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RE-IMAGINING TROUBLED SPACES OF ACADEMIA WHILE THINKING WITH AND THROUGH OCEANS

Black feet white sand – A photo essay

Cheri Hugo

I explore the use of the ocean as a metaphor to navigate difficult spaces within academia for womxn of colour. In addition, the ocean and my personal swimming adventure are intertwined. That is the visual tale of how I used swimming and the water metaphorically to guide me through two challenging environments – the sea and academia. Using autoethnographic methodology and drawing on hydrofeminism and Black feminist theories, I share personal narratives from my experiences with and through the water in Cape Town, South Africa, as a womxn of colour. The chapter highlights two strategies that emerge through this journey: resilience and empathy. Through a poem and narratives, I unpack and explain the significance of these strategies in supporting my survival and thriving in both the ocean and academia. I foreground the need for re-imagining troubled spaces in academia and for using creative and personal narratives as a means to highlight social justice perspectives in the design of higher education.

My work focuses on strategies for womxn of colour in academia to navigate postgraduate education, and move from surviving to thriving. Who am I, and what challenges do womxn of colour face? I am interested in the experiences of womxn of colour, who navigate whiteness and patriarchy, while juggling an often-overwhelming teaching load and attempting postgraduate degrees. I engage autoethnography to examine my experiences as a Black womxn academic and doctoral student teaching in the University of Technology's Design Department. I use autoethnography to present a first-person narrative of prejudice and address injustice. To conduct the autoethnography, I combined theory and narrative to connect analysis with action, bridge material and ethical practice, and illuminate methods to embody change. I collected data through various methods, including original poetry, journaling, drawings, self-timed photography, and mixed media. I also use methodologies that focus on embodiment and affect to move past traditional logics of study (Figures 13.1 and 13.2).



FIGURE 13.1 Cheri Hugo, Black feet 1. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.2 Cheri Hugo, Sacred. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.

As I look back on my childhood in Cape Town, I am struck by how much the experiences of exclusion and discrimination have stayed with me. From a young age, I knew that some beaches were not meant for people like me.

And even now, as I move through the city's beaches, I can still feel that sense of unease and uncertainty. These childhood experiences have influenced the way I approach other spaces as well, including the classroom where I now teach. As a drawing instructor in a design course, I am constantly aware of the need to reassure both myself and my students that we belong here. It can be challenging, but I know it is important work.

Lately, I have been immersed in a PhD study on the strategies that womxn of colour in design can use to thrive in academia. This research has led me to explore my own embodied experiences with rage, race, and respectability politics. Using autoethnography, supported by decolonised feminist theory and methodologies, I hope to tell a story that can help others navigate these complex issues. However, I am more than just a PhD student and teacher. I am also a mother, a designer, a writer, and a creator. I carry with me the legacy of my ancestors who were enslaved, displaced, and forcibly removed from their homes. These experiences continue to haunt me, but they also drive me to push for change and to be a force for good in the world.

In 2020, as the world was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, I found solace in the ocean. I had read that swimming could help with COVID-19 lungs, and I was drawn to the water in a way I had not been before. Despite feeling like an outsider in the ocean, much like I do in academia, I felt a sense of freedom and release (Figures 13.3, 13.4, 13.5, 13.6, 13.7, 13.8, 13.9, 13.10, and 13.11).



FIGURE 13.3 Cheri Hugo, *Homage*. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.4 Cheri Hugo, White sand 1: plunge. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.5 Cheri Hugo, White sand 2: step. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.6 Cheri Hugo, White sand 3: tippy toe. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.7 Cheri Hugo, White sand 4: defend. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.8 Cheri Hugo, Black feet 1: play. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.9 Cheri Hugo, Black feet 2: perform. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.10 Cheri Hugo, Black feet 3: prepare. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.11 Cheri Hugo, Black feet 4: pray. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.

Black feet, white sand

Black feet through this white gate
Black feet on the mountainside, high
Black feet overlooking the white sands and oceans deep
Black feet on white tiles
Black feet all over this lady's white sheets

Black feet in black adidas slippers Adidas branding all over this white
neighbourhood and cobbled sidewalk
Black feet tippy toe over the railway line
Black feet over the rocks and creepy crawly goedetjies
Black feet on the white sands
Black feet sinking deep
Black feet wet with salty water

Black feet slow and steady deep we go
Black feet respect we must show, the highest honour is bestowed
Black feet I can hear them fret
Black feet tippy toe on the ocean floor
Black feet glide, slide, step and gently push up

Black feet pointed, glide, Grand Jete and Pirouette
Black feet with ancient one's dance all over the ocean floors
Black feet stand firm in the ocean waves
Black feet remember you are on the front line
Black feet must be ready steady against the tide
Black feet with teeny tiny white sands, on this white lady's garden table high
Black feet performing, remember who you a r e.

