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Ageism and gatekeeping: My experiences as an early career academic at a historically black university in South Africa

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Abstract

In 2019, senior black academics wrote about their experiences as members of faculty at historically white universities (see Khunou, et al., 2019). These experiences were reflective of the authors' encounters with the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and neoliberal capitalism. However, often experiences of academics from historically black universities (HBUs), especially early career academics (ECA), are marginalised and excluded. Using intersectionality and Nat Nakasa's 'native of nowhere' as theoretical lenses and an autoethnographic reflexivity approach as the methodological approach, I narrate my encounters with ageism and gatekeeping at a HBU as a New Generation of Academics Programme academic. I argue that the intersectionality between ageism and gatekeeping made me feel like a *native of nowhere*. I equally conclude that moving forward there is a need to foster a sense of belonging among ECAs through enacting decolonial love. This requires that senior (black) academics not to perpetuate similar violent experiences they endured. This way, ECAs can become *natives of somewhere* within the university.

Keywords: ageism, early career academics, gatekeeping, higher education, New Generation of Academics Programme, South Africa.

Introduction

The award-winning edited volume, *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou, et al., 2019), is a collection of painful narrated experiences of some senior black academics at historically white universities (HWUs) in post-apartheid South Africa. These are institutions that Malaika wa Azania (2020) describes as 'corridors of death' because often both black academics and students 'struggle to exist' in these institutions. This struggle is as a result of their encounters with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, neoliberal capitalism, as well as a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix that continue to characterise the South African

academy. As such, they often have to deal with subtle and overt racism, harassment, discrimination, white privilege, cognitive, epistemic, existential, and ontological violence, and alienating and marginalising curricula, institutional culture, and others (Hlatshwayo, 2020). This has resulted in them feeling as though they are "natives of nowhere"[1], who are primitive, inferior, irrational, and black (Kumalo, 2018; Maluleka, 2021b). One of these senior academics, Khoza-Shangase (2019: 42), has since pronounced that she now suffers from 'intellectual and emotional toxicity'. She writes:

> I have diagnosed myself as suffering from intellectual and emotional toxicity induced by racism, harassment, discrimination, and white privilege within the academy. Toxicity is defined as the degree to which a substance can damage an organism or the degree to which it can be poisonous (Campbell, 2007). In audiology, my field of practice and research, there is a phenomenon referred to as ototoxicity. Ototoxicity is the property of being toxic to the ear. This form of toxicity is commonly medication-induced, can be predictable but not always preventable, but can be identified, monitored, and managed to varying degrees of success. Imagine I, as a black female academic, with its culture, systems, and policies—this substance. My journey through higher education, through a black female student, to an Associate Professor in a historically white university, resonates and mirrors this phenomenon of toxicity exceptionally well. (Khoza-Shangase, 2019: 42)

Although this edited volume is timely, it is also limited. Its limitation stems from the fact that it is silent on the experiences of black senior and early career academics (ECAs) based at historically black universities (HBUs) in post-apartheid South Africa. However, this limitation can also be seen as an opportunity for those black senior academics and ECAs like myself who have either worked or studied at an HBU, to narrate their own experiences of that part of the South African academy. This is important because in post-apartheid South Africa there seems to be a perception or a tendency to refer to the 'academy' as comprising of HWUs only. Therefore, with this paper, I intend to contribute to an emergent body of work that seeks to archive experiences of black academics with and of the academy in post-apartheid South Africa and beyond, irrespective of which institution they belong to or affiliate with. I begin by briefly exploring the history of higher education in colonial and apartheid South Africa, followed by post-apartheid South Africa. I then discuss my preferred theoretical lenses and methodological approach. This is then followed by my theorising of the intersection between ageism and gatekeeping as manifestations of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and coloniality—and how these continue to play themselves out in post-apartheid South Africa, especially at HBUs. I also reflect, briefly, through narration, on my experiences and encounters with ageism and gatekeeping at an HBU. Lastly, I argue for the centring of decolonial love to transcend narrow instances of

[1] The phrase "Native of nowhere" was coined by the Nathaniel (Nat) Nakasa, a black-African journalist during apartheid.

ageism, gatekeeping, and other violent manifestations of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, neoliberal capitalism, as well as a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix.

It should also be noted that although the paper's central argument is localised to a South African experience, it also provides critical insights with significant implications on regional and international contexts as well. This is because ageism and gatekeeping as phenomenon in higher education have been recorded in other contexts in the African continent (see Andoh-Arthur, et al., 2018; Brandt & Josefsson, 2017; Kalina & Scott, 2019), and globally (see McFadyen & Rankin, 2017; Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). Therefore, what is novel about this paper is its unique theoretical orientation and a methodological approach that could be applied in other contexts and thus advance knowledge production in ways that ensure rigorous research occurs.

