

The personal is political (and institutional): The marginalisation of Black women in academia

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1 Introduction

‘... they [senior colleagues of color] refused to engage in unforgivable silences that would have perpetuated a presumption that the average white male professor’s experiences are the same as those of women of color. They exposed for their dean the reality that we – female faculty of color – do not function in a color- and gender-blind profession and that we who are female and colored are never presumed competent.’

Angela Onwuachi-Willig, ‘Silence of the Lambs’¹

‘We spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough, which is bad enough, but then we turn around and either praise or excuse men for the same reasons.’

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie²

The higher education system inherited from the apartheid regime ‘was designed, in the main, to reproduce, through teaching and research, white and male privilege and black and female subordination in all spheres of society.’³ In 1993, higher education institutions mirrored the

1 Y Niemann ‘Lessons from the experiences of women of color working in academia’ in G Gutiérrez y Muhs, Y Niemann, C González & A Harris (eds) *Presumed incompetent* (2012) 446.

2 C Adichie *We should all be feminists* (2014).

3 S Badat ‘Transforming South African higher education, 1990-2003: Goals, policy initiatives and critical challenges and issues’ (2004) *National policy and a regional response in South African higher education* 4.

racial and sexist institutionalisation of apartheid policy: The majority of women academics were employed below the position of junior lecturer while less than three per cent advanced to the position of professor at some historically white universities.⁴ Black people 'were conspicuously absent or under-represented and Black women in particular were grossly under-represented.'⁵ Since then, the number of women academics in the South African higher education sector, including law schools has steadily increased.⁶ There has also been a rise in the appointment of women as vice chancellors, rectors, deans, and heads of department.⁷ However, upon closer scrutiny of the statistics, it is clear that higher education continues to struggle with gender imbalances. The majority of women remain stuck at lecturer level or below.⁸ In 2018, a total of 3125 professors were employed across higher education institutions: Men constituted 70 per cent of this number, while women were at a meagre 30 per cent.⁹ Currently, South Africa has 26 higher education institutions: only six are led by women as vice chancellors and principal.¹⁰

Although all women are potential victims of sexism in the higher education landscape, for Black women academics, the struggle is more complex and intersectional: They have to navigate a space in which they encounter 'racism, misrecognition, and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures.'¹¹

In this chapter, I explore the experiences of Black emerging and senior women in South African academia. The chapter is structured into five parts: Following this Introduction, Section 2 provides the theoretical framework. In part 3, I focus on the experiences of Black emerging and senior women academics in the South African higher education sector. Section 4 establishes that South African academia constitutes a deeply alienating space for Black women. Part 5 provides the Conclusion.

4 L Naicker 'The journey of South African women academics with a particular focus on women academics in theological education' (2013) 39 *Studia Hist. Ecc.* 326.

5 As above.

6 M Hlatshwayo & B Ngcobo 'Are we there yet? An intersectional take on black women academics' experiences in a South African university' (2023) *Journal of Education* 172.

7 Council on Higher Education (CHE) 'Vital Stats Public and Private Higher Education' (2022) 61-82.

8 Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo (n 6) 172.

9 Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo (n 6) 172.

10 Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo (n 6) 170.

11 Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo (n 6) 171.

2 Theoretical framework

I locate this chapter mainly in Black feminist thought and African feminist theory. Black feminist thought is predominantly concerned with empowering Black women and promoting social justice for this marginalised group.¹² According to Collins, 'Black feminist theory concentrates on the thoughts and experiences of Black women to find meaning and understand their experiences.'¹³ A prominent feature of Black feminist theory is the notion of intersectionality in terms of which gender is not seen in isolation, but viewed in relation to race, competence, age, and culture, to name but a few.¹⁴ Black feminist thought focuses on how these intersecting identities impact 'power relations and social injustice' of a specific group.¹⁵ Mirza writes:

As Black feminists we are compelled to interrogate the way power, philosophy and identity intersect our lives, and how as women academics we explore our diverse, personified experiences, and deliberately celebrate our individual experiences as Black women academics within a South African perspective.¹⁶

African feminism developed as a rejection of mainstream Western feminism which although rooted in gender politics, ignored issues such as race, class and geographical context.¹⁷ According to Goredema, African feminism centres and validates the experiences of 'women in Africa and of African origin'.¹⁸ The author further describes African feminist theory as a position of 'justice that aims to create a discernible difference between women who were colonised and those who were

12 P Mahabeer, N Nzimande & M Shoba 'Academics of colour: Experiences of emerging black women academics in curriculum studies at a university in South Africa' (2018) 32 *Agenda* 31.

