

On (un) Becoming Ghosts in Academia: A Coloured Female Academic's Narratives in Post-student Protest Higher Education in South Africa

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168.14>

ABSTRACT

I am conducting an autoethnographic study on the narratives of female academics of colour in the post-student protest era. I am interested in exploring how women of colour navigate this space, the progress made through the unrest, and the remaining obstacles. Autoethnography is a research and writing approach that aims to describe and analyse personal experiences to gain a broader understanding of cultural and social experiences. This approach challenges colonial research practices and aims to represent others in a more politically, socially just, and conscious manner. The concept of hauntology, as explained by Derrida (1994), suggests that socio-economic and political phenomena such as apartheid, racism, inequality, and injustice are not dead but continue to have a lingering impact on our existence. My connection to these ghosts' dates back over 300 years, to the arrival of the first slave ships from India and Ceylon. These ghosts have been with me throughout my life, from my mother's womb through my upbringing, education, and now my academic career. In the current emotionally charged debates surrounding coloured identity, my goal is to explore how a group of female academics of colour engage with these ghosts from our past and how they can be utilised to navigate these still troubled spaces. By intertwining my growth stories with black feminist theory, particularly the concepts of respectability politics, anger, and creative resistance, I will illustrate what becomes possible in our academic and personal lives when we embrace, welcome, and liberate our ghosts.

Keywords: Academic identities, coloured identity, hauntology

1 Introduction

Hauntology - a concept derived from Derrida (1994), suggests that social-economic and political phenomena, such as apartheid, racism, inequality, and injustice, are not dead but haunt and define our presence. My ghosts go back over 300 years, from when the first slave ships arrived from India and Ceylon (Erasmus, 2001). My ghosts have been with me all my life, in my mother's womb, from birth, throughout growing up, studying, and now performing an academic life (Lewis, 1996).

Against the current context of emotionally charged debates around decolonisation, positionality, and race (coloured) identity, I use a narrative approach to explore how I - as a coloured female academic - engage with these ghosts of our past (materialised here in my imaginary as ballerinas) and how I might use them to help navigate these troubled spaces. I have been drawn to ballerinas my whole life. I find ballerinas fascinating: these magical, spiritual creatures with near superpowers. They glide over stages, ghostlike figures appear flying, and they mesmerise audiences. When you study the audience, they are spellbound by the ballerinas on stage. Ballerinas are haunted, haunting, beautiful, and mystical. Edgar Degas, a well-known French artist, has captured the essence of this in his pastel drawings and oil paintings, as well as the loneliness of these dancers within their complex relationships with each material and method.



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Proceedings DOI: [10.21467/proceedings.168](https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168); Series: AIJR Proceedings; ISSN: 2582-3922; ISBN: 978-81-970666-6-5

2 Theory and Calculation

In contrast to the delicate charm of ballerinas, a poignant contradiction exists: They embody a standard of beauty and elegance that sharply contrasts with my reality as a woman of colour in South Africa. Despite this incongruity, the fascination with ballerinas continues, prompting me to reflect on the underlying motivations behind this attraction. As Lewis (1996) suggests, the theory of hauntology provides a lens through which to analyse the complex dynamics at play. The ghostly presence of ballerinas in my story, intertwined with the haunting echoes of historical injustices, represents a paradoxical tension between allure and alienation. As Derrida (1994) explained, Hauntology posits that the spectres of past injustices continue to shape our present realities, influencing our perceptions and experiences profoundly. Thus, the enduring charm of ballerinas can be seen as a manifestation of this haunting presence, revealing a complex interplay between personal identity and societal ideals. As I grapple with this paradox, I am confronted with the unsettling question: Why am I drawn to representations of beauty and grace that inherently exclude and marginalize individuals like myself? My stories talk about being dis- and misplaced (Hossain, 2013). Like a ghost in the in-between. In the in-between space of excavating my Ph.D., I have to discover who I am. Where am I from? Why do I feel so lost? In this section, I am looking at scenes from my life, drawn both from my childhood and professional context, to show how I am experiencing the ballerina, this symbol of Western, white beauty and grace both as an oppressing and liberating force (Daigle, 2019; Clive, 2019). Weaving stories on my own becoming with black feminist writings on intersectionality, respectability politics, and rage, I will depict what is being made possible in our own academic and personal spaces when we embrace our ghosts, welcome them, free them, and us - a personal haunting that speaks to a more significant political material symbolic haunting of South Africa.