Colonial and apartheid South African higher education landscape

The South African higher education landscape mirrors its legacies of colonialism and apartheid, neoliberal capitalism, and a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Badat & Sayed, 2014). Because of this, higher education in South Africa during colonisation and apartheid was differentiated into three tiers, namely: the dominant tier, the intermediary tier, and the subordinate tier (Naidoo, 2004).

The dominant tier was constituted by English universities that were established during the colonial period and whose mandate was to preserve and extend English ways of being, knowing and living in the colony. In other words, these institutions were vested in preserving and promoting British history, religion, knowledge, traditions, and values. Hence, they were meant for only English-speaking students and academics. And, despite their discriminatory practices, these institutions were meant 'to be research intensive and enjoy[ed] favourable international reputations and ranking, coupled with well-established infrastructures' (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019: 2).

The intermediary tier consisted of Afrikaans-speaking universities. These were universities whose primary function was to preserve, maintain and promote Afrikaner nationalist ideals, identity, culture, traditions, and history. Their mandate was also 'to serve as a socio-economic and linguistic resource in producing and maintaining Afrikaner national identity, together with the production of the Afrikaner elites who would play a critical role in the apartheid state' (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019: 2).

Universities that made up the subordinate tier came as a result of the adoption of the University Act of South Africa (Act 12 of 1916) which formalised university education in the Union[2] by broadening the mandate of the University of South Africa (UNISA), as well as the adoption of the Extension of University Education Act (Act 45 of 1959) by the apartheid regime (Badat, 2004; 2009). These universities were mandated to serve the oppressed population of South Africa, that

[2] The Union refers to the coming together of British colonies and Boer republics in 1910 to form the Union of South Africa. The Black majority, as well as other oppressed minority groups, were excluded from this Union.

is, the colonised Other. Thus, they were not only differentiated racially and geographically; they were also differentiated along ethnic lines (Maluleka, 2021a).

The education that was offered in all these three tiers was intended to erode all previous remnants of indigenous African education and their ways of knowing, being and thinking by adopting Euro-Western curricula with its alienating pedagogic cultures, and epistemological framing (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022). So, the first two tiers are what make up HWUs and the last tier makes up HBUs. Essentially, higher education at that time in South Africa was created in such a way that it intersected with and reproduced the colonial and apartheid mandate.

Post-colonial and post-apartheid South African higher education landscape

Democratic South Africa has been engaged in a process of *ukuhlambulula*[3], its education system from its colonial and apartheid past (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022), with the hope of re-establishing *seriti sa MaAfrika*[4] (Mphahlele, 2013). This saw the adoption of numerous policy and legislative frameworks meant to address the historical injustices of the past that still underpin the post-apartheid higher education landscape (Badat, 1994, 2004, 2008). However, these historical injustices still find expression in these very policy and legislative frameworks. For instance, Hlatshwayo (2022) asserts that the neoliberal logic and its discourses that continue to inform and shape higher education in South Africa can be historicised within the policies and legislative frameworks that have been governing higher education since the 1990s. The very same policies and legislative frameworks that Hlatshwayo speaks of also created spaces in which the historical injustices could be diagnosed, challenged, and transcended.

Despite this, unfortunately, only in 2011 was a proposal made by the Higher Education South Africa Task Team for development of the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) that would see highly capable ECAs, like myself, being recruited and inducted into higher education, as well as being mentored by senior academics. This proposal, and now programme, seeks to recruit highly capable young scholars and intellectual into the South African academy given the dying and retiring old academic cohort. The nGAP is the biggest recruitment programme in South Africa 'within the Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework (SSAUF), a university staff development component under the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP)' (Department of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation).

It is also a 'systemic response to the challenges related to the composition and capacity of academic staff to adequately respond to the competing demands placed on higher education'

[3] Tisani conceptualises *ukuhlambulula* as a process of cleansing, which entails 'cleansing—inside and outside, touching the seen and unseen, screening the conscious and unconscious. This includes healing of the body and making whole the inner person, because in African thinking 'there is an interconnectedness of all things' (Thabede, 2008: 238)' (Tisani, 2018: 18).

[4] Loosely translated, this means the restoration of the dignity of Africans. Seriti literally means 'a shadow' and is also more than an individual's existential quest for appearance. It is a life force by which a community of persons are connected to each other (see Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022).

(Hlengwa, 2019: 1) because of 'the slow pace of transformation, the ageing workforce, the relatively under-qualified academic staff workforce' (DHET, 2016: 3).

