



My Journey of a Thousand Miles

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Introduction

I am a black African woman who dares to revoke and invalidate boundaries, a woman who is not scared by change of any sort. I see challenges and problems as opportunities. I am a woman from very humble rural beginnings—beginnings which others may perceive from a deficit, lack, deficiency, disadvantaged perspective. I am forever proud of my roots for from their wisdom I am today. My roots have grounded me for today and tomorrow's trials. I am the last born of six children, two boys and four girls. I am told that I started school at a much earlier age than is usual because I could already read and write. I am a mother of two grown-up boys, Tumi and Bokang.

This important conversation is not just a narration of my experiences to others, but a chance to listen to my own voice. It is also a dialogue with myself as I bring to the surface not only what others think I am, but also

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my own fears, insecurities, and the pain I have endured throughout my journey to the promised land of academia. I have allowed my feelings about this journey to inform my growth. They have become my trusted path to becoming a knowledgeable person. As I start to write this piece, I begin with a deep reflection on the genesis of this journey, and I interrogate my thoughts about how it all began: what my role has been (or could have been), what I bargained for or wished I did, and my experiences of being part of an 'acclaimed' academic community which is finding it hard to free itself from the imperfections caused by decades of discrimination.

It has been an arduous two-decade-long journey better described by Lenning et al. (2011, p. 1) as a road trip with many detours and 'a journey of a thousand miles' (Lao Tzu) worth completing in baby step. It has also been an uneven playground to uncover the conspiracies of those who have full ownership rights within universities that are undergoing transformation—a rare occasion for a black woman from a disadvantaged background to defy the odds. It has also been the most fulfilling passage into academia, which has undoubtedly culminated in a full basket of opportunities and achievements which entail among other things: changing the lives of the many students who crossed my path, progressing through the academic ranks, assuming significant leadership positions in Higher Education, participating in key national Higher Education policy structures, receiving invitations for guest speaking, and this chance and others for ally-ship and sisterhood with scholars beyond the borders of my country. All these mark academic rites of passage, which unfortunately have come at no cheap price, but rather with so much pain and resilience at the prime of my academic career. I have had to make hard choices to endure the pain, and out of 'free will' I toiled, for I knew this would give me 'freedom to be happy' (Ahmed, 2019, p. 4) and to live my life as an academic.

I am filled with complete awe and appreciation, first for my patience, resilience, and tenacity, and then for the 'gifts of grace' I have received in this profession—opportunities of direct and indirect mentorship, collaboration, friendships, networks, and sisterhood that have carried me through this journey and brought me to this platform where I contemplate with other black women warrior scholars from outside the borders

of my country. We contemplate not only history and what has been, but the future and what should be for us and many other black women in this profession.

As I lament and shed tears for constantly being subjected to tests, to microscopic analyses questioning my integrity as a black woman, I also cry for my country and its persisting challenges and ‘gross inequities in access, opportunities, participation and outcomes especially for blacks—students and women academics’ (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2019). A strong expectation now lies upon me to contribute to building a better academia—one that I have always contemplated and longed for. I share with my sisters the strategies I have used to navigate the difficult journey. I share values that have grounded my own career path when all else seemed bleak. As I narrate these storied accounts, I hope readers, especially young upcoming academics, will take the cue and draw from my lived experiences, and those of others, ideas about what might possibly work for them.

Contextual Contradictions

In their ideology of a layered reality and the long-researched framework of structure, culture, and agency, great scholars and social theorists Roy Bhaskar (1989) and Margaret Archer (1995, 1996) argue that without an enabling environment, supportive culture(s), and people with agency, change is reduced to a futile exercise. In the past, many areas of work in South Africa, including universities, sequestered blacks to spaces devoid of lucrative opportunities for personal and professional development (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2017a, p. 2). In universities—especially historically white universities—black academics were seen as ‘illegitimate, alien occupants’, visitors, or intruders (Mabokela, 2012; Mabokela & Magubane, 2004). Certainly not much learning could take place in these spaces where people were subjugated to areas of no worth (Naicker, 2013). This was a deliberate strategy by the apartheid government meant to keep the ‘clever blacks’ on the back pews with as little opportunity for educational and economic emancipation as possible. Although today the democratic government has achieved significant milestones in

transforming the higher education system (CHE, 2019), there are recurring problems with ensuring 'access with success'. The system struggles to achieve equity in outcomes for among others, black children who access higher education, and struggle to complete their studies on time or altogether. It struggles with equitable representation and participation of black women scholars in academia (CHE, 2019; Makhubu, 1998). The numbers of black women professoriate and women in higher echelons are still very low regardless of the many redress strategies put in place by government and by individual institutions (CHE, 2019). Although government through the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has recently started financing several capacity development programmes at all universities, attempts to provide black women with equitable opportunities are still marred by many contradictions and discrepancies. Too often, black women are undermined directly. When mediocre support is offered, or distributed unevenly by those perceived as the rightful occupants of these universities (historically white universities), black women are undermined. Black women are undermined by taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions that they are voiceless, passive, invisible, inarticulate, and lacking agency. Policy rhetoric continues to convey that all is fine—when it is far from so. Black women are impacted by unequal power relations and cultural stereotypes about race, gender, identity, and language. Enormous challenges continue to exist in terms of the scalability of these capacity development programmes. Turning the tide of inequity around is no easy feat.

