

Troubling whiteness: A critical autoethnographic exploration of being white in the context of calls for the decolonization of higher education

Abstract

The context of higher education in South Africa continues to be a racialised space despite its transition from Apartheid to democracy in 1994. This article reports on a critical autoethnographic study that uses reflexive memory work to explore how the author can continue to position herself and practice as an educator within this current context of higher education. The central argument of the paper is that complex forms of identity politics and white fragility heighten a tendency for white people to respond with ‘injurious’ self-defensiveness when their whiteness is called out. Such responses are counter-productive to finding constructive ways of positioning oneself as a white person in the ongoing and wider project of decolonising higher education in South Africa. A process of critical reflectivity, mediated by a range of theoretical insights, enabled the author to work with her own white fragility and move beyond a limited defensiveness towards a position that allowed her to acknowledge her on-going whiteness while envisioning more constructive ways of being a white educator in the current South African context.

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Introduction

Two recent movements in South Africa have had a significant impact on the way in which I see myself as

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an academic and educator. The first is the #FeesMustFall movement, which intensified across 2015 and 2016. Langa (2017) explains that this movement started as a reaction to the increase of fees at universities but expanded to include a call for the decolonisation of education. Students argued for a curriculum that reflects “the lived experiences of African people, including recognition of their work that is often on the periphery of what is taught...” (Langa, 2017: 10). However, Langa (2017: 39) points out that the call for decolonisation was also about “the composition of the academy” and challenging ongoing white privilege in academia (see also Maringira & Gukurume, 2017). The second influential movement has been an intensified call within the discipline I teach in, psychology, for the recognition and development of African psychology. Academics, such as Nwoye (2015), argue that the need for an African psychology is the outcome of a dissatisfaction with the discipline’s over-reliance on euro-centric psychological theories.

As a lecturer teaching within a post-apartheid context, it has been an increasingly difficult process to know how to locate myself as a ‘white’ academic and educator within the current context of higher education in South Africa. While the South African constitution aims for non-racialism, there is no doubt that the country remains a highly racialised context. Historically, people in South Africa came to identify themselves through a system of racial classification because of legislation. As Jawitz (2016) highlights, most South Africans continue to identify themselves through this system and, as a result of national policy and legislation that seeks to redress historical inequalities, educators and students in higher education continue to use racial categories to classify themselves. Consequently, the South African higher education context is a “racialised space” (Jawits 2016: 2) where race continues to impact on aspects such as teaching and learning (Soudien, cf Jawits, 2016). This article reports on a piece of critical autoethnography (CAE) research through which I attempt to answer the question of how I can continue to practice as a white academic and educator during a time in which a decolonised higher educational system and an African psychology are being negotiated in a space where race continues to impact on the everyday experiences of educators and students.

Changing demographics, changing engagement with race

I have been an educator within an institute of higher education in the post-apartheid context for approximately 16 years. During this time, the racial demographics of the student population at the university in which I teach have changed considerably. When I first started teaching, a large portion of the student population were classified as white, but over the years the enrolment number of black students increased and as a result the majority of students at the university in which I teach are now classified as black, with white, Indian and coloured students constituting the minority. The change in racial demographics is important because it indicates a positive transition away from

the legacy of Apartheid, during which the intersection of race and class meant that the majority of black South Africans could not attain a university education (Kujeke, 2017). As the demographic of the students has changed, my engagement with race (a social, political and historical construct) has also changed.

At the time that white students were still present in fair numbers, I was introduced to the concept of “whiteness” through the work of Melissa Steyn (2005: 121) who argues that whiteness:

“is best understood as an ideologically supported social positionality that has accrued to people of European descent as a consequence of the economic and political advantage gained during and subsequent to European colonial rule”.

Whiteness is, therefore, a position of privilege that has “psychological, cultural, political and economic dimensions” (Steyn, 2005: 122). Through a process of self-reflection, I became increasingly aware of my ongoing privilege as a white person, and the difficult idea that despite my view of myself as non-racist, I may, albeit unintentionally, still be engaging in whiteness in some of my everyday teaching practices. As a result, instead of positioning myself as non-racist, I identified myself as anti-racist; a position that acknowledges my desire to be non-racist but simultaneously recognises my on-going whiteness (see Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013).

Ahmed (2004a: 1), however, points out that claims of being anti-racist are often ‘non-performative’. Referring to the work of Austin (1975), she argues that speech is performative only “when it does what it says” (1). Ahmed (2004a: 4-5) questions the performative value of admissions of racism embedded in anti-racist claims, noting:

“... sayings are not always doings, or to put it more strongly... the investment in saying as if saying was doing can actually extend rather than challenge racism. The claims I describe do not operate as simple claims. They have a very specific form: they define racism in a particular way, then imply ‘I am not’ that. So, it is not that such speech acts say, ‘we are anti-racists’ (and saying makes us so); rather they say, ‘we are this’ while racism is ‘that’; so, in being ‘this’ we are not ‘that’, where ‘that’ would be racist. So, in saying we are racists, then we are not racist, as racists don’t know they are racist...”