However, despite these numerous policy and legislative interventions, both black students and staff still face challenges in HBUs and HWUs. Some of these challenges include but are not limited to the funding crisis; lack of academic staff diversity; the plight of workers to end outsourcing; the often forgotten experiences of disabled students and staff, as well as the plight of LGBTIQA+[5] students and staff; the experiences of first-generation black working-class students and staff who are the first in their family to come to university to either study or work; the role of language as a symbolic representation of hegemonic cultures, epistemic racism, deafness and xenophobia, cultural alienation; a curricula that embodies Eurocentric and alienating values, beliefs, knowledge, pedagogies and assessment practices; deeply contested notions of the academy as an 'institution' and the marginalised experiences of black female academic staff and students in the South African academy (Mbembe, 2015; Naicker, 2015; Heleta, 2016; Maringira & Gukurume, 2017).

These challenges have led to many black students and staff feeling ontologically and epistemically Othered (Case, et al., 2018). In other words, they perceive themselves, and are perceived, as pariahs in the academy—who are out-of-place (Khunou, et al., 2019; wa Azania, 2020). They are what Fanon (1961) describes as the '*wretched of the earth'* who live in the 'zone of non-being' (Mignolo, 2007: 10)— 'between No Longer and the Not Yet' (Santos, 2014: 10). This is because they continue to be separated from their being, culture, and indigenous identities (Kumalo, 2018; Mzezewa, 2023). Thus, they have become *homeless, de-homed, unhomed,* and *worldless* in the post-apartheid South African academy (Madlingozi, 2018, 108). For instance, Batisai (2019), Nathane (2019), and Rugunanan (2019) reflect on the intersectionality of being black, Indian and female in the post-apartheid South African academy, and how that often constructed and made them feel as though they were 'foreigners' who needed to be alienated because they were 'space invaders' who were 'bodies out of place' in the South African academy (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

On top of the challenges highlighted above, the South African academy, especially HBUs, are confronted with more sets of challenges. Badat (2009, 2016a, 2016b) and Hlatshwayo and Fomunyam (2019) argue that these institutions are yet to transition to the 'post' because of the continued instability, finance mismanagement and systemic corruption which often lead to being placed under administration, labour bargaining issues, academic thuggery[6], violent protests by students and staff, often resulting in disruptions to the academic project, and others.

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[5] An acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual, and many other terms (such as Non-binary and Pansexual, etc.).

[6] Academic thuggery is a concept used in South Africa's higher education discourse to make sense of acts of academic dishonesty by very senior members of faculty where they steal and publish parts of their students' dissertations and theses as either journal articles or book chapters without their students' prior knowledge or consent. The concept also speaks to acts of writing theses and dissertations on behalf of others for monetary gain. Often, some senior academics are at the forefront of these unethical practices.

Theoretical insights: Intersectionality, native of nowhere, and autoethnographic reflexivity methodological approach

The paper builds on intersectionality as its theoretical lens. Crenshaw (1989) first coined intersectionality to describe the problems that black women experience with the law. Gouws (2017) also notes that there are other persons such as Sojourner Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell who were writing about and through intersectionality the same time Crenshaw was writing.

Other scholars such as hooks (1994) and Gqola (2011) have been engaged in intersectional analysis because of its flexibility, breadth, and complexity (Atewologun, 2018), as well as the varied ways in which people can attempt to make sense of the 'relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege' (Carastathis, 2014: 304). I agree with Mazibuko (2020), who strongly argues that intersectionality is against single category analyses. It is rather about analysing the world through varied points of analysis.

In other words, intersectionality recognises multiple forms of oppression and creates spaces (Crenshaw, 1989) that 'enable us to move beyond conceptualising of oppressions as separate analytical categories and classifications and to create a multidimensional framework to look at the different oppressions on one's complex identities' (Hlatshwayo, 2020: 168). Therefore, I use intersectionality as a framing in this paper to make sense of and theorise about ageism and gatekeeping and how they intersect. I also use this framing to theorise some of my experiences that were characterised by ageism and gatekeeping whilst I was still employed as a lecturer under the nGAP at one of the HBUs in post-apartheid South Africa, and how those experiences made me feel as though I was *a native of nowhere—who did not belong* at that institution.

I strengthen my use of intersectionality with Nakasa's (2005) notion of 'native of nowhere.' Nakasa used this phrase to express his existential dislocation, due to him being forced into exile out of apartheid South Africa on an exit permit—a one way ticket out of the country that saw him renounce his South African citizenship (Kumalo, 2018; Hlatshwayo, 2020). He was forced to leave South Africa because of his continued campaign against apartheid through the articles and opinion pieces he wrote. In 1964, he wrote the following about this situation:

> If I shall leave this country and decide not to come back … it will be because of a desire to avoid perishing in my own bitterness—a bitterness born of being reduced to a second-class citizen. (Nakasa, 2005: 106)

In 1965, because of the depression he suffered at the hands of the apartheid regime that made him feel as though he was a 'native of nowhere … a stateless man [and] a wanderer' (Nakasa, 2005: 106); Nakasa jumped to his death from a seventh-storey window on Central Park West and 102nd Street in Manhattan, New York.

