in which the European understanding of "ego cogito, ergo sum"/"I think, therefore I am" comes to be preceded by "Ego conquiro"/ "I conquer, therefore I am," as a primary expression of colonisation (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 252). According to Maldonado-Torres (2007, 251-252), this is a more "historically accurate expression" of the Cartesian formulation, which takes cognisance of the power relationship between the "European and colonised Dasein," which he expresses as follows:

> "I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are not, lack being, should not exist, or are dispensable)."

The decolonial imperative, therefore, seeks to make the subject and the contexts from which the subject speaks, more visible (Grosfoguel 2007, 213). It is about "making visible the invisible and about analysing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 262).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs an ethnographic approach to engage critically and reflexively with black tutors' experiences within the academic pipeline at HWUs. This approach allows for "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of a range of data sources, including visual texts, the latter having formed part of the data collected for this research. The prolonged process of participant observation, stemming from having worked alongside research participants, complements the workshop and interview activities that occurred later. As such:

> "Ethnography seeks to uncover the dynamic processes, shared meanings, and influence of place that shape social life. It investigates how individuals make sense of their world and how these understandings influence their actions and interactions within specific geographical and social contexts" (McLeod 2024, 4; see also Hammersley 2006, 4).

As the concern here is also with notions of being and becoming, a constructivist ontological perspective is adopted which draws on Maldonado-Torres' (2007) "coloniality of Being." Fúnez-Flores and Phillion (2019, 51) assert in this regard, that:

> "A political ontological approach situates…universities as colonial sites of encounter where the onto-epistemological differences are continuously at play…what a decolonial political ontological ethnographic approach proposes is a firm, honest, and humble political alliance with those who enact a counter-hegemonic narrative by giving them more discursive visibility."

SAMPLING

Seven black tutors, comprising Master's and PhD students who were teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels on ADP academic literacies courses and working as Writing Centre consultants, were approached to participate in this research project. Many of these tutors also tutored within their disciplines. As ADP staff, we had developed good working relationships with these tutors over the years. The aim was to draw on these working relationships as a pivotal point for engaging with tutors' experiences of the HWU context, to enrich our own understanding, as permanent academic staff, of the lay of the land our postgraduate tutors were

exposed to. As such, a purposive sampling method, known as intentional selection, was used for "its ability to provide rich, context-specific insights… for exploring complex phenomena in depth" (Tajik, Golzar and Noor 2024, 1). The purposive sampling method, therefore, complemented the theoretical lens of "coloniality of Being."

DATA COLLECTION

The faculty's Research Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance for conducting this research. Tutors who participated, did so freely and gave written consent for their data to be used. Pseudonyms were provided to protect tutors' identities.

Tutors were invited to participate in three workshops spread over a few months. Workshops were facilitated by all the ADP lecturers involved in the broader DHET tutor development project. The first workshop asked tutors to reflect on their journeys into HE, up to the point of being tutors and writing consultants. Part of this workshop involved a creative exercise in which tutors were asked to construct and discuss a sketch of their journeys into academia. The second workshop explored the literary practices that the tutors employed, given their status as academic literacy tutors and academic writing consultants. The third workshop asked tutors and project leaders involved, to reflect on their experiences of having participated in the previous workshops. Each of the workshops utilised reflexivity as a mode of enquiry and provided useful insights into the affective domain of being a black tutor in a HWU.

The workshops were a blend of face-to-face and online sessions on the Microsoft Teams platform to accommodate those tutors who could not attend in person. Permission was granted by all the tutors and lecturers involved to have the workshop sessions recorded, utilising audio and video recordings. Data was stored in a dedicated Microsoft Teams folder for this project and only the lecturers on the project could access the data for the bigger DHET collaborative project as well as for individual projects. The recorded data was transcribed verbatim, first manually by the lecturers and later, due to time constraints and the sheer volume of data, the services of a paid transcriber were used. Towards the end of the transcribing process, Otter.ai and Microsoft Teams transcription tools were employed to offset mounting costs. To ensure accuracy, lecturers' quality-checked all transcribed data.

