



A trio reclaiming blackness and black spirituality: A tribute to Vuyani Vellem

**Authors:**

Buhle Mpofu¹ 
Lethabo M. Molopyane¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Buhle Mpofu,
buhlem202@yahoo.co.uk

Dates:

Received: 03 May 2022
Accepted: 28 July 2022
Published: 20 Sept. 2022

How to cite this article:

Mpofu, B. & Molopyane, L.M., 2022, 'A trio reclaiming blackness and black spirituality: A tribute to Vuyani Vellem', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), a7710. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7710>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Issues related to racism are still pervasive in global society; and Blackness has dominated identity politics in the South African political and public debates since the downfall of apartheid. Recently, there have been questions on whether skin colour can be used as a generalised indication of being previously disadvantaged with some arguing that skin colour cannot be used as a condition for empowerment. They argue that socio-economic conditions must rather be used as the criteria for empowerment. This contribution draws on the notions of Liminality (Turner) and Third Space (Bhabha) to investigate how the lives of three black intellectuals – Steve Biko, Tambudzo Marechera, Vuyani Vellem – resembled the 'liminal threshold' as they underwent 'initiation' on black identity. The authors conclude that despite the many years of 'chanting down Babylon', black people still have to contend with white supremacy in the same way that Tambudzo Marechera, Steve Biko and more recently, Vuyani Vellem, fiercely challenged it.

Contribution: This study is a contribution to keeping the legacy of Vuyani Vellem alive by highlighting the notions of Liminality and Third Space to demonstrate how the lives of the three black intellectuals resembled the 'liminal threshold' as they all underwent 'initiation' on black identity in their respective times and contexts.

Keywords: whiteness; blackness; Liminality; Third Space; Steve Biko; Tambudzo Marechera; Vuyani Vellem.

Introduction

Helen Zille's tweets caused a stir when she said:

Black privilege... is being able to loot a country and steal hundreds of billions and get re-elected. If people want permanent poverty for the masses, they are going about it the right way #BlackPrivilege (see Dieman 2019:n.p.).

The same outrage was witnessed after a Democratic Alliance (DA) election campaign poster in Phoenix emerged which stated, 'The ANC called you racists, The DA calls you heroes'.¹ South African politics reflects upon the continued onslaught on blackness and the racial polarisation which is still prevalent in South African society. Dismissing the term 'white privilege' as a mere generalisation and a form of racism is an assault on blackness. A recent racial act in South Africa was witnessed at Stellenbosch University where a white student was caught on camera peeing on a black student's study material, remarking that that is what white boys do to blacks (Evans 2022).

Although the South African democratic system has arguably achieved political freedom for black South Africans, the economic legacies of the apartheid era are still visible and manifest themselves in structural challenges that perpetuate poverty and inequality. These challenges have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which left many people unemployed and having to rely on a government grant. Data recently released by Statistics South Africa confirm that the unemployment rate 'climbed to 35.3% in the fourth quarter of 2021, up from 34.9% in the previous period' (Trading Economics 2021:1).

Theoretical framework: Defining race, liminality and threshold

This study employed the concepts of liminality and threshold as a theoretical framework to discuss how the three black intellectuals Tambudzo Marechera, Steve Biko and Vuyani Vellem underwent some form of initiation into the new dispensation and confronted white supremacy in

¹Viewed from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-07-phoenix-posters-da-exploits-fear-and-deepens-divisions-during-election-drive/> (Grootes 2021).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

ways that were similar and highlight how they did not live to fully realise the potential of blackness. For purposes of this study, it is imperative that the terms race, liminality and threshold are clarified. In the following section, we will define race, liminality and threshold as they are applied in this study.

The concept of race assumes different forms in different contexts. Race can be a biological, historical, political, or a cultural matter. For the purposes of this article, race shall be defined as 'a concept that signifies and symbolizes socio-political conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies' (Winant 2001:317).

