And so, I choose to (re)write

Long before I first realised it, I had learnt to take careful note of where I was before I could decide how to be. Neither the realisation, nor the unconscious action of observing before acting, is especially strange – at least, not if you have spent most of your life watching and waiting in the way I have. Admittedly, the hardest part of this realisation is that the more I have attempted to make sense of myself in relation to the worlds in which I live and visit, the deeper my sense of struggle and conflict. I vacillate, quite vividly, at times, between memories of childhood friendships and adult disappointments. There was Anna-Marie, for instance, with whom I shared daily walks from school. I know there were whisperings of them moving – I think her mother might have mentioned it to me one late afternoon as I was about to head home. But, for some reason, I still cannot remember when exactly Anna-Marie and her family left. I can only recall knocking on their front door a few times before realising that not only was nobody home, but the house was empty. Their departure seemed to set into
motion a ripple effect of removal trucks and removed friendships –
normally on a Saturday, with neighbours lifting furniture, amid hugs
of promising to stay in touch.

A silence settled in our street. And I began to befriend the new girl
next door, Marion. She did not attend the same school as me. Hers
was much nicer. I remember recognising it through the back window
of my father’s car as I caught sight of girls wearing the same uniform
as Marion. I don’t think Marion and I liked each other very much. We
were the only two girls in our street. I think the boredom forced us
into each other’s company. We were awkward in our girlhood chatter.
I remember her father was ‘white’, but her mother was ‘coloured’.
I mention this only because it was an odd union to witness at the
time. A time of which I had little understanding, even as I lived and
experienced it. I don’t know what happened to Marion. The next
removal truck came for my family.

It would be a year later that I would first begin to assign names
and understandings to South Africa’s apartheid, its residential
segregation and forced removals, its racism, its hatred, its fractures.
High school saw me initiated into a politics of resistance, of protests
and rallies in the place of abandoned lessons. It was a time of
invigorated hope – mostly convinced by our untested youth. It was
also a time of deep despair and fear – deepened by our individual
inability to formulate. As a collective, it all made sense – the rallying
calls and demands for change, the release of Nelson Mandela, for a
freedom which we could only understand in relation to that which
we had not yet experienced. Schoolmates would disappear overnight;
someone would reappear, others never did. We lived and experienced
a time few of us could truly understand. And maybe it was best that
we could not fully comprehend the sheer depravity and obscenity of
apartheid. After all, how does one process such immorality through
a consciousness of innocence? There are reasons that we keep
certain images, words, actions and violence from children. Theirs is a
vulnerability that once tainted cannot be restored. Such are the lives
of those blotted by apartheid – a dehumanisation enforced by those
who cannot but be dehumanised themselves. It reminds me of Das’s (2007: 4) observation that ‘we learn about the nature of the world in the process of such living’.

The idea for this book, even as I write these sentences, has still not been fully thought through. What was meant to be an exploratory analysis of alterity – specifically, what it means to be seen and perceived as ‘other’ – slowly slid into struggles which I thought I had laid to rest through previous writings. Maybe it is the timing of the writing – the restrictions imposed by an altered world, dictated by a global pandemic, or the fact that I am on research leave from my university allowing me an indulgence of time I have never appreciated enough. Or maybe it was the fact that I had read George Orwell’s (1946) essay, ‘Why I write’ for a second time. I first read it as a naïve undergraduate student, probably at the same time when I read Roland Barthes’ ‘Death of the author’.

Orwell (1946) explains that a writer’s ‘subject-matter will be determined by the age he lives in … but before he ever begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape’. He famously identified that writers, to varying degrees, and depending on their contexts, are driven by four motives to write. One is sheer egoism – a ‘desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood … But there is also the minority of gifted, wilful people who are determined to live their own lives to the end, and writers belong in this class.’ Second is aesthetic enthusiasm – a ‘perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement’. Third is historical impulse – a ‘desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity’. And fourth is political purpose – a ‘desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after’ (Orwell, 1946).

I see myself and my writing reflected in all of Orwell’s possibilities. While my ability to assign emotional cognition to it arose later in
my life, I intuitively knew that my attitude towards the world was disfigured by a knowledge that I somehow fell short of whatever criteria had been set as acceptable. My own disfigured impression of the world has been somewhat subdued by age and time, especially while living in surroundings of significant political reform, but the world, unfortunately, has not become any less of a disfiguring place. I come to my writing with an intention of re-figuring myself. The unequivocal claim of this writing as my own renders it free from the grip of those who repeatedly claim to know my story, who, in their efforts to speak and write on my behalf, over me, down to me, succeed only in erasing any trace of who I truly am. The self-proclaimed beauty of this writing is so for no other reason but that it is written by someone who, had I believed my apartheid masters, should never have been able to write in the first place.