3 Coloured identity and current shifts in women's understanding of self

In 2019, a research paper about coloured women and their identity (Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht & Terblanche, 2019) started to intrigue me. In this paper, which caused an uproar in academia and was eventually withdrawn, the authors linked race to a limited brain ability. The call to fight back, to challenge a system that still allowed such racism, became loud and difficult to ignore. I felt the call to join women of colour in spaces such as “the kroeskop⁵ movement” on Facebook, a movement in which women of colour proudly wear their natural hair, where women refuse to adhere to Western standards of beauty, and where the personal becomes political. These shifts, these calls started to whisper eerily in my ear: who am I? I am the firstborn of Peter Goetham, the firstborn of Boeta Gummy Goutami, from 4 Tiny Street, District 6. I was born of slaves, of people lost at the bottom of the ocean bed, of people never buried. I am from displaced people on the Cape Flats, I am of “kaapse klopse⁶” born from and within a life of superstitions. Comfortable with the unexplained and hair-raising presence of things unnamed. Evil was/is real, even if not spoken of, and successfully oppressed people like me for generations and generations (Chetty, 2010).

4 Academic context: a merged Extended Curriculum Programme

In 2002, the government proposed restructuring the institutional landscape of higher education (HE) in South Africa to become a top-down, government-driven vehicle for transforming society (Frans, 2008). The objective of this restructuring was the development of a HE system that would deliver effectively and efficiently and that would be based on equity, quality, excellence, responsiveness, good governance, and management. The mergers were driven by an efficiency agenda that now characterises the academic sector, internationally but also in South Africa, following

⁵ kroeskop /-kɔp/ [Afrikaans, kop head], an offensive term for (one with) frizzy or tightly-curved hair (used especially of the hair of black or 'coloured' people).

⁶ The Kaapse Klopse (or simply Klopse) is a minstrel festival that takes place annually on 2 January and it is also referred to as Tweede Nuwe jaar (Second New Year), in Cape Town

numerous shifts in policy to allegedly respond to inequality entrenched amongst Historically Black Universities (HBCUs) and particularly among universities of technology. However, what was not considered was the potentially traumatic impact of these mergers on the staff involved. As part of the consolidation process of merging several Technikons and Colleges in the Western Cape, I was moved along with my department to the District 6 campus (only recently renamed), where my family was forcibly removed 70 years ago. Working as a lecturer in design and teaching in the Extended Curriculum Programme on this site (this cursed place, a place stolen and haunted by unmarked graves) is strange and, at times, chilling.

5 Methodology

I was introduced to autoethnography in my search for a methodology that would allow the unpacking of my own and my colleagues' narratives. Tansley (2021) states that "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis, 2004)". This was a good match for the type of research I wanted to engage in. My personal experiences of being an academic in the design discipline and navigating the start of postgraduate studies are the focus of this chapter. Describing me and my colleagues' journeys feels important, bringing an often overlooked perspective. Autoethnography challenges colonial ways of researching and representing others and treats research as a political, socially just, and socially conscious act (Holman Jones, 2018; Ellis, 2004). Research in higher education cannot be done without these considerations. As a method, autoethnography is both a process and a product. This means I am personally involved in the research - "doing" and "writing" about my own experiences and those of colleagues in similar situations- while critically reading and analysing this narrative along and through black feminist literature and theories (Daigle, 2019; Hossain, 2013).