According to Lindner (2018):

The concept of race is socially constructed, developed over centuries partially as a method of social control (McIntosh 2007:349). Science has shown that race is not biological, but merely an ideology based upon superficial value judgements (Painter 2010:2). The term white[ness] refers most obviously to light skin, but also denotes those who historically have benefitted from light-skin privilege... Clifford Leek (2014) notes that whiteness can be defined 'as a set of practices that function to protect and maintain privilege, while others defined whiteness simply as the experience of privilege' (2014:214). Both definitions are necessary, however, even those who acknowledge their whiteness often do not recognize the ways in which it protects privilege, which is one way in which whiteness becomes problematic. Indeed, even 'seemingly "benign" practices of whiteness reinforce white supremacy'. (p. 44)

This article serves to reflect the persistent issues of racism that the three black intellectuals fought boldly. This reflection shall be represented using theories of race and racism to unpack the underlying issues of black struggles and white privileges. Victor Turner's notion of Liminality and Homi Bhabha's theory of Third Space shall be used to explore the continued violence and oppression taking place within the liminal spaces of black struggles and survival.

Homi Bhabha's theory of Third Space is a post-colonial theory that describes a transitional phase that breeds hybrid identifications. It is important to note that this is not a physical transformation but rather a political and conventional process of change. It is a sociocultural tradition which puts emphasis on the identity in contexts where there are unequal forces of representation. Victor Turner's notion of liminality seeks to explore the phase with which an individual deviates from the cultural norms of the society, deconstructing the normal central values of a society. It also addresses a transitional 'middle' phase when one has outgrown the previous social status but has not yet identified with the next social status. It is worth mentioning that Turner broadly uses the theory of liminality conceptually and theoretically. Therefore, the theory is not only limited to cultural rituals and rites, but fits into a broader sociological and anthropological context where 'almost anything in which there was a normally short-lived period of upending of a prior hierarchy and during which power reversals occurred, or at least appeared to have occurred' (Wels et al. 2011:1).

Liminality is a term that has been used to describe an experience of in-between and uncertainty and has been studied by scholars in diverse disciplines (Broom & Cavenagh 2011) to identify qualities of transitioning or a state of being in between transitions. The 'rites of passage' model uses the concept of liminality to explore transition and has been used by different scholars to frame or conceptualise the experiences of young adolescents, including the medical studies exploring cancer (e.g. see Marshall, Grinyer & Limmer 2019; Schwartz & Von Glascoe 2020). In this study the concept of liminality is applied to denote the transition and 'rite of passage' from wrestling with colonial and black oppressive practices through a transition where black communities enjoy justice, freedom and other rights without having to constantly fight for recognition. This creates some ambivalence. The concept of ambivalence approaches cultural identity through opposing perceptions and dimensions which are at tension. For Bhabha (1994):

The duality that presents a split in the identity of the colonized other—allows for beings who are a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer's cultural identity. (p. vii)

In postcolonial theory, liminality is employed by theorists to describe the situation of migrants when they are 'in-between spaces', where they experience cultural ambiguity as they transition between different cultural settings where they develop hybrid identities. In this study, these concepts are employed to highlight the ambiguities that the trio experienced as they sought to transition from colonialism.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, threshold refers to the process of 'starting a new stage in your life, or having a new experience', 'the place or point of entering or beginning' and 'a level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not'. For example, it can be used to describe the transition for young people who are 'on the threshold of their careers'. For purposes of this study, the word threshold is employed alongside liminality to highlight the transition from colonial and racial struggles through to an ideal of a society that is free from racial and colonial oppression. The study contends that this transition still at 'the place or point of entering or beginning' and 'a level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not' (Merriam-Webster).

On being black when Black Lives Matter – Marechera (1952–1987)

Dambudzo Marechera was born in 1952 and grew up during racial discrimination, poverty, and violence in pre-independence Zimbabwe. He attended St. Augustine's Mission, Penhalonga, where he clashed with his teachers over the colonial teaching syllabus. He had similar clashes with staff at the University of Rhodesia (now University of Zimbabwe) and was expelled during student unrest. After getting a scholarship to study at New College, Oxford, he was expelled there also for his so called 'unsociable

behaviour'. Writing about the life of Dambudzo Marechera in a contribution titled: *The Life and Times of an African Writer* Holon (2006) observed:

I got my things and left.