My purpose, therefore, first, is to push myself into a world in which women who look like me, are de facto cast as oppressed and voiceless. There are pre-judgements, if not about the colour of my skin, then my gender, and if not either of these two, then both, or my religion, and of late, if not my religion, then my hijab. Each marker adds another dimension, another (dis)embodiment – until I am no longer just human, but an intersectional appellation of race, ethnicity, culture, gender and religion.

Each embodiment is accompanied by the weight of its own connotations. These connotations are imposed from the outside, they dissect and disfigure me into what I am (mis)perceived to be, rather than who I am. They come from without, they are imposed, which has seldom not served as disfigurement. My writing, though fraught in its depictions and experiences of marginalisation, exclusion and oppression, is a means of undoing the disfigurement, of freeing myself from the biases and myths of what my identities seemingly provoke.

My second purpose is, I write not for you, but to you. I write to you as an acknowledged agreement with Barthes (1977: 5–6), that a text ‘consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and
entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader’. While the writing is mine, the text is yours. In Sparkes’ (2007: 540) words, ‘I have chosen to offer a story for consideration, then the story must do its work, on its own, as a story.’ I neither can, nor want, to control how my writing is interpreted from different and unique perspectives. Like Sparkes (2007: 540), my only ‘hope is that the reader might think with the story and see where it takes them.’ Some readers might find resonance and familiarity, others might remain unmoved, even sceptical.

For me, this book takes me on a retrospective journey – one which signals my tiredness with being framed by theoretical debates and arguments, which are about me, but fail to see or recognise me. But perhaps, more than that, it is what Saidiya Hartman (2008) describes as a sense longing, which arises from loss. Something un-happens when a life is en-framed, dictated, restricted and reduced. There are yearnings for what could have been, should have been. The constant side-lining, overlooking and exclusion write themselves onto who I am and who I become, creating a scepticism in the world around me.

A postcolonial autoethnography

My life has been marked by experiences which I recognise as shared with others but not the same as others’. There are exacting experiences and knowledge which imprint on us – as an oppressed collective, as women, as women of colour, as Muslim women, as hijab-wearing Muslim women, experiences which would be unknown to an individual who embodies none of these descriptors. Das (2007: 41) captures this sense as follows:

My knowledge of you marks me, it is something that I experience, yet I am not present to it ... My knowledge of myself is something I find, as on a successful quest, my
knowledge of others, of their separateness from me, is something that finds me ... And it seems reasonable to me, and illuminating, to speak of that reception of impression as my lending my body to the other’s experience.

While I am attuned to the knowledge, and live with the impressions of others, I cannot make sense of their stories without taking account of mine first. I know of their lives and their stories through my own witnessing. I can imagine myself in their emotions when they suffer at the words and actions of discrimination and ‘othering’, I can retell their stories only to the extent of what I know, but I cannot recapture their stories without losing the essence of their pain, loss and displacement. I can imagine what it might be like for a refugee to flee her home by foot, with no more than a single bag, containing her life’s value. I can imagine her dread, her hopelessness, but I cannot lay claim to knowing her true trauma without being her. I cannot speak on her behalf any more or less than I can speak on behalf of all women, or Muslim women, or any semblance of a community for that matter. To do so would not only imply a undifferentiated understanding of communities, but that communities are undifferentiated in the first place. Moreover, to do so would be to fall into a misleading rhetoric of colonisation which prides itself on a misrepresentation of all women and, in particular, women who are not ‘white’, as not only a fixed category but fixed as victims (Mohanty, 1988; Radcliffe, 1994).

I am of the view that it is not enough to consider only what we know, it is equally necessary to interrogate how we have come to know what we know. This view might be implicit within conceptions of epistemology – as more than just a way of knowing, but also systems and processes of knowing that are linked to worldviews based on the conditions under which people live and learn (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The problem, however, remains a predominance of Anglo-normative epistemologies which often overshadow or, worse, misrepresent or erase, other forms of knowledge production. In response, explains Young (2009), postcolonial theory has been
created from the political insights and experience that were developed during colonial resistance to Western rule and cultural dominance, primarily during the course of the anti-colonial struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries. Instead of theoretical rigidity and dogmatism, maintains Young (2009: 14), postcolonial theory contains ‘a spirit of innovation and a desire to combine universal ideas of social justice with the realities of local cultures and their particular conditions.’

Starting with the deconstruction of ethnocentric assumptions in Western knowledge, postcolonial studies mark the intrusion of radically different perspectives into the academy (Young, 2009), as well as knowledge. Importantly, while the prefix ‘post’ might infer a period ‘after’, ‘colonialism’s economic, political and cultural deformative traces’ are in the present (Shohat, 1992: 105). For the most part, explains Maldonado-Torres (2016: 10), colonialism and decolonisation are usually depicted as ‘historical episodes ... locked in the past, located elsewhere, or confined to specific empirical dimensions’. Generally, colonialism is used to refer to the strategy of European political domination from the 16th to the 20th centuries.