13 PH Collins *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2000) as cited in Mahabeer and others (n 12) 31. See also K Crenshaw *On intersectionality: Essential writings* (2017).

14 PH Collins 'Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas' (2015) *The Annual Review of Sociology* as cited in Mahabeer and others (n 12) 31.

15 As above.

16 H Mirza 'Transcendence over diversity: Black women in the academy' (2006) *Policy futures in education* as cited in Mahabeer and others (n 12) 31.

17 S Tau 'We are not fully citizens of our universities: African women leaders, non-belonging and construction of new cultures and citizenships in South African higher education (2023) *Pan – African Conversations* 154.

18 R Goredema 'African feminism: The African woman's struggle for identity' (2010) 1 *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 34.

deemed the colonisers.’¹⁹ Although one could argue that Black feminist thought and African feminism share similarities such as a focus on the liberation of Black women, these theories are not synonymous. Amina Mama states the following:

The use of the term ‘African’ in ‘African feminism’ has multiple philosophical and political ancestries, but these share the historical identification with the continent of Africa, and serve to mark some feminist thought as African and therefore not the same as feminist thought rooted in, say, Asia or the Americas. It also is a subjective, creative cultural identification with the cause of African liberation.²⁰

For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the marginalisation of Black women in South African academia through the lense of Black feminist thought and African feminism. In line with African feminist thought, I define Black women as all groups that share a history of colonial oppression. So-called Coloured and Indian women are therefore included in this definition.

I also draw on ‘Curriculum transformation framework: Reimagining curricula for a just university in a vibrant democracy’, a document focusing on the meaning and realisation of curriculum transformation at the University of Pretoria.²¹

Jansen proposes that we understand curriculum not only as a particular course syllabus, but as an institution.²² He defines the concept as follows:

[Curriculum] is not only the text inscribed in the course syllabus for a particular qualification, but an understanding of knowledge encoded in the dominant beliefs, values, and behaviours deeply embedded in all aspects of institutional life.²³

19 As above.

20 A Mama ‘African feminist thought’ (2020) *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, African History* 3.

21 Hereafter referred to as the ‘UP Curriculum Transformation Framework’. This framework evolved out of *lekgotla* between the management of the University of Pretoria and student societies in March 2016. Three work streams on respectively language policy, institutional culture and curriculum transformation were established after the *lekgotla*. See University of Pretoria, Office of the Vice Principle: Academic ‘Curriculum transformation framework: Reimagining curricula for a just university in a vibrant democracy.’

22 J Jansen *Knowledge in the blood: Confronting race and the apartheid past* (2009) 172.

23 As above.

In line with Jansen's understanding above, the UP Curriculum Transformation Framework does not provide a narrow definition of curriculum transformation but rather incorporates four drivers which guide the process on curriculum transformation. These drivers are firstly a '[r]esponsiveness to social context; secondly '[e]pistemological diversity'; thirdly '[r]enewal of pedagogy and classroom practices' [and] fourthly, '[a]n institutional culture of openness and critical reflection.'²⁴

The first driver envisages ,among other things, that teaching is linked to 'current affairs and cutting edge research' which includes interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary research.²⁵ Drawing on the notion of intersectionality in terms of Black feminist discourse, the first driver also calls for the critical examination of the 'role of race, socio-economic class, gender, sexuality, culture, nationality, age and other categories of identification and disadvantage within disciplines.'²⁶

Epistemological diversity (the second driver), similar to African feminist thought, focuses on 'bringing marginalised groups, experiences, knowledges and worldviews emanating from Africa and the Global South to the centre of the curriculum.'²⁷

The third driver ' involves continuously rethinking and re- evaluating the ways in which we learn and teach.'²⁸ The fourth driver deals with the so-called 'hidden curriculum'. In this regard, the Curriculum Transformation Framework is cognisant of the fact that a 'hidden curriculum can be found in the spaces, symbols, narratives and embedded practices that constitute the university and, in the diversity, or lack thereof, of the staff and student cohort.'²⁹ A transforming curriculum requires that these practises which form part of the country's 'legacy of discrimination', are exposed and resisted.³⁰

