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South African higher education: A toxic milieu of neoliberalism, colonialism and anti-Blackness

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Post-colonial higher education contexts experience a never-ending recuperation from the multiple violences imposed by colonisation. Coloniality has largely been successful in maintaining a hegemonic hold by white settler colonisers in various facets of higher education despite attempts to decolonise this sector and attempts at transformation. The problem that this article addresses is that these decolonial and transformation initiatives are usually circumscribed within neoliberal parameters that simply perpetuate white hegemony. There appears to be oblivion as to how neoliberalism impacts Black subjects in academia and how historic colonial practices have seamlessly effectuated neoliberal tenets in new cycles of racial repression, issues that this article takes up. Methodologically, this conceptual article applies the tenets of Critical University Studies (CUS) and invokes the principles of Unapologetic Black Inquiry (UBI) to examine neoliberal racialisation, (c)overt anti-Blackness sentiment, the academe's preoccupation with white sensitivities and the systematic silencing of dissent through neoliberal mechanisms of discipline and control. This article concludes with caution of how a critique of neoliberalism has expediently been trumpeted as the new danger that academia needs to respond to. The effect might be at the expense of evading issues of deep-seated racism that continue to prevail.

Contribution: This article makes a specific contribution to the field of CUS and addresses the relationship between colonial continuity and neoliberalism, focusing on the differential experiences of the Black academic subject. It also theorises the notion of camouflage and deflection from racism as a priority social justice imperative.

Keywords: neoliberalism; higher education; coloniality; camouflage effect; anti-Blackness.

Introduction

[C]olour racism as it relates to the traditional apartheid plantation model has morphed into a neoliberal plantation in the higher education space with new colonial masters … Black students and Black academics continue to experience the university as alien as they assimilate hegemonic western Eurocentric culture and epistemology. (Maistry & Le Grange 2023:1)

Maistry and Le Grange (2023) challenge the notion that three decades of democracy is time enough to dissolve centuries of anti-Blackness that was the central mission of white hegemonic discursive practice in South Africa under apartheid. They contend that the culture of assimilation into a white hegemonic framework is likely to continue with neoliberalism as yet another layer of West-induced oppression.

The research problem that I focus on relates to how decolonial and transformation initiatives get circumscribed within neoliberal parameters, the effect of which is to simply perpetuate white hegemony. I thus draw attention to the question of oblivion to neoliberalism's differential impact on Black subjects in the academe and how historic colonial practices have seamlessly effectuated neoliberal tenets in new cycles of racial repression.

In this article, I lead two key arguments; the first argument is that applying neoliberal tenets in the South African higher education sector functions in overt and covert ways to preserve colonial hegemony, sustaining a continuity of repression in what Mtyalela and Allsobrook (2021) describe as the privatisation of apartheid. The second argument is that while there appears to be general discontent among the academe in South Africa about the neoliberal contouring of the academic space, the effects of neoliberalism impact Black academic subjects in materially different ways than it does their white counterparts.

Note: Special Collection: Neoliberal Turn in Higher Education.

This article begins with an overview of the South African higher education context, followed by an explication of the key theoretical and conceptual heuristics applied in this article.

The South African post-colonial higher education context

A distinguishing feature of post-colonial higher education contexts is the never-ending recuperation from the multiple violences imposed by centuries of colonial occupation (Maistry 2023). South Africa's notorious apartheid history represents a catastrophe of over 350 years of coloniser rule that has scarred South African society in particular ways, with unemployment, poverty and deprivation still a prevalent condition experienced particularly by Black communities (Mokhutso 2022). The university sector in South Africa under apartheid was highly differentiated and separated according to race, with funding disproportionately higher for white institutions than institutions designated for Black South Africans (Wangenge-Ouma 2010). This legacy of segregation and economic marginalisation has had enduring effects, much of which has continued in the post-apartheid era.