Yet, contrary to being ‘locked in the past’, colonialism is neither restricted to a specific time nor a particular place. In other words, just because colonialism is a part of a particular society’s history does not mean that the impact of colonialism is no longer evident or felt. Instead of eroding, colonialism morphs and adopts different forms within different contexts. It is the residual influence of colonisation, its messiness and contradictions (Sium et al. 2012), which brings into contestation notions of decolonisation. It is this messiness which prompts me to rely on a postcolonialism as a ‘constant interrogation’, ‘a possibility that is “not yet” but that may announce the prospect of “something new”’ (De Oliveira et al., 2012: 2).

Postcolonialism, explains Young (2003: 3), offers you a way of seeing things differently, ‘a language and a politics in which you come first, not last’. Western knowledge relies on binary oppositions: instead of master–slave, man–woman, civilised–uncivilised, culture–barbarism, modern–primitive, coloniser–colonised. In seeking to undo the
demonising effect of these binary constructions, postcolonialism seeks to develop a different paradigm in which identities are no longer starkly oppositional or exclusively singular but defined by their intricate and mutual relations with others (Young, 2009). Postcolonialism, therefore, begins from its own counter-knowledges and from the diversity of its cultural experiences. It offers a language of and for those who have no place, who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledges and histories are not allowed to count (Young, 2009). In this vein, a number of scholars have begun talking about critical raced and raced-gendered epistemologies that emerge from the social, cultural and political (Bernal, 2000). Bernal (2002: 107) explains that these ‘raced and raced-gendered epistemologies directly challenge the broad range of currently popular research paradigms, from positivism to constructivism and liberal feminism to postmodernism, which draw from a narrow foundation of knowledge that is based on the social, historical and cultural experiences of Anglos’.

One notable example is that of Hartman, who has done compelling work by conceptualising and using ‘critical fabulation’, as a mode of storytelling that involves subjunctive and critical speculation on the gaps and silences of official archival records relating to the transatlantic slave-trade. The intention here, explains Hartman (2008: 11), ‘isn’t anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible’. She describes her method as ‘straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration’ (Hartman, 2008: 11). Hartman (2008: 11) considers stories ‘as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive’.

This writing is my story, my autoethnography – my reparation, if you will. I am not distant from it; I stand right in the centre of it, with the purpose of forwarding a perspective, which not only
contributes, shares and fills certain gaps, but brings into question the establishment of certain dominant narratives. Like Hartman (2008), I think of stories as restorative, not only in the sense of filling in the missing pieces or words, but in terms of restoring dignity and justice. When I tell my story, I am gathering ‘knowledge from the past and not necessarily knowledge about the past’ (Bochner, 2007: 203).

Narratives, as Farber and Sherry (1995) remind us, de-emphasise conventional analytic measures and instead place more emphasis on the aesthetic and emotional; narratives value ‘stories from the bottom’ – that is, stories from women, people of colour, people who suffered oppression. The importance and value of narratives reside in an acknowledgement that part of human life and living is talking about it; silence signals oppression (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). Because humans are deeply influenced by what is said about them, they cannot separate their lives from the accounts others have given of them – ‘the articulation of our experience is part of our experience’ state Lugones and Spelman (1983: 574).

By embarking on an autoethnography, I am not merely trying to change the way my story has been told by others, I am also transforming my ‘sense of what it means to live’ (Bhabha, 1994: 256). I am driven by a postcolonial appeal which insists that if I wish to imprint my own way of life into the discourses which pervade the world around me then I can no longer allow myself to be spoken on behalf of or to be subjugated into the hegemonies of others. This is not simply about establishing a new narrative. As method and product, autoethnography disrupts the inscribed binary between science and art, between theory and the imagination, and between rationality and emotion (Ellis et al., 2011).

Stories, as Ellis et al. (2011) note, are complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that introduce unique ways of thinking and feeling and assist individuals in making sense of themselves and others. Grounded in personal experience, autoethnography holds the potential to ‘sensitise readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that
deepen our capacity to empathise with people who are different from us’ (Ellis et al., 2011: 274).

Not to tell my story is to infer an untruthful acceptance that things might not be otherwise. The very idea that something might be ‘otherwise’ is indicative of a particular situatedness, a willingness to provide another perspective – one which sees the world from the bottom up. Insofar as my writing seeks to interrogate the taken-for-granted centres of dominance and subjugation, insofar as I am interested in bringing to the fore and restoring the misappropriated representations of who I am, and ought to be, I situate this writing as a postcolonialist (ad)venture.