This, [is] the opening line to Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*. Apart from being the coolest opening line in African fiction, [it] is a fair summary of the writer's life. He was always getting his things and leaving; not that he had many things to get – in his last years, homeless and reduced to sleeping on park benches in Harare, Zimbabwe, all he had were his typewriter and a few books. He died at thirty-five, an age when most writers are just publishing their first novels. It is a mark of his genius that, with only three novellas, some short stories, poems, and essays published during his lifetime, he is regarded today as one of the most influential postcolonial African writers. (p. 1)

Marechera employed postcolonial literature to expose the perils of blackness during the colonial period. African literature has always played a crucial role in exposing dominant ideologies of white supremacists. Tambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* (1978) is an award-winning novel telling a story of growing up in colonial Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The narrative captures his audience's imagination as he depicts the lives which were disrupted by white colonisers through the experiences of a young black man who confronted racism between the 1960s and the 1970s. Marechera describes his pain in raw truth and eloquence which secured him a place in African literature as an innovator and rebel commentator of the ghetto conditions. It is the radical nature of his tone, and its counter colonial discourse that made *The House of Hunger* one of the best post-colonial masterpieces in African literature. His readers are also treated to humour and how he managed confrontations with the colonial system as he navigated themes on survival, mental health challenges and violence within the context of despair and hopelessness. Wayne and Grogan (2018) succinctly observed:

The novella's themes include colonialism, social destitution, violence, state-sanctioned oppression, identity struggles, poverty, dislocation, disillusionment, and anger, all of which are appropriately imaged in Marechera's visceral metaphor of the pain and violence implicit in the literary text. More specifically, corporeal imagery emphasises the unnamed narrator's troubled existence, suffusing *The House of Hunger* in a manner that elicits disgust and horror, thus encouraging the reader's affective response to the representation of the colonial condition. (p. 1)

Although he died young, Marechera's literature left an indelible mark on the struggle against colonialism and social injustices. Very little has changed as our contemporary youth still have to endure similar struggles on the margins of society.

On being black when Black Lives Matter – Biko (1946–1977)

Stephen Bantu Biko is considered to be one of the influencers of a commitment to dialogue as the best method for the resolution of the political problems during the apartheid era of South Africa (Biko in ed. Arnold 1978:61). He rejected

violence and forms of confrontation (Biko in ed. Arnold 1978:61) which he defined as 'going against existing laws in order to register a protest over a particular issue' (Biko in ed. Arnold 1978:143). Biko died at the age of 31 and authored a polemic which challenged white domination. In his book titled *I Write What I Like*, Biko (in ed. Arnold 1978) raised the following question: What is the character of a defeated race? He addressed this question as follows:

A race that brags about expensive clothes that they wear, that are produced by another race. A race that brags about cars that they drive, that are manufactured by companies owned by another race. A race that brags about their houses that are financed by financial institutions owned by another race. A race that takes their kids to school to be taught by another race. A race that will celebrate their wedding in the style of another race. A race that has fully adopted language and religion of another race. A race that will hate each other defending another race. A race that will get excited to work for another race. A race that the only freedom it has is the freedom to vote and not economic freedom. A race that will kill each other just to have a political position and be in office and not be in power. A defeated race is that race that is in majority but its survival relies on the minority race. (p. 144)

Biko (in ed. Arnold 1978) considered himself as part of the defeated race and called on the 'black man' to:

[C]ome to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. (p. 145)

Some of the challenges regarding the freedom of black people are still as prevalent today as they were during the early years of South Africa's democracy. Central to these issues, is a conversation on economic transformation and how the country can address the gap of inequality through 'black economic empowerment'. This conversation is important, given that the majority of black South Africans still live in poverty. The black economic programme has also been marred with corruption and poor administration of resources, and this has provided some form of 'convenient justification' for those who blame the black majority rule and defend white supremacy. Lack of progress in addressing poverty and inequalities has provided a fertile ground for protests and a call for so called 'radical economic transformation'.

Biko (1978:30) eloquently reminded us, that the 'ground for a revolution is always fertile in the presence of absolute destitution'. These self-inflicted national wounds could be considered as beginning with what Mbembe (2001:225) refers to as image ontology. For example, Black Lives Matter is a movement which inspires the discourse on the consciousness of black people and its approach is irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society. Therefore, the movement becomes a relevant discourse such as black theology because it inspires the belief that an anomalous situation is a deliberate creation of the colonial matrix of power.