Comrie et al. (2022), reflecting on the US academic context, remind us that many, even people of colour, might be guilty of anti-Blackness sentiment and remind us of the difficulty of broaching racial justice issues in academic contexts where white supremacy might parade in an overt and covert fashion. Research into this phenomenon is yet to gain traction in the fragile South African higher education space, where white sensitivities often appear to take precedence over historic Black oppression. Mamdhani's insights on the transition to democracy have salience as he reflects on the gesture of blanket amnesty accorded to whites, rescuing them from accountability for social and economic privilege enjoyed under minority white rule (Mamdhani 2021). This non-accountability might well be the reason why an acute white consciousness is yet to emerge among the white community, even in any ostensible fashion. The absence of this consciousness results in a distinct oblivion to neoliberalism's differential impact on people of colour.

Key conceptual heuristics: Anti-Blackness, Unapologetic Black Inquiry and Neoliberalism

In approaching this article, I draw inspiration from iconic Black Consciousness Movement leader, Steven Bantu Biko. I loathe the racial categorisation of 'Indian' imposed on me by colonial racists, preferring to invoke instead, Biko's notion of Blackness, namely that of contempt for the racial markers imposed by colonialism and apartheid. Biko urged mobilisation under a single identity. He was clear that:

> Black Consciousness is a totality of involvement [*in which*] blacks must sit as one big unit, and no fragmentation … we must resist attempts … to fragment our approach. We are oppressed not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group. (Biko 1978:19)

I am acutely aware of the danger of conflating anti-Blackness with colourism and racism. Anti-Blackness, as defined by Comrie and colleagues (2022), refers to:

> [*T*]he beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviors of individuals and institutions that devalue, minimize, and marginalize the full participation of Black people – visibly [*or perceived to be*] of African descent. It is the systematic denial of Black humanity and dignity. (p. 1)

An important feature of anti-Blackness in higher education is that it moves beyond individual prejudice and gains its currency from its systemic institutionalisation and embeddedness in especially historically white universities. This is not to assume though that Black subjects are trapped or are not agentic in such contexts. Comrie et al. (2022) assert that:

> [*A*]nti-Black racism is not just about the racial oppression of Black people by whites, but by other racial and ethnic groups as well, all of which have themselves been heavily influenced by white supremacy. Indeed, anti-Blackness and anti-Black racism reside and thrive within institutions and ideologies of white supremacy, whiteness, and fear of Blackness and have a profound effect on anyone forced to engage with those institutions and ideologies, irrespective of their own racial or ethnic background. (p. 3)

Indigenous African people have indeed experienced racial prejudice by other subjugated groups (Mixed race people and Indians) (Maistry 2023), the extent and pervasiveness of which is certainly an area ripe for research in contemporary South Africa and in higher education in particular.

Although Biko's idealism has waned somewhat, his philosophy and unapologetic demeanour serve as a powerful anchor for the broad movement of Unapologetic Black Inquiry (UBI). The field abroad has been influenced by a range of powerful scholar-activists, including bell hooks (1994, 2009), Audrey Lorde (1983, 1997; Davis 2000, 1981), Angela Davis and Cornel West (Coates 2015a, 2015b; West 2016, 2018). The intellectual labour of this movement is consciously activist in nature, embracing a project which generates knowledge and scholarship that challenges social injustice. The principles that shape this intellectual work include that of self-affirmation, which begins by renouncing chronicles of Black inferiority and recognising Black identity and culture beyond mere tokenism and for expedience. Unapologetic Black Inquiry advocates for centring Black lived experience as diverse and rich and integral to intellectual discourse and scholarship. It also entails challenging institutionalised oppressive power structures within the academy that serve to silence, dismiss or dilute Black voices. Interdisciplinarity and intersectionality are key framing heuristics for comprehending Black experiences, which also views critical reflexivity as fundamental to examining positionality and personal privilege. Unapologetic Black Inquiry also calls for profound ethical engagement in mutually reinforcing and beneficial relationships with communities for liberation and socioeconomic empowerment. In the last decade with the explosion of (social) media

platforms, the discourse on Black suffering and white transgressions has lifted the lid on these issues (Jackson, Bailey & Welles 2020). Despite this, Black academics in white 'controlled' academic spaces are required to tread lightly lest they trigger white sensitivities.

