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On violence in South African higher education: An ideological perspective

Abstract

South Africa is inherently a violent country. From the service delivery protests, rise in murder rates, gender-based violence, and an increasingly violent higher education sector; South Africans are increasingly feeling vulnerable and despondent about the future. In this paper, I attempt to provide a conceptual understanding of violence in higher education. Through Gramsci's idea of the organic crisis, I propose two kinds of violence that need urgent attention if we are to realise higher education transformation and decolonisation. Firstly, I propose a focus on what I see as the deeply embedded and well-entrenched epistemic violence in higher education. This violence operates at the level of curricula and knowledge production, and occasions the need to displace the dominance of Eurocentric thought in curriculum design. Secondly, I propose a focus on social violence, which operates at the discursive level of the institutional culture. This relates to the growing frustrations, anguish, and depression among Black academics and Black students who continue to see, read and experience higher education in South Africa as inherently anti-Black, anti-women, and increasingly anti-poor. I end the paper with some concluding thoughts on the need to adopt a broader conception of violence, and the epistemic/ontological/methodological possibilities this gives us in transforming the higher education sector in South Africa.

Keywords: *decolonisation, higher education; transformation; violence*

1. Introduction

At least 20 people were brutally killed in Diepsloot, north of Gauteng in Johannesburg, in the first three months of 2023; making this area one of the most dangerous places to live in South Africa (Chabalala, 2023). In 2020, Tshegofatso Pule, a 28-year-old woman who was eight months pregnant at the time, was found with gunshot wounds on the chest, hanging from a tree in Roodepoort (Seleka, 2020). Her estranged lover, Ntuthuko Shoba, was sentenced to life imprisonment for orchestrating her murder (Seleka, 2020). Babita Deokaran, the chief director for financial accounting in the Gauteng Department of Health, was assassinated outside her home on 23 August 2021 (Silenced, 2023). It is alleged that Deokaran was brutally murdered for being

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a whistle-blower, seeking to expose about R332 million that was stolen from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Health through the personal protective equipment tenders (Silenced, 2023).

There is little disagreement that South Africa is largely a violent country. Violence in South Africa is often explained in terms of the imperial/colonial/apartheid history of the country, and its unresolved relationship with brutality and force. The postcolonial thinker Mamdani (2016) argues that during the colonial era, a bifurcated or structurally separate relationship existed between citizens (who enjoyed rights, recognition and liberties) and subjects (who endured force, violence and occupation). Mamdani's bifurcated state reveals the complex manner in which the colonial state sought to shape and reshape the African political society with those citizens enjoying cosmopolitan human rights, recognition and respect, while those subjects who are treated and classified as tribal/traditional subjects who did not have access to civil liberties. This socio-political and epistemic separation, which Fanon (1963) and later Santos (2007) call the abysmal line separating those living in the zone of being (that is, the recognised humans) and those in the zone of non-being (that is, the owned and controlled subjects) continue to have implications in post-apartheid South Africa. For those living in the zone of non-being, violence is a way of life, a tool with which social, political and economic disagreement and arrangement are resolved. In this paper, I build on the work of decolonial philosophers such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Heleta (2016) and Kumalo (2018), who shine a spotlight on the epistemic colonisation (that is, cognitive and intellectual occupation) that plagues the public university in South Africa, and its damaging logics for students and academics. I suggest that there exists in South African higher education two types of violence that need to be interrogated, explored and theorised – an epistemic level operating at the level of curriculum knowledge, and social violence that operates at the level of institutional culture(s).

2. Contextualising violence in South Africa

South Africa is at war with itself. Between 2021 and 2022, about 1,4 million households experienced housebreaking in the country (Stats SA, 2022). 205 000 households experienced house robbery, with another 42 000 households experiencing motor theft in the same reporting period (Stats SA, 2022). In the third quarter of 2022 alone, 7 555 people were murdered in the country, 3 144 of whom were killed by a firearm, 2 498 by other weapons such as knives, sharp and blunt instruments, with others killed with the bare hand (Stats SA, 2022).