In retrospect, I realise that during my earlier years at the university I frequently engaged in non-performative, anti-racist speech acts. Committed to a project of anti-racism, I spent a lot of time encouraging white students in my lectures to critically reflect on their position as white people and often challenged them on their enduring whiteness. I took on the omnipotent task (see Ringrose, 2007) of someone who could see their own

whiteness while exposing other white people's denial of their whiteness. My role was calling on white students to reflect on their ongoing privilege. Problematically, I often read these students' resistance to my insights as resistance to change, rather than a complex engagement with their racialised subjectivity (see Ringrose, 2007). Ironically, in acknowledging my on-going whiteness (through my claim to be anti-racist), I was claiming that I was "actually not really subject to whiteness", which according to Ahmed (2004b: 4) is a "transcendent fantasy". In declaring my ongoing whiteness, I was, therefore, firmly in control of it. Even above it. From this position, the real racists were my white students. From this position, I did not have to reflect on the way in which my racial subjectivity as a white person was playing-out in my everyday practices as an educator. I did not really have to act in anyway because, after all, the problem wasn't with me! Ironically, while my anti-racist stance was non-performative in the way in which Ahmed (2004b) notes, that is, it did not contribute to the kinds of changes needed, it was still inherently performative in the sense that it re-inscribed the effects of whiteness. My curriculum and my teaching practices were kept safe from scrutiny and my racial performativities left unchecked. From this perspective, non-performativity, has inverse performative effect.

This comfortable position has been increasingly challenged as the demographics of the student population have changed. Through a reflection on memories of a series of engagements with black students (that I report on in this article), it is clear that I have increasingly been confronted with my own whiteness. Yancy (2012: 1) has come up with the phrase "Look, a white!" to describe what happens when black people call out white people on their whiteness. Yancy developed the phrase in response to Fanon's writing about his encounter with a young white boy. In this encounter, the boy sees Fanon and shouts out to his mother, "Look, a Negro! I am frightened"! Yancy (2012: 4) argues that it is this exclamation (in various forms and contexts) that is repeated over and over again when white people constantly mark black bodies as "different/deviant/dangerous". Yancy (2012: 6) proposes that the exclamation 'Look, a white!', repeated by black people (in a variety of forms) who experience whiteness:

"counters the direction of the gaze, a site traditionally monopolised by whites' that has the potential to lead to a moment of uptake that indicates a form of white identity crisis, a jolt that awakens a sudden and startling sense of having been seen"

In exclaiming 'Look, a white!' in the face of whiteness, Yancy (2012: 11) argues that black people are countering the gaze and pointing out ongoing problematic "white discourse and white social performances". In the past, the ways in which my whiteness was playing out in my roles as an educator were largely invisible to myself, precisely because, and ironically so, I had positioned myself so firmly as anti-racist and because

I had a large enough pool of white students to deflect my own whiteness onto. This changed as black students became the majority and through a number of engagements with these students, my whiteness has been made increasingly visible to myself.

When I first started this research my initial analysis of my memories of engagements with black students was influenced by my reading of research and theory that fits into the field of (critical) whiteness studies. However, during this process I came across the work of Ahmed (2004b) who challenges the many declarations that whiteness studies make. When I looked at my own research, I realised that what I was engaging in was a process of “white seeing” (2004b: 4) that read as nothing more than an admission of the ways in which I was reproducing whiteness. The confessional tone of my emerging analysis was troubling me because I felt like I had cornered myself into a position where the only worthwhile thing that I could really say as an admission of my whiteness was, ‘Look, I am sorry’; a position that is entirely unproductive according to Achille Mbembe (2015) if it is paralysing and does not lead to a constructive outcome. A further challenge to my early analysis came as a result of having engaged with the ideas of a number of academics who are critically engaging with, for example, what African psychology is (Ratele, 2010), what decolonisation is, or could be (Mbembe, 2016), whether white South Africans should engage in political and professional silence (Hook, 2011; McKaiser, 2011; Vice, 2010), the role of identity politics (Haider, 2018), the concept of white fragility (Di Angelo, 2011) and black anger (Jones & Norwood, 2017) and Althusser’s (1968/2004) notion of interpellation. Collectively, these academics challenged me to think differently about my initial analysis, which had done little more than describe and acknowledge my whiteness. As Ahmed (2004b: 12) argues, “saying is not sufficient for an action and can even be a substitute for action”. Too much of whiteness research tends to do little more than re-describe (and re-inscribe) whiteness in its various forms, when what is needed is action that will attend to and undo ongoing whiteness (Ahmed, 2004b).

My way forward was to attempt to engage in an analysis that, on the one hand, acknowledges the way in which my whiteness has continued to play out, but, on the other hand, addresses this whiteness and critically engages with what might be some of the implications for acknowledging this whiteness. Rather than responding from a position of paralysing and patronising guilt as a result of having had my whiteness seen, I attempt to demonstrate a critical engagement with some of what I have been confronted with by these students. In this way, I hope that I have engaged, to some degree, in the “double turn” that Ahmed (2004b: 14) proposes. In her words:

“the task for white subjects would be to stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards other” (Ahmed, 2004b: 14).

Therefore, in this study I avoid what Hook (2011: 30) describes as “politically correct self-flagellation” by engaging critically *with* the voices of the black students who have called out my whiteness. This is an attempt for me to actively rethink and renegotiate (van der Watt, 2007) how I can continue to be and practice as a white educator in the current context of higher education in South Africa.

