

Intersectionality, safe spaces and transformation: Is the South African higher education realm capable of and ready for creating extra-binary safe spaces?

Yona Siyongwana

Transformation is a term with a broad meaning but little agreement as to what it is and what it could be. Soudien (2010, 4) attributes this to the complexity that characterises the South African higher education system post-apartheid with regards to the weight that apartheid legacies carry, as well as the complexity of the structural cobweb of social and economic inequalities. These inequalities are posited as being “accompanied and underpinned by a complex skein of discriminatory political and cultural attitudes, dispositions and orientations” (Soudien 2010, 4). Furthermore, it is also deeming the generation of historically conscious responses that acknowledge the gains of the apartheid era and the democratic dispensation necessary while remaining staunchly opposed to a reduction of said dialogue to the defences of the regime and its instances (Soudien 2010, 4). This very complexity lends the transformation discourse within the South African context its contentious nature, despite the general consensus. This broad agreement on the *principles* of transformation is essential, thus, requiring the recognition of the *central* contention.

The call for transformation is not unique to the South African higher education system, nor is it endemic to South Africa. However, it is fluid and dynamic in nature, sculpted to the national needs and histories particularly impacted by phenomena such as imperialism, slavery and colonisation. The South African education system is no exception to this rule, while Soudien (2010, 4) notes the apartheid era’s higher education as the arena for fierce contestation with regards to the creation of progressive and inclusive resistance movements. Multiple bodies, for instance, organisations, individuals and institutions position themselves at the forefront of the anti-apartheid discourse (Soudien 2010, 4). However, it is important to note that transformation ought to be regarded as more than the presence of *particular* numbers as part of a “demographic intervention around the imbalances of race, gender, class and language” (Soudien 2010, 4). Soudien (2010, 4) terms this the representativity approach of transformation or the ideological engagement with domination and emphasis on the distribution of political and economic power, and the execution of social inclusion and exclusion through societal processes as an alternative approach. Instead, in order to

adequately investigate and critique the transformation process, it is crucial that representation and ideology are not distinctly segregated but instead, are understood to be part of an intersectional, holistic understanding of higher education.

The higher education system of the apartheid era was notorious for its highly inefficient and racialised hierarchical institutional order and severe marginalisation of black students. This essential architecture is still very much present in the infancy of the democratic regime. As per the National Commission on Higher Education's (NCHE) 1996 report outlining recommendations for a new higher education policy framework alongside initiatives for schooling, the post-1994 democratic dispensation found itself tasked with reconstructing this order through the establishment of a "single, coordinated, national system of education premised on a programme-based definition of higher education". This definition of higher education is structured to "promote access, and cater for the significant increase in numbers of people seeking to enter higher education" (NCHE 1996).

These elements also coincided with the overarching objectives of social development and economic growth. This report also was the basis for the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE), the intended blueprint for the "radical reform of the higher education system", focussed on the achievement of equity also informed by the 1997 White Paper, one of the most important higher education policy statements of the post-apartheid era, and its vision of promoting "equity of access and fair chances for success", 'eradicating unfair discrimination' and 'redressing past inequality' (WP3 1997, 14, as cited in Soudien 2010). The NPHE also aimed to ensure representativity through progressive staff and student demographic profiles reflective of the South African society pertaining to race and gender, increased participation, success and graduation rates of black students with a particular focus on African and coloured students, as well as the increased representation of Blacks and women in senior academic and administrative positions (Soudien 2010, 7).

However, these measures do not necessarily guarantee transformation, especially when considering the whiteness of senior staff in most South African universities (both historically black and white), and for the most part, blatantly exposes the class cleavage between lecturer and (black) student, often accentuated by differentiated cultural, social and economic experiences.

However, although much of the NPHE was implemented, with a reconstructed architecture evidenced by the reduced number of institutions from 36 to 21, improved access to primary school education in rural communities, and funding and monitoring and evaluating vehicles constructed to build cohesion and compliance, only 5% of black children who enter school in any one year graduate in comparison to 60% of white children (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005; Soudien 2010, 9–10). Furthermore, African student populations are underrepresented in higher education, and even more so in universities, with lowered access to secondary school education also serving as an obstacle.

This glaring disparity highlights the elephant in the policy room – student success and access at university – and how certain elements of civil society are left to atrophy despite a lauded policy framework and deep insight into the concepts of inclusion and exclusion, and the workings and redress of discrimination. Despite the high enrolment volumes, the value of schooling is very much in question in light of the differential distribution of educational quality in the context of the “skewed revolution” of access that characterises the migration of previously excluded groups to formerly white, coloured and Indian communities and schools, leaving more often than not the poorer and vulnerable (marginalised) societal demographics behind, bringing about a distinct differential to their higher education experience.