In a country like South Africa, where national rhetoric around social cohesion and forgiveness marked the tone of the immediate post-apartheid environment, UBI was not likely to gain favour or traction. Colonialism and racism, however, could not magically disappear; its lingering legacy was indelibly etched in the blueprint of South African universities. The apartheid regime had little patience for a critique of the university sector with university academics understandably reluctant to traverse this perilous scholarly endeavour. It is important to remember that white universities in South Africa under apartheid were powerful organs of the state. These institutions sustained an intelligentsia and pseudo-science that endorsed the state's divide-and-rule (based on race) policy. As can be expected, this powerful grouping that controlled and shaped knowledge production (epistemology) was not likely to radically alter its culture and ethos with the advent of democracy. This issue will be pursued later in this article.

Harvey reminds us that the political elite in the new South Africa has uncritically embraced a neoliberal economic agenda (Harvey 2007). There is little contention that neoliberal creep has filtered into higher education governance in South Africa with stratifying and exclusionary consequences (Baatjes, Spreen & Vally 2012). Neoliberalism has instituted new managerialism with academic labour-exploitative practices that may compound the experience of Black academics. As a point of entry, I present a brief account of the genesis of neoliberal thinking and its fundamental tenets. At the outset, it is important to note that neoliberalism, as a political, economic and social (including education) agenda, has never been applied or implemented with any degree of absolute coherence and consistency. Harvey assesses that while it has mainly produced negative effects as it relates to distortions or asymmetries in wealth accumulation globally and within nation-states, in some instances, neoliberalism has produced relatively positive outcomes in specific developing country contexts, contributing to poverty alleviation and better standards of living across the board (Harvey 2007, 2020). While there are fundamental principles that its founding fathers (Friederich Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society) hold dear, neoliberalism has been applied in contexts where competing policies have been or are at work. South Africa is a distinct case in point.

Neoliberalism advocates for minimal state involvement in the economy, contending that the state lacks the rectitude a deregulated economic environment inherently possesses. The state's role ought to be that of preserver of law and order, enforcer of private property rights and creator of enabling conditions for free markets to thrive. Neoliberalism also advocates the idea of individual liberty and freedom of choice. While individual freedom of choice appears as a laudable value, this 'universal' value is inherently contentious as it presumes that each subject departs from the same economic, cultural and social capital premise. Once deemed a public good, higher education has not escaped neoliberal infiltration. While the Department of Higher Education and Training has not openly advocated for competitiveness between higher education institutions in South Africa, state-associated organs regularly publish league tables of university achievements such as student throughputs and research outputs. Neoliberal managerialism has become the modus operandi in South African universities, demanding increasing accountability and perpetuating a surveillance and performance culture (Maistry 2015, 2022). The differential impact of the application of neoliberal tenets in higher education is discussed later.

In the section that follows, I offer an account of the theoretical insights that guided the methodological approach to constructing this conceptual article.

Research methods and design

I draw on Gloria Anzaldua's notion of mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa 1987), with personal testimony as an operative apparatus, complexly connected to the social and political. Esteemed American critical scholars Pasque, Patton, Gayles, Henfield, Milner, Peters and Stewart, in their compelling work titled 'Unapologetic Educational Research: Addressing Anti-Blackness, Racism, and White Supremacy', remind us that 'violence, systemic policy, and white supremacy (is) infused throughout dominant research practices, programs, and policies. Racism embedded in research is often cloaked with dominant white perspectives' (Pasque et al. 2022:3). They caution that elements of the white academic fraternity are openly scornful of topics that focus on marginalised peoples studying their own lived experiences of oppression and are quick to assign derogatory labels to such research as 'navel-gazing' and 'mesearch'. Maistry (2023) reminds us that the deliberate:

> [A]ligning of blackness with inferiority, deficiency and lecherousness, so much so that attempts at reclaiming blackness as positive connotate, exposes the argument to the risk of expedient critique, namely that of re-instigating essentialism. Implicit in this kind of critique is the inevitability of whiteness as a preferred aspiration. (p. 1)

There is little tolerance and patience for claiming Blackness and reflecting on the historical plight and plunder of Black people, as this is deemed unproductive in moving the nation forward.