Critical autoethnographic memory work

To reflect on my ongoing position and practice as a white educator I engaged in a process of critical autoethnography (CAE). CAE challenges the dominance of positivism in the social sciences and demonstrates how personal accounts of lived experiences can open up for exploration aspects of cultural life that traditional research methods often cannot access (Chang, 2013; Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013).

Giorgio (2013, 407) argues that autoethnographers use memory as much of their data. She writes, “when I write from memory, I re-live and re-imagine, shaping my memories into autoethnography, a suturing of lived experience with theory, memory with the forgotten, the critique of self with those of others and culture”. Her assertion highlights a few important characteristics of memory work as a method of CAE. Firstly, it suggests that memory work involves a process of reflexive writing. Miller (2008), for example, demonstrates through a process of reflexive writing how he was able to revisit experiences and develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of how race plays out in the context of higher education.

Secondly, Giorgio’s (2013) contention highlights that memory work is a process of remembering with the aim of social critique. Through writing about memories, autoethnographers open up the social and the political for critical exploration. Reed-Danahay (2017: 149) aligns CAE with the “reflexive self-analysis” that Bourdieu advocated for and argues that the critical and reflexive process of CAE enables a “vigorous reflection on the institutional practices and fields in which we operate” (Reed-Danahay, 2017: 152). Similarly, Potter (2015: 1436) demonstrates how CAE allows for a “process of theorizing through self-exploration and reflexivity” that leads to a “nuanced and complex” understanding of how the self is embedded in wider social systems.

Thirdly, Giorgio (2013) suggests that through reflexive writing, CAE has the potential for “re-imagining”. In other words, for change. For example, Magnet (2006) demonstrates how CAE enabled a process of reflexivity which assisted her in understanding how she, as a white, Jewish, lesbian woman occupies, simultaneously, spaces of both marginalisation and privilege. She sees this process as a “methodology for change”, as it contributes towards the development of an “oppositional consciousness” and developing alliances that allow for resistance (Magnet, 2006: 747).

In this article I aim to demonstrate that reflexivity and writing about memories of engagements that I have had with black students is a powerful method through which I have, over time, come to understand my past and imagine my future social and political positioning and practice as a white educator in the context of higher education in South Africa.

The process of collecting my data began at the point of engagements that I had with some of the black students in my class and carried on when I started the process of writing up each of these experiences in the form of evocative story telling. The process of analysis began at the point at which I consciously tried to make sense of these engagements after they had occurred and were relegated to the realm of memory. Through the process of writing up the memories I engaged in another level of analysis as I tried to make sense of what I was writing. This writing and analysing has been an iterative process, rather than a once-off experience; a process that I returned to over and over again while immersing myself broadly in theory and research that exists around the topic.

‘Look, a white!’ memories

In this section I will present an integrated discussion of the memories of different engagements I have had with a few black students on campus over a number of years that have brought my whiteness under the spotlight. There are two ‘types’ of memories that I will present. The first set of memories recounts actual engagements related to my teaching practice with students who I have directly taught. The second set of memories relates to engagements with two students I did not actually teach and who called me out on my whiteness based not on any direct incident or interaction with them, but rather on the mere presence of my white corporeality. The trajectory of memories highlights the changing nature of the engagements around my whiteness and my response to it. These memories demonstrate how, through a commitment to praxis, I was able to respond to the feedback on my whiteness in relation to the engagements that occurred directly in relation to my teaching practice. However, the feedback that occurred in relation to the presence of my white corporeality, rather than my practice, was more difficult to work with and required considerable critical reflection.

Memories in relation to my teaching practice

‘African thighs’

During one of my community psychology lectures I questioned the way in which Western notions of beauty have taken hold globally. The discussion was situated in a wider lesson around social constructionism where I introduced the idea of discourse as constitutive of reality and identity. I used a personal experience as a way of illustrating the multiplicity and changing nature of discursive subject positions.

I recounted how, while growing up, I had been embedded in a Western culture that constructed the ideal female body as a slim body. I spoke of my discomfort at puberty when I developed a curvaceous body with voluptuous thighs and soon realised that I did not have what was considered a ‘beautiful’ or ‘acceptable’ body. Accordingly, I positioned myself as increasingly unattractive against a dominant normative construct of beauty and as a solution I decided on liposuction and made an appointment with a plastic surgeon. I shared with my class how the Western *construction* of beauty became apparent to me: I had run a seminar and afterwards a young black woman approached me to discuss an aspect of the seminar. Before leaving she told me that, on a different note, she wanted me to know that she and her colleague had decided that I had ‘the perfect African body’. In that moment, their perspective transformed my body into something more acceptable and shortly after this encounter I cancelled the appointment with the surgeon. I explained to my students that someone from a cultural context different to mine had presented another discourse of beauty that clashed with and disrupted the Western discourse of beauty that had become naturalised for me. From the reactions of my students it felt that the example had been well received. However, at the end of the module I was horrified to read the following comment on an anonymous student evaluation: “*Kerry is racist as she said all black people have fat bums*”.