The attempt to investigate cultural revolution from the lenses of coloniality also requires a closer examination of Euro-centric Christian values as it is the very prejudice that necessitates the need to convert, civilise, and colonise based on the perceptions of the outsiders. One would argue that the historical nature of whiteness is evident on the constructions of black identity and portrayal of black people as lazy or criminals who are corrupt. Such labelling obscures the exploitative structural practices within the economic system which is racially biased. Therefore, the colonial matrix of power which is imbedded in South Africa's social and economic structures requires further analysis. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) observed:

Coloniality as a power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, lies at the centre of the present world order that Ramón Grosfoguel correctly described as a racially hierarchised, imperialistic, colonialist, Euro-American-centric, Christian-centric, hetero-normative, patriarchal, violent, and modern world order that emerged since the so-called 'discovery' of the 'New World' by Christopher Columbus. At the centre of coloniality is race as an organising principle that hierarchized human beings according to notions and binaries of primitive vs. civilised, and developed vs. underdeveloped. (p. 254)

On being black when Black Lives Matter – Vellem (1968–2019)

The Council for World Mission (CWM 2019) described Vuyani Vellem as:

[A]n outstanding gift to the Church, the academia and the ecumenical movement. As a Church leader, theologian and ecumenist, [who] gave generously and passionately to the life-giving, liberative and transformative mission agenda of the community of faith ... [and noted that]. It was his passion for justice, his commitment to life in fullness for all, his fierce opposition to the life-denying forces to holistic living and his uncompromising and unapologetic stance on liberation theologies and the dignity of black people that made him a leader among leaders in the struggle for peace and justice. (p. 1)

Paying tribute to Vellem, who passed away prematurely at the age of 51, Van Aarde and De Beer (2019:1) observed:

He related his faith and theology to the experiences of black townships and informal settlements – the land question and the reality of socio-economic exclusion and injustice ... His theological insights were saturated with African wisdom, an embrace of the 'kraal' amidst 'mekhukhu' and 'eKasi' (Vellem 2014) – a disruption of Empire's deadly and all-embracing exclusions. He insisted on finding life in the harshest of places – on claiming it, celebrating it and sharing it ... was committed to [the church's] unshackling from colonial, pigmentocratic and culturally oppressive structures, and the death it dealt ... To unshackle the church, a subversive model of ecclesiology is the starting point ... For a Black Theology of liberation, the subversive character of the church is in the memory of the miserable, the condition of blackness. (Vellem 2015:5)

It is important to highlight that the emphasis of Vellem on 'memory of the miserable, the condition of blackness', is something that dominated the writings of Marechera. While Vellem was concerned with the condition of the church and

her spirituality within the context of blackness and confronting white domination, Marechera and Biko were concerned with the socio-economic conditions during the colonial and apartheid rule, and they all fought white supremacy in liminal spaces of deprivation and racial discrimination which marginalised black majority people.

In underscoring the relevance of the debate on blackness, Boesak (2020) recently drew comparisons between Biko and Vellem 'In search of our human face: Black consciousness, black spirituality, inclusive humanity and the politics of vulgarity' and engaged the concepts of Africanisation and Afrocentricity, colonisation, coloniality and decoloniality in exploring the question of whether a true Afro-pluralism is possible without a true African indigeneity. Boesak (2020) concluded that:

Like Biko, Vellem (2007) never separated spirituality from freedom ... [and] Spirituality, for him, is 'the symbol of liberation in South African public life' ... Biko, he believed that to do this we need a living, vibrant black theology of liberation, to combat 'the internal logic of Western superiority and debunk it' (Vellem 2014). Insistently, he rails against the 'co-opting' of African spirituality under the new liberal-speak guise of 'inclusion'. It is not genuine inclusion, he argues, but rather 'a vexing cosmetic use of African values and a refusal of the death of consciousness. (Vellem 2014:23)

Spirituality extends beyond identity politics and should have the potency to name and unmask all forms of dehumanisation. Racial and gender discrimination, xenophobia, exploitation and other forms of violence against black people require new forms of Afrocentrism which will 'de-bunk' and 'combat' Western superiority. It is for this reason that scholars like Sesanti (2016) advanced the idea of a return to African ideals such as *ubuntu*, and 'traditional African precepts' such as the seSotho proverb '*feta kgomo o tshware motho*', which is central to an African approach to economics, the promotion of a caring and compassionate society, and the work towards the 'elimination of poverty, criminality and greed' (Sesanti 2016:36).