The masking of dominant white perspectives is seldom challenged in South Africa, a context in which open secrets of colonial white privilege prevail (Maart 2014). Pasque and associates caution that Black academics who research and theorise their lived experience are likely to have their scholarship rejected by liberal and right-inclined journals. In South Africa, a somewhat disconcerting phenomenon is that relations of colonial dominance get reproduced through

the scholarship of white scholars who profess ideas for the country's curriculum decolonisation, oblivious to the appropriation at work and the power and privilege that they still command, a sentiment also articulated by Cusicanqui (2020) in the American context (Cusicanqui 2020).

Anzaldua urges that we (Black academics in this instance) navigate the perilous border space that we occupy as academics caught between a Western-Eurocentric hegemonic academy and transgressive scholarship that disrupts and reveals the contradictions in coloniality. Negotiating this liminal space requires courage and bold expository testimony. As also declared by Pasque et al., I am acutely conscious of my positionality and privilege as a middle-class commentator in an academic space. Maart reminds us of the power of autobiography in documenting, especially the lived experiences of oppressed Black subjects (Maart 2014). Maistry (2023) asserts that Black trauma has:

> [A]ttained a naturalness, a relegation to a state of perdition, so much so that even the new Black political, economic and academic elite, while empathetic to the cause, have somehow acquiesced to the notion of Black trauma as optically unpleasant but a tolerable destiny. (p. 3)

Neoliberal tenets function in overt and covert ways to preserve colonial hegemony

> The narrative of the colonization of South Africa that prevailed and continues to prevail in certain segments of contemporary South African society, is that of white colonizer as industrious, noble, peaceful and innocent being, divinely tasked with the project of bringing civilization to the country's indigenous Black tribal people – people bereft of religion, cognitive competence, and incapable of responsible land ownership. (Maistry 2023:1)

The seeding of this saviour mentality by white colonisers can be traced back to the very exploits of the colonisation enterprise – its lingering effect is often seen in the higher education space as patronising overtures in the direction of Black people.

The higher education landscape confronting the new South Africa (post-1994) was fragmented and uneven, with universities serving under different authorities with different standards and quality assurance mechanisms. The material and human resource context of many Historically Black institutions (HBIs), many of which were located in rural areas and former Bantu homelands, was just not comparable to that of their white counterparts in the urban metropolis of South Africa. The state embarked on what might be described as a fraught merger process (see Jansen 2003a, 2003b; Mohuba & Govender 2016; Mouton et al. 2013). Contestation among reluctant new bedfellows was expected across every aspect of the university enterprise (Mfusi 2004). The establishment of statutory institutions like the Council on Higher Education and the development of the National Qualifications Framework signalled a clear political intent to contrive a uniform standard of higher education provisioning. What followed was a raft of higher education policies that proliferated in the decade since 1994 (Mouton et al. 2013). It might be argued that standardising higher education provisioning was necessary. It also marked what might be considered the new government's (un)witting but official endorsement of a neoliberal accountability and surveillance regime.

The germane question was which institutions in South Africa at the time would be deemed the standard bearers of quality. Extant decolonial literature is unequivocal in asserting that universities on the African continent are precisely institutions that have been modelled with Western-Eurocentric frames of reference but geographically located in Africa, even in countries that had a long history of liberation from their colonial masters (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017). Given South Africa's belated liberation, white coloniser influence on the country's higher education system has become firmly entrenched, so much so that when the student-led #RhodesMustFall campaign rocked the epistemological foundations of South African higher education, South African academics of all racial persuasions were found wanting (Maistry 2020). What became clear was that higher education, its curriculum and its academic fraternity were steeped in the Western-Eurocentric matrix; a traumatic realisation is that, in the main, discipline heads and rank-and-file academics were, in fact, firm disciples of Western-Eurocentric epistemology and ontology. There is little contention that shaking off this colonial academic heritage has not happened to any substantive degree (Veracini & Verbuyst 2020). One might argue that a somewhat apologetic tone prevails in South African education, an embarrassed-to-ask, taciturn disposition to decolonise the academy.