Based on the four drivers, it is clear that curriculum transformation extends beyond the syllabi that is taught to students. It requires reflection on how we teach as well as an interrogation of the knowledges that are at the forefront of our teaching and research. Furthermore, curriculum

24 UP Curriculum Transformation Framework 2.

25 As above 2-3.

26 As above 3.

27 As above 3.

28 As above 4.

29 As above 5.

30 As above.

transformation requires a confrontation with the persisting practices of discrimination found in the 'hidden curriculum'.

The four drivers will be discussed in more detail throughout the chapter.

3 The experiences of Black emerging and senior woman academics

3.1 The use of personal narratives as research approach and methodology

In terms of the UP Curriculum Transformation Framework, '[r]etrieving and foregrounding historically and presently marginalised narratives, voices and subjugated knowledges, not only as process of nostalgia, but as creating *new forms of telling*, being and becoming' is central to curriculum transformation.³¹ Furthermore, epistemological diversity in terms of the latter framework includes the excavation of 'African,... knowledges and practices that have been devalued and marginalised and, in some cases, decimated and distorted by US and European centrism and epistemic racism and sexism.'³²

Arya points out that using personal narratives displays the 'integrity of lived experiences ... in the construction of narratives.'³³ According to Harris and Gonzalez, the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' emphasises the importance of personal stories from marginalised groups, such as [Black] women who are often rendered voiceless in society.³⁴ Feminists have drawn on this slogan to assert that 'personal stories are symptomatic of a larger structural problem and thus well placed to facilitate broader political discussion.'³⁵ Amina Mama urges us to conceptualise the notion of 'thinking' as something that

31 As above 2. Italics my emphasis.

32 As above 3.

33 R Arya 'Black feminism in the academy' (2012) 31 *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* as cited in Mahabeer and others (n 12) 31.

34 G Gutiérrez y Muhs, Y Niemann, C González & A Harris (eds) *Presumed Incompetent* (2012) as cited in B Magoqwana, Q Maqabuka & M Tshoedi 'Forced to care at the neoliberal university: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by black women academics in the South African University' (2019) 50 *South African Review of Sociology* 9.

35 As above.

transcends ‘intellectual discourses.’³⁶ The author argues that thought can be communicated through a plethora of mediums, including the ‘performance arts, visual culture, fashion and style, and bodily expression ...’³⁷ Based on the latter, it is therefore safe to argue that the use of personal narratives is a central tenet of African feminist thought.

The use of personal narratives is not often used in legal research but should not be regarded as insignificant or inferior in legal academic discourse. In this regard, the use of personal narratives is a form of autoethnography located under the paradigm of qualitative research.³⁸ Autoethnography is a research approach that encapsulates the author’s personal story and the ‘larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story.’³⁹ As a methodology, autoethnography ‘narrates the ‘ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto) while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context where self-experience occurs.’⁴⁰

3.2 Personal experiences mirroring larger systemic issues in academia

My personal experience in academia stems from my positionality as a ‘Coloured’ female academic in a law faculty and former editor of a law journal. In my fifteen plus years as an academic, I have developed the proverbial ‘thick skin’ because of racism and sexism inflicted on me from both students and colleagues. Although I made my concerns known at the faculty, I never entertained the idea of using my experience as potential research. However, it was the constant harassment by authors in my role as editor which provided the impetus for this chapter: My competence had frequently been called into question by white and Black male authors as well as white women: I have been asked whether I have a ‘proper system in place’ to run the journal; another author, after informing me that he,

36 Mama (n 20) 2.

37 As above.

38 N Govender, N Khumalo & T Agbede ‘Sisterhood in academia: Storying our experiences in higher education’ (2024) 6 *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies* 7.

39 JW Creswell & CN Poth *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (2013) as cited in Govender and others (n38) 7.