ANALYTICAL TOOLS

A thematic analysis approach was used to code and analyse the data. Data collection kicks off the analysis of data, with the analysis becoming more complex as the research progresses (Peel 2020, 7). The thematic analysis process followed in this article is drawn from Peel (2020), in the form of (1) collecting data; (2) engaging with and becoming familiar with the data; (3)

coding data; (4) generating code categories; (5) conceptualising the themes emerging from the data; and (6) contextualising and representing the findings. Utilising this approach allowed for a systematic framework in which sense-making within the contexts of tutors' lived experiences could unfold in ways which shed rich insights into the HE context and its (mis)alignment with tutor identities.

ANALYSES AND DISCUSSION

The feedback received from the tutors in this study, signalled certain tensions within the academic pipeline. Of significance was the emphasis they placed on their home-grown capital. These recollections of home are important. They speak intimately to who these tutors are, their worldviews, and value-systems, and the extent to which these become eroded in a rigid academic pipeline. Tutors spoke in varying degrees about their sense of dislocation and alienation, and been rendered invisible by the dominant institutional culture. Unsurprisingly, race and class remain primary underlying factors in many black tutors' narratives about their experiences in HWUs. The challenge faced by many black students (and staff) transitioning into the ethos of HWUs, therefore, remain largely grounded in a discourse of coloniality, particularly in relation to notions of "Being." It is to this that we now turn, as we try to make sense of the nature of our tutors' "Being." Such sense-making, serves as an indication of the extent to which our universities have become transformed, inclusive spaces.

Not Just Anyone Can Climb a Baobab Tree to Get to Its Fruit

Derrick, a PhD student who works as a tutor and a Writing Centre consultant, recounts his struggles within his department and the extent to which he felt cut off from his home identity and sense of authenticity. He recounts struggling with supervisors about his grades and is critical of the lack of helpful feedback he received towards assisting him navigate his journey towards becoming an academic:

> "So I remember having that fight with him… all of that has sort of… brought me to the stage where, I think…always feeling like I didn't belong in the space… I often remember…calling people back home to speak Afrikaans, [it was] like drinking water..."

Derrick taps into the familiarity and security of his home to display an acute awareness of himself and his aspirations, and how this sense of location is disrupted within the HWU space. His story about the Baobab tree is enlightening in this regard:

> "We have Baobab trees where I'm from, these massive trees… You can't climb…to get the fruit. In our village, we had special guys who were known for picking baobab tree fruit… they'd have

> a quiver of sticks, and they would hurl these sticks at the tree to bring down the baobab fruits…there's a lot of skill involved… And there's knowledge you need when you're doing all of that… And I think for me, I've struggled with that…but I was just trying to find my voice…"

As an aspiring academic at a HWU, Derrick's narrative reveals certain complexities and challenges pertaining to postgraduate supervision of black students and the gatekeeping that occurs around disciplinary discourses and knowledge production. Derrick's story of the Baobab tree represents a blueprint for the training, development, and nurturing he expected to receive as a postgraduate student, tutor, and aspiring academic. In his story, the Baobab tree represents epistemology, the knowledge-base of the discipline that Derrick was trying to master; the fruit represents the rewards obtained, in the form of postgraduate degrees, scholarships, publications and other legitimate forms of scholarly recognition; the "special guys" refers to the human and intellectual expertise within the department, in the form of research supervisors and mentors; the "quiver of sticks" is representative of the tools, the insights, the gestures and practices that one needs to acquire, so as to be guided towards gaining access and obtaining the "fruits." Derrick draws an analogy between the Baobab tree and his academic journey to indicate what he found lacking in the postgraduate space. He sketches the complexities around negotiating gate-keeper relationships and how these impacts feelings of self-worth, legitimacy, and the struggle to develop an authentic "voice." Derrick thus finds himself confronted with the reality of "the way we do things around here" (Jansen 2004, 1).