This begs the question of who commands or demands or requires or expects to be apologised to for decolonial initiatives that need to be implemented at universities. Critical scholars at education conferences often premise their conference papers with tongue-in-cheek declarations and apologies for the presumed upsetting nature of the content of their papers. It is no mystery that this apology is usually meant to hedge commentary on historical and contemporary racism. Invoking decolonial discourse such as 'white coloniser' or 'Eurocentrism' attempts to call out white privilege or explaining how white hegemony is still at work in the South African academy is viewed as souring the mood. Critiquing senior white liberal academics is met with scorn and constructed as disrespectful even by academics of colour (Majavu 2022).

These assertions are easy to dismiss as unsubstantiated anecdotes but represent an unspoken narrative (Maart 2014).

Important to the focus of this article is the evolution of the #RhodesMustFall movement, which began predominantly at historically white universities by Black students dissatisfied with the curriculum status quo that prevailed into the post-apartheid era – its 'whiteness' as well as 'the skewed racial demographics of staff and student populations' (Rao 2020:47).

This activism later commutated into the #FeesMustFall movement. The latter activism, which rapidly blazoned to all universities across the country, had a wider scope that included, among other foci of higher education discontent in South Africa, 'the scrapping of fee increments, insourcing of workers and a progressive shift in student funding from loans to scholarships', what Rao described as 'anti-privatisation' protest action (Rao 2020:48). While student activists at the time had not articulated an explicit disillusionment with neoliberalism as covert foe that had infiltrated South African higher education, their actions were marked by a distinct subtext, namely, a rejection of subtle moves to privatise what they deemed significant aspects of the university, including the employment of low-level support staff.

The effects of 350 years of colonialism in South Africa are far from well documented despite persuasions from conservative circles that purport that this is the case. If anything, South Africa's colonial history has been largely penned by the white academic fraternity in ways that shamefully distort the violence of apartheid (Majavu 2020). The dark underbelly of apartheid South Africa remains largely concealed despite attempts in the early post-apartheid era by institutions like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to expose centuries of racially motivated atrocities committed by white colonisers against Black people (Maistry 2023). It might well be argued that this ambitious project lacked the political teeth to achieve anything resembling the outcome of the post-World War Two Nuremberg Trials. National social cohesion became the powerful chant of the political elite, a rhetoric that reverberated across the nation – one that appealed for a non-revolutionary calm and patience of the novice politically emancipated yet economically, culturally and socially marginalised Black subject. The extent to which truth or reconciliation was achieved is a moot point.

The apartheid project was purposefully designed to create and maintain structural inequalities, and colonialism as a global project of exploitation was unashamedly in the economic and political interests of the colonial motherlands. Colonisation was a global political and economic project aimed at dominating and exploiting human and natural resources. In South Africa, this project was given effect through conscious calculation and orchestration up to a relatively recent three decades ago. Promulgating racial differences was a central tenet (Pillay 2021). South Africa, as a mineral-rich locale, was a magnate for European imperialists and was subjected to centuries of systematic extraction for the benefit of colonial homelands, the British aristocracy in particular, who in contemporary times unashamedly flaunt colonial-inherited wealth, with a somewhat reluctant and diluted apology for colonial malfeasance and barbarity.

Unlike the case of the United States, Canada and Australia, where white colonisers who remained eventually became the majority ruling population group, in South Africa, white colonisers, at the height of grand apartheid, comprised a mere 12% – 15% of the population. However, they successfully maintained and retained power through a project that included systematic physical, cultural, linguistic and epistemological violence. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández remind us that 'settler colonialism is the specific formation of colonialism in which the colonizer comes to stay, making himself the sovereign, and the arbiter of citizenship, civility, and knowing' (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013:73).

