

Postdocs and Their Lived Precarity in Neoliberal South African Universities

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Abstract

The precarity of postdoctoral research fellows (postdocs) has become endemic since the 1990 Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility and the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics. This article seeks to clarify why postdocs seem to be facing extreme forms of precarity and vulnerability in South African universities. It questions why the intellectual and academic communities have largely ignored or fundamentally rejected the conditions of precarity, homelessness and *facultylessness*, and contemporary enslavement lived and experienced by many postdocs. It argues that postdocs share the predicament of those most likely to be from what Enrique Dussel calls modernity's underside. Even when formally free, postdocs often face situations of oppression and exploitation. It contends that the specificity of contemporary postdoc slavery can most usefully be understood through considering its defining dimensions together with those of the contingent workforce. Drawing primarily on my lived experience as a postdoc in two South African universities and supported by literature on the subject, this article deploys a biographical method and offers a critique of postdoc experience through the lens of Black Existentialism.

Keywords: neoliberal African university; postdoctoral fellows; lived experience; precarity; academic unfreedom; epistemic injustice; "race"; intersectionality



Education as Change
Volume 30 | 2026 | #19438 | 16 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/19438>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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Introduction

This article proffers a Black Existentialist analysis of the lived precarity of many postdoctoral research fellows (hereafter postdocs) in South African universities. In doing so, it harnesses a biographical method in centring this author's lived experience as a postdoc in two South African universities in order to make sense of the precarity of many postdocs in neoliberal South African universities. The article explores various thematic issues linked to the precarious situations lived by postdocs, such as the problem of being facultyless, issues of belonging and unbelonging, postdoc immaturity, and anonymity and invisibility of postdocs in the South African academy. It projects the postdoc as a global subject of precarity (Vij 2019). It argues for a reformulation of postdoctoral research fellowships (PDRFs) beyond the conventional academic requirements placed upon postdocs to publish at least two peer-reviewed publications per year to consider, in tandem, the liminal, existential, and epistemic dimensions of PDRFs to actualise a coherent project of postdocs' liberation from labour exploitation. Doing so requires decolonising PDRFs in order to reimagine them anew outside Eurocentric thought. As such, I theorise facultylessness, postdoc immaturity, belonging and unbelonging, anonymity and invisibility—these added dimensions of postdoc precarity—from the position of the being a black postdoc, “offering an explicit discussion of black labour for the project of liberatory politics” (Chevannes 2022, 76). Ultimately, this article makes a case for a progressive and philosophical understanding of the precarity lived and experienced by many postdocs in South African universities. The aim is to explore and interrogate the precarious and liminal position occupied by many postdocs in neoliberal South African universities. Part of the research problem being addressed in this article is two-fold. First, research on postdoc precarity in South African universities is relatively new (Hlatshwayo 2024). Second, what is largely missing in the literature on postdoc precarity are the narratives, voices, and the lived experiences of many postdocs and how they navigate the postdoc system in their lives (Hlatshwayo 2024). As research around concepts of precarity and ontological precariousness is gaining traction in the higher education sector (Vij 2019), this article contributes to the growing body of literature on postdoc precarity in South African universities. The main question undergirding this article is: How might we understand the precarious lives of postdocs in South African neoliberal universities? The subsection that follows shines a spotlight on my own subjective positionality as a current postdoc in a South African university and my intersubjective personal motivation for undertaking this work.

Positionality and Personal Motivation

I approach this article from a personal and lived experience of being a postdoc in two South African universities. From this position, I experimented with various precariat conditions affecting many postdocs in South African universities. Being a postdoc, two conflicting elements of modern freedom converge. First, as a postdoc, one is effectively

a *perpetual student* who is incapable of maturity. Second, postdocs are *deprived of* being a staff member despite the fact that postdocs carry similar duties associated with tenured faculty work, such as teaching, postgraduate supervision, and research. I argue that this leads to a situation described by Vatansever (2020, 1) as “a loss of existential securities”, eventually forcing postdocs to be in a state of being “in-between” following Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualisation of this site or dwelling as a Borderland, marked “with potentialities and challenges, capable of producing displacements in both spaces” (Moura and Guerra 2023, 257).