40 NK Denzin ‘Performing (auto) ethnography politically’ (2023) 25 *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* as cited in Govender and others (n 38) 8.

himself was an editor, implied that I did not properly understand the concept of 'double blind peer-review' and proceeded to explain it to me in a highly paternalistic and condescending manner. Some interactions with male colleagues had bordered on outright bullying: I was told by one author that I was 'driving the journal into the ground' and compromising the integrity of a 'once esteemed journal.' Another author, after being confronted by me for the disrespectful tone of his email, responded as follows: 'The problem is, you think too much of yourself.' White women, for the most part, avoided direct confrontation, but requested faculty management to 'intervene' and 'investigate' when they were unhappy about the duration of the review process over which I had no control. I described only some of the interactions that took place, but a myriad of similar instances occurred during my five-year tenure as editor.

Common reactions to my experience are often the following: 'You are complaining about something that happens to everyone, no matter their race or gender' or 'These are mere personality clashes, everyone experiences these in the workplace.' The reviewers of this chapter criticised it for being 'riddled with personal anecdotes.' (The reviewers disregarded the fact that the use of personal narratives is located within feminist theory and regarded as a valid research approach and methodology.)

However, as I delved deeper into feminist discourse, I realised that my experiences are not unique, but endemic in larger academia and symptomatic of the broader issues of sexism, racism, misogyny and patriarchy. For example, studies conducted at various higher learning institutions, show that Black emerging women scholars share very similar experiences: They narrate that they feel 'invisible, voiceless [and] undermined,' 'experience racial and patriarchal oppression' and must constantly prove their worthiness to do the job.⁴¹ Black women academics in leadership positions are not exempt from the latter experiences. tau conducted a study to explore the experiences of Black female directors, deans and vice chancellors at various South African universities.⁴² Some participants reported feeling 'invisible' in a 'very masculine space'.⁴³

According to Govender, Khumalo and Agbede, Black women academics face several limitations, including discrimination, bullying

41 Mahabeer and others (n 12) 30.

42 Tau (n 17) 156.

43 Tau (n 17) 157-158.

and microaggressions.⁴⁴ Microaggressions are ‘subtle acts that demean and discriminate against marginalised groups.’⁴⁵ According to Arya, Black women ‘... have had to experience ‘racial discrimination’ *before* their qualifications were even considered which resulted in them having to work much harder to show their capacity and excellence as academics in relation to their male counterparts.’⁴⁶

The framing of this chapter as being ‘riddled with personal anecdotes’ is therefore a disavowal of the systemic challenges that Black women academics face and displays a form of disrespect towards those who locate their scholarship in Black feminist and African feminist theory. It emanates from a false sense of superiority which regards the use of personal narratives as inferior to ‘historically entrenched narratives and ways of doing.’⁴⁷ Furthermore, it is indicative of the ‘hidden curriculum’ which displays ‘deeply held stereotypes concerning which knowledges and voices count.’⁴⁸ I also view it as an attempt to silence a form of telling that foregrounds the voices of Black women.

4 The university as an alienating space for Black women

Mahabeer, Nzimande and Shoba, drawing on bell hooks and Puwar, report that Black women are often depicted as ‘outsiders’ and ‘space invaders’ in academia.⁴⁹ They are regarded as ‘incompatible’ with the academic space that was originally designed for ‘...[w]hite middle-class males in an imperialist White supremacist and capitalist system.’⁵⁰ Tau explains that subsequent to the establishment of the modern university, higher learning institutions consisted of colleges rooted in patriarchy.⁵¹ The author argues that ‘modern European universities, located in Africa...functioned as spaces to reproduce cultural and social norms.’⁵² As a result, African men were granted exclusive access to these

44 Govender and others (n 38) 1.

45 As above 5.

46 Arya ‘Black feminism in the academy’ (2012) 31 *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* as cited in Mahabeer and others (n 12) 30. Italics my emphasis.