During my stay near the sea in Simons Town, on the Kalk Bay side of Cape Town, I was eager to participate in an early morning swimming event with a community I had recently joined. However, I had to stay at a bed and breakfast, a predominantly white space, and I could not help but reflect on the labour and sacrifices I had to make to be there. As I gazed at my black feet on the white sheets, I reflected on the added burden that womxn of colour face when enjoying beach days – the financial cost, the responsibility of caring for their families, and the extra effort required to access the ocean. All of these thoughts made me feel like an impostor, performing for a white audience (Figure 13.12, 13.13, 13.14, 13.15, 13.16, 13.17, 13.18, 13.19, 13.20, 13.21, 13.22, 13.23, and 13.24).



FIGURE 13.12 Reflection on a poem. Photo: Cheri Hugo.

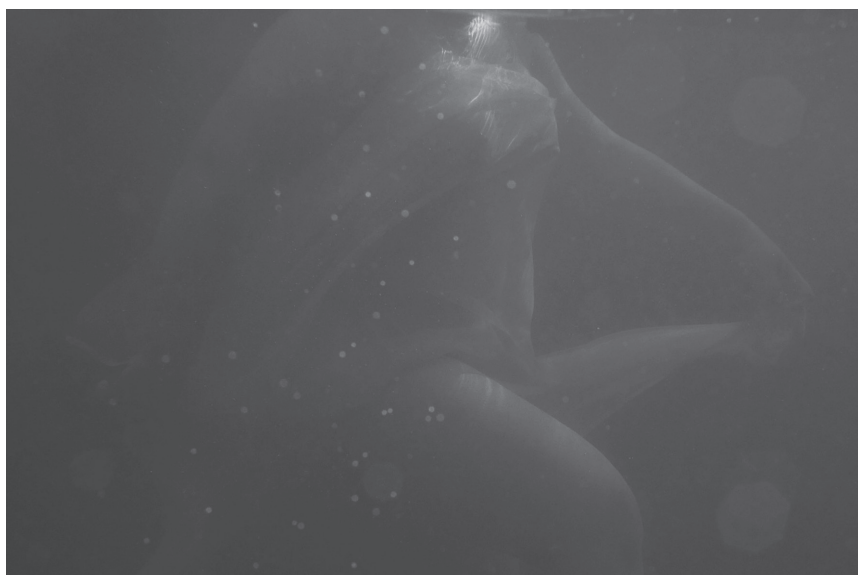


FIGURE 13.13 Cheri Hugo, Venus. Still from an Mp3 video in which the poem is read while the figure dances. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.14 Cheri Hugo, Ancient voices 1: Honour. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.15 Cheri Hugo. Ancient voices 2: Acknowledge. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.16 Cheri Hugo, *Ancient voices 3: Communion*. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.



FIGURE 13.17 *Ancient voices 4: Action*. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.

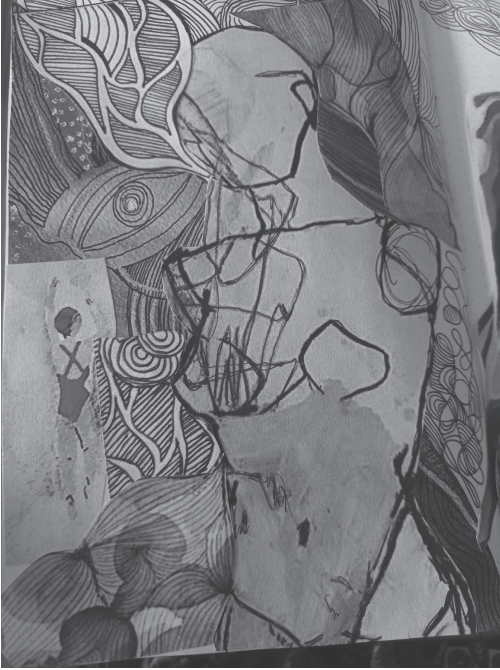


FIGURE 13.18 Cheri Hugo, *Creating with ocean 1: See.* Photo: Cheri Hugo.