So, I use the native of nowhere framing to make sense of ontological and epistemic Othering I suffered as an ECA at an HBU in post-apartheid South Africa. Lastly, both intersectionality and native of nowhere framings aided my theorisation of my ontological complexities of being an ECA in the South African academy.

Methodologically, I used an autoethnographic reflexivity methodological approach (Ellis, et al., 2011). Autoethnography as a reflexive methodological approach enabled me to consciously embed myself in theory and practice and, by way of intimate autobiographic account, to theorise about my lived experiences as an ECA at an HBU and the intersection between ageism and gatekeeping I experienced as manifestations of the legacy of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism, and coloniality (Ellis, et al., 2011). I chose this methodological approach because it is 'important that we tell our narratives about our experiences, either good or bad, from places where we may experience them and about the actors in our stories and how they made us feel about particular subjects', especially since we exist in a world characterised by coloniality 'where people's stories are often told by others' (Mbhiza, 2023: 216). In other words, a world where there are *those who can define others and those who are defined*. Therefore, there is a need for those who are constantly being defined to begin to define themselves.

I operationalised this methodological approach by engaging journal entries of moments I reflect on in this paper. This is not something new to me as I have previously reflected on my experiences in the academy (see Maluleka, 2021a). Journaling as a method of data collection and generation is one of the research methods that qualitative researchers doing reflective work constantly use. One of its advantages lies in its ability to afford researchers the opportunity 'to identify themes and patterns, make sense of fragmented events, feelings and meanings' (Alterio, 2004: 321). In other words, journaling is particularly valuable, in that, it allows one to capture personal experiences or introspective data in detail, which, in turn, provides them with deep insights that they can reflect on at the later stage.

The intersection between ageism and gatekeeping as manifestations of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and coloniality

Ageism is a term believed to have been initially coined by Robert Neil Butler in 1969 to describe discrimination against senior citizens and patterned on sexism and racism.[7] This discrimination is often individualised or institutionalised (Butler, 1969). Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualised a more nuanced definition of what ageism means, and this definition has also been endorsed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (see Gutterman, 2022). The WHO's (2021) definition of ageism, which I use to guide my discussions in this section, reads as follows:

[7] See *Ageism and age discrimination in Africa*, by University of Pretoria's Centre for Human Rights (2021). Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/OlderPersons/AgeismAgeDiscrimination/Submissions/Academics/Centre-for-Human-Rights-Pretoria-University.docx

> Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age. It can be institutional, interpersonal or self-directed. Institutional ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age. Interpersonal ageism arises in interactions between two or more individuals, while self-directed ageism occurs when ageism is internalized and turned against oneself … Ageism often intersects and interacts with other forms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, including ableism, sexism and racism. Multiple intersecting forms of bias compound disadvantage and make the effects of ageism on individuals' health and well-being even worse.[8]

Gatekeeping, on the other hand, has been observed as the modus operandi that characterises higher education globally, and not just in South Africa (see McFadyen & Rankin, 2017; Kalina & Scott, 2019). Some understand it as an act performed by an individual or institution that sees them control the flow of information regarding opportunities (Hay, 2000). In other words, gatekeepers decide and ultimately influence what information, resources or opportunities reach others (Kalina & Scott, 2019). Thus, they serve as barriers to access. However, others conceptualise and understand gatekeeping differently. For instance, they emphasise that gatekeeping should be considered as one of the tools that ensures and maintains 'quality' of and in higher education (see Lund & Forray, 2019), whilst others recognise its developmental characteristics that see senior academics offering developmental advice to black ECAs like myself to improve their craft and contribute to higher education and society more positively (see Ragins, 2018; Starfield & Paltridge, 2019). Therefore, in the context of this paper I use the former understanding of gatekeeping to reflect on my experiences at the HBU in post-apartheid South Africa.

There is no doubt that ageism and gatekeeping dialectically intersect and were central features of colonial and apartheid South Africa's higher education, and they have since become increasingly pronounced in post-apartheid South Africa's higher education landscape. This is something that has been highlighted by both staff and students since the dawn of democracy. The issue was then brought up again by students during their 2015-2016 protest, dubbed the #MustFall protests. At the level of knowledge production within the university, both age and gatekeeping tactics are continuously being used to determine who is regarded as a legitimate knower and who is not. Often, the legitimated knowers are regarded as university professors and senior researchers whose knowledge contributions are most valued (Maluleka & Ramoupi, 2022). Because of this, these legitimated knowers are ontologically and epistemologically recognised in the academy (Fanon, 1952/2009; Kumalo, 2018). On the other hand, there exists delegitimated knowers, whose knowledge contributions are 'confer[red] to the status of non-use, non-value

[8] Global report on ageism (Geneva: World Health Organization 2021, 16). Available at: https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combatting-ageism/global-report-on-ageism

and non-visibility within formal education system' (Fataar & Subreenduth, 2015: 110). These are usually black students and ECAs. Deliberate attempts are continuously enforced to epistemologically marginalise their knowledge contributions and thus exclude these contributions in the formal education system in South Africa (Cross, 1986). Because of this, abyssal epistemology is maintained (Santos, 2007, 2009, 2014). Santos explicates that we ought to consider modern western thinking as abyssal thinking because it continuously constructs visible and invisible distinctions. The invisible construction is thus considered as being the foundation of the visible ones.