Higher education has not been immune from this violence. Scholars have revealed the prevalence of rape and sexual violence at South African higher education institutions, drawing on the role of cultures, masculinity, myths and homophobia, amongst others, in perpetuating violence in the sector (Brown, 2018; Collins *et al.*, 2009; Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021). In a paper titled, "Factors associated with female students' past year experience of sexual violence in South African public higher education settings: A cross-sectional study", Machisa *et al.* (2021) interviewed 1 293 female students across the South African higher education system. The findings reveal how 17% of the participants experienced sexual violence in 2020 alone. This, combined with childhood sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, as well as controlling behaviour has contributed to the vulnerability of these students. Vincent and Munyuki (2017; 2018) reveal the complex tensions that students experience in a university residence in South Africa who self-identify as gay, lesbian and bisexual, and their responses

through fitting in, attempting to keep a distance, and voicing concerns in an effort to navigate and negotiate patriarchy and misogyny in their lives (Munyuki & Vincent, 2018; Munyuki, 2018; Vincent & Munyuki, 2017).

The higher education funding, accommodation issues, registration challenges, curricula design, and assessments have often resulted in the burning down of university buildings, setting alight of academic staff members' vehicles, and even assaulting and intimidating members of the university community. In 2014, students at the Tshwane University of Technology set alight 18 vehicles belonging to the institution when they protested about the lack of funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (News24, 2014). In 2023, a group of students set fire to the University of Fort Hare's examination venue at the Alice Campus, hours before the start of the mid-year exams. It is alleged that the frustration stemmed from what the students considered a "congested exam timetable" that was forced upon them by the university (McCain, 2023a). The normalisation of violence, or what Morwe (2020) calls the "culture of violence as a mechanism to solve problems with authority", appears to be the *modus operandi* in resolving political disagreements both in society and in higher education. We cannot forget the brutal murder of the then University of Zululand Dean of Education Professor Gregory Kamwendo, who was shot and killed outside his home in 2018 (McCain, 2020b). This is coupled with the current threats to the life of the University of Fort Hare's Vice-Chancellor Professor Sakhela Buhlungu, whose bodyguard, Mboneli Vesele, was shot and killed in January 2023, resulting in Buhlungu remarking that "Vesele took a bullet for me" (Mthethwa, 2023).

It can be argued that the emergence of the #FeesMustFall protests in 2015/2016 constituted a resistance against the economic violence and marginality in higher education. Students correctly revolted against the growing commodification of higher education and the neoliberal turn(s) that made debt, indebtedness and loan schemes crippling for them. This commodification is represented through the ever-increasing cost of higher education, the declining state subsidy for the sector, and the unaffordable private accommodation, amongst others. Furthermore, this economic violence, characterised by a much broader organic crisis facing the sector include the growing hunger, homelessness, financial exclusion, and the 'missing middle' that remains underfunded and starving in higher education. A significant amount of the emergent literature on violence in South African higher education looks at physical violence and gender-based violence (Brown, 2018; Collins *et al*., 2009; Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021; Ndlozi, 2015).

I now turn to the theoretical tools of this paper.

3. Gramsci and the organic crisis

In the *Prison notebooks,* the late Italian philosopher Gramsci (1975) argues that the then fascist regime led by Mussolini, which he called the "'totality bloc", faced a different kind of crisis, as it lacked legitimacy to its rule. For Gramsci, such a crisis results when the ruling political class is unable to claim their legitimacy and control in society. This is seen when the ruling class and their political organisations cease to have a monopoly over the major political decisions in society, with citizens beginning to undermine, subvert, and respond in counterhegemonic ways against them. Put differently, a Gramscian organic crisis occurs when citizens begin to form alternative sources of being and belonging outside of the *formal structures* of the state, thereby rendering it illegitimate (Babic, 2020; Forgacs, 1988; Seedeen, 2020). They then live outside of the powers of the state, and do not need its interventions.