Theorising the construction of racial otherness

Racism is a system among individuals, communities and institutions that functions on the notion that members from different races possess different qualities and characteristics. Commonly used in disciplines such as sociology, the theories of race are crucial when dealing with matters addressing the socio-cultural, political and economic matters affecting people of colour. Even after colonialism, the apartheid era in South Africa, and the implementation of laws that are against race-segregation, the issues of race and racism are still tenacious. The everyday lived experiences of black people navigating through social, political, and economic spaces is the main impediment from freedom of racial discrimination. Over the years, black people have suffered terrorisation, discrimination and victimisation while white people enjoyed the privilege of belonging to the dominant and most protected race.

Anderson (1990:190) asserted that we live in a colour-coding society where a black man is perceived as an object of white surveillance. Colour-coding, difference and otherness have become intriguing themes of representation. Representation according to Hall (1997) is a:

[C]omplex business, especially when dealing with 'difference', it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way. (p. 226)

The racialised system disdained the status of black people, seeing them as lazy but using them for servitude. White people belittled black culture, making black people believe that their culture is natural and unchangeable. They racialised and problematised the noticeable cultural difference between black people and white people that can be reconstructed at any given time. In essence, 'naturalization of the culture of blacks was a strategy designed to fix difference, and thus securing it forever' (Hall 1997:245).

The call for the advancement of racial equality where black people will be treated fairly in the previously biased social institutions has been a desire for many. The concept of colour line continues to exist in everyday life and is interpreted differently in different contexts. Racism is a system that cannot be fully eradicated but continues to evolve in different settings. This racial system comes in two 'languages', which is the black and the white frame of mind, the social realities and experiences. It demonstrates the socio-political conflicts arising in public and social institutions because of different skin colour. The idea that:

[B]lacks comprise a problem, blacks are forever victims, objects that feel but lack the ability to think has become the principal mechanism through which race is pushed outside of history and into the realm of natural inevitable events. (Gilroy 1987:11–12)

The economic, cultural, social and racial differences between black people and white people are historically fixed issues that are still controversial in modern society. It is unfortunate that these matters are evident in South Africa, a democratic country which prides itself with its famous African proverb *ubuntu* (humanity). With the persistent racial forces observed in the South African context, there is a need for further engagement on the complexities of race and racism together with its implications.

Racism in South Africa

Given that South Africa has witnessed an increase in incidences of open racism playing out in the public sphere, there is a need to develop alternative responses. The incidences such as that of Penny Sparrow, Steve Hofmeyr and Dianne Kohler-Barnard and the political battles which dominate narratives of the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) all contribute to the polarisation of South Africa society. Even the controversial and divisive actions from organisations like AfriForum are a clear indication that black South Africans still have to endure the racist practices in a society that promotes racial diversity and tolerance which is enshrined in

the constitution and reflected in the vision of a rainbow nation (for more details see Cilliers 2021). It is unfortunate that mistrust continues to dominate all sections of South African society and there are growing numbers of black people who believe that the current government has allowed racism to flourish through white arrogance and nostalgia from some white people who consider themselves to be victims. As Mncube (2021) observed, there is:

A general culture of victimhood amongst the white population [which] has birthed the factually incorrect claim of white genocide in South Africa. The idea has been promoted by white nationalist organisations such as AfriForum who have embarked on campaigns and overseas tours in an effort to garner sympathy and support. The portrayal of white South Africans as a victimised minority could not be further from the truth and statistics can attest to that. (n.p.)

Until white South Africans come to the table and honestly engage with fellow black South Africans on important matters such as the economy, land and racial discrimination, not much is likely to change, and we can anticipate more protests and violence. Historically, black people have been violated and continue to suffer the impact of structural injustices from the apartheid rule. At its inception, the narrative of the South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) was about 'the triumph of the human spirit over adversity' aimed at creating a non-racial society. Although 'race' remained ANC's central focus area during exile it was only in 1978, at its Kabwe's national conference that coloured people, Indians, and white people were allowed onto the national executive committee (for more details see: The Archival Platform 2018). Since then, Black Consciousness has been compromised under the guise of creating a 'non-racial society'. The white community has employed an ambivalent tactic of putting a black man in higher positions as a disguise for a racially free society. This tactic can never be fathomed as the end of black struggle. Instead, its ambivalent nature aims to tolerate a black face while exploiting it without announcing its mission. Such simplicity and a convenient approach to black oppression has only resulted in affirmative action which has enriched a few black people while the majority are still living in poverty.