However, the 2015–2016 #Mustfall protests vividly showed that those who are regarded as delegitimate knowers can also contribute to conceptualising and producing new specialised knowledge, discourses, and ideas (Maluleka, 2021b). In other words, these students, and many before and after, have highlighted that the university can be a space where post-abyssal epistemologies exist, wherein knowledge pluralisation, problematisation, and knower pluralisation is most valued (Santos, 2007; Fataar & Subreenduth, 2015).

Nevertheless, ageism and gatekeeping dialectically intersect and pronounce themselves in other logics of the university. This may be in the university's institutional culture(s), marginalising curricula, promotion criteria and others.

A native of nowhere: My experiences as an early career African academic at a historically black university in post-apartheid South Africa

On the 15th of August 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 global pandemic, I took a leap of faith and decided to relocate from the cosmopolitan City of Johannesburg to one of the rural towns of South Africa. I was joining one of the HBUs in a fulltime teaching position from the 1st of September that year. About a year earlier I had applied to the nGAP and only in 2020 was I called in for an interview and subsequently offered the job.

Naturally, I was extremely excited to join this historic university because it was a site of revolutionary resistance, intellectually and otherwise, during apartheid. It continues to be a site, in many ways, against the violent legacies of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix. As a black South African, this institution appealed to me more because my only experience of higher education was through HWUs as both a student and member of faculty. So, joining this institution felt like I was *returning to the source of my own being* (Cabral, 1973, italics—own emphasis). I was going back home *where I would be with my people, where I would no longer be a native of nowhere.*

I was joining this HBU as an ECA from an HWU. I considered myself as an ECA then because I was in the process of completing my doctoral studies (Msiza, et al., 2021), and I was still in within my first 5 years in the academy (Garbett &d Tynan, 2010). However, I conceptualised and still conceptualise being an ECA well aware of the fact that no universal understanding of what constitutes being an ECA exists in literature (Sutherland & Taylor, 2011; Lewin, 2019). Equally, I agree with Hlatshwayo and Majozi's assertation, drawing from Pithouse-Morgan, et al. (2016), 'that our understanding of ECAs should focus more on an academic's ontological being

and becoming after their employment and absorption into the academic profession, with the diverse forces and factors that shape them in the different institutions' (Hlatshwayo and Majozi, 2024: 2). My experiences in both institutions were obviously different. However, for the sake of this paper's central argument, as well as its limited scope, I would rather not compare both my experiences at this stage. This is also avoid a situation where I would be un/consciously painting one institution as better or worse than the other. I would rather stick to the experiences that I said I will explore and theorise on.

Therefore, after joining this institution (i.e., HBU), I soon came to learn that things were not going to be how I had imagined. So, below, I narrate critical moments of my encounters with ageism and gatekeeping at that institution. These are moments that, according to Kiguwa,

> are often characterised by struggles in naming moments … Part of the struggle concerns ambivalent feelings of knowing and unknowing: second-guessing personal experiences of subjectification. Of course, this is made even more challenging given the common accusations of being 'oversensitive' and, sometimes, 'paranoid' whenever [ageism and gatekeeping] is named and called out by black bodies…. Part of the dilemma has to do with the almost invisible nature of informal institutional cultures within departments; these function to reinforce and sustain hegemonic practices, spaces and traditions of the academy that are exclusive to already marginalised bodies. These cultures and communities of practice are so invisible as to render any challenge and resistance almost impossible, precisely because one would first have to undertake the work of making the invisible visible. (Kiguwa, 2019: 11)

The first moment that I reflect on below happened in September 2020 when I just joined the institution and the department.

> *First Moment*
> *It was induction day, and all new members of the department were inducted into the department and school that day. Part of the induction included being told that the school and the department's operative and epistemic logics were underpinned by a certain theoretical orientation. Therefore, we had to make sure that our teaching approaches and research were underpinned and informed by this particular theoretical orientation.*

This was my first encounter with ageism and gatekeeping. I was the only one out of the new staff members who questioned this approach. I argued that our academic freedom was being impeded, and that we could not be expected, in an academic space, to sing from the same hymn sheet, because this had the potential of re-enforcing a particular form of gatekeeping—an approach that did not approve new ways of imagining the world and doing things. Hence, it seemed logical to continue with the old ways of doing things, because new ways often disrupt existing ways, and some people are not open to *un*learning and *re*learning.