I recall my deep distress and discomfort as I tried to comprehend how this could have happened. I approached a colleague who reassured me that the student had simply misunderstood. This experience, however, never left me and I was haunted by a nagging feeling that somehow, I had in fact been ‘racist’, but could not see how. While I certainly never said “*all black people have big bums*”, this student’s perception that I was problematically racializing black bodies led me to think more carefully about the example I had used. The answer came while reading a paper by Magubane (2001) who critiques a paper by Gilman which explores how black bodies like Baartman’s have been objectified by white people. It was an observation she made about how Gilman developed his argument that stood out for me. She writes: “although Gilman’s intention is to argue that perceptions of difference are socially constructed, he focuses on Baartman’s “inherent” biological differences” (Magubane, 2001: 821). I can recall in this lecture, and on other occasions, that I have made reference to “*my African thighs*”, not “*African perceptions of my thighs*” and as a result, while my intention was to demonstrate that ideas about what kinds of bodies are beautiful are socially constructed, I inadvertently reproduced the idea, through reference to “*my African thighs*”, that black bodies are *inherently* different.

Through reflection, I have further realised that my example also risked constructing culture as static rather than changing and contested. Black and white bodies vary

considerably and cultural scripts about these bodies are not static or monolithic. Not every black person reveres a voluptuous and curvy body. Not every white person opposes a voluptuous and curvy body. In retrospect, I believe that in using the example, I was also reproducing a duality between African culture (read black) and Western culture (read white), a binary that does not acknowledge the complex ways in which ways of knowing are “entangled” and “intertwined” (Jansen, 2017: 5). Such a dualism “ignores the fact that cultures are dynamic, always in a process of becoming, moving targets, always being hybridised from both within and without” (Tomaselli, 2017: 7). This has led me think more carefully about how I use this example in my teaching in the future, if at all.

Euro-centricity

On a number of other occasions black students have challenged me on aspects of my teaching practice that are related to my whiteness. For example, a student rightly challenged me on the Euro-centric slant of my reading list for my sexuality and gender module, which led me to immersing myself in the literature and becoming much more versed in the work of a wide range of African academics writing and theorising in the areas that are now included in the course content. Another student reacted angrily to an article that I prescribed that critiqued and, through the critique, reproduced representations of African sexuality during colonialism and apartheid. She told me that this reading should not be included in the module. I interpreted her reaction as a misunderstanding of what the author was aiming at, but after reflecting on this experience I realised that as a white person I was afforded the luxury of observing this history with a certain level of emotional detachment. I had not acknowledged or even anticipated how she, and the other black students in my class, would possibly respond to seeing how black South Africans had been viewed through a colonial and apartheid lens. This has made me much more aware of how I teach particular content. For example, there is a need to prepare students for difficult content and then to engage meaningfully, rather than defensively, with difficult emotional responses as part of their learning experience.

As argued earlier, I believe that my commitment to praxis has meant that I have been open to these ‘Look, a white!’ exclamations from my students and acting on them purposefully. Drawing on the work of Freire, Breunig (2005: 111) describes praxis as involving a process of both reflection and action: “Praxis, therefore, starts with an abstract idea or experience and then translates it into purposeful action. Praxis is reflective, active, creative and socially constructed”. I am fortunate enough to have been formally trained as a teacher before becoming an academic and I believe that this training prepared me to engage in a process of critical praxis that has enabled me to respond constructively to my students’ feedback on my whiteness.

Memories in response to my white corporeality

My commitment to praxis, however, has not been sufficient for me to deal with the more recent ‘Look, a white!’ engagements that I have had with two students who I did not teach and who called me out on my whiteness in response to the mere presence of my white corporeality rather than any direct incident or interaction with them. These engagements required a different level of reflection and analysis to resolve how I could respond to the feedback that I was receiving on my whiteness.

‘All the white people should go home’

At the end of a panel discussion on the decolonisation of education, held after-hours at my University, a student stood up and asked what a white person was doing on a panel that was exploring what decolonised education could look like. He was angry! He shouted, *“all the white people should go home and drink tea and coffee and do the things that white people do!”* I was sitting in the theatre a few rows ahead of him. I felt humiliated and angry and I recall having a strong urge to leave right at that moment and then quickly reconsidered the decision. If I left I would run the risk of being further humiliated, perhaps booed or applauded as I left. Some of my black colleagues were in the audience and I feared that they would judge a dramatic exit as defensive or a declaration of guilt on my part. I waited until the end and left, angry with this student’s aggressive confrontation.

‘These white people’

After a lecture, I was walking to my office when a student (not a student from any of my classes) who was sitting with a group of his friends, called to a student who was walking just ahead of me to come and join them. As he turned to face them, he noticed me. He said to his friends, while holding my direct gaze, *“I can’t! I am on my way to a lecture to deal with these white people.”* His friends laughed and one responded *‘Everyday!’* I felt a strong emotional reaction and an urge to challenge him, but instead I lowered my head and kept walking. I could feel my cheeks grow warm with humiliation and frustration.