While in the Gramscian classical sense, an organic crisis is largely referred to as the inherent, internal legitimacy crisis that the ruling class faces in a society (Gramsci, 1975), scholars have conceptually developed the term to apply in different contexts to make sense of the organic crisis that confronts various organisations and entities. In her work, Carroll (2021) adopts the organic crisis to theorise post-Cold War Japan and its inability to respond to the stagnant economic growth, rising debt levels and a gradually ageing population. For Robinson (2019), the organic crisis is a useful lens to conceptualise the crisis facing neoliberal capitalism and its implications for the rise of neo-fascist regimes in the United States and in Europe (Robinson, 2019). In his analysis of the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall moment, Badat (2017) observes that higher education in South Africa is confronted with a deep-rooted organic crisis through the interlinking of the political and economic crisis facing the country as seen through the adoption of neoliberal economic policies that have constrained the possibilities of real transformation in the sector.

In another paper, I used the organic crisis to theorise the crippling structural challenges that the public university in South Africa is facing, and the need for systemic, curriculum reforms to confront whiteness and coloniality in the sector (Hlatshwayo, 2019). In this paper, I rely on the organic crisis to think through the crisis facing higher education in South Africa, as well as the different kinds of violence that should be tackled in order to pursue real and meaningful transformation in the sector. I see and read the higher education landscape in South Africa as largely trapped in an inherent and existentially organic crisis, one driven by the failures of the post-apartheid democratic government to tackle the imperial/colonial/apartheid logic that is still deeply rooted in higher education (Heleta, 2016). I am persuaded by Mbembe's (2016) argument that the current university in South Africa remains a colonial outpost, and that the decolonial agenda ought to be concerned with the recreation and reinvention of the alternative to the university; that is, the pluriversity, that would enable the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the different types of beings, becoming and knowledges in higher education

It is necessary to disclose my own intellectual orientations and positionality. I am strongly influenced by the decolonial intellectual traditions and its unwavering belief that the university in the global South is a colonising and oppressive entity that needs to be dismantled, reimagined and reconstituted (see for example, Mbembe, 2016). I have argued in another paper that what makes the decolonial calls more urgent in South African higher education is that they seem to have coincided with the emergence of the neoliberal logics that have produced new forms of marginality for us. We see this with students becoming our fee-paying clients who have bought and paid for the curricular goods of the institution (Hlatshwayo, 2022). Equally more troubling for me is the decline of the idea of the public good of the university necessary for the societal growth and development to now being seen as a private good, an investment that is beneficial only to one's own life (see also Mthobisi, 2019; 2022). Thus the decolonial tradition largely frames my thinking and shapes my approach to this paper.

4. On epistemic and social violence

In this paper, I extend the argument of violence in higher education as also manifesting itself in two important aspects; 1) violence in the epistemic sense (i.e. violence at the level of curriculum and knowledge), and 2) violence in the social sense (i.e. violence at the level of institutional culture, being and belonging). I am not suggesting that this should constitute the *only* conceptions of violence in higher education. One can still argue that there is economic violence in higher education (such as financial exclusion, campus homelessness, or hunger,

amongst others) (see, for example, Masutha, 2023). We also have colonial conceptions of university/community partnerships, namely using the community as an anthropological data extraction site for research and knowledge production often at the detrimental expense and exploitation of the community (see Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). Furthermore, higher education violence could also be understood in the pedagogic sense (i.e. violence through outdated and colonising teaching and learning practices in the classroom). However, for the purposes of this paper, I propose a two-pronged approach to understanding violence in higher education.

Curricula in South African higher education continue to value and legitimate Eurocentric thought in its design, construction and organisation (Almeida & Kumalo, 2018; Chikaonda, 2019; Matthews, 2018). African and global South epistemic traditions are marginalised and pushed to the periphery of higher education curriculum thinking. This is what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), calls the "cognitive empire", where we continue to see and experience the crippling and alienating curricula that value and legitimate the global North.

The first urgent task in responding to the epistemic violence, namely violence at the level of knowledge and thought, is to dislodge and to deconstruct the Cartesian rationality premised on a flawed assumption of *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"). The "I" in that western philosophical tradition signifies and represents the colonising white heterosexual political being who, based on his body, has access to recognised forms of reason, rationality, cultures, spiritualities and humanity. Those who are not white, not heterosexual, or men are therefore sub-humans who need to be owned, controlled and occupied. This echoes Césaire (1955)'s argument on colonisation as inherently the "thingi-fication" of Black people. The Cartesian rationality socially constructs individuals and produces several crises (and violences). Firstly, it collapses and reduces the body to rationality and secondly, it creates an emergent legitimate discourse to justify slavery, imperialism, colonisation and occupation.