The responses from some of my senior colleagues present at that induction session were disheartening. I remember my contention being dismissed in a very subtle, but condescending manner. I was told that I was still young and new to the institution; therefore, I did not know what I was talking about or what was good for the students I was to teach. These were comments made by senior colleagues who were black, both male and female; colleagues who have been employed by the institution, school and department for the longest of time. However, at that very moment when the comments were being made, I downplayed the impact that they had on me. But when I got home, reflecting on the day, I came to realise that those responses were not only imperious and disdainful; they also impacted my mental wellbeing and health negatively. I then started doubting my decision to join the institution. I also questioned if I *belonged*, or whether I would ever *belong*. I wondered if I could ever contribute meaningfully to the department's academic project without losing myself and what underpins my own scholarship. However, I reassured myself that, perhaps, things would get better, and I should not read too much into it. To my surprise, things went from bad to worse.

The second moment that I reflect on below occurred in the 2021 academic year. There was a move by the department to pair senior members of staff with ECAs when it came to teaching larger classes, especially since the department did not offer tutorials due to a very small graduate cohort within the department, as well as financial constraints. This move was supported by all members of the department, especially us the ECAs, because we saw it as an opportune moment to learn from more experienced individuals among us.

> *Second Moment*
> *I was co-teaching a research course with one of the senior colleagues in my department. During one of our usual meetings, I shared with her an idea that I thought would improve our research activities in the department and ultimately the school. I did this because I had no reason not to trust her. Also, I shared the idea with her because we were co-teaching the same course, and the idea was related to that course. Next thing, the idea was announced during one of our departmental meetings by our Head of Department (HOD). I was puzzled by this announcement because I had not yet shared the idea with anyone except my colleague. Our HOD credited her with the idea, and then asked us as the department, especially me, to rally behind this idea. I was specifically asked to assist our colleague's "idea" because it was directly related to the course we were both co-teaching. After the departmental meeting, I approached my former colleague to ask her how the HOD knew about the idea when I had not shared it with him yet. My colleague downplayed the situation and proceeded, in her patronising voice, to make an unsubstantiated excuse for her actions in this regard. She never attempted to apologise or reconcile with me. I then approached the HOD to make him aware that this was my idea and ask him to intervene. Instead of organising a meeting between myself and our colleague to try and resolve this matter; our HOD proceeded to apologise on her behalf.*

This signalled yet another moment of my experience with ageism and gatekeeping. I say this because one might dismiss this moment as merely a plagiarism issue and nothing else. However, beyond its plagiarism merits, this moment also had elements of ageism and gatekeeping that I discuss below. It should be noted that I do not have the words to even describe how this moment made me feel at that time, and how it continues to make me feel even after having resigned from that institution. But all I can say is that my emotions were definitely heightened at that moment.

What my senior colleague, both by age and academic ranking, did by plagiarising my work was something I did not expect because I had no reason not to trust her. Given this, I am of the view that she did what she did because she was hoping to advance her own career at the expense of mine. This leads me to believe that her actions could be read as being gatekeeping in form and nature, because part of gatekeeping is about frustrating one's chance of advancing in their career whilst you advance yours in the process – and this what she did or at least attempted to do. Moreover, I view her actions in this situation as boarding on ageism because I am also convinced that she did what she did thinking that her age and academic standing would scare me from speaking out.

When I decided to speak out on the matter, I went and reported her to our HOD. However, our HOD also failed to address this matter appropriately because when I approached him to ask that he organises a meeting between our colleague, myself and with him as the mediator, he refused. He then proceeded to apologise on behalf our colleague instead. At first I read his apologising on behalf of our colleague as him dismissing the matter as not being a big of a deal. However, upon reflection, I concluded that this was a form of ageism also being exercised by our HOD on behalf of our colleague. I concluded this because our colleague who wronged me was older than myself and the HOD in terms of age. Therefore, in some African cultures, especially those that exist in southern African, the idea of an elder apologising to someone younger than them is frowned upon. Because of this, my colleague never saw the need to apologise to me and this led to the collapse of our working relationship because I then asked to be paired with another senior colleague because I refused to continue working with someone I did not trust that closely.

The other moment that I experienced which speaks more to gatekeeping than ageism happened in mid-year of 2021. Below I speak of this moment.