The system's progress is constrained largely by institutional environments (cultures and histories), uneven distribution of resources, and lack of willingness by those who claim they are natural inhabitants of these institutions to exercise their agency towards developing newcomers, especially blacks who are often perceived as outsiders. This resistance and indifference which stem from un-researched, unscientific reasons such as arguments about encroachment of 'personal spaces', 'fears of losing jobs', or 'fears that the quality of education will suffer in the hands of the other', have come to form new acceptable sub-cultures.

Many universities in South Africa, especially historically white universities (HWUs), have been and continue to undergo metamorphosis, and

are in continuous transformation to truly redeem and reclaim themselves from discriminatory historical legacies and cultures that still manifest in subtle debilitating formations. The luxury of enjoying a normal academic growth and trajectory is therefore hard to come by. We would agree that naturally, one's intrinsic energies, power, and agency function at the maximum if the environment is nurturing, trusting, and enabling, rather than untrusting, passive, and condescending. This is where mentoring, sisterhood, collaboration, and working together could turn the tide around. Contrary to this wish for ideal spaces, however, there is always a dearth of not only willing mentors, but those who truly understand the shortcomings of Blacks (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2017a, p. 12).

The idea of joining a place that was previously reserved for a certain group of people in a country with a history of discrimination, a system that is still fraught with imperfections that throttle people's souls, is bound to give you chills no matter how assertive and brave you may be. Having to strive to be like the other, to be trusted for your brains (not favours), or to become a respected academic is even more nerve-racking. This is a feeling that only those who go through this journey can understand. As you work yourself up the ranks, you are filled with fear and doubt about whether you are good enough, and whether you will disappoint yourself and others who have bequeathed trust upon you. You are challenged to deal with your own insecurities, as well as the doubts of those who perceive blackness as a 'lack'; as poor quality and a lowering of standards. The absurdity of those who bear assumptions that discrimination has dissipated into thin air, while such appellations thrive, leaves many black academics having to navigate difficult academic spaces on their own. Becoming intentionally oblivious to the noise(s) and becoming resolute not to wear the victimhood mantle over my head have required much strength. Denialism by perpetrators has done nothing, but propagate subtle acts of discrimination, while countenancing their arguments has stalled progress in achieving equity in academia. Making a success of one's career is the only way to disprove the myths that abound in such unsupportive environments.

The Pains and Gains of an Academic Journey

The pain of having to scrape the surface to make headway in what would otherwise be available to all can only be understood by those who go through the same experience. If the past painful history of our country had not been, I guess there could have been equity of opportunity and outcomes for all. These narratives are not easily believed or understood by those who have not been in similar situations.

I joined academia in 2000 as an intern in research management at a Centre for Higher Education Studies at a well-known historically white Afrikaans speaking university. A shift from being a high school biology and chemistry teacher to be an academic in a transforming University was bold: first, the change of discipline, second, change of career, and third, joining a previously white institution at a time when the country was undergoing massive transformation. The bold step gives me chills today as I look back at all the struggles I endured to 'fit', to 'survive', and to prove my credibility (Shackleton, 2007) , but also as I look at all the achievements and celebrations I enjoyed to this end, albeit with little freedom as these were viewed with scepticism by those who claim to be legitimate knowledge holders (Maton, 2014; Mainah, 2016; Mabokela, 2012). I am also not surprised by my achievements because I have been a big dreamer from childhood. My heart yearned to be a medical doctor—a passion that still burns inside me for my late father nourished it well. Against my wishes, I found myself in a teaching career following in my mother's and big sister's footsteps. Although this was by default and not by design, I was not going to let that stop me from becoming a 'doctor' one day, and ironically, I became one in higher education. This account is therefore facing backwards into my lived experiences, inwards into self, and outwards into my environment, but most importantly it looks forward into the future that we can create for ourselves and others who join the academy.