In what follows, I offer a portrait of the precarity of postdocs in South African universities as a Black Existentialism. I offer a critical way of looking at the modern university from the perspective of a postdoc. There are many ways to talk about postdoc experiences in modern universities, but for this article, I have chosen themes that are closer to my own experiences and observations, having been a postdoc in two South African universities. I theorise the nodes of intersection between postdoc precarity and academic unfreedom and, in doing so, highlight issues of facultylessness, contemporary enslavement, oppression, exploitation, immaturity, and belonging and unbelonging. The next section gives a contextual background on postdoc precarity by highlighting major debates on labour precarity, racial capitalism, and higher education governance in South Africa.

Labour Precarity, Racial Capitalism, and Higher Education Governance in South Africa

According to Hlatshwayo (2024), research on postdocs in general and the challenges they face in the South African academy is relatively new. Until recently, Kerr (2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b) has been the sole voice in highlighting the precarity of postdocs in South African universities, although this is slowly changing as more scholars are beginning to shine a light on this pandemic. Hlatshwayo observes that largely missing and under-represented in the South African literature are the “postdocs’ narratives, voices, experiences, and how they grapple with the postdoc system in their lives” (2024, 2). In an article titled “The ‘Academic Precariat’: Postdoctoral Fellows in South African Higher Education” (Van Schalkwyk 2022, 1), published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa, Van Schalkwyk notes that there is “no systemic and comprehensive data” on the challenges postdocs face in their “precarious position as neither students nor staff”. The article further notes that postdocs occupy a “liminal space” and that they have been described by some scholars as being part of the “research precariat” (Mothapo 2021; Woolston 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). While this CHE research on postdoc precarity has created a welcome spotlight on the issue, I argue that the modern slavery discourse and its particular framing of postdoc precarity are relevant. As postdocs, precarity and academic unfreedom have become the epistemic frameworks we use to analyse and measure our existence. Salomão and Jobim (2016) note that the conditions of precarity today are not particular to any specific sector as they cut across many industries, including academia. They argue that labour precarity constitutes the

overall labour reality of contemporary workers. Postdocs fall within the category of these contemporary workers and experience precarity in similar and different ways. Salomão and Jobim (2016) observe that precarity requires new social rights for all workers subjected to a discontinuous labour market. They define labour precarity as a struggle for new rights for everyone. In the book, *Precarious Liberations: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa*, Barchiesi (2011) argues that precarity is not just a matter of insecure jobs or an unstable labour market. Barchiesi (2011) contends that labour precarity is the result of racial capitalism, which forces people to depend on uncertain and unrewarding employment prospects. I contend that postdocs, as part of the precariat, depend on survival since they have to contend with uncertain and unrewarding employment prospects. According to Jones (2023), there is an increased international concern for the postdoc precariat, which is rising broadly in tandem with rising postdoctoral numbers. For Jones (2023), a constellation of issues faced by many postdocs globally includes low pay, marginalisation, pressure to produce research outputs in a short duration, and inadequate pension. In the context of South Africa, postdocs receive lowly paid stipends and are not entitled to any pension benefits. They are treated as postgraduate students and therefore are not regarded as employees of the university. As a result, they do not have employee numbers and are consequently exempt from tax obligations. I argue that the tax exemption is used by the neoliberal university as a tool to justify the exploitation of many postdocs. In settler polities such as in South Africa, precarity is directly linked to blackness and racial capitalism. Maart (2014) argues that knowledge production cannot be delinked from racial capitalism and demands that we should engage in the critique of the political economy of neoliberal universities. She contends that the production of knowledge, like any other production, cannot be divorced from the production of a product under capitalism. Maart (2014) further argues that racial capitalism demands that we ask who the producers of knowledge are, and under which circumstances and historical conditions knowledge production takes place.

In 2025, the CHE commissioned a team of researchers to conduct a national study across all 26 South African public universities offering postdoctoral research programmes. According to the CHE, the study seeks to understand diverse practices surrounding the postdoctoral research fellowship programme with the “intention of drawing on best practices regarding how universities can maximise the value of PDRFs to significantly enhance academic and research staff capacity” (email communication from the postgraduate school on behalf of the CHE to author, 2025). The project sets out to address the following six main questions:

- What are the official positions adopted by public universities in South Africa regarding the contracting and use of PDRFs?
- How do public universities in South Africa fund their postdoctoral research fellowship programmes?

- How do public universities in South Africa identify and place PDRFs within institutional structures and manage the postdoctoral research fellowship contracts?
- In what ways are postdoctoral research fellowship programmes supported across various South African universities, and how does the support align with institutional and national imperatives for transforming academia?
- What are the factors that underlie the perceived reluctance of public universities in South Africa to leverage PDRFs to enhance academic and research staff capacity in their respective institutions?
- What would be the nature and distinctive features of a national framework that could enable the transformation potential of PDRFs to significantly contribute to enhancing academic and research staff capacity building in universities?