Derrick's narrative helps us to grapple with the workings of the "coloniality of Being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007) within HWUs, and builds on the outcomes of the 2015 Fallist Movement in South Africa's HE institutions. Using this base, "coloniality-of-Being" becomes a lens for understanding how race, as a marker of difference, can be used to denote a hierarchy of humanness. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2022a, 3:05-3:15) drives this point home when he states: "social classification of the human population, racial hierarchising, and gendering, these three constitute the colonisation of Being." He argues further that this "social pyramid" was used to justify slavery and impose non-human traits on those designated as other. The same principle, he adds applies to the colonialisation of knowledge, where those deemed "sub-human" were viewed as possessing only "primitive knowledge…which does not contribute to society…so you delegitimate, you disqualify that knowledge, while maintaining the knowledge of those at the top" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022a, 5:23-5:37). To sustain such "colonial matrices of power… you need to develop institutions, systems, and structures to govern that" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2022a, 5:54-5:57). The need to address the current retention of "institutions, systems and structures" that serve to uphold the colonial imperative within the South African HE landscape, is a plea made by all the decolonial scholarship drawn on in this article. Derrick's narrative,

thus offers the opportunity of raising awareness of both the covert and overt workings of coloniality, and helps us to focus on the need to rethink the nature of the relationship that can, and perhaps should be cultivated between academic staff and their students, particularly around mentorship.

Tuliswa is a black female postgraduate tutor on our academic literacies course, and a recipient of an equity development scholarship that supports aspiring black academics. She criticises the traditional teaching space she's been exposed to, for not permitting entry to *other* voices and experiences from the outside, calling for a more holistic and humanising space: She states:

> "A lot of…lecturers…don't allow that space - they are really rigid in 'I'm a teacher, you are the student, all we can speak about is academics.' Nothing else matters."

For black students having to confront feeling out of place in HWUs, the absence of more supportive and nurturing teaching and learning relationships can contribute to feelings of isolation and despair, representative of a "colonised Dasein" (Heidegger 1962 cited in Maldonado-Torres 2007, 251) who lacks a sense of authentic "Being-in-the-world."

Of course, this is not to say that black tutors and postgraduates have no recourse to have their concerns addressed within formal university structures. Many universities have teaching and learning centres offering classroom support and inclusive facilitation training. For issues related to instances of discrimination, harassment, and bullying, students and staff can approach their university's equity and transformation offices (e.g., Office for Inclusivity and Change at UCT), for assistance and guidance. In our tutors' cases, given the degree of trust established with them over a few years of working together, they felt relatively comfortable raising highly sensitive issues during our workshops. Bringing those concerns before formal university structures, however, would mean that individual tutors would publicly be challenging what they deemed to be unfair practices within the university space, and so reporting cases, presented too great a risk (see for example, Saunderson and Carolissen's [2025] insights into some of the psychological costs of racial profiling and microaggressions encountered by black male students at an HWU; see also Heller's [2023] commentary on the enduring impact of racism in South African universities). One can thus assume that there are many instances of discrimination that black tutors *do not* report to the relevant institutional structures, out of fear of victimisation.

Carrying the burden of blackness in HWU's

Often, the silencing of black postgraduate students' voices can also take on a degree of malice, relative to the degree of difference that they represent in the HWU space. Such an emphasis on difference constitutes a form of violence that many black students, who lack the accepted forms of capital valued by HWUs (such as having attended previously white/ex-Model C schools), experience (see Nomdo 2015; Bazana and Mogotsi 2017). Entering HWUs without such capital, often evokes feelings of imposterism, "the feeling that you are not as qualified or as smart as the people surrounding you, even though it is almost certainly not the case" (Abdelaal 2020, 62). The lack of access to dominant institutional discourses, configures the black student as intellectually, emotionally, and psychology deficient when measured against white student achievement. Amy, a Writing Centre consultant who comes from a working-class coloured township setting, transferred from a historically black university (HBU) to pursue postgraduate studies in the sciences. She states of the shift into the HWU space:

> "I actually wanted to quit, because some of my lecturers tortured me. Some of them…very racist… I felt like they were attacking me directly. I was the only coloured in my group, and I was called to the front of my class…every day for a week to answer questions…that was me being bullied."

Similarly, Busi, who also worked alongside Amy as a Writing Centre Consultant, relayed her experience of humiliation as a new black postgraduate student who was directly measured against her peers by the course lecturer. The incident involved submitting a piece of writing for evaluation and then being divided into groups of five, with each student receiving a number from 1 to 5 to facilitate the critique. She states:

> "It really crushed me…whoever was number one in your group was the strongest writer… number five, who was like, 'you don't know how to write.' I was number four…the lecturer literally told us, 'if you are number four or number five, you can't write. You don't know what you're doing, and the reason you are in the group is basically to complete the group…you literally have no contribution'…you literally felt like… You had no role to play."