There is a distinct danger in compressing or condensing South Africa's sordid colonial history in this fashion as it fails to capture the enormity of the trauma that came with 350 years of subjugation – oppression as evidenced in contemporary times by colonial powers (like the state of Israel), on the civilian population of Gaza. The political machinery under grand apartheid South Africa was powerful in projecting an alternative narrative to the international world. Of significance for this article is that economic exploitation in contemporary times happens under a mutating economic master, namely that of neoliberalism. This economic ideology strongly advocates economic globalisation as the preferred model for the future of the world economy despite asymmetrical patterns of wealth accumulation and distribution that characterise the current economic world order. Multinational conglomerates based in the global North dominate and actively shape the world economic order. In essence, in the South African context, colonial exploitation has morphed with relative ease into neoliberal economic exploitation and neoliberal ideology that has begun to permeate almost every facet of society, including education.

In the South African context, neoliberal capitalism has a distinct white settler colonial tinge, and contrary to populist or conservative sentiments that the ruling Black political elite is, in fact, the country's economic elite, white coloniser economic hegemony still prevails in contemporary South Africa. If anything, the demise of apartheid, which resulted in the suspension of economic sanctions, was an 'unforeseen' gift to a white-dominated South African economy. New patterns of colonial exploitation by multinational corporations based in the global North are an outcome of global neoliberal economic policies and uncritical invocation of such tenets in the South African context. In essence, structural inequality, as it relates to the economics of the country, has, in fact, deepened in the democratic era of the country's history, with economic indices consistently reflecting the continuation of colonial capitalist violence in the contemporary neoliberal capitalist environment. The majority Black population bears the brunt of such policy initiatives.

Neoliberalism, through its globalisation and internationalisation imperatives, continues to perpetuate cultural imperialism in the academe, homogenising curricula in a fashion that retains the supremacy of Western-Eurocentric values, knowledge production and ethos. The advent of the knowledge economy is a distinct neoliberal phenomenon, with patents, copyrights, transferable skills and competencies working in servitude of

the economy. Epistemic justice or attempts at restoring and valuing Indigenous knowledge production often get relegated to a secondary status. Such restorative work is often assigned to under-funded units within universities and not mainstreamed, given its lesser potential as a money spinner.

Neoliberalism's peculiar impacts on Black academic subjects

Maart (2014) observes that even when some whites recognise the abominable and repugnant nature of racism, they seldom expend energy on assessing the full political implications thereof. In academia, for example, simply recognising and acknowledging that racism is wrong without consideration of its ramifications and how it plays out through the structures of the university is to address the issue at a surface level. It follows that there is limited will to understand how colonialism and neoliberalism are likely to impact Black academics. What is clear is that South Africa, having emerged relatively recently from coloniser rule (white supremacy and anti-Blackness), endures the lingering effects of colonialism (Veracini & Verbuyst 2020). It must be noted that this emergence was preceded by two decades of intensified anti-Blackness, especially in the period following the 1976 Soweto riots. This took the form of discriminatory practices in all spheres of life, including health care, employment and education, resulting in systemic inequalities that have carried into the post-apartheid era.

Negative stereotypes of Black people as dishonest, inherently violent by nature and cognitively challenged were the mantra of the apartheid propaganda machine. Anti-Blackness also took the form of perpetual harassment of Black people, who were subjected to vehement policing, constant surveillance and economic exploitation. White colonisers in the heydays of apartheid exercised property rights over Black people as an expendable factor of production. The outcome of this systematic marginalisation is evident in the recurring cycles of poverty prevalent in the Black community of South Africa (Mokhutso 2020). One might contend that after 30 years into the new democracy, this tragic past might have diminishing significance. Coloniality as an analytical concept is an apt reminder that 350 years of anti-Blackness is not likely to be erased in a short three decades. Maistry (2023) drawing on anti-Blackness theory contends that:

> [D]espite their political, economic or intellectual standing, Black subjects, even as they occupy the zone of being alongside other race groups, cannot escape the default race hierarchy and construction of Black as inherently corrupt, misguided irrational and cognitively wanting, and are always relegated to the bottom of the racial status ladder. (p. 3)

Coloniality has largely been successful in maintaining a hegemonic hold by white settler colonisers in various facets of the higher education space despite attempts in recent years to decolonise this sector. While universities across the spectrum (historically Black and white) are at pains to demonstrate attempts at transformation, these initiatives are usually circumscribed within neoliberal parameters, which constrain the academic agenda in particular ways instead of having liberating effects. While legislated apartheid has long gone (for three decades), Mtyalela and Allsobrook draw our attention to the privatised nature of apartheid in the post-apartheid era, arguing that colonial power prevails as 'a facticity-inducing force for Black subjectivity' (Mtyalela & Allsobrook 2021:357). What was clear was that the white hegemonic hold of the academe was not likely to disappear in the post-apartheid era. How would this hegemony be disrupted in the new South Africa, and how willing were white coloniser academics to embrace the notion of white consciousness? As stated earlier, the machinery for knowledge production, dissemination and funding of research in South Africa under apartheid was strongly connected to and tightly controlled by the apartheid state. The bureaucracy that administered research funding, the editorial boards of academic journals and heads of publishing houses did not change overnight in the new South Africa. Similarly, bureaucracies in white universities had also not reconfigured their racial proportions. Even in instances where Black vice-chancellors were appointed to lead white institutions, many of these colleagues were severely handicapped by a hegemony of middle-level white management that was determined to maintain the status quo.

The concept of dysconcious racism (King 2015) is salient here. It refers to a state of being unreceptive to ideas or suggestions – an impervious, stoical and imperturbable disposition of segments of the white academe to reified systems of racism and white privilege that prevail even in the post-apartheid era (a period when racism was declared unlawful).

Dysconsciousness, according to King, 'is an uncritical habit of mind … that justifies inequity by accepting the existing order of things as given' (King 1991:135). This begs the question of the extent to which the order of things had substantively altered at universities in the post-apartheid era. Several white universities retained their original identities because the university merger project did not affect them. The mothership mentality of centralised control over satellite campuses was adopted by white institutions that did incorporate smaller former Black institutions. Such satellite campuses in remote regions are meant to serve usually rural-based Black students. In essence, despite the formal end of apartheid, white institutions, in their reluctance to let go of decades of control, found 'creative' ways to extend and continue segregation practices to the detriment of Black students and the Black academe. While all public higher education institutions in South Africa, technically and in law, belong to the state, many white institutions operated like privately owned institutions, finding ways to privatise apartheid systematically. The jury is out as to whether the state, under the leadership of the Minister of Higher Education, has the political will or the authoritative conviction to dissolve racist and obstructionist university councils. The role of powerful alumni and that of

fundamentalist religious organisations strongly associated with the governance of former white universities should not be underestimated.

It follows that the working conditions, institutional culture and ethos of such institutions present particular challenges for Black academics to navigate. When neoliberal performance policies are added to the higher education mix, it is not unreasonable to assume that the plight of the Black academic, already negotiating a violent academic space, is likely to be compounded. Some liberal white academics may well empathise with this condition at best; the full extent of the tribulations of being a Black academic in a hostile white-dominated institution is certainly an area that is ripe for research. I am acutely aware of pathologising the plight of the Black academic in oppressive contexts and that such colleagues are, in fact, agentic and have the potential to push back at power. I am also guarded about not over-romanticising this agentic potential especially in contexts where systematic marginalisation, exclusion and even dismissal are real threats. Mtyatela and Allsobrook (2021) contend that Black academics unwittingly embark on a kind of self-regulation, by finding ways to adhere to race-infused neoliberal expectations. Invoking Foucault's notion of governmentality, Mtyalela and Allsobrook (2021) see Black governmentality:

> [A]s a private, productive mode of exploitative power, which may be distinguished from the publicly rationalised repressive apparatus of apartheid … [it] complicates the autonomy of the subject of emancipation, throughout the history of abolition of slavery, indirect rule, revolution, and decolonization. (p. 357)

The Black academic, as the subject of emancipation, will always struggle for any degree of absolute autonomy in contexts where coloniser hegemony still prevails. Drawing inspiration from Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, Mtyalela and Allsobrrok caution that the illusion of a clean break with our colonial past will likely stall Black emancipation further. It is not unreasonable to expect that neoliberalism as a western-conceived ideology perpetuates a colonising mentality and is likely to impact Black academics in particular ways.