A similar study was conducted in 2022 by the CHE, albeit on a smaller scale, but nothing of significance was done to improve the precarious conditions under which postdocs find themselves in various South African universities.

Brief Notes on Biographical Method and Storytelling

In this article, I deploy a biographical method to better understand the precarity I experience as a postdoc in two South African universities, with the hope of shedding light on similar precarious situations in which many other postdocs may find themselves. This method allows me to narrate my personal experiences.

This biographical method overlaps with what has been called the “autoethnographic” method adopted by some qualitative researchers, sociologists, and anthropologists (see, for example, Nunez and Gula 2022). . According to Qutoshi (2015), “autoethnography”, which remains a contested method, allows authors to narrate their lived experience to respectfully study communities through immersion and field-based research. For Holman-Jones (2016), “autoethnographic” appeals have a distinct advantage of waking us to the existence and experiences of others, especially those different from us. While I concur with these researchers’ understanding of “autoethnography”, I have chosen to call the methodology a biographical account because I have purposefully selected what I write about my past experiences as a postdoc.

It is also worth noting that the biographical method, “autoethnography” and storytelling share a “reciprocal, interanimating relationship” (Holman-Jones 2016) with what performance studies scholar Della Pollock describes as “living bodies of thought” (2006, 8). Adichie (2009) reflects on the importance of storytelling: “Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” The contextualisation of biographical details with

storytelling here helps to enhance the understanding of postdoc precarity as a studied phenomenon, “fostering a nuanced understanding of the researcher’s positionality and biases through reflexivity” (Huang 2024, 3). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state that research methods such as storytelling, narrative inquiry, and analysis of experiences are commonly used.

The Problem of (Im)maturity in Postdoc Fellowships

The concept of maturity conceived in this article suggests an alliance between maturity and responsibility, and calls on postdocs to take collective responsibility for their precarious lives. I argue that fighting against the precarity of postdocs in the South African academy cannot be just a product of an individual’s efforts but rather is produced through political agency (Meagher 2018). In many South African universities, postdocs are treated as postgraduate students. They are required to register as students despite having obtained their doctoral degrees. I contend that this specific treatment of postdocs as postgraduate students is akin to rendering them as *perpetual students* who are incapable of maturity. This is despite the fact that many postdocs undertake duties that are similar to those carried out by tenured faculty, such as teaching, postgraduate student supervision, and research. I contend that postdocs are entrapped in postdoctoral fellowships that solely value them in terms of publication outputs with complete disregard for their dignity, humanity, and livelihoods. Reading Fanon, Gordon (2005) links maturity with blackness. He points out that to be black is never to be a man or a woman. He writes: “It is to be, under this collapse into pathogenic reality, locked in underdevelopment, frozen, in other words, in *perpetual childhood*” (Gordon 2005, 370; italics in original). As a black postdoc, I feel that the current formulation of PDRFs locks our potential as postdocs in underdevelopment and freezes our abilities as emerging scholars in perpetual studentship. I argue that the way PDRFs are designed in the neoliberal South African universities denies many postdocs academic maturity and “militates against the possibility of maturity” (Gordon 2005, 370). This anomaly of postdoc immaturity led Kerr (2020a) to pose the following questions: “How can postdoctoral fellows—who are already among the minority of PhD-holding academics, be required to conduct and publish their research, and sometimes supervise postgraduate students—still be considered as students, interns and apprentices? How can it make sense to say that they are being prepared for a future academic career when they already work actively as academics?” Kerr poses these questions to reflect the immaturity and stunted growth of postdocs in neoliberal universities. I contend that this form of immaturity is forced upon postdocs, and it is difficult for them to walk out of it. As Macamo concludes: “Thus, only a few who cultivated their minds have succeeded in freeing themselves from immaturity and continuing boldly on their way because the world built by Europeans seemed to be premised on preventing the majority from emancipating itself” (2024, 32). For Meagher (2018), to value maturity is not to demand it at every point in a human being’s development. He posits that immaturity is not actually a bad idea and argues against eliminating it. His thesis is that immaturity is necessary for maturity to become a possibility.