My academic life, and my life in general, has been values-driven. I come from a family that possessed strong values and work ethic. My dear mother who was a primary school teacher and principal modelled many values that helped through tough times, and which underpin my life

today. Among them I can mention resilience, assertiveness, dependability and trustworthiness, respect for self and others, hard work, and her amazing resolve to provide for her family. Nothing surpasses consistent hard work and conviction to a worthwhile course—these do not escape the eyes of those with a similar conviction, and perhaps power and interest to forge relationships and become your allies/associates in the academic journey. The strength of my oral tradition upbringing has been to learn by listening to those with wisdom, observe, and watch, act, and emulate them. It was easy for me to translate these teachings into the academic environment and to grow my profession by paying attention to what academia and the university stand for.

Never in my academic journey have I enjoyed a day or holiday/vacation without working on building my profession. I remember all my working holidays and forfeited leave with fond memories—for in them I made a lifetime investment, learning and catching up on scholarly work, reading, writing, mentoring others, and supervising postgraduate students. All these investments and achievements would not have been possible without this huge sacrifice of setting time aside every day to build this career.

I have spent almost two decades working in historically white Afrikaans Universities, and I am currently working in a historically white liberal university. I have spent this time learning and unlearning cultures. As a black woman, I have met many challenges, but yes, there have also been many opportunities which I have intentionally embraced. My motto all these years has been to see challenges as opportunities and not to expend much energy lamenting these as constraints. I have not had any formal mentors by my side, but I have always imposed myself in a very subtle but respectful way on those who exuded wisdom and knowledge of higher education. I have not been scared to work hard for things I wanted, to sacrifice sleep, to ask questions when I did not know, and to learn from the work of others. I have found worrying about what other people should do for me or for other black colleagues not too useful, because oftentimes we fail to support each other, even though charity is argued as beginning at home.

Mentorship for me is two-fold, it is direct and indirect. Subtle imposition, observation, and emulation without impersonation or cloning

oneself all fall in the latter category. Direct mentorship usually is more formal, involving someone who is more experienced in helping you learn the ropes of the profession. In my earlier career at a historically white university, I benefitted from the wisdom of a white male who created many learning opportunities for me. He supported my understanding of higher education structures nationally and internationally, making strategies for mastering the academic enterprise transparent for me. My most memorable learning, however, came indirectly. I observed the strategies and approaches my experienced and learned colleagues employed and learned from everyone who surrounded me. This way of learning saw me grow in academia in a short space of time.

More than ever before, many academics are inundated with their own work (teaching, research, community engagement, institutional contribution, and developing themselves professionally). Institutions have also massified, while cohorts of learners have changed drastically. All these aspects are demanding much more from those with power and experience. My advice to newcomers is to value indirect learning opportunities, as not everyone may be privileged to have a mentor.

I am also worried by expectations that those who are alleged to have 'arrived' or 'made it' in academia should mentor others single-handedly. This expectation can serve to stifle the growth of those who give hope to others. As we argue for the building of a kinder values-driven academy, we should be sensitive to the changing nature of academia, and the huge expectations on those academics who could serve as potential mentors, advisors, collaborators, and sisters to create an ideal future—one that is hopeful, kind, and truly inclusive.

I have chosen to model good academic business conduct and acumen, and I create opportunities for others seeking to transform themselves, inviting them into working spaces. Hard work, consistency, and dependability have become requisite attributes and criteria that I use as a basis for sharing my knowledge, energy, and time with others. I believe these traits are a foundation for a successful academic career.

I must hasten to warn my sisters that modelling alone is not enough. It is incumbent on new academics to understand the goals of academia, what the profession stands for, and the skill sets required for mastery. They should develop and hone these. Finding yourself, your space, and

your voice in academia does not happen by default, but by design. It is not a big bang, but a long carefully crafted journey. In my unpublished book, ‘Turning the Tide of Disadvantage in My Favour’ (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2017b), I narrate my lived experiences in the form of aphorisms. I defy constraining scholarly works of writing (Mays, 2018, p. 4) as I decode myths about disadvantage, lack, and deficiency that many people associate with singleness, with women, and with black women academics in particular! In that work I conclude,

...if only we could stop dwelling on polarised dimensions that the world has constructed for us as women, and as black women, but rather set our minds on what these connotations can turn into if we listen carefully to their cues, and if we make informed decisions to always turn the tide of disadvantage into opportunities, then a lot more women can become what they have always dreamed and aspired for South Africa has many opportunities and possibilities to offer and all we have to do as black women is to have an appetite for moving beyond long-established comfort zones and boundaries defined for us by others who because of their own selfishness, insecurities and lack of trust would rather see us occupy positions of no power forever (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2017b, pp. 33–34).

I am still on this journey of defying these boundaries, *shiFting* them out of my path. As I continue on this journey of a thousand miles, the world of growth continues to await me!

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