My grandmother used to say: "die slawe van java kannie russie wan' julle is nie gevind en begrawe nie, ons dra die seer", which loosely translated means that the enslaved people from Java, where my family originates from, cannot be laid to rest, and we carry the pain. I am embarking on an autoethnographic study, exploring narratives of coloured female academics in a post-student protest era. I am interested in how these women negotiate this space, what has been made possible through the unrest, and what still holds us back. Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience to understand the broader cultural and social experience. This approach challenges colonial ways of researching and representing others and sees research as a political, socially just, and socially conscious act. I regard autoethnography as both a process and product, doing and writing myself into this world.

As such, autoethnography resists traditional research methods, which favour the hegemony of whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, Western Christianity, able-bodiedness and the like. Autoethnography allows us to shift the gaze and challenge some dominant narratives around progress and success. I will use me and my colleagues' stories as a lens to portray how the ghosts of the past still haunt us. Hauntology is a concept derived from Derrida (1994), who suggests that social-economic and political phenomena, such as apartheid, racism, inequality, and injustice, are not dead but haunt and define our presence. Our ghosts go back over 300 years to when the first slave ships arrived from India and Ceylon. My ghosts have been with me all my life, from birth to growing up, my studies, and my academic life.

In the current context of emotionally charged debates around coloured identity, resulting in more robust and more confident voices, I am aiming to explore shifts in how coloured female academics are engaging with these ghosts of our past. Using artwork, a digital collage of Western paintings, and my own, I will depict what is being made possible in our academic and personal spaces through these shifts when we embrace our ghosts, welcome them, and free them and us. I draw on the sea in this exhibition series as a metaphor for higher education institutions. I draw on Edgar Degas, the French Expressionist, and ballet dancers as inspirations and symbols of whiteness and my academic performance in academia. My undercurrent of trying to perform white to be seen in academia. The ballet dancers are superimposed into seascapes. The odd combination of a ballerina in the sea visual depicts the out-of-place feeling many womxn still feel in the South African design industry and tertiary institutions that teach design and in societies.

6 Discussion

Finding allies using their skills and understanding your shortcomings is essential to progress. Looking at allies, asking for help: I had to look across the room of the SAVAH conference to my colleague and friend for the correct pronunciation of words. Even though I practised them all week in front of a crowd of academics and researchers, at that moment, they were gone. Calling on our friends and allies during a presentation, as I have, co-creates a space of engaging and performing differently and showing that there is solidarity from other women of colour. Allowing other women to participate and be part of the performance of my presentation creates new practices of co-performance, questions, and counters' how things are usually done in academia': the individuality, the perfectionism, the flawless performances.

Hauntology is an "ongoing conversation with the ghosts of the past, aiming at inventing a different future rather than fixing the past" (Lewis, 1996, p1) page. This is not about fixing the past; it is about recognising the past in the present and the future so that I will show up at every opportunity. Our bodies will haunt you - we represent the past in the present - you cannot see us. We remind you daily about the past; you might ignore us, but we are becoming more potent by the day. Avery (2008) writes that haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power, such as dispossession, appropriation of resources, or slavery, make themselves known and how their impacts are felt in everyday life. Injustices need not wait for some future remedy because "now" is already thick with possibilities that disrupt mere presence. In showing up, as uncomfortable as it may be, we disrupt.



Figure 1: *Amongst the rubble: Ballerina on bin day*

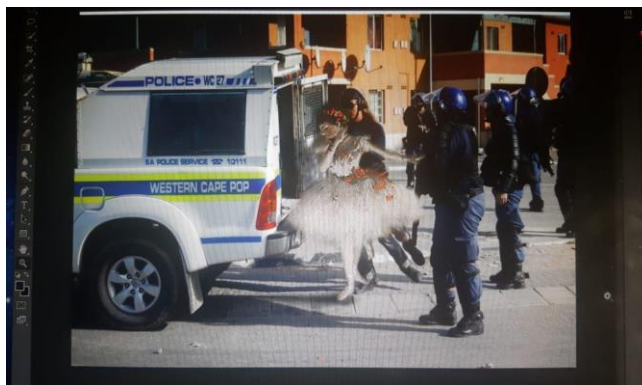


Figure 2: *Amongst the rubble: Always Guilty, wrong place wrong time.*



Figure 3: *Amongst the rubble: Victims and onlookers*



Figure 4: *Amongst the rubble: Unexpected treasure*

The above images reveal the process of visually working through my research. My "rage" turns to joy when I create. I find the shock of the ballerinas (Figures 1-4) (mis)placed in my township environment a way to disrupt ideas about where "ballerinas" are supposed to be. By placing the ballerinas in my community, I create counter narratives. I challenge concepts that have been held dear by society. I push against the ideas of patriarchy and whiteness. The ballerinas are ghostly figures, invisible to the apparent eye. They represent the past in my present.