Navigating White Spaces in the Face of Precarity and Unbelonging

When I joined a university in Cape Town, South Africa, I struggled with precarity in the face of whiteness and with the notion of belonging. Perhaps it is because this university is located in Cape Town, which is often referred to as “the last colonial outpost in Africa” (Chaturvedi, Daya, and Pande 2023, 1). There were good intentions by the university to create a working environment and space that fostered some sense of belonging among postdocs. There were also clear efforts to treat postdocs as part of the ecosystem of the university. The reality, however, is that I still felt alienated, and the whiteness of the space added another dimension to the already precarious situation I found myself in. Such white spaces are a feature of “resilient colonialism” (Nyamnjoh 2016). Some decolonial scholars have aptly described this nature of resilient colonialism as coloniality, which affects some aspects of our daily lives. Unbelonging ought to be understood in the context of spatial imaginaries, which encompass but are not confined to the university. Political belonging, according to McNevin (2006, 135), “encompasses the physical and conceptual shape of polities, the status attached to members of a political community relative to non-members and the means through which political claims are asserted and legitimised”. Similarly, the status afforded to postdocs in a university as “neither students nor staff” (Van Schalkwyk 2022) frames how one is positioned with respect to others and the degree of belonging postdocs relish in the context of liminality. As Almarode, Saltus, and Strayhorn (2024, 1) allude, “the human condition thrives on the opportunity to bond, attach, engage, connect, and be a part of community”.

My Lived Experience as a Postdoc in a Colonial University

In this section, I foreground my own lived experience as a black postdoc in two South African neoliberal universities. I critically interrogate it within the framework of Black Existentialism. I examine what it means to be facultyless and enslaved in a contemporary university world that retroactively delegitimises your worth and agency through PDRFs’ institutional and structural systems of oppression, exploitation, and marginalisation. Facultylessness refers to the liminal position occupied by the postdocs within the university ecosystem, as neither students nor university staff. While they are hosted as guest researchers in various institutions, postdocs still experience the feeling of being facultyless. For Jane Anna Gordon, contemporary enslavement writ large does not reside in one sector of the economy but can be concentrated in “multiple pockets of global supply chains” (2020, 153–154). In this article, I aim to tell my lived experience as a postdoc through biographical reflections. These reflections are blended with critical reflexivity “to avoid the pitfalls of engaging blackness as a static and essentialised mode of subjectivity” (Stevens et al. 2017, 1). For most black people, this way of looking at past experiences is “rooted in daily life” (More 2018, 38)—a life such as that lived by postdocs who are black like me in neoliberal South African universities.

At a university in Cape Town, I came face to face with the neurotic contact with whiteness, and I felt the heavy effects of the white gaze on my black body (Biko 2004;

Fanon 1967; Manganyi 1973; More 2018; Yancy 2008). On the surface, it would appear that I was coping with this “cruel and oppressive logic of whiteness” (Yancy 2021, 218), yet my inner self was experiencing the kind of numbness one gets from imbibing too much alcohol. It was difficult for me to belong in this colonial university, which is contaminated with the scent of whiteness. In essence, I lived a “petrified existence”, as Gordon (2015, 114) calls it, wherein “choices, thought, dreams, deeds, all become inward, while for others, freed from this malediction, such concerns direct themselves to the world”. What was lost to me at the time was the realisation that my discontentment with whiteness was a “sign of health. A healthy response is to fight it. It is to go ‘out there’ and do something” (Gordon et al. 2018, 114). However, I realised I could not fight the system alone and had to terminate my postdoctoral research fellowship five months into it. In addition to telling my lived experience as a postdoc, this article also highlights the value of theorising it, for any theory “gains its sustenance from that which it offers *for* the lived reality of those who are expected to formulate it” (Gordon 2000, 11). This, then, brings us to the important challenge raised by Gordon (2010). It is, in effect, for blackness to face itself. He writes, “Blackness, in all its metaphors and historical submergence, reaches out to theory, then, as theory splits from itself. It is the dark side of theory, which, in the end, is none other than theory itself, understood as self-reflective, outside itself” (Gordon 2010, 197–198). The point being made here is that postdocs must not live only to tell their experiences but should also bring meaning, analysis, and interpretation to their experiences. At this point, this article moves to the thematic issues of anonymity and invisibility of postdocs in the South African higher education sector.