It was after these engagements that I started to reconsider whether I could continue to be an educator as a white person. In the first of the two engagements, the student is clear that white people should *“go home”*, that is, that white academics have no role to play in conversations about the decolonisation of education in South Africa. The student makes reference to a stereotype about white people: *“drink tea and coffee and do the things white people do”*, suggesting that they are all alike. In the second engagement, the idea of white people (plural) needing to be *‘dealt with’* implies that action needs to be taken against *all* white academics, who are positioned as equally problematic. My first analysis of these engagements was guided by various commentators’ reflections on student protests at the time.

These commentators' focus was on the problematic identity politics at play. From this perspective I saw these memories as reflecting *some*, and most certainly not all, of the spirit of the #FeesMustFall movement, after which both engagements occurred. While few doubt the legitimacy of the movement and the reality of many of the grievances that the students raised, concerns have been raised about some of the aggressive politics at play. Watermeyer (2016) contends that, as a revolutionary political movement, the #FeesMustFall movement needed to identify an “enemy against whom they could pit their battle. He notes that on several occasions the slogan “kill all whites” was seen on display during the movement. Jonathen Jansen (2017), similarly, is critical of the fact that white academics became the ‘enemy’ through a strong identity politics at play during the #FeesMustFall movement.

Haider (2018) is critical of many forms of contemporary forms of identity politics which tend to present race as a fixed entity and produce an ideology of race that reproduces essentialised, reified and biological constructs of race that reinforces rigid divisions between people classified according to different racialised categories (Haider, 2018: 42). Haider (2018: 46) argues that essentialised notions of race serve to reinforce the idea that whiteness is the outcome of individual psychology rather than a social, historical and “political formation”. So, while he does not deny racism and the importance of the project of anti-racism, he does question the problematic way in which contemporary forms of identity politics are reifying and essentialising whiteness. As Snyman (2008: 94) points out, essentialist thinking about race not only “stifles the debate on racism, but also makes it difficult to transcend its parameters”. Kimberly Foster (2018) warns that “when identities can be invoked to assert an unquestionable authority” careful political analysis and “thoughtful conversations and meaningful activism” that aims to benefit *everyone* are closed down. Through contemporary identity politics race ideology serves to place black and white people in oppositional categories that “consolidate[s] a type of paralysing standoff’ between people positioned in these over-determined racial categories” (Gunew, 2007: 141).

My reading of the authors above led to an analysis of the students’ behaviour through the lens of a ‘problematic’ identity politics at play. Feedback from one of the reviewers of this paper challenged this initial analysis and proposed that it is perhaps better to conceive of it as a ‘complex identity politics’. As a white person, if I *only* see the students engagements through the lens of a problematic identity politics on their part I am essentially let off the hook. No further analysis is required and I can conveniently see the students as out of line. What is needed is a much closer analysis that recognises the nuances of what is at play. In this set of memories, the students’ engagements *were* very difficult to relate to in any meaningful way because I experienced my identity as a white person as being reified and from such a position

I felt like I had been relegated to the position of the eternal enemy who simply reproduces white supremacy and, therefore, needs to be excluded from the project of decolonisation. I felt intense discomfort, as I had in the first set of memories, but this time I felt unable to negotiate a way forward.

What I have come to realise is that a large part of the paralysis I experienced in this moment was what Robin Di Angelo (2011: 54) refers to as “white fragility”, which she defines as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves”. She argues that this fragility is the outcome of being socialised in contexts in which most white people did not have to “build the cognitive or affective skills” nor the “stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial lines” (Di Angelo, 2011: 57). I certainly experienced a defensive emotional reaction, which included anger and a deep sense of personal injury despite the fact that the students hadn’t personally called me out on anything specific. In my memory I describe wanting to, in that moment, leave the room and even considered leaving academia. These are some of the defensive moves Di Angelo (2011) identifies as associated with white fragility.

During these engagements with these two students I was, against the back drop of a colonial and Apartheid past, “interpellated” or “hailed” (Althusser, 1968/2004: 700) as a particular white subject. In the well known example of a policeman calling out ‘hey you!’, Althusser (1968) demonstrates that in such an instance most people are likely to turn around as though they are being directly addressed, even if they know they have done nothing wrong. In that moment you literally become the thief being called out. Without anything being directed at me personally I immediately recognised myself in the interpellation and, as a result, interpreted and experienced the student’s statements as a personal affront.

In an article entitled *Aggressive encounters and white fragility* Jones and Norwood (2017: 2044) argue that when black women speak out against microaggressions they risk their actions being read through the trope of “the angry black woman. Loud. Erratic. Uncontrollable. Full of attitude”. In these moments “the problem becomes the Black woman as opposed to the condition to which she is responding”. This response is, according to Jones and Norwood (2017) mediated by white fragility. I now recognise my own response as the outcome of a combination of my white fragility and the images of the “kill the whites” signs I had seen and internalised during the #FeesMustFall movement. The result was that I, in turn, read these students through a particular trope. The students in this moment were perceived through the trope of ‘the angry young black man’. Aggressive young black men. Personally threatening black men. As a result I was upset and angry. However, left unmediated, nothing

constructive emerged from these emotional responses other than a reading of the students as a problem. Jones and Norwood's (2017) explanation of the trope through which anger is read offers a way of reframing the experience, one that recognises the fact that in these moments the students are not calling me out per se, but the continued inequalities and injustices of the post-Apartheid university context that continue to linger in the present university context.

