



Voices of Women in Higher Education: Historical Contexts and Colonial Legacies

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The modern-day neoliberal university is characterised by intense competition amongst academics due to increasing pressure for promotional advancement. Female academics find themselves subjected to a culture of condescension and discrimination by violating their rights to equality and equity. Consequently, informed by our personal experiences as female academics, working in three different institutions of higher learning in South Africa, we concur that these institutions can be characterised as a “community” marked by hyper-individualism, power dynamics (even power games) in which female academics find themselves alienated, as many women struggle to balance their professional lives with family responsibilities. As female academics, we are confronted on a daily basis with this dual challenge of having to fulfil our roles as wives and mothers (and oftentimes daughters, taking care of aging parents) while at the same time having to illustrate the daunting task of excellence as professionals. Wang, Xu, Peng, Wang, Wang, et al., (2012) note that in order for female scholars to survive in the academe, they are forced to immerse themselves completely in their work as they are essentially required to not only live the academic role but to, metaphorically speaking, “eat” and “breathe” the academic life daily. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) concept of corporeality this means a female academic’s body is not just a biological object but a living expression of her-being-in-the-midst-of-the-world. She now has to straddle two unique and separate worlds; one which must inevitably yield to the other, revealing the tension between body, mind, and world as an interconnected space. In both of these worlds she is often silenced when she speaks rendering her

body invisible. Here Merleau-Ponty’s concept of corporeality helps us to understand how the female body is immersed in all these tensions and how these tensions simultaneously exercise its full force on her body. This corporeal perspective illuminates how institutional structures and societal expectations become inscribed upon female bodies, resulting in not only abstract conflicts of time management, but embodied experiences of stress, fatigue, and fragmentation that challenge the very possibility of selfhood across these divergent spheres.

Over the years, we (as editors of this Special Issue) witnessed how many brave female academics shared their embodied experiences (scars) at conferences. They related how women, despite finding themselves in a world encumbered by fear, intimidation, resistance, and alienation, learnt how to continue moving through layers of structural oppression, how to speak, how to move, as they perceive their world of work. To Merleau-Ponty (1962) through her struggle, as she tries to reclaim her embodied subjectivity, she knows herself as free and full of possibility and potentiality of being and becoming. For example, the first author of this editorial, vividly recalls a presentation of a Canadian female academic at a conference hosted in Germany some years ago, in which that academic relayed the stress involved in maintaining the work-life balance. The inherent demands of female academic careers, Judith Butler (1990) argues, such as teaching responsibilities, research productivity expectations, community engagement commitments, and the long working hours, working during weekends, and frequent travel is a political and existential tension reflecting the way institutions and gendered norms

operate through her body. As one of the contributors in this special issue points out, while institutional policies are designed to support female academics there is a concerted and undermining disconnect between formal policy statement provisions and the practical implementation thereof. Irigaray and Greene (2008) characterise these tensions between policy and practice as the “phallogocentric” ordering of universities (p. 106), meaning the spaces that preserve the status quo by promoting forms of masculinity that paradoxically obscure the very power dynamics their policies claim to address.

Therefore, in this issue, we urge the readers not to only hear the voices of women, but to see and respond to these women challenging us to recognize how academic discourse remains anchored in modes of articulation that position female academics as the constitutive “other” against which institutional norms are defined. These articles reveal how such othering manifests in daily micro-aggressions, structural barriers, and institutional blindness to the specific experiences and needs of women navigating themselves in higher education. What comes across strongly in these articles is not individual struggles but evidence of what Irigaray would term the institutionalized “specularization” of female academics when leadership in these faculties of education fail to acknowledge and respect the voices of women. Irigaray and Green (2008) write:

To put into place a mode of specularization that allows for the relation of woman to ‘herself’ and to her like. Which presupposes a *curved mirror*, but also one that is *folded back on itself*, with its impossible reappropriation ‘on the inside’ of the mind, of thought, of subjectivity. Whence the *intervention of the speculum and of the concave mirror*, which disturb the staging of representation according to too-exclusively masculine parameters (p. 55).

The above quote from Irigaray of “curved” and “folded” mirrors as a metaphor, shows how women in academia must manage complex reflections of themselves. That is, both how they perceive themselves and how institutional structures perceive them without access to the same straightforward paths of self-

definition available as that to their male counterparts. Their abstract “speculum” and “concave mirror” should be viewed as alternative frameworks that women in the academe must develop to understand their experiences when traditional academic structures (that favour men) fail to recognise and appreciate their unique challenges and contributions. These distorted reflections create additional cognitive and emotional labour for women academics who must constantly negotiate between institutional expectations shaped by neoliberal norms and their own authentic scholarly identities. Higher education institutions perpetuate what Irigaray and Greene (2008) describe as the “economy of the same,” wherein difference is not truly recognised but subsumed under masculine universality disguised as neutrality. This brings us to the articles in this Special Issue, that we think is long overdue in South Africa.