In line with Bhabha’s (1994) understanding, I do not conceive of postcolonialism as a time after colonialism. Rather, a postcolonialism refers to the underlying discourses of colonialism, which have to be interrogated and brought into disrepute. For Bhabha (1994), then, postcolonialism is a theoretical weapon, intent upon resisting certain ideological and political hegemonies. Postcolonialism is as concerned with challenging the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions emanating from Europe, as it is with disrupting dominant assumptive conceptual frameworks which have rendered the ‘other’ as passive and docile (Bhambra, 2014). My concern and intention echoes that of Bhambra (2014: 116) which is to re-inscribe ‘other’ cultural traditions into ‘narratives of modernity and thus transforming those narratives’. Not only am I embodied by markers of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality and religion, but my particular set of markers determines how (between hospitality and hostility) I access and participate in certain spaces. I am trapped in a perpetual navigation of sense-making, of explanation, justification, even apology. My ‘otherness’ enshrouds me, not because of who I am, but because of how I have been marked.

The only way to unsettle both the insularity and distortion of hegemonic narratives is to bring them into contestation through an unmarked knowledge that lives in who I am. In bringing into presence who I am, I can potentially make myself known – a politics of ‘getting
closer’ to others ‘that will enable the distance and differences between us, to move the political terrain in which it is possible to speak and hear’ (Ahmed, 1997: 28–29).

Women’s lives, stories and experiences, as feminism seeks to accentuate, have largely been excluded, reduced or invalidated. Although there is widespread consensus that women’s experiences must be made visible as an authoritative and unmediated source of knowledge, there are limits and risks to basing politics on essentialist versions of ‘women’s experience’ (Applebaum, 2008). Not only are the social and political categories of my identity (identities) different to that of other women, but the way in which I experience ‘othering’ and oppression is as distinctive. This recognition places me in a somewhat paradoxical relation(ship) to feminism. I consider it as a methodological lens to centre my experiences as a woman, but I do not trust this lens as a safe and encompassing space of belonging. I am disturbed by a predominance of Western understandings of what constitutes gender exclusion and oppression; I am disturbed by the perpetual casting of ‘non-Western’ (or third world) women as victims of patriarchy through the vantage point of both ‘Western’ men and women.

A more accurate description, therefore, would be an employment of critical race feminism as specifically attentive to the marginalisation of women who are not ‘white’ and, as such, out of the fold of Western feminism. Hence, when I use feminism, I do so with a knowledge that while I am attached and included as a woman, I am excluded and detached as a Muslim woman of colour. Consequently, I see my writing as being grounded in a feminism, directed at subverting systemic and structural hegemonies, including feminism.

In sum, my story is as seeped in the subversion of South Africa’s apartheid ideology as it is in being a Muslim woman in a world of increasing Islamophobia. It is wholly possible to frame my narrative as a mere continuation of an anti-apartheid or ‘struggle’ discourse. It is indeed the case that my experiences as a teacher (discussed in Chapter 2) and as an academic (discussed in Chapter 5) might be
ascribed to the residual effects of an apartheid society still trying to find its way to a socially just ethos. The disgraceful deployment of race-based politics during apartheid has yet to leave the shores of democratic South Africa. But I would be hesitant to box my experiences into a particular historical and geopolitical climate. The subjections of scrutiny and ‘othering’ provoked by my religious identity succeed, at times, in leaving my experiences of racism or sexism in the shadows of my ‘othering’. To limit these experiences to a South African context would not only suggest a reduction of the sheer geopolitical span of Islamophobia but would only offer a skewed interpretation of my lived experiences.

My experiences are not limited to a specific locality. The experiences which I have offered in the various chapters of this book are not my totality. They are experiences, distinctive in their influence upon me, but not isolated or singular. They matter insofar as they compel me to self-reflect not only on the specificity of the moment but on the preceding events, contexts, role-players, their meaning for me, and for others, like me, or not like me.

In an oddly ambivalent way, I recognise with relief that I am not alone in my ‘othered’ trauma and pain. I see my story as a kaleidoscopic reflection of all ‘othered’ others, whether in the vein of South Africa’s struggle politics, America’s Black Lives Matter, or ‘the state of exception’, enforced by an increasing number of European liberal democracies which ‘restricts democratic rights under the guise of safeguarding or even expanding them’ (Santos, 2007: 16). As a South African the knowledge which I produce is probably more critical now than what it was during apartheid because I am writing this text as a citizen of a democratic state, not an oppressive regime. As a global citizen, my knowledge can serve as a preface to other situated knowledges – unrestricted by borders and unified in its determination to subvert epistemic injustices.