Anonymity and Invisibility of Postdocs in the Academy

This section seeks to analyse different forms of black invisibilities in the African neoliberal university, which are centred mainly on “race”, indigeneity, and episteme. As neither a student nor a staff member, the existence of a postdoc fellow in a university becomes one of invisibility and anonymity. At the core of the lived experience of a postdoc (which is not monolithic) is that “invisibility and dehumanisation are the primary expressions of the coloniality of being” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 257). The framing of the coloniality of being is thus extended in this section to understand postdocs as part of the *damned* whose voices, subjectivity, and agency have been rendered invisible and relegated to the margins and wasteland of the neoliberal university empire. According to Gordon, there are different kinds of black invisibilities. One is epistemological in nature. It is based on the “presumed illegitimacy of non-Euromodern knowledge” (Gordon 2021, 24) and thus the illegitimacy of the knowledges of postdocs. I argue that this epistemic invisibility takes the form of how the postdoctoral research fellowships are constructed and constituted in many South African universities as a “form of presumed knowing” (24) in which postdocs are identified as a group of people from whom there is “nothing to know or learn” (24); instead, they are required to publish in peer-reviewed journals and books through an exploitative capitalist university system of knowledge production. Having been

excluded from the production and appearance of contributing to knowledge, postdocs are engaged in a “constant dialectical struggle for meaning” (Gordon 2015, 229), and the opportunity to bring to the table their universalising and decolonising practice in the production of academic knowledge is lost.

For postdocs, anonymity and invisibility have an intimate relationship premised on their status as neither students nor staff members. The invisibility spoken of here is a function of the liminal space occupied by many postdocs in African universities. For Gordon, “it is the paradox of invisibility by virtue of being looked at but not seen” (Gordon 2023, 54). Ralph Ellison brought it to the fore in his classic novel titled *Invisible Man* (1952). The point about coloniality and neoliberalism in higher education is that they work upon academics individually (Warren 2018). That was certainly the case with me when I was a postdoc in universities in Cape Town and Johannesburg, respectively. Being neither a student nor a staff member designated me as anonymous and invisible. The challenge today for postdocs who live in a university world of flux is their invisibility. Rinne argues that instead of focusing on what is visible, “we need to see what’s invisible: what’s on the edges and beyond the mainstream, where new value and insights are to be found” (2022, 57). Rather than making a postdoc experience equivalent to publishing in peer-reviewed journals and books in terms of career path, Rinne argues that there is a need to “explore the true value in getting lost beyond our comfort zones. We’re still clinging to an old, outdated script when what’s actually needed is to write a new script” (2022, 57). That new script is the need to reconceptualise the construction of the PDRF as constituted at present so that it does not only speak to demands of publishing placed upon the postdocs but is also constitutive of several elements that enhance the academic freedom and human worthiness of postdocs. In the end, it takes courage and deliberate action to make the invisible visible by calling out the precarity of postdocs in neoliberal universities, even if it is uncomfortable.

On the Question of Value and the Quest for an Academic Home

Many postdocs in South African neoliberal universities are hosted as guest researchers in various departments and faculties. As a guest researcher, some barriers and restrictions are placed before you to the point that “one must refrain from speaking one’s mind” (Gordon 2008, 165). The illegitimacy placed upon postdocs as neither students nor staff, and the demand to be faceless in the modern university, leads to a neurotic relationship with the university they are supposed to be indigenous to. Now, 35 years after the 1990 Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility and the Dar es Salaam Declaration on Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility of Academics, respectively, the question of the precarity of postdocs continues unabated. This brings us to the question of whether one is valued in a particular environment (see Covarrubias 2024)—in this case, whether postdocs are valued in the neoliberal university. However, a problem with the concept of “value” emanates when attached to human beings in that it commodifies them. I argue that the modern university market commodifies postdocs through requirements such as publishing in peer-reviewed

publications for the university to attain high rankings and research subsidies from the government. This form of value attached to postdoc fellowship contracts is not only exploitative, but it also undermines the dignity and humanity of postdocs who get lowly paid stipends as neither students nor employees of the modern university. Instead of value derived from the market commodification of postdocs, what is preferred here is Anna Julia Cooper's (1988) notion of "human worth". For some postdocs, precarity and the question of value have meant questioning why they embarked on doctoral studies in the first place if their human worth and potential are illegitimised.

I argue that postdocs are indigenous to the modern university. The university is the only world in which they belong. However, the facultylessness and homelessness suffered by many postdocs make belonging to the university as a home impossible. The notion of home used here is extraordinarily broad in its possibilities. At the heart of postdoc precarity lies "the realisation of a form of perverse homelessness" (Gordon 2008, 164). Gordon's insights bring forth a consideration for a discussion on constraints faced by postdocs in a modern university. He argues that freedom is something that we cannot have by escaping constraints. A faculty in an academic context is that which makes one belong in the modern university. To be facultyless is not to belong. In effect, it is to be homeless. For Gordon, the "importance of home for a rigorous theory of freedom should not be underestimated" (2008, 164). For postdocs to refrain from speaking their mind about their precarity, oppression, and exploitation is exemplary of being cast into homelessness where speech without fear becomes a difficulty.

