

PhDing while panicking in a Pandemic

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a global panic and the destabilisation of economic, and education systems resulting in a sense of anxiety and helplessness at a societal and individual level. We offer a reflection of the end of our PhD journey, that occurred concurrently with the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa. Thinking through an intersectional lens we draw parallels between our precarity as black women in higher education nearing the end of our PhD journey (s) and the unpredictability of life during the pandemic. While we recognise the incompatibility of life during a pandemic and PhDing (completing a PhD), we use this moment to map out how the precariousness in academia lends itself to a sense of anxiety and helplessness often to the death of scholarship. We attribute our panic while PhDing to the process of completing the thesis as well as the sense of insecurity we have observed and experienced within academia. We argue that the casualisation of young black women academics, lends itself to the reproduction of exclusionary practices in higher education.

Introduction

“It is not that black women have not been and are not strong; it is simply that this is only a part of our story, a dimension, just as the suffering is another dimension—one that has been most unnoticed and unattended to.”

Hooks (1991, p.257)

When it comes to the black women’s narratives there is a tendency to tell one sided narratives (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Narratives of the unstoppable magical black woman pinned against the narrative of the broken,

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battered and bruised black women, fail to see black women for all their complexities. We recognise how our narratives offered here, are adaptations of the well documented narratives of black women in academia. While we look at focusing on the end of our PhD journey which coincided with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we draw on our shared interest in narrative methodology and gender underpinned by African-centred/ decolonial feminist ethic to reflect on how our different experiences shaped how we have experienced the pandemic and the end of our doctoral journey. We highlight through the use of intentionality a multifaceted narrative of our PhD journey and the ways our individual narratives converge and diverge as we reflect on PhDing during a pandemic.

We use the word PhDing to encapsulate the process and acts of completing a PhD that is inclusive of but not exclusively related to the completion of the dissertation. PhDing is intellectual, emotional labour that involves sacrifice and managing personal and professional relationships amongst other things. The sense of panic we discuss here is attributed to helplessness and anxiety during this pandemic while questioning our position as knowledge producers as black women within a space that tends to reject people who look like us.

The pandemic

While some may say that the pandemic has exacerbated the inequalities in society (Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020), others may argue that this pandemic has illuminated how deep the crevices of inequality lie (Blundell et al., 2020). We contend that the latter is perhaps more accurate. We echo the words of Badat (2020, p.24) that the lockdown regulations have “laid bare and exacerbated inequalities, social exclusion, and injustice in all arenas of society”. The national lockdown is an emergency protocol that requires all South Africans to stay at home unless they are performing an essential service, getting an essential good or a service, one is collecting a social grant or if one is seeking emergency or life-saving medical attention or medication (The Presidency of Republic of SA, 2020).

The Covid-19 has shaken our sense of security in all areas of our life. The perpetual threat to life, financial security, livelihood and limited connection to social support structures has left all vulnerable. The efforts towards ‘flattening the curve’, that is reducing the number of infections saw many countries employ varying national lockdowns, which meant that the government put restrictions on the movement of their citizens. While the restriction of movement enabled governments or countries to curve the spread of the virus, the ramifications of these strict lockdown regulations may still be felt long after the pandemic (Greyling et al., 2021; Pillay & Barnes, 2020; Wagerif, 2020). In South Africa and globally the pandemic had serious implications on economic, health systems, education systems and personal lives (Badat, 2020; De Groot & Lemanski, 2021; Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021; Posel, et al., 2021; Ryan & El Ayadi, 2020). Enguita-Fernández, et al., (2020), note while there is a need for the restriction of movement,

these restrictions added a burden on women. In addition to the burden of care, the lockdown has also resulted in restricted access to economic opportunities, and limited social support (Wagerif, 2020). Colpitts et al. (2020) also reflect on the difficulties of balancing professional and personal responsibilities during the pandemic while trying to complete their PhD studies. The collapsing of the homework divide in our own lives was an extension of already compounded lives as full-time students and working involved in multiple contract projects.

In conceptualising this piece, we reflected on these inequalities alongside our experience through an intersectional lens. While there are similarities in our narratives, particularly towards the end of our thesis, our experiences were also shaped by other identities that we occupy. For instance, the first author moved to her parents' home at the end of yet another one year contract which coincided with the lockdown. Living in a house with seven other people, which included her then 3 year old, resulted in challenging home-life balance while simultaneously trying to complete a dissertation. For the second author, the pandemic and lockdown impacted her own personal resilience because it stripped her away from her support system (Khan, 2020). Living with only her sister left her isolated from her friends, family and colleagues. Writing her chapters became a challenge, and trying to focus on her thesis while the world was going into chaos and losing her support system, seemed impossible.