In the second of the two incidents I describe in this set of memories the student does not direct his comment directly at me, but the presence of my white corporeality, which, in that moment, elicits his response. This reflects that the racialisation of subjectivity involves, on many occasions, "reading the body as a text" (Dudek, 2006: 2). Harte (2016: 74) argues, after Stuart Hall, that race is "a collection of fragmented floating signifiers and semiotic sequences" and that "skin colour can be seen as a badge of a shared socio-cultural history, produced by dominant discursive powers" (Harte, 2016: 75). From such a perspective, a person's skin colour becomes a "primary defining signifier that appears to fix race" (Harte, 2016: 77). As a white lecturer, moving around a campus in a post-apartheid context, against a backdrop of calls for the decolonisation of education, my skin colour will be read as a text and will illicit a response from black South African students. As Harte (2016: 77) argues, "race is a floating signifier that slides and shifts depending on context...". Within the current context of higher education in South Africa, and considering my sociohistorical positioning, I have to acknowledge that it is likely my white skin will be read as signifiers of my economic and cultural privilege. In this encounter my corporeality is read by the student as what Harte (2016: 75) above referred to "as a badge of a shared socio-cultural history", that is, my presence as a white person in both of the engagements in the second set of memories elicits an invocation of a generic white *people* and a calling out of the injustices of a particular social and political reality. These encounters are not, as I initially experienced them, a personal attack directed at me specifically. In my initial reading of the situation, through a lens of what I interpreted as only a problematic identity politics on the part of the students, I was inadvertently putting the onus onto my students to remedy their behaviour. They needed to change their tone, to accommodate my emotional needs. They should sort out their aggressive approach or phrase what they are saying better so that I am not personally injured.

What explanation is there for my intense emotional reactions to these engagements if they are clearly not direct at me personally? Butler (1997: 100) contends that "identities are formed within contemporary political arrangements". Who we are and how we experience ourselves and others is constituted socially, and we inevitably become deeply attached to our identities. As Foucauldian philosopher Todd May

(2006) proposes, if I am to capture the rhythms of how I navigate my thinking and desiring human body through the world I “have to talk about the world in which my navigating occurs, a world that has a specific character... it is often the stamp of this world that, in important ways, makes me who I am, makes us who we are” (p. 11). Who I am, according to Todd (2006), is “largely a collective matter...deeply bound to the question of who we are” and because this ‘collective self’ emerges from a particular historical legacy, “it is not something we can simply shake off” (p. 16). Our socially mediated identities are largely not recognisable by ourselves as historically constructed and contingent, but are, rather, experienced as ‘specified’ and fixed identities. As a result when these identities are experienced as being attacked we defend them and reinforce them because our very ‘self’ (constituted through the language of these identities) feels vulnerable and threatened. I have become aware that my initial response was from a sense of personal injury to my identity. Unlike when students pointed out where my whiteness was implicated in my teaching practice and where I could alter my behaviour through praxis, I felt paralysed when I experience my white identity as being challenged and, as a result, found myself oscillating between, on the one hand, defensiveness and anger and, on the other hand, considering whether I should resign from academia. This injured response is performative only in the way in which it serves to reinforce my need to protect my identity as a white person. In this way, instead of responding constructively to the ‘Look, a white!’ exclamations, I became more invested in defending, what I perceived to be, my ‘injured self’ and, therefore, my whiteness.

Fortunately, Butler (1997: 104) points out that that these injurious positions can be resisted and challenged: “As a further paradox, then, only by occupying – being occupied by – that injurious term can I resist and oppose it, recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose”. However, in this quote, Butler (1997) points out that resisting and opposing is not just a matter of stepping outside of our socially constructed self. As she points out we occupy and are occupied by our historically contingent selves, and it is only from within these occupied spaces that we can, therefore, begin to navigate and negotiate a different self. I cannot simply step above the historical reality that I am a white South African, born, raised and schooled throughout Apartheid.

Navigating a way forward

Once I was able to recognise the cause of my injurious defensiveness I started to consider how I could engage more constructively with the question of how I can continue to position myself and practice as a white pedagogue within the current context of higher education and, more specifically, within the discipline of psychology. Firstly, I recognised that such a response had to incorporate acknowledging my on-

going whiteness. As Sara Ahmed (2004b: 15) puts it, white people are required to “inhabit the critique with its lengthy duration”. I cannot simply step outside of the historically contingent space I occupy, but I can navigate a way through it in a critically reflexive and *ongoing* manner. Secondly, I have to recognise that I am not entitled to what Di Angelo (2011: 60) terms “racial comfort”. Di Angelo (2011: 61) proposes that historically white people “have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort. In sum, I have to learn to accept the reality of race discomfort, especially considering that I am white in a post-colonial and post-Apartheid context.

Zembylas and McGlynn (2012: 41) contend that discomfort can have transformational effect:

“discomforting emotions play a constitutive role in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities and in creating possibilities for individual and social transformation”.