Postdoc Precarity in a Neoliberal University

Like poverty, postdoc precarity "is not a fate but a condition, it is not a misfortune but an injustice" (Gutiérrez cited in Ardito 2007, 166). It is a result of a failed project of neoliberalism in African universities. This failed project is linked to the failed global capitalist project, which has not only commodified university education but also ontologically colonised its subjects. According to During (2015), global neoliberalism has replaced the analytical power of the concept of the "subaltern" with a new category: "the precariat". Precarity refers to all "those who live without a reliable and adequate income and applies to those with unstable or no access to the institutions and communities best able to provide legitimacy, recognition, and solidarity" (2015, 20). The precarity faced by the postdocs across African universities fits this description of precarity's epistemic reach. During (2015) argues that the conditions of contemporary precarity "connote an experience which is also an anthropological truth" (20). In other words, it leads the damned (postdocs) to question their humanity and their worth and to "recognise and accede to a particular account of what it is to be human" (20). Beyond ontological negation, Hlatshwayo (2024) mentions intersectional challenges of navigating employment precarity, casualisation, and job insecurity. These have far-reaching effects on the health and well-being of postdocs in South African universities. However, I have argued elsewhere (Mgibisa 2025) that a lot of scholarly work on precarity fails to account for the myriad ways in which people of African descent,

specifically black people, lived through precarity before the deadly pandemic. I argue that while employment precarity, casualisation, and job insecurity affect almost all the postdocs in African universities, our understanding of these precarities is insufficient to explain that black people have lived the life of a pandemic all their lives and ever since they were born (Mgibisa 2025). I contended then and now that this permanent state of “black precarity” can be compared to what Butler (2009) has characterised as an ontological condition of vulnerability, although this does not imply black people have no ontological resistance to the sociogenic conditions (Fanon 1967). This, then, leads us to the question of the agential power of postdocs.

The Agential Power of Postdocs

Steve Biko understood that power is identical to political life. He declared that “no group, however benevolent, can ever hand power to the vanquished on a plate” (Biko 2004, 91). The condition of one’s freedom, as Gordon (2021, 30) suggests, “requires power as empowerment and processes of growth”. For Gordon, this form of power is premised on the idea that power resides within people and that “the circumstance shifts as the basis for such power becomes their investment—their willingness, in effect, for power to consolidate in institutions and the individuals who represent them” (Gordon 2021, 42). Agential power, then, becomes the necessary condition for human flourishing and a realisation that what the Global South actually has, as its greatest strength, are “the concepts and methods that are based on the existential, political and historical reality of having to survive on the conditions in which they were not meant to survive” (Gordon 2014, 102). What the postdocs need is to galvanise their agential power and use it against structural and institutional conditions that give birth to postdoctoral research fellowships, which may be epistemically oppressive in ways that treat postdocs as perpetual students devoid of maturity and incapable of assuming tenured faculty roles once their doctoral studies are over. They need to cultivate and create access to conditions enabling them to reconceptualise postdoctoral research curricula that recognise what it means to be a human; what it means to have humanity and dignity; and what it means to have (academic) freedom. Unfortunately, access to these conditions is not available freely but requires agency and political action. Fanon and Biko taught us how to be *actional*. They acted. We also need to act now and change the precarious conditions that define postdoctoral research fellowships in African universities.

Concluding Reflections

This article illuminated a fundamental problem at the core of postdoctoral research fellowships in South African universities: the precarity of postdocs and the added dimensions of immaturity, anonymity, invisibility, homelessness, and unbelonging. It contends that the inherently precarious lived experiences of postdocs in neoliberal universities create conditions in which epistemic injustice emerges, producing enormous challenges and consequences for many postdocs. Thus, this article raises important questions concerning the exploitation and oppression of postdocs as well as

the ongoing relationship between precarity and belonging, and the spectre of their marginality and liminality, which manifests and becomes intertwined in the postdoc curricula. Ultimately, it proffers a Black Existentialist critique of the exploitative and oppressive forms of PDRFs. The overall argument put forward in this article is a move towards the decolonisation of oppressive forms of PDRFs and the reconstitution of PDRFs that prize the worth, human potential, dignity, and freedom of postdocs in a neoliberal university.

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