The Congolese philosopher Mudimbe (1988) writes about the after-effects of that Cartesian rationality and its production of what he calls the "colonial library", namely a racist, flawed, myopic and dangerous scholarship that claims to speak for and about Africans, even when the African is actually (and factually) absent, invented, misframed and misrecognised in the archive. Matthews (2018) attempts to sidestep this colonial library though exposing the dominance of Eurocentric thought in Political Science curricula in South Africa, and the possibilities of recentring and replacing marginalised Black scholars in curricula. Matthews does this through prescribing the dominant and taken for granted texts alongside Othered postcolonial readings that critique and challenge one another. This approach achieves several things. Firstly, it challenges the hegemony of the global North scholarship as unstable, flawed and increasingly illegitimate. Secondly, it helps to access what Mignolo (2009) calls epistemic disobedience, and what Gordon (2011) terms "shifting the geography of reason"; that is, looking at the word and the world through the eyes of Africa and the global South. This contrasts with imposing theories, philosophies and conceptual frameworks on the subalterns who are often seen as useful subjects for testing analysis, interpretation and discussion.

Gordon (2021) cautions us against what he calls "disciplinary decadence" in our efforts to respond to epistemic violence in curricula. For Gordon, the epistemic solutions to tackling coloniality in higher education cannot be the inward looking, nativist and insulated knowledge systems that reduce knowledge to opinion, and is only context specific (Gordon, 2020: 55-56). This will result in what he terms "epistemological solipsism"; that is, increasingly irrelevant and stagnant knowledge(s) and disciplines that have no real value and meaning outside of

their confined contexts. In an effort at overcoming this challenge, and building from what Santos (2007) proposes as the "ecologies of knowledge", I draw on Pinar (1994) and Le Grange (2019) to develop the concept of Ubuntu *curerre* (or ubuntu curriculum), as an onto-epistemic solution to higher education curriculum thinking (Hlatshwayo, Shawa and Nxumalo 2020; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020). Ubuntu-*currere* is a philosophical project committed to humanising and Africanising[1] the existential relationship between the teacher and the student. This includes 1) rejecting Eurocentric thought as the "only game in town", 2) moving beyond the delivery of higher education curricula as *a priori* (as already given), to students having a meaningful role to play in curriculum design, conception, creativity and delivery, and 3) reimagining the relationship between the teacher and the student beyond the neoliberal hierarchy and inequality that currently characterise their relationship within the academy. Put differently, Ubuntu-*currere* demands that we rethink thinking itself, reconfigure curricula, recentre students, and ensure that global South epistemic traditions are prioritised.

Elsewhere, I suggest that:

> The development of programmes and module templates could be an opportune moment for the extension of Ubuntu-*currere*. The values of caring, sharing, respect, negotiation, consensus, and democracy between the university and stakeholders could be strengthened by the co-creation of these programme and module templates … current practice in South African universities is that the development of module templates excludes student consultation and engagement to such an extent that the process largely remains the duty of the lecturer who facilitates that module – the so-called 'expert' – and to a large extent their colleagues in the discipline (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020: 11).

Thus, rather than bringing in students to the curriculum experience only through teaching and learning practices and through module/course evaluations, I suggest having students play a significant part in the very conception, design, imagination and social construction of the module. This would help respond to that Freirean challenge of seeing students as empty vessels who need to be deposited with curriculum (Freire, 2018). I am not suggesting that academics are not the experts in their disciplines, or that we ought to advocate a horizontal conception of the curriculum experience. I am suggesting an acknowledgement of the role that students can play in enhancing and enriching the curriculum experience through their complex life worlds that would benefit not only fellow students, but also the teachers.