The transformation agenda pertaining to black female academics, albeit legislatively sanctioned, is often hindered by the academic space, characterised by white, middle-class cisgenderism which does not align with the realities with which this specific group identifies. This usually results in intersectional oppression which in some cases may be expressed in exclusionary organisational culture and erasure. The following section seeks to discuss this erasure within the African context.

The erasure of the black female academic

The narrative of the exclusion of black women from spaces of an academic or educational nature is one not particularly foreign to the African continent. In actual fact, it is one seemingly endemic not only to the continent but to the African diaspora. Characterised particularly by the use of female labour in the domicile context, black women are often excluded from gaining access into educational or academic spaces, hindering them from

actualising their capacities, as well as developing their skill sets to fluidly capacitate their integration into an ever-changing global society. This, in conjunction with the vulnerabilities to risk factors, such as race, class, gender, poor health and the perpetual cycles of poverty and crime, exacerbate the societal ills that black women face, as compounded by the coinciding and inseparable identities of gender and race which accentuate and qualify the black woman's navigation through her respective reality.

However, it would be naïve to assume that the challenges women face by virtue of their exclusion from the academic environment are solely the property of those on the outside. Butler-Adam (2015, 1) notes four fundamental causes of the story of female scholars' exclusion with reference to the fields of Mathematics and Science, namely a glaring gender-based disparity in access to education itself, the ghost of inadequate teaching methods inconsiderate of gender parity, collapsing institutional structures incapable of supporting women, as well as remnants of (c)overt discrimination in academia.

Black female academics find themselves on the perpetual backfoot, with reference to the matrix of domination particularly sustained by the patriarchal order. Lomax (2015) notes this as the collision of the academic industrial complex, sexism and black lives which do not matter, whereby vulnerabilities such as race, gender and class profiling, unequal and often inadequate access to education, employment discrimination, unequal pay and increased punishment levels in the academic environment are rife. The matrix of domination, which speaks about the fluid, intersectional nature of oppressions premised on constructs, such as gender, race and class, which permeates through the spaces that black women access, marginalising their experiences and effectively excluding them. This is true of the academic-institutional space. The pattern of underrepresentation is not novel to the black female academic and does not necessarily stick to the norm of the heteronormative, transcending into invalidating the perspectives of queer female bodies functioning in this sphere.

Heleta (2016) notes some epistemic violence associated with current institutional, research and curriculum-based norms, especially within the higher education system. This violence does not manifest in a physical manner, albeit an occurrence. Instead, this violence is mechanical and systematic, thus, giving it an air of discreetness, as it lurks in the shadows, suffocating the black female existing and functioning within the system, and invalidating their experience and identity within it.

Unfortunately, this ultimately results in the erasure of the black female academic, not only in their extra-academic lives but also within the academic-institutional space. One ought also to note that the call for decolonisation within the higher education system is not necessarily one to be restricted to overturning the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Instead, it also ought to be considered as an overarching transformative call for access, legitimacy, representation, and visibility, not solely within the historical and lingual contexts but also within the personal wherein audiences previously excluded have a voice and can develop the agency they have been deprived of to truly engage the spaces they wish to, and in the same vein, transform them to spaces of progressive, dynamic and vibrant engagement.

The erasure and neglect of bodies that fall out of the norm is a reality known all too well by the LGBTQIAP+ community, one which is often marginalised and sidelined. This community often finds itself having to navigate the heterosexual space that higher education characterises itself to be, often at risk of being abused, exploited and endangered due to their gender identities and/or sexual orientations, while these violations are compounded by classism, sexism and racism. The following section seeks to investigate how queer bodies function in heteronormative higher education environments while also seeking to deconstruct these same ecologies, using student movements as their primary means of engagement and resistance in the #FeesMustFall era.

Disrupting the norm – the LGBTQIAP+ story

In the post-Rhodes Must Fall era, decolonisation has become a discourse that has generated much anxiety and excitement. Kessi (2018, 101) attributes this to a fervent and urgent need for South Africa to define itself as a society, as well as locate itself within the global environment with the university as the locus in the post-apartheid era. As such, noting the university as a medium to access global civilisation, which possesses coloniality as its foundation, decolonisation seeks to rid this institution of this quality. This, according to Kessi (2018, 101–2), can only be achieved through the development of an approach more sensitive to apartheid and colonial legacies, and subsequently the encouragement of a shift in attitudes, mindsets, institutional systems, and structural changes at micro and macro levels, moving the transformation agenda beyond demographic change brought about by the need for the redress of apartheid inequalities in historically white institutions (HWI) through employment

equity and affirmative action policies.