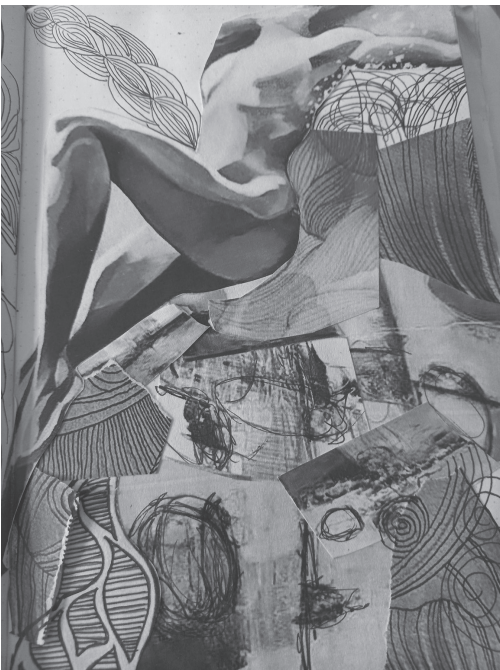


FIGURE 13.19 Cheri Hugo, *Creating with ocean 2: Feel.* Photo: Cheri Hugo.

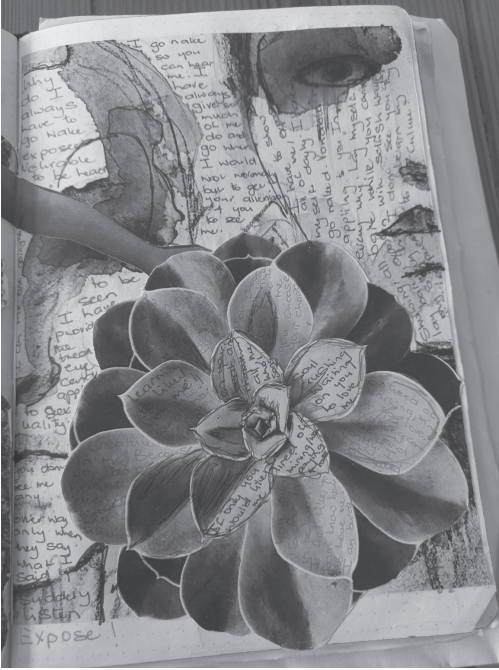


FIGURE 13.20 Cheri Hugo, Creating with ocean 3: Write. Photo: Cheri Hugo.



FIGURE 13.21 Cheri Hugo, Creating with ocean 4: Entangled. Photo: Cheri Hugo.



FIGURE 13.22 Cheri Hugo, Creating with ocean 5: Grow. Photo: Cheri Hugo.

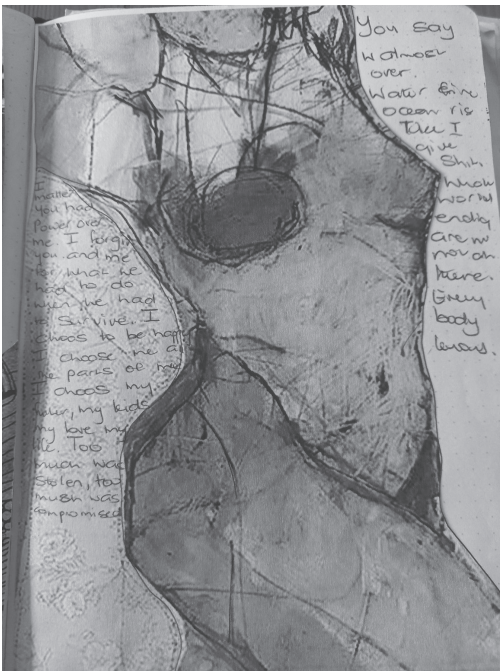


FIGURE 13.23 Cheri Hugo, Creating with oceans 6: Become/(un)become. Photo: Cheri Hugo.



FIGURE 13.24 Cheri Hugo, Warrior. Photo: Verity FitzGerald.

I advocate for the re-imagining of troubled spaces in academia by thinking with and through the ocean. Womxn of colour in academia have learned to negotiate and survive by being resilient, offering care to ourselves and others, and making difficult sacrifices as we navigate spaces that are often unwelcoming. By drawing on embodied, affective, situated, and autoethnographic methodology, we can disrupt the colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, anthropocentric logics that continue to shape hegemonic practices in the academy.

Contributors:

Verity FitzGerald (Photography)

Cheri Hugo Poems (artwork, figure, art direction, journal entries and photography)

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