Another important aspect that we need to confront and dismantle in tackling epistemic violence in higher education is what Apple (1971) calls the "hidden curriculum". This is the site of the discursive gap (Bernstein, 1975) where ideology, ethics, beliefs, and deeply rooted assumptions around valued and legitimate knowledge reside. In decolonial terms, transforming and reforming this aspect of knowledge and curriculum thinking is often difficult, challenging and frustrating, as it has implications for academic freedom and institutional autonomy, where academics can and should write and teach as they wish and see fit (Altbach, 2001; Blell, Liu & Verma, 2022; Macfarlane, 2016). In the research-orientated Humboldtian conception of the university in 19th-century Germany, the idea of academic freedom denotes the scholarly and intellectual freedom to teach and to learn (Altbach, 2001: 206). This 19th-century conception of academic freedom was subsequently expanded beyond the classroom to include disciplinary

1 In this context, Africanization refers to the epistemic/ontological/methodological attempts at recentring Africa and African modes of being, seeing and thinking before we engage with the world. Privileging the African gaze(s) in all its complexity, nuances and contradictions is important before we position and engage with the Other in our analysis.

and societal issues that currently shape and inform the way we think about academic freedom. Altbach (2001), Macfarlane (2016) and Blell *et al.* (2022) write about the emergent global threats to academic freedom, to women of colour, as well as to students. I argue that the rise and return of the "strong man" in global politics, such as the then Trump administration in the United States, the then Johnson administration in the United Kingdom, the Erdogan regime in Turkey, the Xi dictatorial regime in China, the Modi Hindu fundamentalist regime in India, amongst others, have implications for higher education academic freedom, funding, safety, precarity and security for the academics and students.

Related to the idea of epistemic violence in higher education knowledge and curriculum design is the idea of institutional culture(s) as exclusion, marginality and isolation, particularly for Black students and Black academics. Puwar (2004) writes about this organic crisis as what happens when women and people of colour enter spaces they were previously excluded from. I call this the social violence, namely violence and marginality at the level of being, belonging and becoming in the public university.

In the book, *Being At Home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions*, Tabensky and Matthews (2015) raise interesting questions about the idea of being at "home" in the South African university, and to what extent the university ought to be a place where we all *feel* at home. Munyuki (2015: 40) notes that the idea of "home" often signifies and represents "comfort", "security", rituals, ceremonies, and belonging; resulting in what is called "home comfort". Home can also be a place of discomfort, where we see abuse, violence, pain, constraints, and deeply ingrained traumas playing out in the open, as well as outright exploitation. Home is, at times, a space where we refuse to have difficult, vulnerable conversations, or confront our challenges, traumas and struggles. At times these are swept under the carpet and not addressed for the sake of family harmony and the well-being of the collective. Thus, home is not a neutral, innocent, non-ideological space. It is contested, and often filled with ethics, beliefs, ideologies and assumptions that are often implicit and firmly rooted in our habitus and life worlds. It shapes who we are and whom we become. The idea of home or feeling like you can belong and be at ease, is tied with the idea of institutional culture, and its real and corporeal capacity to exclude, isolate and push to the periphery. While for some scholars it is easy to collapse the idea of institutional culture to whiteness (see, for example, Ngcobozi, 2015), I argue that institutional culture itself and its operational functioning(s) in the university, departments, organisations and research centres, amongst others, is far more complex. Higgins (2007) suggests that the term "institutional culture" is slippery and often difficult to explain and define. However, we do feel and experience it. For Metz (2022: 115), the conceptual instability cannot stop the efforts to transform and to Africanise the institutional culture. Metz proposes five aspects in the university that offer an epistemic opportunity to rethink the way we do things – the curriculum, research, language, aesthetics, and institutional governance.

For Black academics and Black students, public universities continue to be a place of discomfort, displacement, social dislocation and trauma (Khunou *et al.*, 2019; Langa *et al.*, 2017; Nyoni & Agbaje, 2022). In the book, *Black academic voices: The South African experience*, Black scholars theorise themselves and their experiences in navigating and negotiating a colonising and alienating institutional culture at a historically white university. They graphically detail the pitfalls of navigating institutional racism, sexism, misogyny and harassment (Khunou *et al*., 2019). In the chapter, 'Sitting on one bum: The struggle of survival and belonging for a black African woman in the academy', Nathane (2019) reflects on her painful experiences:

> I have always felt like I have been sitting on one bum for the greater part of my academic life. I felt I didn't belong. For a long time, I felt like an outsider looking in: a stranger in a land that was not my own … my experience of the academic world is that it can be an unfriendly space where there are entrenched practices that are not in the policies of the universities, but reside with certain individuals … the real power lies with the micro individuals and not necessarily within the structure of the institution. These individuals are also known as part of the Big Five in certain corners and are located in different structures of the university. These same individuals also serve as gatekeepers, creating zones of comfort for others based on clearly criteria known only by the few (Nathane, 2019: 178).