This is similar to what we have seen in the Western context where the Black Lives Matter movement is gaining global momentum as different voices speak out on the issues of racism and racial supremacy in different contexts. For South Africa to live up to its vision of a 'rainbow nation', it will require not just a matter of forgiveness, but also redressing systemic injustices and ensuring real change so that we calm the growing racial tensions sparked by these historical injustices. As observed from the continued racial tensions even after South Africa was declared a democratic country in 1994, there is a great need to challenge white supremacy to give up its power and racial prejudice against black people. Christian spirituality and theology have an important role to play in restoring racial harmony and peace in South Africa. This calls for closer examination on

where we have come from and how we can develop renewed self-awareness and appreciate black self-consciousness as radical re-imagining of theology and African spirituality through Afrocentrism (Evans 2015):

... It is unfortunate, though, that my appreciation and legitimate pride in my race was not provided by my study of Christian theology. Instead, it came as a result of the civil rights movement. It was not until the social revolution of this era that I, like many of my contemporaries, developed a new awareness, appreciation, and awakened self-consciousness of blackness. Until that time I lived in a sort of racial twilight zone. On one side, I was being told that I was created in the image of God and therefore had value. On a pragmatic basis, however, it appeared to me that the benefits of possessing that divine image were reserved for white people because it seemed that they were the real benefactors of God's kingdom on earth ... (n.p.)

These words are from the book *Oneness Embraced: Reconciliation, the Kingdom, and How We are Stronger Together* by Evans (2015) who captured his childhood experiences and imaginations within a white dominated society and church. It was not just the African-American culture that shaped his upbringing, but the Christian background 'profoundly influenced by white evangelicalism' because he 'studied in its institutions, interfaced with its church and parachurch organisations, and dialogued with its leadership and its epistemological and theological worldview' (Evans 2015:n.p.).

Here was a black American man grappling with the intersecting trajectories at the interface of race, identity, and Christianity. These experiences can be profound in shaping who we become, especially where the civil rights movement in the United States (US) and Steve Biko's black consciousness movement in South Africa pioneered revolutionary resistance to white domination. (Biko 1978 in Evans 2015:n.p.)

hooks (1992:9) talked about 'Loving blackness as political resistance' and concurred that 'in a white supremacist context "loving blackness" is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life. When present it is deemed suspect, dangerous, and threatening' (hooks 1992:10).

Afrocentrism and spirituality

hooks (1992) eloquently argued that one way in which we can understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience is by recognising the connection between domination and representation:

The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's 'orientalist' sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other' ... It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm. (p. 42)

That the field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people in society, and this is clearly reflected in the racial tensions and inequalities that are still prevalent in contemporary South African society. Spirituality remains one area in which Western dominance is still visible in African religious practices where Euro-centric liturgy is still dominant. Such deficiencies in theological articulations and blackness render theology irrelevant as it ignores the 'political, socio-cultural and economic realities that shape the outlook of the African people' as identified by Kasali (2003:2).

It is also important that the discourse on racism and white supremacy should also address Afro-xenophobia which will ensure the recovery of African dignity as means to deal with the Eurocentric discourses and neo-colonialism. For example, Sesanti (2016:35) underscored the significance of 'tapping into (subjugated) African knowledge' as an essential part of dismantling neo-colonialism in education and other spheres of society. For Sesanti (2016:35), Afrocentrism is an absolute key for this important task and the restoration of African culture is 'central' to an Afrocentric education. Sesanti (2016) argued that Afrocentricity is:

[A] philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location, and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture ... a quality of thought and practice rooted in the cultural and human interests of African people. (p. 35)

Reclaiming the black identity through the lens of Afrocentrism and spirituality

Black communities have embraced the need to reclaim their space and draw on global movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement to articulate a revolutionary discourse on their struggles for black identity. This approach is grounded on the recognition of the challenges prevalent in contemporary society and that the coloniality of power remains deeply entrenched in new forms of oppression. These tendencies are evident in perceptions that portray black Africans as unable to think, something we inherited and is imbedded in centuries of colonial literature which 'had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as the "other"... of a dominant discourse' (hooks 1992:32). While this is true for all black people who have been rendered unthinking, it is especially so for black women who were marginalised in accessing colonial education because of patriarchal practices which privileged boys and disadvantaged girls who were confined to domestic roles such as cooking and cleaning as means to prepare them for marriage.