Wariness of the neoliberal camouflage effect

In this section, I raise caution about how neoliberalism might get foregrounded as the clear and present danger that threatens the academe as a whole, a position that the white liberal left might expediently exploit as the target of their critical academic energies. Deflecting attention to neoliberalism as the most ominous threat to the academe might well be at the expense of the racial equity agenda. This phenomenon is not unfamiliar in the academe; a case in point is the significant critique by Black feminists of white posthumanist scholars who appear preoccupied with ontological equivalence (ontological flattening) to the more-than-human, including animals, the environment and technology. Yet, they (un)wittingly expediently skirt the

reality that many humans in the world, especially people of colour, are subject to a sub-human existence. It is important to recognise this deflection of attention as a reluctance to confront race as a primary evil and to deal with its historical, present and future implications. Similarly, Ahmed cautions about liberal white feminism's eagerness for inclusion in protest politics on gender equality but rarely considers how the very structures that they seek to inhabit remain largely unchallenged as it relates to inherent racial prejudice and hierarchy (Ahmed 2018).

A narrative that is often paraded in South Africa is that we are now in a post-race phase and that dredging up historical racial transgressions should have no currency as it is likely to hold the nation back from progress. The emergence of neoliberalism as a threat to all in the academe, which requires a unified stand against its oppressive potential, might well be considered an opportunistic deflection, one that draws in the Black academic subject as a fellow victim of the neoliberal onslaught.

What might be considered a noble feature of South African higher education in the post-apartheid era is the various mechanisms for funding earmarked for advancing Black academics as researchers and scholars. While research into the impact of such initiatives is yet to confirm the scheme's effectiveness, little is known about the ideology behind such initiatives. At face value, it might seem obvious that these schemes are pro-Black and intended to redress issues of the racial composition of the academe by fast-tracking the development of young Black academics; the extent to which a neoliberal agenda also drives such orchestrations is yet to be fully understood. The notion of the entrepreneurial academic, one with competencies to source research funding and produce research outputs (books, book chapters and journal articles) in line with performance expectations and graduate research students in regulation time, is a distinct signal that this type of grooming is unapologetically neoliberal. The neoliberal, competitive ethos has seeped into the higher education sectors and permeates almost every aspect of the academy. It translates into individualism and competition between academics, which is the hallmark of the neoliberal spirit.

As a conceptual piece, my intention in this article was to draw attention to the fractures currently present in South African higher education and to provoke questions as foci for further research, especially as it relates to colonial continuities, anti-Blackness and the effect of neoliberal policies. As such, I am reluctant to prescribe solutions or offer recommendations, which is standard practice in empirical work. I do, however, encourage a reconsideration by the university fraternity of its current colonially informed social and governance practices in ways that recognise historical prejudice, with a view to its rectification.

Conclusion

In this article, I engaged the principles of UBI to argue for a bold and uncompromising approach to understanding the condition of the Black academic in the South African higher education space. I contend that colonial continuities are at

work, especially in white universities that serve to preserve white hegemony. Historic colonial practices have mutated into neoliberal practices in a somewhat seamless fashion, with accountability, surveillance and governance mechanisms reifying white hegemony. Importantly, the application of neoliberal principles in the higher education space is likely to have a differential impact on Black subjects, still coming to terms with a context constructed within a Western-Eurocentric framing. The article concludes with a cautionary note of how general discontent amongst the academe in South Africa about neoliberal contouring of the academic space might displace a focus on issues of race and racism in South African higher education.

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