> *Third Moment*
>
> *One of my papers was accepted for one of the national conferences in education. I had no research funds at the time to fund my attendance of the conference. So, naturally I approached my HOD and the departmental secretary to ask if there was any funds from either the department, school or university budgeted towards assisting ECAs like myself to be able to attend at least one academic conference. The answer I got from both my HOD and the secretariat was that they do not know of such funds.*

This for me represented another moment of gatekeeping at play because crucial information was withheld by those who control information flow that leads to opportunities (Kalina & Scott, 2019).

In light of all of this, and for the sake of my mental wellbeing and health, I decided to resign from the institution and the nGAP. This is because things were never the same. I felt as though I did not belong; I was a native of nowhere in an institution initially established under apartheid for natives, an institution that continues to educate natives in post-apartheid South Africa. I also felt that I was too new in my career to be dealing with issues that impact my career negatively, as well as my mental health. So, I chose to maintain my sanity and mental health instead.

In conclusion, I chose to only highlight three moments that I believe capture very well the ageism and gatekeeping I have experienced given the limited scope of this paper. However, this is not to say that these are the only experiences I encountered. Equally, it also not to say that all my experiences with colleagues in that department and the university in general were negative. In fact, there were moments where I was convinced that things were going to change for the better, especially when I interacted with colleagues my age who were passionate about transforming the lives of black students, the public university and in the process make a difference in the world. That is why I cannot boldly claim that my encounters with ageism and gatekeeping are the only moments I experienced and are reflective of the entire university's institutional culture and are also representative of the entire faculty within the university.

What is to be done? Centring decolonial love in higher education in post-apartheid South Africa

Challenging ageism and gatekeeping in higher education is not only a political act; it is also an epistemic, existential, and ontological one. This because such toxic academic practices often result in working environments that contribute to ECAs mental illness. One may ask: How then can ECAs speak back in a context of violence and intimidation? I think it is up to any ECA who has experienced any form of abuse when and how they would want to articulate their experiences, especially since many of them are aware of the possibility of alienation from all fronts from their abusers (Singh, 2024), who are often senior academics that Smyth (2017: 99) has since termed 'academic rockstars'.

Hence, the aim of this paper was for me to speak out about my own experiences, as well as theorise about how I think both senior and ECAs can work together to challenge the toxicity that continues to characterise higher education in South Africa and elsewhere. This is because the "speaking out" cannot be the burden of ECAs only, especially since there is a plethora of admirable, respectful, and genuinely supportive senior academics whose duty is to also call out their senior colleagues who are abusers.

If we are all in agreement that the challenge of toxic academic practices is the burden of both senior and ECAs; I am of the view that there is a need for both black senior and ECAs to build relationships that are characterised by decolonial love. This is imperative, especially since

love is seldom not considered as being part of the sociopolitical, cultural, economic, epistemic, pedagogical and ontological struggle. 'Yet key political movements of Black consciousness and black nationalism are centred on love [and care] to challenge self-hatred' (Makhubu & Mbongwa, 2019: 12).

In other words, it is important to centre decolonial love if we are all committed to reimagining and creating a post-apartheid higher education landscape in post-apartheid South Africa that is free from the intersecting violent legacies of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix. Hence, Davis argues that love should always anchor our lives and our relationships with others because the 'revolutionary possibility of love requires identifying and deconstructing historical alliances between love and reason and between benevolence and imperialism; otherwise, we collaborate with a violent legacy' (Davis, 2002: 146; see also Ureña, 2017).

Sandoval (2000) considers decolonial love a humanising form of love. This is because decolonial love demands that we affirm, recognise and respect each other despite our differences (see also Davids, 2019; Maluleka, 2021a; Hlatshwayo, Zondi & Mokoena, 2023). Similarly, Maldonado-Torres asserts that this kind of love recognises 'alliance[s] and affection across lines of difference'. It is thus 'the humanising task of building a world in which genuine ethical relations become the norm and not the exception' (Maldonado-Torres, 2008: 187). In other words, decolonial love is an ethical imperative that responds to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and coloniality—all of which are characterised by instances of cognitive, epistemic, existential, ontological and social harm.

Therefore, to transcend these instances of cognitive, epistemic, existential, ontological and social harm, firstly, there is a need for both black senior and ECAs to establish relationships based on decolonial love, ethics of care, compassion and understanding, 'in which genuine ethical relations become the norm and not the exception' (Maluleka, 2021a: 84). This would, in turn, not only see these academics recognising each other's humanity; it would also see them prioritising and maintaining each other's physical and mental health and wellbeing. Secondly, enacting decolonial love can enable black senior academics to go beyond narrow instances of ageism and gatekeeping, and other harmful instances associated with violent legacies of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and a pervasive coloniality and its power matrix, in the work environment. This could be replaced by the establishment of working spaces that are for nurturing and developing black ECAs to also become nurturing, caring, and loving senior academics in the near future. Additionally, such spaces can traverse to allow black ECAs to speak when they feel overwhelmed, defeated, and frustrated (Hlatshwayo, et al., 2023). This way, black ECAs will not drown in feelings of frustration, sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and despair. In other words, they will stop feeling like they are *natives of nowhere, who do not belong*. Instead, they will become natives of somewhere, who belong. On the other hand, black senior academics will be empowered to offer support in the best way they can to black ECAs under their care and guidance. Ultimately, communities of practice anchored by decolonial love would be established (Brodie, 2013; Ching, 2021).