In restoring black dignity, gender justice is one of the key goals requiring interventions from governments. For example, there are scholarships that prioritise women and girls as part of a long-term strategy to empower women. White supremacy benefitted greatly from the marginalisation of black women in that poor levels of education among

women ensure cheap labour as the majority of African women are exploited in the global markets where they work as domestic workers and provide services at restaurants and bars. There are fewer educated women than men, and this epistemic violence is a result of marginalisation of black women, who in some circles have been labelled as being 'voiceless'. Such labelling is a convenient explanation for this violent injustice, for in the profound words of Indian author Roy (2018:1), '[T]here is really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard'. Therefore, we need to be revolutionary and intentional about listening to the 'deliberately silenced and preferably unheard' as means to restore human dignity for women in their destitution.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015:22) has highlighted the intersectionality of racial hierarchy, its epistemological design, and how it is imbedded in the modern world order. Therefore, the struggle of the black communities should be at the centre of any meaningful engagement within the intersectional ties which are reflected in racial hierarchies. Given that racism is not an event, but a system, it is critical that this system must be analysed from the perspective of coloniality because the epistemological tools that have been employed to analyse the system are in themselves, Western and constructed within a hierarchical racial order. The argument raised by Quijano (2000:233) is relevant as it points to the black existential condition within the colonial matrix of power (coloniality of power). Maldonado-Torres (2007:242) convincingly argued that the modern forms of exploitation and domination (power) cannot be engaged or viewed outside the impact of colonisation, slavery, segregation, apartheid and capitalism.

In helping us appreciate the dominant and exploitative tendencies of the colonial structures, Biko's (1978) exegesis of Black Consciousness is important:

Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the 'normal' which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realisation that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man ... Black Consciousness therefore takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people ... (p. 49)

Biko's understanding of Black Consciousness presents an alternative lens which is an essential instrument to counter white domination. Therefore, movements such as a Black Lives Matter are at the centre of appropriating the struggles of black people as a means to counter the black inferiority complex as well as challenge white supremacy and domination. On the other hand, Black Consciousness is central to the need to critique power, and at the same time, brings forth the centrality and locality of Blackness as it takes the experiences of black people seriously. In doing so, it stretches beyond the colour line in its application of

intersectionality as its analytical tool, while engaging with the social and epistemic location of the *damnés*.²

Conclusion

In summary, while Anderson (1995:94) has critically engaged with the question of ontological Blackness, particularly, arguing for an attempt to go beyond it, his critique of black theology fails to consider the spatiality where black people find themselves, which is the zone of non-being in Fanonian terms. Black Lives Matter as a movement acknowledges the existential ontological challenges that black people experience. Biko (2017) asserted that:

The Bible must continually be shown to have something to say to the black man to keep him going in his long journey towards realisation of the self. This is the message implicit in 'black theology'. Black theology seeks to do away with spiritual poverty of the black people. It seeks to demonstrate the absurdity of the assumption by whites that 'ancestor worship' was necessarily a superstition and that Christianity is a scientific religion. (p. 31)

Therefore, this link between the Black Theology Project in the US with the black theology of South Africa and the Black Consciousness movement derives from provincialised through to the global. It is for this reason that this article drew on the notions of Liminality and Third Space to highlight how the lives of the three black intellectuals resembled the 'liminal threshold' as they all underwent 'initiation' on black identity in their respective times and contexts. Despite the many years of 'chanting down Babylon', black people are still undergoing some form of initiation into the new dispensation and confronting white supremacy in the same way that Marechera, Biko and more recently, Vellem – fiercely confronted. The study has demonstrated how they did not live to fully realise the potential of blackness and left us to face similar struggles in the face of injustices. Therefore, confronting whiteness will require that black communities embrace what the trio stood for as they struggled against every form of racial oppression within the liminal spaces of black oppression, and white communities can support people of colour in the pursuit of racial justice by acknowledging the plight of black people.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the Vukani Batho for keeping the legacy of Vuyani Vellem alive.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

²This is taken from Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961) popularly known as *The Wretched of the Earth*. In his work, also translated as *The Damned of the Earth*, Fanon reminded us that: 'Decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon'. For him, the reality that decolonisation is an encounter between two mutually antagonistic forces (the coloniser and the colonised), it followed that colonisation cannot be resolved in a peaceful manner but will involve violent protests and armed colonial struggle.