Colleen Moodley explores the multifaceted experiences of Black Women Academics in higher education institutions in post-Apartheid South Africa. In her conceptual paper she draws on relevant literature to foreground the voices of Black Women Academics as they navigate the intersecting dynamics of gender, race, and institutional culture within a historically male-dominated space. Framing her analysis through Nancy Fraser’s three-dimensional theory of justice and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, she highlights the unique and often marginalised experiences of Black Women Academics. The findings of her study suggest that, despite efforts to promote gender equality, the distinct challenges faced by Black Women Academics in academia continue to be overlooked.

Juliet Paulse explored identity formation, resilience, and agency within the academic spaces of higher education. Paulse reflects on and analyses the lived experiences of her dual role as a Black Female Professional Administrative Support Staff (PASS) member and doctoral student in an institution of higher learning. She critically examines how colonial legacies continue to shape institutional structures and cultures, perpetuating systemic barriers for marginalised individuals, particularly women. She also highlights the

strategies of resilience and resistance employed by Black Female PASS members and other marginalised groups as they navigate exclusionary academic environments. Ultimately, she argues that personal narratives hold transformative potential, serving as powerful tools for institutional change and contributing to the broader pursuit of equity and inclusion within the academe.

Leevina Iyer focuses on the challenges related to gender, generational identity, and disability, among others, which continue to persist in higher education. She argues for the deconstruction of the complexities of her identity as a university lecturer, considering that the identities of lecturers play a crucial role in informing their pedagogies. The research question which guides this study is: “How do my intersecting identities as a female, millennial, and epileptic university lecturer influence my pedagogical practices in History Education?” The study draws on the intersectionality theory, which highlights the need to view herself as a complex being and to consider the intermeshing of her identities, particularly in her professional space. In her findings she highlights the distinct relationship between her identities related to gender, generational identity and disability and the aspects of curriculum design, technology-based pedagogical approaches, inclusive student engagement and critical dialoguing. Thus, this study illustrates the necessity of reflective pedagogy, especially with the role of identity in shaping pedagogical considerations and teacher-development and proposes a model to cope with the institutional constraints and social stigma in higher education.

Marcina Singh advocates for the “academic mother”, particularly in contexts where there is a historical legacy of discrimination, which she argues is critical to realising gender equity and flourishing democracy. The discourse of academic mothers is a pushback against the masculine framework often used to describe academia. She argues that the COVID-19 pandemic redirected one’s attention to the importance of general wellbeing, but specifically for women who need to manage work, household, and childcare

responsibilities. The findings highlight the guilt of the working mother and challenges presented in terms of leadership opportunities amongst others. She puts forward several recommendations in recognising the role that women play in society and support needed to attain gender equality.

Ndamulelo Mabidi highlights the need for research focusing on how formal communication strategies could be developed to support female academics. The rationale for this study stems from identified gaps in the existing literature concerning effective communication strategies that enable female academics to share their narratives within higher education institutions in South Africa. The research questions are informed by the narratives female academics in South Africa communicate, the prevalent communication strategies, and the advancement for sharing their narratives. Black Feminist Thought and Khan’s Model of Engagement are used as appropriate frameworks for exploring the narratives of female academics.

Natalie Rasmussen explores how African American women navigate the intersecting forces of racism and sexism in higher education. Theoretically and methodologically, she draws on critical autoethnography and storytelling, to construct her personal narrative as she reflects deeply on her experiences. Her paper offers critical insight into the survival strategies and coping mechanisms employed by Black Women in academia, illuminating how systemic inequities are managed and endured. Reflecting the everyday realities of high-achieving Black Women and the predictable backlash of American white supremacy, Rasmussen draws on existing literature to frame her experiences within psychosocial constructs such as John Henryism, Armoring, the Superwoman Schema, and the communal support of Sister Circles. Her paper contributes a nuanced understanding of the structural and emotional tolls placed on Black Women in academic spaces, while offering valuable direction for institutions seeking to foster more equitable and affirming environments.

Each paper in this Special Issue bears testimony to how women continue to be alienated and marginalised in today’s neoliberal university,

as a perpetuation of colonial legacies under the guise of democratic and fair practices. To echo Irigaray and Green (2008) as discussed above, difference is not acknowledged and celebrated but subsumed under masculine universality disguised as neutrality. Therefore, if we hope to create an equitable future and transcend an abhorrent past in the academe we need to confront the uncomfortable truths – some of which have been accentuated in the papers in this Special Issue.

References

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