47 UP Curriculum Transformation Framework 5.

48 As above.

49 Mahabeer and others (n 12) 29.

50 As above.

51 Tau (n 17) 145-146.

52 As above.

institutions in order to continue the colonial legacy.⁵³ The European foundation of our universities means that gender is primarily understood in terms of Western epistemology: The body is framed in terms of the binary understanding that male equates to being powerful whilst female indicates the opposite.⁵⁴ Furthermore, societal gender norms infiltrate the academic space. Patriarchy influences how women are perceived in academia. For example, leadership is historically and stereotypically connected with being male.⁵⁵ Black women leaders at higher education institutions have criticised the university as a space which 'wants to ensure that those that fully belong should assimilate and change who they are to fit in.'⁵⁶ Put another way, although Black women gain access to the university, it is a certain *type* of Black woman that is preferred to take up space.⁵⁷ In this regard, Puwar suggests that 'it is certain type of bodies that are tacitly designed as being the natural occupants of specific positions [and that] are deemed as having the right to belong.'⁵⁸ The university as a space is 'politically, historically and conceptually' structured in such a way to 'host a specific kind of character and culture, that establish pre-existing tropes.'⁵⁹ One such trope is that of the 'angry Black woman' which stereotypically categorises Black women as 'hostile, aggressive, overbearing, illogical, ill-tempered and bitter'.⁶⁰ A demure Black woman who does not question (male) authority and who refuses to challenge 'ideas and memories cloaked in 'culture', 'standards' or 'tradition' will assimilate and therefore have a much 'easier' space to navigate. However, a woman opposite from the latter character, will be 'cut down' and 'put in her place' by the patriarchy. Norwood and Jones writes powerfully:

This so-called 'angry Black woman' is the physical embodiment of some of the worst negative stereotypes of Black women-she is out of control, disagreeable,

53 Tau (n 17) 146.

54 Tau (n 17) 163.

55 N Moodley-Diar 2021 'Possible barriers for the advancement of women in their development as academic leaders and managers in higher education: A case study of the Tshwane University of Technology in Gauteng, South Africa' Masters Thesis, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences as cited in Tau (n 17) 149.

56 Tau (n 17) 157-158.

57 Italics my emphasis.

58 N Puwar *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place* (2004) as cited in Tau (n 17) 160.

59 As above.

60 <https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work> (accessed 1 June 2025).

overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared. She will not stay in her 'place.'... Importantly, the 'Angry ... Woman' label is assigned almost exclusively to Black women. The salience of this trope comes from the combination of blackness and non-conforming feminism.⁶¹

Apart from carefully navigating the academic space filled with tropes about the Black body, Black women also have to struggle with their competence being called into question as discussed elsewhere in this chapter. To question the competence of an academic, is not solely about questioning their ability to teach or to perform a specific administrative task (such as editing a journal), it extends to doubting their intellectual work. In this regard, Shirley Tate argues that white supremacist privilege has a significant impact on how the intellectual work of Black women scholars are perceived.⁶² She refers to the racial stereotype that 'only whites can do theory' and to the tendency of white women academics to appropriate the work of Black scholars without acknowledging the latter group.⁶³ Tate writes:

[There has] been a lot of debate in Europe about why is it that feminists in Germany in the UK, all over Europe, really, use intersectionality as a methodology, a heuristic, a theory and never say where it came from. That's an example of white privilege that I am talking about here. So that it completely erases a whole history of Black feminist activism in the United States where that came from and erases the person who was the first person to actually use that word, that concept – Kimberlé Crenshaw [a Black woman] as we know. It becomes the property of whiteness then, because as we know in academic life, theories usually assume to be from white people.⁶⁴

Tate writes from her positionality as a professor based at a Canadian university.⁶⁵ The views she expresses about race and white privilege should therefore be seen within the larger North American and European context. However, that does not mean that the scholarship produced by Black women (in particular), are not viewed as inferior to that of white academics. The latter assumption is, in my view, related to the racial trope that Black people are intellectually inferior to whites which has

61 T Jones & K Norwood 'Aggressive encounters & white fragility: Deconstructing the trope of the angry black woman' (2017) 102 *Iowa Law Review* 2049.

62 S Tate 'The impossibility of black-white feminist allyship: A summary' in S Makoni & C Van Der Merwe (eds) *Decolonial options in higher education: Cracks and fissures* (2025) 145-146.