Covid 19 and the breaking of institutional walls

The pandemic arrives amidst growing calls for the transformation of higher education (Badat, 2020; Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019), which sees deliberate efforts towards the recognition of student needs that go beyond the formal teaching. This was evident in students call for free higher education (Dlamini, 2019), academic advocacy for the transformation and decolonisation of the curriculum (Morreira, et al., 2020), the university space (Kessi, 2017). The new normal as it were, brought to the fore the urgency of these conversations in higher education.

In South Africa, we know that social and economic inequalities mean that a number of students do not have the resources, such as laptops and data, to cope with online learning (Badat, 2020). While most universities attempted to provide these for most students (Bone, 2020), this effort is only one of the many challenges students and staff face (Jantjies, 2020; Mpungose, 2021). Jantjies (2020) notes that there is limited applied technology training for educators but no evidence for training for learners and students. Despite the technological challenges the pandemic has exposed how the education system is ill-prepared for remote learning that has become a norm in this pandemic (Colpitts et al., 2020).

In their reflective piece, Corbera, et al., (2020) speak of the conditions in which they find

themselves able to write during the pandemic in Barcelona. Amongst the things, they list as privileges at this time are good health, job security and space. De Groot and Lemanski (2021) note that poor South Africans living in urban areas often live in crowded, high density homes which will disadvantage students from poorer communities who may have relied on the campus connection and space for the success of their studies. As PhD candidates in this time of uncertainty, we were still fortunate enough to still have the resources to access online resources we needed, connect to our supervisors, as well as engage in activities related to our PhD and the development of our careers.

Despite our relative comfort, there was lingering concern regarding what comes of our career beyond this journey. Echoing Ramose (2010), who questioned the role of education in Africa in dire poverty, we ask of what use is the call for more PhDs, particularly black female PhD holders (Herman, 2012). Unfortunately, there aren't enough academic positions in academia for all the PhDs graduated with black female graduates occupying the least and lowest positions in academia (Nathane, 2020; Phakeng, 2015). With this knowledge, while completing our PhDs while on contract position we sometimes contemplated like Ramose (2010) and Herman (2012) amongst others the purpose of these qualifications when we too face the possibility of being unemployed PhD holders.

The completion of one's PhD's signifies a transition from student to being an academic (Breier et al., 2020). Being an academic is about the long term commitment to scholarship and the development of the next generation of academics (Herman, 2012) however, this purpose is often thinned in the process of securing a career in academia. Academia is underpinned by market driven values, that require scholars to participate in business orientated activities that at times may be difficult for younger academics who have not learned to play the game (Bone, 2020).

Breier, et al., (2020) note while South Africa higher education policy advocates racial and gender equality, it still maintains neo-liberal policies that are inclined to promote the monetarization of output commonly expressed as publish or perish. Nathane (2020, p.178) argues that the power and racial structures that are reflected in institutions of higher education are a "manifestation and reflection of what exists in the broader South African society". Amongst the plethora of responsibilities that academic staff have, universities tend to place an emphasis on research and research publications (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020).

While a PhD is considered a great achievement towards realising, it is only one component of the requirements of an academic post. In addition to a PhD, one is required to have teaching experience, conference attendance and presentation as well as publication outputs (Herman, 2012; Nathane, 2020). As emerging academics,

we recognise that the expectation to publish is not only limited to those in the academic positions but also a requirement for us who want to occupy more permanent positions. In writing this piece we reflect on our PhD journey, we also think about how our individual narratives, as well as collaborative narrative, would deviate from the narratives of black women in academia.

Black Women's experiences in academia

It is unfortunate as Black¹ female academics that our stories are not unique it seems that the only solace is in knowing that there are many before us and possibly after us that have and will experience this. Much research has been done into Black women's experiences in academia within a South African context and found that while there are a few who flourish in this environment, many are marginalised (Maodzw-Taruvunga & Divala, 2014; Mokhele, 2013). This phenomenon of the marginalisation of Black women academics is a global issue (Mabokela, 2001). The issues and challenges Black women face in academia are not new but rather it has been argued that these issues have not yet been fully acknowledged and resolved (Henry & Glenn, 2009). Academia has been described by many as a hostile space particularly for Black women who encounter more barriers than white women (Aguirre, 2000; Maseti, 2018). Ours here is not to rehearse the narrative but to add to it. Potgieter and Moleko (2004, p.84) argue that "black women are not taken seriously (or given adequate support) as producers of academic knowledge", which has detrimental consequences for their self-esteem and their career trajectories (Maseti, 2018; Potgieter & Moleko, 2004). In her paper, Maseti (2018) takes us through her painful experience as a Black woman in academia at a historically 'white' university. She notes how she was one of the few Black academics in her department, which left her psychologically scarred and always having to "prove my worth and intellectual capability" (Maseti, 2018, p.343).