Nathane reflects on her existential instability and anguish in grappling with institutional racism, racialised power and social dislocation at a university. This is broadly indicative and symptomatic of the social violence created by a higher education sector that refuses to take structural and systemic transformation seriously. To be Black, women and, at times, young, is to be a space invader, a pariah in the academy. In one of the most painful reflections on the violence that Black students and Black academics have to navigate in the public university, Malaika (2020) argues that historically white universities have become "slaughterhouses" where Black bodies go to die. For Malaika, historically white universities are spaces full of contradictions and charged with violence as they give Black students the right kind of cultural capital (and habitus) to succeed in society, while at the same time damaging and traumatising them.

In another paper, I have suggested that we need to build on and extend Roy's (2020) concept of the "pandemic as a portal". I observe that the emergence of Covid-19 was an epistemic and ontological portal in the academy, an opportunity to rethink, reimagine, and reconsider the counter hegemonic alternatives of the university we need; and to fashion a much more inclusive, democratic and socially just higher education sector in South Africa (Hlatshwayo & Bertram, 2020). It was an opportune moment to take account of the decolonial turn(s) in the academy, a moment to be more self-reflexive about our practices and the way we continue to enable, facilitate and reinforce coloniality through the institutional culture practices. Rather than head this call, universities in South Africa reinforced the neoliberal agenda through demanding and extracting more academic labour from academics (and students), resulting in what become the "never-ending day" in our lives (Boncori, 2020), with meetings, teaching, and university work, at times ending around 22:00, because the colonial assumptions suggest that because technology has made us all accessible to one another, productivity and performance ought to improve similarly.

Perhaps more concerning for me was the narrow conceptions of teaching and learning during the pandemic teaching, where we (falsely) assumed that moving teaching and learning online would enable some form of continuity of the academic programme. We deliberately neglected and disregarded how Black working-class students, particularly those who live in townships and rural areas, were left behind. These students struggled with access to food, a conducive environment, appropriate shelter, reliable WiFi connectivity, and sometimes sharing their home with over 12 siblings (Gittings *et al*., 2021). This greatly affects students' ability to engage successfully with the module, resulting in some students being left behind in their studies. Almost four years later, we are yet to take comprehensive stock of the South African higher education regarding the students who were academically left behind because of the pandemic; 1) how many they are; 2) the potential measures we can introduce to make sure they complete their qualifications and programmes; and 3) making sure that we are better prepared for future pandemics in higher education.

Black academics' challenges in higher education are highly gendered, patriarchal, and misogynistic by nature. Women academics in general and Black women in particular, have been forced to take on this invisible, unseen, and unrecognised care work in the academy. This emotional labour, often unpaid and un-rewarded, results in Magoqwana, Maqabuka and Tshoaedi (2019) writing that women academics have become the "Black nannies" at universities. This reflects the precarious, exploitative and abusive environment that millions of Black working-class women perform domestic work. This is indicative of the crippling neoliberal policies in higher education where different institutions of higher learning use employment precarity and short-term contracts as a tool to drive up performance, while expecting more productivity and research outputs from academics. This neoliberal turn, exploitative and colonial by nature, brings with it performance management instruments, quality assurance regimes, ratings, rankings, subsidies, fundings, grants, amongst others, all designed to make the university more attractive, desirable and prestigious.