63 As above.

64 As above.

65 <https://apps.ualberta.ca/directory/person/shirleya> (accessed 1 June 2025).

taken root because of our colonial and apartheid past.⁶⁶ For example, in recent South African history, four academics from the University of Stellenbosch wrote an article titled 'Age- and education-related effects on cognitive functioning in Colored South African women.'⁶⁷ The article was published in a 2019 edition of *Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition*, a peer reviewed, accredited journal, but was later retracted after a public outcry about the racial stereotypes propagated by the article. The Psychological Society of South Africa and the advocacy group, Amandla.mobi wrote open letters to criticise the article.⁶⁸ The latter group called out the article's 'racist ideological underpinnings, flawed methodology, and its reproduction of harmful stereotypes of 'Coloured' women.'⁶⁹ The authors of the now retracted article found that Coloured women are at an 'increased risk... for low cognitive functioning' due to 'a combination

66 In 1903 the South African Native Affairs Commission ('SANAC') was launched, tasked with assessing 'the status and condition of the Natives', including 'their education'. The investigation culminated in the SANAC Report of 1905, a comprehensive historical document pertaining to the status of African affairs. The SANAC Report has been regarded as a blueprint for the creation of the white supremacist state that came to fruition in the Union of South Africa in 1910. In the field of education, the Union secured the services of former Natal Chief Inspector of Native Education, Charles T Loram '...to best ensure implementation of a national education policy upon which a race-based labour aristocracy could be built and sustained.' Loram has been described as an 'inherent racist' who believed that '...whites had to decide what was best for Africans' because they were too '...immature in their stage of civilization.' These views found expression in Loram's 1917 doctoral thesis, *The Education of the South African Native*, a notorious piece of work that would go on to influence the education of blacks for several decades. Loram's philosophy on education was premised on the main idea that blacks would not be allowed to determine the substance and purpose of their education and that whites would therefore need to define the knowledge that blacks would acquire. He attempted to justify this racist and paternalistic ideology by ascribing a specific psychology to blacks which seemingly explained their intellectual inferiority in comparison to whites. In terms of his theory of 'arrested development', black children might show intelligence during early childhood, but their 'intellectual development' became arrested at adolescence. His ideology about the intellectual inferiority of blacks became one of the foundational principles of Bantu education introduced by the apartheid government in 1953. See LE Arendse 'Inequality in the public basic education system: The role of the South African courts in effecting radical transformation' LLD Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2020 Chapter 2.

67 <https://awethu.amandla.mobi/petitions/letter-to-the-editorial-board-of-aging-neuroshychology-and-cognition-1> (accessed 24 May 2025)

68 (n 67) and <https://thoughtleader.co.za/an-open-critique-of-the-nieuwoudt-et-al-2019-study-on-coloured-women/> (accessed 24 May 2025). See also 'An open critique of the Nieuwoudt and colleagues (2019) study on Coloured women' 26 April 2019 <https://www.psyssa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/PsySSA-Statement.pdf> (accessed 1 June 2025).

69 (n 67).

of low education level, poor quality of education and socio-demographic factors such as ethnicity, employment, marital status, income and health status...' ⁷⁰ Although the study was conducted on a small sample size of only 60 Coloured women from the same geographical community, the title, abstract and introduction of the article inferred that the results were applicable to *all* Coloured women. ⁷¹ Critics of the article correctly argues that it 'draws on colonial stereotypes of African women, and 'Coloured' South African women specifically, as intellectually deficient.'⁷²

It is against this background that the contemporary South African university should be understood as a place that was not originally created for women. ⁷³ Coupled with the racist legacy of many South African universities as well as the racial and patriarchal legacy of colonialism and apartheid, ⁷⁴ it is not surprising that Black woman academics often experience the university as an alienating space.

5 Conclusion

How should Black women academics respond to their institutional and intellectual marginalisation as described above?

Firstly, is it worth it to lodge a formal complaint when you are being bullied by a racist and/or sexist colleague, especially when they are in an authoritative position? In her book 'Complaint', Sara Ahmed writes about people who have experienced racism, sexual harassment and bullying within universities. ⁷⁵ Ahmed was employed as a Professor of Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, but resigned at the end of 2016 because of the university's failure to effectively deal with sexual harassment complaints. ⁷⁶ Ahmed writes:

When complaints pass through a formal inquiry, the information is usually contained. Universities will use the language of confidentiality – the need to protect the identities of those who make complaints – to justify that containment, and there is some truth to that. But confidentiality is also misused. It becomes a

70 As above.

71 As above. Italics my emphasis.

72 As above.

73 Tau (n 17)146.

74 See Badat (n 3).

75 M Binyam *The Paris Review* 14 January 2022 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2022/01/14/you-pose-a-problem-a-conversation-with-sara-ahmed/> (accessed 24 May 2025).