Lastly, both black senior and ECAs can enact decolonial love as both an epistemic and pedagogical approach. This way, they would be in a position to confront all the intersectional injustices that characterise higher education in post-apartheid South Africa by inculcating critical consciousness in their teaching and research work (Freire, 1970/1996; 1998). This means that they will be in a better position to conduct research and teach knowing that they, as well as their students, experience different social, educational, political, and economic conditions before they engage in any academic work (Maluleka, 2023; Maluleka & Ledwaba, 2023). Part of this exercise entails also "creating our own home" as black academics:

> We must accomplish this via peer mentorship—both within and outside our home institutions. This can be made possible through research collaborations across institutions amongst black academic staff [and students]. Through this, we will be able to produce black counter-knowledges in the academy and the curriculum. We must challenge a curriculum [and logics] that insults our dignities and presence as black bodies—ours and our students'. We must confront the moments of racialisations [ageism and gatekeeping] (both ours and our students') that attempt to erode our different contributions to, and presence in, the academy. (Kiguwa, 2019: 13)

This mentorship is particularly important especially within a programme such as the nGAP. I know that part of the nGAP is informed by the need to have mentorship sessions facilitated by senior academics and was one of the reasons that motivated me to apply to be part of this initiative. This was not the case during my time at that institution. In other words, what I am trying to say is that no mentorship ever took place apart from the co-teaching, and why this was the case – I do not know. However, one hopes that mentorship is now offered to ECAs joining that institution as either part of the nGAP or not.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that ageism and gatekeeping are manifestations of the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, neoliberal capitalism, and coloniality. Therefore, these are cognitive, epistemic, existential, ontological and social ills that need to be confronted and dismantled. This is because black academics, be they senior or ECAs, need to 'proactively engage in this project of speaking back, challenging and resisting co-option into a structuring field that pits black bodies against each other and denigrates and humiliates black presence as fundamentally alien to the academy' (Kiguwa, 2019: 12). Therefore, in this paper, I narrated my encounters with ageism and gatekeeping at an HBU in post-apartheid South Africa, and how that forced me into resigning from a permanent teaching and research position. This was my way of proactively speaking back against moments of alienation and dismissal I had experienced. Part of this speaking back also saw me urging senior African academics to rediscover their generational mission, which is to make sure that they contribute to nurturing black ECAs in ways that are meaningful and are underpinned by decolonial love.

I, for one, remain committed to decolonial work in my own teaching, because of the overwhelming presence of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, neoliberal capitalism and coloniality in the education space in South Africa. For instance, I use decolonial love as pedagogical approach to teaching sensitive and controversial topics in history to my history students and I have since reflected on this (Maluleka, 2023). Essentially, as a pedagogical approach, decolonial love has enabled me to teach sensitive and controversial topics in history to my history students in ways that centre their experiences, feelings, and voices. This is because I have came to realise that their experiences with the past, their feelings about that very same past and how it continues to inform and shape their present realities and those around them need to be known and felt by others; and the only way that can happen is through creating spaces where their voices could be expressed and felt by others. This approach to teaching history not only allowed my students to have a voice about the past; it also allowed them to *see themselves and feel themselves* more in the work we do in the classroom (Godsell, 2019).

Moreover, this approach has also empowered my students and I to see 'whose histories, whose voices, whose writing, whose knowledge' are legitimated in the historical records that we constantly engage with and whose is not? (Bam, et al., 2018: 1); and how we can work towards remediating the situation in our own classroom. Part of these remediation efforts include pairing decolonial love with what Walsh (2014) terms 'decolonial cracks'. This, according to Walsh, involves the process of identifying cracks within the wall of coloniality in which to do decolonial work. As we do decolonial work within and through these cracks, we are then able to widen them and increase and deepen the scope of decolonial work. Because of this, we are able to deeply reflect on how marginalisation is enacted within the historical record and outside of it. In turn, this allows us, especially me as the teacher, to create spaces that then establish the hope that they, the students, can also find their own decolonial cracks in their work and in their lives that they can use to contribute to a more humane world.

Author Biography

Paul Maluleka is an Associate Professor of History Education in the Department of Educational Foundations, University of South Africa. His activism, research, supervision, and teaching are located along the fault lines of Africanisation, decolonisation, and queer theorisations. He has published numerous peer-reviewed papers and has presented at various National and International Conferences.

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