In Botha's (2014) experience as a Black woman in academia, she notes how her experiences of being silenced, intimidated and rendered invisible in academia eventually led her to develop her 'agency' and 'ownership', which helped her to persevere within academia. Nkambule (2014) offers her experiences as a black student and academic. She relays memories of being under-prepared for the university's learning and teaching culture, feeling undermined as a Black lecturer and constantly being discriminated against and stereotyped. These narratives of alienation, vulnerability, being rendered invisibilised, having no access to support, being undetermined and constantly having one's credentials being questioned, were all themes emerging from research with Black women academics (Maodzw-Taruvunga & Divala, 2014; Mbokela, 2001; Mbokela & Mawila, 2004; Mokhele, 2013; Ndlovu, 2014).

¹ Black in this text refers to all groups that were oppressed during apartheid

While South African historically ‘white’ universities were founded on the ideologies of patriarchy, whiteness and classism that produce social injustices, they have made a concerted effort to transform (Cornell et al., 2016; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). These efforts have included the development of policies to redress inequalities and the inclusion of Black people (Cornell et al., 2016; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). However, despite these efforts, the university remains a very alienating space for many Black students and academics who find themselves in these universities (Cornell et al., 2016; Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Kessi, 2017; Maseti, 2018). This is because these transformation plans are but cosmetic, in that overt and covert exclusion and marginalisation practices remain intact within the institutional cultures (Mohope, 2014). In tackling these challenges faced by black students and academic staff, the University of Cape Town set up the Black Academic Caucus, which is a community of influential Black academics (Kessi, 2017). This group is a network of Black academics who provide each other with psychological and career support as well as work together to create a decolonial institution (Kessi, 2017). This network has helped Black academics find a space of belonging in UCT, an historically ‘white’ institution, however, this is but one institution, what about the other historically ‘white’ universities?

Theoretical Framework

In the study, we have employed Black feminist theory of intersectionality, as an appropriate theoretical framework to unpack our experiences as Black women who are PhDing through a pandemic. According to both Howard-Hamilton (2003) and Mokhele (2013), Black feminist theory is an appropriate theory for researching Black academics, as the theory helps one to have a deeper level of understanding about their challenges and needs. Black women in academia, are subordinated by (at least) racism and sexism, which make them vulnerable to having their presence and contributions overlooked, erased, and even appropriated, thus the need to unpack their challenges (Mokhele, 2013). Furthermore, Black feminist thought places the ideas and experiences of Black women at the centre of analysis (Collins, 2000).

Intersectionality coined by Crenshaw (1991), is what separates Black Feminist thought from other feminisms. Intersectionality is an analysis that argues that different systems of oppression crisscross to shape ones lived experience (Collins, 2000; Collins, 2007). These may be systems of race, class, gender, location, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, age and other identities (Collins, 2000). This approach acknowledges that each experience is unique but also notes that people in similar social categories such as black, women academics may also share similar experiences. Crenshaw’s (1991) work on Black women in America showed that violence experienced by these women is shaped by their identities such as their race and class. However, she notes that women’s experiences of violence differ as a result of their class and race. The way women in abusive relationships access resources, which could help them cope with the abuse or help them leave an

abusive partner, are shaped by the intersection of race, class and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). We make a similar argument for Black women in academia, arguing that our experiences and panic during the pandemic is because of the intersections of our race, gender, class and age.

Methodology

We adopt an autoethnographic methodology to explore our experiences as Black women PhDing through a pandemic. The personal narrative is a type of qualitative research in which the researchers' stories becomes the object of study, focusing on how either individuals or groups of people make sense of events (Creswell, 2007). Autoethnography provides a space for the researcher to draw and reflect on their own experiences as a way of understanding phenomena (Schmid, 2019). Academia has marginalised and excluded multiple voices and "autoethnography is a potential gateway for those with subordinated, subjugated identities to have a voice and express unheard, silenced, perhaps taboo-ised stories" (Schmid, 2019: p.265).