76 <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv> (accessed 24 May 2025.)

way of keeping secrets. In my research, a lot of people talked about ending up in a file. The file is put away in a cabinet, and the cabinet is in a room, and the door to the room is locked, and that's that. ...So the file isn't just the papers locked up somewhere in the institution – the file becomes you. *You* have to keep it closed. And that weighs you down, it holds you back. It can be incredibly painful to know what happened, to know what you went through, but still you can't say it, you can't get it out.⁷⁷

The quote above describes the frustrating situation of a complaint that is swept under the rug by an institution. This may happen for several reasons, including protecting the alleged offender or protecting the good name of the university. The university, through policy and a failure to act, can therefore become complicit in alienating an already marginalised group, such as Black women. But it is not the university *per se* that implements policies and decides on a course of action, it is the people employed by the university. Unfortunately, as Ahmed observes:

When people become more secure and better resourced institutionally, they also tend to become more conservative and more willing to do, as I call it, the work of institutional polishing – play by the rules, make the institution look good – because there are benefits attached.⁷⁸

I do not think that Ahmed should be understood as discouraging Black women to lodge formal complaints against their institutions if they have a legitimate dispute. However, she is warning the latter group about what to expect when they do decide on this course of action. Furthermore, she is appealing to the moral conscience of people in positions of power to take these complaints seriously and not to become complacent once they have secured a prestigious title.

Jones and Norwood argue that Black women are constantly in a state of 'decisional moments'.⁷⁹ Remaining silent allows 'the aggressor's stereotypes and embedded assumptions to go unchecked [and] may cause a Black woman to feel as if she is complicit in her own oppression'.⁸⁰ However, speaking out may result in negative consequences related to career and health, among other things.⁸¹ The constant wondering of 'Should I check myself? Am I coming on too strongly? Am I out of line?'

77 Binyam (n 75).

78 As above.

79 Jones & Norwood (n 61) 2057.

80 Jones & Norwood (n 61) 257.

81 Jones & Norwood (n 61) 257, 258.

may lead to an erosion of confidence over time.⁸² Furthermore, several studies have proven that ‘discrimination can lead to emotional distress, depression, anxiety, nightmares, post-traumatic stress disorder, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and stroke.’⁸³ Therefore, all these potential consequences have to be weighed carefully before a Black woman decides on which course of action to take.

Secondly, what should be done in response to the marginalisation of Black women’s intellectual work?

The UP Curriculum Transformation Framework requires that the invisibility of certain groups should be addressed ‘by critically interrogating the composition of students and staff, especially in disciplines historically dominated by one sex, gender, gender identity and/or race, and removing pedagogical and classroom hindrances in the way of diversification.’⁸⁴ Furthermore, the Framework acknowledges ‘the effects of victimhood and false senses of superiority’ emanating from our apartheid past and requires that we ‘innovate instead of being paralysed in relation to that past’ in classroom practices.⁸⁵ In addition, the Framework specifically calls for the excavation of ‘[h]idden histories, including ... the contributions by Black people and women ...’⁸⁶

One way in which to address the marginalisation of Black women’s intellectual work is to prescribe our own research as well as that of other Black scholars (women, if possible] for the courses we teach.⁸⁷ This ensures that disciplines are not dominated by one group’s intellectual work and addresses the gendered power imbalance that may be present in a classroom. In addition, by prescribing our own research, we challenge the false sense of superiority of some male and white female colleagues and model to our students that Black women are not victims but refuse to be paralysed by our apartheid and colonial past.

I conclude this chapter with Shirley Tate’s apt advice to Black women academics:

I used to resist giving students my work because I thought, no, they can find it. Then I thought to myself one day, why am I doing this? This is stupid. It’s

82 Jones & Norwood (n 61) 257.

83 Jones & Norwood (n 61) 258.

84 UP Curriculum Transformation Framework 4.

85 As above.

86 As above.

87 Tate (n 62) 146.

not vanity getting your students to read your work. What you do is produce knowledge that other people read, why can't your students read it?⁸⁸

88 As above.