The neoliberal logic in higher education has brought with it a number of challenges. Firstly, it has socially constructed and presented publications as having more currency than teaching and learning and community engagements, leading to academics' frustrations that pedagogy has been sacrificed at the altar of publications and their subsidies. Correspondingly, this has resulted in a new culture in university departments, with senior scholars opting to do more research and supervision, while junior and novice academics (often Black, young and women) shouldering the bulk of the teaching load at the university (Aprile, Ellem & Lole, 2021; Hollywood *et al.*, 2020; McKay & Monk, 2017). The implication of the unequal burden is that novice scholars continue to languish at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, while senior scholars continue to research, obtain promotions, grants and subsidies. Secondly, the neoliberal turn has created a publish-or-perish discourse, with academics being reduced to factories for the production of research outputs despite the effect on their well-being, mental health, and family time (Amutuhaire, 2022; De Rond & Miller, 2005; Eftekhari, Maghsoudnia, & Dorkoosh, 2021). One of the significant effects of the neoliberal turns in higher education and the introduction of austerity regimes and market-based solutions logics has been the emergence of postdoctoral positions as accessible, cheap and affordable labour reserves for higher education institutions. This is seen in how postdocs are often forgotten, unseen, unrecognised, and invisible scholars at universities (Hlatshwayo, 2024). They are neither staff nor students; they are something in between. They seem to occupy this liminal space of employment precarity, job insecurity and casualisation. They are short-term employees, with contracts often valid for one academic year, and subject to renewal depending on the research outputs, usually being required to produce two research units per year. Postdocs are employed after fewer than five years after completing their doctoral qualifications, and they receive a monthly stipend. Because they are not counted and considered as university employees, their stipends are not taxed, and they do not qualify for any employment pension, medical aid or other employment benefits. Should postdocs encounter challenges either in their personal lives or with their host/mentors/supervisors, they cannot resort to the human resources department for intervention, and they cannot approach the student representative council for help. This results in some postdocs calling themselves the "research mules" of the university, who are targeted, exploited, unsupported and overextended (Hlatshwayo, 2024). Thus, the social violence that is experienced by postdocs in higher education is yet to be properly accounted for, explored and analysed. This is further exacerbated in how as of this

moment, South Africa does not have national legislation or framework that governs the rights and responsibilities of postdocs in the country (see Hlatshwayo, 2024; Kerr, 2023; Prozesky & Van Schalkwyk, 2024). This has meant that we do not know in real terms how many postdocs are in South Africa, how many of them are South African, how many are women, the number of postdocs who are from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, or the research contribution of these scholars, amongst others.

Thus, overall, South African higher education needs to contend seriously with the social and epistemic violence that characterises institutions of higher learning. Reimagining and advocating higher education transformation and decolonisation in the absence of real and material engagement with the epistemic and social violence in the sector could potentially become a futile exercise.

5. Conclusion

The South African state is struggling to respond to the growing culture of violence in the country. From the service delivery protests, rise in murder rates, gender-based violence, and an increasingly violent higher education sector, South Africans are increasingly feeling vulnerable and despondent about the future. In this paper, I have attempted to discuss our conceptual understanding of violence in higher education. Through a theoretical and philosophical foregrounding of Gramsci's organic crisis, I propose two kinds of violence that need our urgent attention if we are to tackle higher education transformation and decolonisation. Firstly, I propose what I see as the deeply embedded and well-entrenched epistemic violence in South African higher education. This violence operates at the level of curricula and knowledge production and concerns the need to displace the dominance of Eurocentric thought in our curriculum design. Part of dislodging Eurocentric thought also demands that academics rethink the relationship between the student and the teacher, opening new possibilities for new, mutual and dialectical learning. Secondly, I propose a focus on the social violence, operating at the level of institutional culture. This tends to focus on the growing frustrations, anguish and depression among Black academics and Black students who continue to see higher education in South Africa as inherently anti-Black, anti-women, and anti-poor. These and other struggles are all crucial in ensuring that South African higher education becomes inclusive, democratic and socially just.

Based on the above discussions, I make the following research recommendations:

- Although the organic crisis in this paper was used a philosophical lens, future research could use could this conceptually rich term as an analytical framework to explore and theorise the growing structural challenges that are facing the public university in South Africa.
- The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has recently proposed the possibilities of introducing a higher education ombudsman in the sector (see Nordling, 2023). A feasibility study could be conducted to see to what extent the ombudsman could help respond to the epistemic and social violence in South African universities.
- Although not a major focus of the paper, the growing precarity and marginalised experiences of postdocs in South Africa is concerning. Future research could provide a narrative inquiry, focusing on the complex experiences of these scholars and the different types of support that are urgently required.

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