Autoethnography is defined as "... an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006: 739). This method of enquiry studies the social and cultural life, particularly the researcher's unique social, political and historical context (Schmid, 2019). In autoethnography research, researchers share their own stories and their voice is foregrounded in the research. Autoethnography values the authentic individual talk and thus the story told by the researcher must be rooted in the person's own words and style (Schmid, 2019). The viewer and subject are collapsed into each other (Anderson, 2006).

Autoethnography, as a method, best allows us to reveal our experiences and the panic of completing a PhD while experiencing a pandemic. Autoethnography is an appropriate methodology as it is an empowering and healing discourse. It is a method that provides a platform for Black women to represent their own stories and experiences, using their own voice. While also being a useful method in uncovering oppressions that may be deeply hidden (Maseti, 2018). Autoethnography is also valuable in that it shows how the personal/ psychological is connected to the political, and how the political affects the personal (Maseti, 2018; Schmid, 2019). Chang (2008) suggests that this method may provide a space for self-transformation which could bring healing from emotional scars. This method allows one to "assert standpoints that have been marginalised" (Schmid, 2019: p 269).

Discussion

Narrative One: To kill a black woman in academia

I once heard someone say in a conference presentation "My mother died in her 40s because she was a black woman". While I do not recall the rest of the presentation I

remember this sentence because it stayed with me, in the same way, it has captivated me the first time I heard it. What could have possibly killed this woman in her 40s that was linked to her blackness? I started to think about the many ways she could have died (see de Gelder, 2012). Was she sick? Was she killed by her lover? When I eventually returned to the presentation, I learned that her mother was ill. I remember the presenter saying that her mom died after suffering a short illness, almost as if she gave up too soon; but then as a black woman having fought so many fights, losing the battle to illness was probably an easier fight to lose.

While I have not battled a life threatening illness, I think about the number of times well intending friends, family and colleagues have encouraged me to fight “this” or “that”, don’t know that “this” is not the only thing I am fighting at the moment. And instead of choosing battles to fight sometimes, it is easier to choose the battle one is willing to lose. Since then, I have returned to that presentation many times. Recently, it came back to me again when I received the news that my PhD was completed. The joy and excitement I felt were soon replaced by a sense of dread. I started to wonder where was the promised light at the end of the long tunnel of studying. Not only was there no light but the tunnel seemed to be getting longer, extended by the sense of precariousness.

The deep sadness was intensified by the sense of guilt I felt. I felt guilty because I knew this great achievement was not mine alone but the many people that had supported me in my journey. Therefore, if not for anything else but them, I had to put on a happy face and allow them to celebrate with me.

Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008) describe the transition out of university as potentially one of the most stressful periods. Most graduates are reported to experience a sense of loss and suffer from depression during this transition due to unemployment (Papier, 2017), which may intensify the sense of loss and increased negative affect (Keough & O’Connor, 2015; Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). In my experience, completing my PhD while precariously employed created a lot of anxiety. It felt as if the panic I felt during my PhD was laced with hope for what lies beyond the PhD journey. Once the line was crossed I soon realised that there was very little that inspired hope beyond the line.

None the less we had to continue working, working out or precariousness as it were. After a year of trying to complete this piece, I reflect on the many webinars I have attended in the past year. I am overwhelmed at how much the narratives of women in academia mirror life in a pandemic. The constant fear, particular for emerging academics, that their end is always looming. While academia is a space of liberation, through thinking theorisation (Hooks, 1991), the academy is also a site for the reproduction of systematic violence. This was emphasised when I got into a more stable position, where instead of congratulatory notes there were many warning sirens. Some warning me of the immense

challenges that lie ahead and others urging me to walk in fists up as I assume my new position. Again, I found myself returning to that presentation. Here I returned to that presentation, asking myself is this how black women die in academia? Is this the battle that is easier to lose amongst the many battles black women face in this world? After attending numerous webinars, particularly those focusing on health and wellbeing during this pandemic as well as webinars and workshops aimed at addressing the challenges faced by emerging black female academics one thing has been consistent; younger scholars, especially black females, seem to sense the dread of it all.

After all that is said and done, as I transition into this new role I wish my understanding of hetero-patriarchal capitalist racism was purely theoretical and not so engraved in my scars. I wish the remedy for those scars was not the knowledge I am not the only one. I wish the shared narrative was not a knowledge that our scholarship will be paved by the broken pieces of those who could not speak, who could not be but brave enough to share the little of their world that our world cares to understand. I wish I didn't have to write about race, gender, feminism and justice as weapons armed to face the multitudes of injustices in and around this space. I wish that that the narratives my work will tell will be happier ones if not; I wish they are important.