I am a stage, dark, and my sub consciousness is a lonely light, a candle caught in a draft; it flickers, one minute this way, then the other - everything else lies in the shadows, in the shade, but they are there. In the "off stage" areas, hallways, staircases, trap doors, at all times. Everything that lives within us or wanders around within us is here; it acts, dances, and lives on this stage, and that is me. Instinct, survival, rage, beauty, fear and taboos, forbidden inner thoughts, desires, and unspoken dreams. We do not want to see memories in the light, as we have displaced and suppressed them out of the light. Perhaps to make the trauma of life bearable, a performance is needed. They dance around us in the darkness; they trick, torment, and poke us; they stalk and haunt us, and whisper. They flaunt themselves and scare us. They make me crazy. They make me angry; they make me a hysterical, "raging" coloured woman. However, they also make me dance.

7 Conclusion

In navigating the complex landscape of my identity as a woman of colour in the historical and social context of South Africa, I find comfort and guidance in the concept of hauntology. Hauntology, derived from Derrida's philosophy, suggests that the ghosts of past social, economic, and political phenomena, such as apartheid, racism, inequality, and injustice, continue to shape our present realities. These ghostly echoes, symbolised by the ethereal presence of ballerinas in my narrative, have accompanied me throughout my journey from historical trauma to contemporary

academia. Amidst the debates surrounding decolonisation, positionality, and race, within the context of my identity, I employ a narrative approach rooted in autoethnography to explore how I engage with these haunting ghosts of the past. The ballerinas, depicted as captivating and haunting figures, represent the tension between oppression and liberation, displacement and belonging. They embody the paradox of beauty and constraint, reflecting the entanglement of Western ideals with the experiences of marginalisation. Through introspection and self-interrogation, I confront the unsettling echoes of slavery, forced removals, and systemic racism that continue to reverberate within my psyche and academic journey. The legacy of historical injustices manifests as a haunting presence, shaping my sense of self and influencing my trajectory within academia. As a woman of colour navigating predominantly white spaces, I grapple with feelings of displacement and otherness, seeking to reconcile my identity with the dominant narratives that surround me. Autoethnography is a powerful tool for unpacking these complexities, allowing me to weave together personal narratives with broader societal legacies. By interrogating my own experiences of dislocation and marginalisation, I challenge dominant discourses, disrupt oppressive systems, and amplify the voices of marginalised communities. My research becomes a form of resistance, a means of reclaiming agency and rewriting the narratives that have historically silenced and marginalised communities like mine. As I navigate the corridors of academia, haunted by the ghosts of our past, I am reminded of the urgent need to confront and dismantle systems of oppression. By embracing our ghosts, welcoming them into our narratives, and freeing ourselves from their constraints, we create space for healing, transformation, and collective liberation. In the dance between past and present, oppression and resistance, we chart a course towards a more inclusive, just, and equitable future.

8 Publisher's Note

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How to Cite

Cheri Hugo (2024). On (un) Becoming Ghosts in Academia: A Coloured Female Academic's Narratives in Post-student Protest Higher Education in South Africa. *AIJR Proceedings*, 122-127. <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168.14>

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- [1] kroeskop /-kɔp/ [Afrikaans, kop head], an offensive term for (one with) frizzy or tightly-curved hair (used primarily for the hair of black or 'coloured' people).
- [2] The Kaapse Klopse (or simply Klopse) is a minstrel festival that takes place annually on January 2, and it is also referred to as Tweede Nuwe Jaar (Second New Year) in Cape Town