By acknowledging discomfort and working with it, one is able to recognise those aspects of our selves that may be implicated in wider social injustice and with this recognition may come the motivation to bring about change (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012). Zembylas and McGlynn (2012) theorise about the pedagogical effect of discomfort within the school setting and argue that students need to be supported, emotionally and intellectually, through a pedagogy of discomfort for it to have transformative effect. The way in which I have addressed the race discomfort I have experienced, in order for it to have transformation effect, has been to mediate it through an engagement with the writing of white South African academics who are grappling with their white identities. One such academic is Samantha Vice (2010) who published an evocative paper that proposed that because all white South African people have been implicated in whiteness, they should focus their energies on self-rehabilitation and engage in silence in political spaces as their voices have historically been heard too loudly and repetitively. From such a perspective, the black student’s suggestion that white academics should remove themselves from the decolonisation project seems legitimate. However, other academics have challenged Vice’s (2010) suggestion of political silence. For example, while Eusebius McKaiser (2011: 453) agrees with Vice that “shame and regret are appropriate moral responses” for white people to experience in realising their implications in the subjugation of black South Africans, he does not agree with the suggestion that they should, therefore, respond with silence. He argues that the focus of Vice’s critique needs to be on “*paradigmatic ways of being white* that are unjust...” (McKaiser, 2011: 455) and, therefore, importantly highlights that not all white people engage in the same levels of whiteness all the time. McKaiser (2011: 458) states that he prefers Vice’s (2010) idea of being careful and

“living in reflective self-awareness” over and above her proposed silence. McKaiser (2011: 457) expands on what it means to be careful: “whites should engage politically in a way that does not perpetuate unearned privileges, *qua* whiteness, and, in a way that allows other interlocutors to engage them – whites – fully, as moral equals”. He also highlights that white people are citizens and should exercise the right to engage. As Mbembe (2016) argues, there is no reason that white people “should put their citizenship into hibernation” and that “opting out” is not constructive “in these times of re-engagement”. Similarly, Di Angelo (2011) suggests that silence and withdrawal are also counter-moves against discomfort and that “continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement results in the perpetual cycle that works to hold racism in place” (p. 66). Rather than retreating or remaining silent we need to start building the affective and cognitive skills and stamina to “sustain conscious and explicit engagement with race” (Di Angelo (2011, p. 66) and, therefore, contribute to the disruption of “common (and oppressive) discursive patterns around race” (p. 67).

McKaiser (201: 460) further argues that not engaging black people within public political space is “an expression of lingering whiteness, insofar as that decision presupposes the hegemony of whiteness could not be effectively rebutted by a black interlocutor”. Hook (2011: 499) makes a similar point that silence can be tantamount to a “self-aggrandizing form of detachment” and that by failing to enter into dialogue one “steps outside the bonds of reciprocity”. He argues that, in not speaking, people secure themselves from corrective feedback and that “silence connotes all too easily the distance of superiority”. Hook (2011: 499) recognises that retreating into silence may be driven by altruism, and a desire to listen and learn from historically marginalised voices, but argues that if one is “genuinely willing to take a secondary position... then to speak, to ask questions, is surely more an indication of modesty than is silence”. He also adds that silence closes down the potential for the kinds of transformative “dialogical practice” that theorists such as Paulo Freire argued for. In the end, Hook (2011: 499) recommends that white people should take up

“a speaking position proportionate to one’s representation – i.e., minority – status a white subject in a post-apartheid context’ by which one ‘attains a less remarkable position by being a small voice, than by being the voice – so noticeable for its absence – that has exempted itself from the set of possible contributions”.

While Vice (2010: 335-336) argues for silence she does verify that this silence should be active, that is, that it should not be “a failure to listen and engage and silence should not rule out conversation”. Reflecting on my memories in this article I suggest a re-reading of what she means by silence. If silence is active and engaging, then the silence Vice (2010) speaks of is the silence that happens when we take the time to actively listen

and to develop “the perspectives and skills” (Di Angelo, 2011: 66) needed to engage meaningfully and constructively when we do speak. Through an ‘engaged listening’, white people are better positioned to involve themselves in conversations that do not reproduce the historical privileging of white voices, and, therefore, contribute to the process needed to contribute towards the undoing of whiteness.

I have found such an opportunity to participate in ‘engaged listening’ around what my role might be in contributing towards African psychology, through an engagement with the work of Kopano Ratele (2016) who responds to a paper by Augustine Nwoye (2015) called **What is African psychology the psychology of?** Ratele (2016: 1) agrees with Nwoye’s (2015) call to advance African psychology and to challenge the euro-centric focus of Western psychology, but in his response asserts that “the growth of Africa(n)-centred psychology is hindered by the view that it is singular and static instead of composed of dynamic and manifold orientations”. He proposes four different African psychologies:

“African psychology as psychology in Africa; as a culturally, metaphysically, or spiritually inclined Africa(n)- centred psychology (which will be referred to as cultural African psychology); as a materially, politically, or critically focused African psychology (shortened to critical African psychology); and what we can refer to as psychological African Studies” (Ratele, 2016: 1).