Such markers of emotional and psychological violence work to reinforce particular stereotypes of blackness, thereby working towards consolidating the boundaries of *necessary* and *legitimate* exclusions that are needed to maintain intellectual integrity, and by extension, the status quo of the colonialities of power, being, and knowledge. Maldonado-Torres' (2007, 251-252) reconfiguration of the Cartesian formulation, namely "I think (others do not think, or do not think properly), therefore I am (others are-not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable)," signals the powerlessness of Busi's "colonized Dasein," captured above.

Sharon, a PhD student who worked as a tutor and a Writing Centre consultant, also relays her transition into the HWU academic space:

> "I was just so, so unhappy… in the…department… I would get physically ill when I would go to campus… I would throw up and go home. And I left and went to…teach English in Korea for a year. And I was like…I'm never going to do academia again…I'm done."

It is significant that many black students experience trauma as part of their transitions into academia. In Sharon and Tuliswa's cases, each took a leave of absence from university to recoup, and to rekindle their sense of "Being" before re-embarking on their postgraduate journeys. Bazana and Mogotsi (2017, 4) note in this regard that "If the institutional culture in HWI is unwelcoming of black culture and the identity of black students, then it continues to reproduce the discourses of an "inferior black" and an "ideal white"."

What stands out in all the tutors' cases reported on here, is that the journey to reclaiming a sense of self-worth occurred through increasing not only physical and intellectual labour, but also emotional labour, since academic credentials on their own (which, ironically, is the basis of tutors' employment) were not enough to overcome gate-keeping practices (see Maluleka 2024, 67-68). Amy's response to feeling bullied was to prove her worth and justify her presence. She states:

> "I decided that I'm not going to let that get to me because I made so many sacrifices…just to get to the point where I can say, 'Okay, I'm finally reaching my dream.' I decided then to prepare for my lectures so that when they call me up to the front, I will gladly go and answer the questions...that was me trying to get through this whole new environment."

Over and above working harder to prove their worth, the black tutors in this study also had to make concerted efforts to humanise the classroom by putting themselves forward as agents of change. As change agents, they sought to disrupt the flow of traditional teaching and consulting norms, and introduced more personalised, empathetic practices within their workspaces, aimed at fostering dialogue and relationship-building. By role modelling other ways of "Being," they gave permission to their students to do the same, thereby resisting the call for assimilating into a "colonised Dasein" (Heidegger 1962). Tuliswa's determination to move away from the rigidity of the lecturing relationships that she was exposed to, is a case in point. She states:

> "You get told you are heard and then get silenced at the same time. And I think for me, it was trying to fight that…and push back on these old practices, while teaching my students that you still have to play the game of academics if you want to survive… This year into Anthropology tutoring…I started the semester by saying, 'Hi, this is me. This is [how] I'm going to approach teaching...It's going to be very different to what you've had before. It might not sit well with all of

> you, and if not, understand that it's a learning journey for me, as much as it is for you. Let's learn from one another. Let's create a space where we are sharing.'"

In Busi's case, she used her experience of being told that she would not make it in science because she could not write, as an opportunity to work extra hard and to become employed as a Writing Centre consultant with a humanising mission:

> "So I took that job as a way of going against this thing, of being told over and over again that I wasn't good enough as an academic writer and that I wasn't going to make it as an academic, right? And it was also a way for me to help people like myself."

Such resilience goes hand in hand with creating new possibilities for "Being-in-the-world," but remains something in process, since compromises with established practices and ways of being, still need to be maintained.

Such compromises set off a simultaneous mode of "Being" and "non-Being" (Heidegger 1962), constituting a form of "double consciousness" that ushers in a liminal mode of existence in which black tutors often shoulder the blame for being victims (Tran 2023, 187; 190). Tran's (2023) work on decoloniality locates DuBois' framework of "Double consciousness" as the dilemma of possessing two contradictory identities, which translates as a disjuncture between the reality of the oppressed and the reality of the oppressor. Within this state of disjuncture, there is a clash between the ways marginalised individuals value their sense of worth and how dominant others undervalue it (Tran 2023, 184). Sharon relates this contested sense of "Being" by referring to herself as:

> "…people who felt that they were…in this grey area and…have to choose…because you couldn't just exist as a person."