Narrative Two: "Where to from here?"

I went into the year 2020 full of ambitions and dreams of completing and submitting my thesis by June and graduating in December. I would finally get to wear my red gown and have my hard work acknowledged and celebrated. After that my career in academia would take off because everyone reassured me that with a PhD in Psychology, you would always find a good job.

Later that year in March, South Africa had its first case of COVID-19. Later that month the country went into a national lockdown, which resulted in universities being shut down among other public and private sectors. In an instant, our lives turned upside down. No longer could we interact face-to-face, isolation and anxiety became the order of the day and I still had to finish five chapters of my thesis.

Every day I would turn on the news to see how many cases and COVID-19 related deaths we were on in South Africa. It seemed to consume my time and I become obsessed with statistics globally and locally instead of writing. Each day my level of anxiety would increase because I was afraid of who would die next, when would it affect my family and who would we lose to this disease.

My supervisors' kindness and understanding alongside a reminder of my obligations to my funders, and myself, motivated me to set aside some time daily to write. I ended up submitting my thesis in September, and after the submission, my eyes were overcome with tears. I couldn't believe that my PhD journey had come to completion, despite

all the challenges I encountered during the pandemic. I took some time to reflect on the journey before jumping into the job market. To reflect on my journey as a Black postgraduate student who was doubted, had my competency questioned, was often one of the few Black students in a majority white class, who was too afraid to publish my work because of the immense insecurity instilled in me during my academic journey and feeling like I had nothing to offer the academic world (Maseti, 2018).

After that break, I got into applying for work because I was done being a student and I could not afford to have a long break. I come from a working-class family, with a single mother of four, living off a police officer's salary, which is not enough to sustain us. Furthermore, I felt the pressure to find a job immediately, as everyone was asking me "so when do you start working now?" After numerous applications to lecturing and research posts and consistently being rejected, I felt the anxiety and hopelessness creeping up again. I soon realised that work was scarce. The pandemic had and continues to result in companies closing, employees getting retrenched, grants not being renewed and academic and research posts becoming more and more scarce. Many of my colleagues who recently graduated with their PhD's find themselves in a similarly precarious situation, without a permanent job, only securing part-time jobs. Furthermore, because I was a full-time student and filled with so many insecurities as a Black student, I did not focus much on creating a publication record which most of the jobs I applied to, required. I now find myself in this pandemic trying to write as much as I can, trying to build my credentials and publication record so that I will be employable and move away from only being the guest lecturer and tutor with a short term contract. At the same time, I wonder if academia is the place for me as a Black woman. The university space has continued to be a problematic space for young Black women, which I have observed as both a student and being part of the staff on a short term contract basis for over 6 years. I have witnessed Black women, as well as myself, having our credentials and competency questioned constantly while having to deal with racism and sexism (Maodzw-Taruvunga & Divala, 2014; Mabokela, 2001; Mabokela & Mawila, 2004; Mokhele, 2013; Ndlovu, 2014).

It all leaves me questioning, where to from here? Where do I as a Black woman with a PhD fit? When you are not employable because you don't have credentials but are overly qualified to be unemployed.

Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has left mass devastation and loss globally. The pandemic has "laid bare and exacerbated inequalities, social exclusion, and injustice in all arenas of society" (Badat, 2020, p.24). In this piece, we reflected on the continuities of these inequalities within academia. Drawing from our experiences as we transition from one stage of our academic career we note how the anxieties regarding our post PhD phase were consistent with the anxieties regarding the post-Covid world, specifically what academia might look like post-Covid.

This article has offered our reflections on completing a PhD, the challenges that arose in that journey and the interplay between our race, class, gender and age as we have tried to and continue to navigate the academy. Our reflections offer a way of thinking through what it means to be young, Black and a woman in academia. Amidst calls for transformation, exacerbated by the pandemic, our reflections show just how slow that process has been and how much still needs to be done to make Black people feel like they belong and can flourish in these spaces. The reflections in this article on being Black bodies in the academy echo those of many researchers before us. In this article, we highlighted our racialised experiences as Black, young, women who have completed a PhD during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of an autographic method in this paper has provided a platform for us as Black women to represent our own stories and experiences, using our own voice, which is an empowering and healing discourse.

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