By proposing these four psychologies Ratele (2016: 14) attempts to “illuminate and create space for different ways of locatedness on this terrain”. That is, the four African psychologies recognise the “different orientations, approaches, or stances to Africa and psychology” (Ratele, 2016: 14) that various academics within the discipline might inhabit. Through his argument he creates a space for *everyone* to locate themselves in the project of developing Africa-centred psychology in the South African context. African psychology is, therefore, not just the work of black South Africans, but *every* psychologist practicing and researching in the South African context. Therefore, the work for white academics, like myself, in the discipline of psychology is, in the spirit of Vice (2010), to listen to, engage with and converse with these different African psychologies to find out in which ways it is most appropriate to orientate themselves within the project. As Vice (2010) suggests, knowing when to be appropriately and actively silent (rather than silent as a form of disengagement) is the anxious task that white academics need to engage in on an ongoing basis.

Conclusion

Gannon (2013, 230) argues that through the process of reflexive writing in critical autoethnographic research (CAE), “we write ourselves into being... into particular

subject positions... and, in unpredictable ways, we call others into relation – both inside the text and in their readings of our texts”. Giorgio (2013: 231) proposes an “autoethnographic subjectivity” that is “an ongoing project... shifting, contradictory, multiple, fragile, fragmented” and an always collaborative process. CAE enables an unpredictable process of re-imagining the self that occurs when people engage with texts, either in the process of writing them or reading them (Gannon, 2013). In this way, the process of working through memories in the written form moves the writer and reader of CAE texts to “engage with and respond... in constructive, meaningful – even vulnerable – ways” (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013: 25). The process of engaging in this piece of CAE memory work, has created a reflexive process, mediated by various theoretical insights of other academics, that has enabled me to critically dialogue *with* the voices of black students who have highlighted the ways in which my whiteness is implicated in my practices as an educator. By sharing it I hope to invite and provide other white academics with an method to think critically about how their ongoing whiteness might be implicated in their practices in constructive rather than injurious and self-defensive ways.

At a personal level I acknowledge the need to remain committed to praxis if I am able to contribute appropriately and meaningfully to imagining what a decolonised psychology might look like in the context of higher education. This requires recognising that as a white South African I am implicated in, in an ongoing way, the practice of whiteness. Shannon Morreira (2015) makes this point in her critical analysis of a body of work by black and white South African academics across a number of universities who are engaging in a process of re-imagining the humanities and taking steps towards contributing to the decolonisation of education in various faculties. Morreira (2015: 9) acknowledges that even those academics whose work is critical and socially and politically responsive continue to be “implicated in the colonial matrix”. She argues, however that within this colonial matrix of power lie “the possibilities for a shift in the epistemological hierarchies at work in universities” (Morreira, 2015: 13). It is these possibilities that I hope to harness in my ongoing work as a white academic.

I would like to end this paper by sharing a colleague’s response to reading a draft of this article. While her feedback was encouraging she pointed out that she felt that my article lacked a certain amount of authenticity. She said that she could see that what I was doing was working to gain perspective on my reactions, however, she said that in the process I failed to acknowledge the extent of my emotional reaction in relation to, in particular, the experiences I recounted in the second set of memories. She suggested that as a black South African she recognised that I may have avoided this out of fear for the possible repercussions of such honesty, but

felt that I had, in the process, sacrificed a truly authentic piece of reflexive writing. In light of this feedback, I think it would be disingenuous of me not to acknowledge the full extent of my emotional response. As I have argued, the identity politics at play in these encounters are complex and the experience of discomfort I report on is, therefore, equally complex. It is filled with a mix of shame, guilt and even anger. These emotions do not miraculously resolve themselves, rather, they linger as I try to engage with them and navigate a way forward. I am, for example, still deeply disturbed, when I see banners like the “kill all whites” one on display during the “FeesMustFall” protests. It would be dishonest and unauthentic for me not to acknowledge the angst it elicits and my personal position that this kind of particular behaviour is unacceptable. It is undeniably hard not to react when your whiteness is called out. My stamina still needs considerable development. However, the process of mediated reflexivity has enabled me to tease my discomfort apart and to recognise what might be driving my varied emotional responses and where I need to take responsibility. It is this process of engaging *with* my emotions, rather than acting out on them or disregarding them, that facilitated an awareness of my white fragility and opened up the possibility for a more constructive engagement with my social world and my positioning and practices within it.

Todd May (2006: 23) argues that because who we become is historically contingent it is, therefore, possible to gradually work ourselves into a different position and take up a different set of practices. He proposes we can “use the material of who we are in order to create new possibilities for who we might be”. Citing Foucault, May (2006: 23), however, emphasises that these new possibilities require “patient labour” as we work on our “limits”. The journey that I am on as I navigate my way forward is a complex and nuanced one. It requires a constant engagement with my sense of self, my varied emotional reactions and my students’ voices. It is far from radical and requires a commitment to remaining grounded and implicated in the contingent history within which I was constituted and out of which I practice as an educator. May (2006: 123) describes this history as “at once constitutive and contingent: it makes us who we are, but not by necessity”. It is only in acknowledging this tenuous position that new possibilities and ways forward begin to unfold. An awareness of the history from which we have emerged does not erase that history nor elevate us above its constraints, rather, as May (2006: 124) suggests, it allows us to “play with, overturn, undercut, rearrange, parody, go beyond the legacy that we are”, but all the while remaining cognisant of the impact of this creative process. It is this process that I commit to as I re-enter into the project of finding my place in the wider collective project of contributing, as a white educator, to a decolonised psychology in the context of higher education in South Africa.

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