A "coloniality of Being" perspective thus signals that the need for change in dominant spaces, falls on the marginalised, while the actual spaces remain intact (Tran 2023, 187). This reproduces coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 244).

The vexed problem of "coloniality of being": Where to from here?

It is clear that deeply entrenched systemic barriers to meaningful transformation (Mutongoza 2025, 1) remain intact and are reinforced by a "Eurocentric hegemony" in which "Universities continue to take a reactive stance on racism as opposed to being proactive" (Fatyela 2022; see also Heller 2023 in this regard). The colonial matrices within the academic pipelines at HWU's, therefore, need to be confronted earnestly to ensure the "deep transformation" that Luescher et al (2023) hint at, but which as yet has not materialised.

Positive steps towards addressing the barriers represented within the academic pipeline, have been made, most notably through interventions such as the New Generation of Academics Programme (NGAP), which prepares future academics (of which 80% of the intake must be individuals of colour) over a six-year period, for academia in SA. However, the limited number of participants, coupled with the challenges of administering and implementing nGAP in participating universities (Department of Higher Education and Training 2023, 3-5), remain a concern. Therefore, more robust, flexible, and short-term interventions are needed to meet the needs of large sectors of postgraduate tutors. A case in point of this type of short-term induction intervention at an institutional level, can be seen in the design of programmes such as the New Academic Practitioners Programme (NAPP), and The Short Course on Teaching for new academics[1]. What we need, therefore, is to use this type of over-arching, cross-cutting model, for tutors, where centring pedagogies of care (Tronto 2010) and discomfort (Boler and Zembylas 2003) becomes integral for creating a more humanising praxis.

This calls for deeper oversight and alignment between departmental, faculty, and centralised institutional tutor development initiatives, with the latter holding the mandate for embedding transformation into tutoring agendas and praxes that include inputs from equity and transformation specialists. This type of tutoring network extends postgraduate support beyond departmental and faculty spaces, and creates a platform for acknowledging the diversity in postgraduate experiences within HE.

In short, we need strong and brave leaders who can inspire meaningful and thoughtful activism. Tuliswa's statement: "I think it's really…only been because I've had one or two moments where I've had other people above me, tell me it's okay to do that, that I've sort of felt comfortable," indicates the very real need for champions in our university leadership structures, to collectively take on the responsibility and accountability of implementing deep transformation.

BRIEF CONCLUDING REMARKS

Systemic racism continues to contribute towards black tutors' feelings of shame, imposterism, and precarity within HWUs' academic pipelines. The desire to be seen, heard, and recognised as someone with an authentic and legitimate sense of "Being-in-the-world," featured strongly in tutors' self-reflective narratives about the academic space.

[1] See UCT and UWC offerings in this regard: https://ched.uct.ac.za/current-aspd-offerings; https://www.uwc.ac.za/study/learning-and-teaching/directorate-of-learning-teaching-and-student-success

The awareness of "Being" and "non-Being-in-the-world" is an outcome of intersecting socio-historical processes. Recognising this, contributes to undoing the rigid colonial matrices of power, knowledge, and "Being" that continue to uphold the assumed homogeneity of the academic pipeline. Alternatively, more flexible pathways with deeply transformative agendas and humanising praxes must be adopted in HE pipelines discourse, together with oversight and accountability tools. This includes incorporating more holistic approaches to tutor training programmes, that extend beyond the foci on technical skills and content knowledge.

The following question was posed to the articles in this special edition: "How far have we come as a HE sector after three decades of democracy?" The simple answer is that we have by no means come far enough. The reflective narratives of the black tutors in this study reveal a reality in which the capacity for change we often speak and write about *must* translate into actual change on the ground. Transformative apparatuses such as those alluded to above, may well be in operation, but these need to be championed to raise their status and visibility. The challenge to decolonise HE systems, therefore, remains the same. All that needs to change is the degree of accountability imposed by government on HE institutions, the adoption of a particular mindset, and the extent of the effort that needs to be put into making such changes a reality.

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