The university environment, often viewed as a safe space, is not so for marginalised groups such as black women and non-conforming gendered identities and sexual orientations, forming part of a critique of the establishment as a space for discrimination due to its often “racialised, hetero-patriarchal, middle-class and Euro-American” patterns of behaviour (Sennett *et. al.* 2003; Walker 2005; Woods 2001, as cited in Kessi 2018, 101–2), and similarly, fertile ground for the germination of resistance movements, such as Fees Must Fall, where the narrative of black pain is an illustration by student activists of the critical need for change and the need for spaces of belonging while bringing issues often sidelined in higher education to the forefront (Ndebele 2016; Matandela 2015, as cited in Kessi 2018, 101–2).

The development of student movements also depicts a need for the university establishment to urgently move away from colonial and apartheid policies that are still prevalent in the space in the form of the intersectional regulation of the sexual and racial, translating into the historical erasure of LGBT bodies and women from “histories of black revolutionary thought” and their reception of exclusionary practices and denial of specific need catering (Davies 2014; Mwikya 2014; Hames 2007, McKinney 2005; Msibi 2013, as cited in Kessi 2018).

Bennett (2005, 18) also alludes to “policy richness” within the academy, where the nuanced needs of queer bodies are left hanging and are sandwiched into the binary where relationships and rites of passage occur within a heterosexist context, and do not allow room for extra-binary rules of engagement due to a policy drought in terms of sexual orientation. These experiences are also compounded by the inability to raise awareness of sexual diversity and tolerance and acceptance thereof due to a lack of support from academics in senior positions who are seldom familiar with intersectionality, its dimensions and general feminist discourse, serving as an intersectional and complex understanding through which the decolonial agenda can be forwarded.

However, this decolonial agenda can only be fleshed out when understandings of the historical, cultural and social contexts that compose institutional DNA generate substantive evidence of the micro- and macro-adjustments that go beyond the numbers question, and

instead, seek to address institutional practices and their associated values, beliefs and principles that perpetuate institutional racist culture.

The shift from transformation to decolonisation allowed for black female and LGBTQIAP+ students to locate and identify with themselves in a manner that made sense to them, especially when functioning in an HWI. The psychological element that is often triggered by systemic violence through misrecognition was for students a context that was easily identifiable through student movements, such as Rhodes Must Fall, allowing for identity reconstruction as “other” and an understanding of the narratives that they wish to create. This was most poignant for black students who are often viewed as the bodies never meant to be, in a constant state of “gratitude” for occupying the university space, and finding themselves having to navigate a system that “undervalues their identities, knowledges and capabilities” (Kessi 2018, 107). This is a glaringly evident display of the disjuncture between the expectation of a safe space and the realities that students endure.

The violently white, cisheterosexual, middle-class environment that epitomises the university environment is often the sunken place that trans-individuals find themselves in. Often invisible and without the proper lexicon in which to grasp their experiences, they struggle to legitimise their position on the institutional totem pole where cisgenderism is the dominant culture (Seelman 2014). This space, under a decolonial microscope, ought to be observed through how knowledge, identity formation and institutional culture interact to either expand or suppress the liberties of the student populace, dimensions that Kessi posits as “significant dimensions of the decolonize imperative” (Kessi 2018, 112). This erasure further extends to curriculum content, a vital component of the university career. Formby (2017, 8) notes sentiments of inadequate or absent representation of LGBT matters in the curriculum in the United Kingdom, while a few feel comfortable to discuss these subjects in class (also see Ellis 2009, National Union of Students 2014).

In the South African context, the education system is viewed to need collaborative content, generated by both scholars and educators alike, enabling open and frank dialogue about sexuality, gender identity and sexual orientation. However, this may be stifled by the educators’ own attitudes pervaded by religion and culture, which, in the case of some Life Orientation educators interviewed by Nell and Shapiro, leads to the exclusion of this topic despite the availability of learning materials, and in the case of scholars in township schools,

a more judgmental attitude toward queer relationships, outcomes of a conservative and traditional upbringing where “a patriarchal culture of male dominance and machismo dominate”. Despite these obstacles, though, the societal landscape is slowly on the move, with civil society playing a larger role in LGBT activism and the generation of a general consciousness of LGBT matters. However, it is time for the dialogue to progress and become an open and inclusive engagement for all, as to encourage greater diversity, inclusivity and tolerance of non-conforming identities across races and genders and deconstruct present structures that seek to suppress as opposed to expand and create a truly safe, transparent and vibrant university space.

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