Authors' contributions

B.M. conducted a literature review and L.M.M. provided the conceptual framework and edited most sections of the paper.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Anderson, E., 1990, *Streetwise*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Anderson, V., 1995, *Beyond ontological blackness: An essay on African American religious and cultural Criticism*, Continuum, New York, NY.
- Arnold, M. (ed.), 1978, *The testimony of Steve Biko*, Maurice Temple Smith, London.
- Arundhati, R., 2018, *The deliberately silenced and preferably unheard*, viewed 09 September 2021, from https://www.girlsglobe.org/2018/08/10/the-deliberately-silenced-and-preferably-unheard/?doing_wp_cron=1630847541.1168539524078369140625.
- Bhabha, H.K., 1994, 'Foreword: Framing Fanon', in F. Fanon (ed.), *The wretched of the earth*, pp. vii–xlii, Grove Press, New York, NY.
- Biko, S., 1978, *I write what I like: Selected writings*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Biko, S., 2017, *I write what I like, 40th anniversary new edition*, Picador Africa, Johannesburg.
- Boesak, A.A., 2020, 'In search of our human face: Black consciousness, black spirituality, inclusive humanity and the politics of vulgarity', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(3), a6164. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3>
- Broom, A. & Cavenagh, J., 2011, 'On the meanings and experiences of living and dying in an Australian hospice', *Health* 15(1), 96–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459309360797>
- Cilliers, J., 2021, *Rainbow nation: Changing the conversation*, viewed 05 September 2021, from <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/racial-tensions-haunt-south-africa-impeding-countrys-progress>.
- Council for World Mission (CWM), 2019, *A tribute to Professor Vuyani Vellem*, viewed 15 June 2022, from <https://www.cwmission.org/a-tribute-to-professor-vuyani-vellem/>.
- Dieman, E.V., 2019, *Helen Zille sparks Twitter ire again with 'black privilege' comments*, viewed 02 May 2022, from <https://www.news24.com/News24/helen-zille-sparks-twitter-ire-again-with-black-privilege-comments-20190517>.
- Evans, J., 2022, 'Stellenbosch urination incident: Petition for expulsion of student gains support', *News24*, viewed 21 May 2022, from <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/stellenbosch-urination-incident-petition-for-expulsion-of-student-gains-support-20220521>.
- Fanon, F., 1961, *Les damnés de la terre*, F. Maspero, Paris.
- Gilroy, P., 1987, *'There ain't no black in the Union Jack': The cultural politics of race and nation*, Hutchinson, London.
- Grootes, S., 2021, 'Phoenix posters: DA exploits fear and deepens divisions during election drive', *Daily Maverick*, viewed n.d., from <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-07-phoenix-posters-da-exploits-fear-and-deepens-divisions-during-election-drive/>.
- Hall, S., 1997, *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*, Sage, London.
- Holon, H., 2006, *On Dambudzo Marechera: The life and times of an African Writer*, viewed 11 October 2021, from <https://www.vqronline.org/essay/dambudzo-marechera-life-and-times-african-writer>.
- hooks, b., 1992, *Black looks, race and representation*, South End Press, Boston, MA.
- Kasali, D.M., 2003, 'Doing theology in Africa', A paper delivered at Wheaton Graduate School, viewed 04 September 2021, from <https://congoinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Kasali-Theology-in-Africa.pdf>.
- Leek, C., 2014, 'Whiter shades of pale: On the plurality of whiteness', in M.S. Kimmel & A.L. Ferber (eds.), *Privilege: A reader*, pp. 211–225, Westview, Boulder, CO.
- Lindner, A., 2018, 'Defining whiteness: Perspectives on privilege', *Gnovis* 18(2), 43–58.
- Maldonado-Torres, N., 2007, 'On the coloniality of being', *Cultural Studies* 21(2), 240–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>
- Marechera, T., 1978, *House of hunger*, Heinemann, Essex.
- Marshall, S., Grinyer, A. & Limmer, M., 2019, 'Dual liminality: A framework for conceptualizing the experience of adolescents and young adults with cancer', *Journal of Adolescent and Young Adult Oncology* 8(1), 26–31. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jayao.2018.0030>
- Mbembe, A., 2001, *On the postcolony*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- McIntosh, P., 2007, "'White privilege and male privilege": A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies', in M.T. Segal & T.A. Martínez (eds.), *Intersections of gender, race, and class*, Roxbury, Los Angeles, CA.
- Merriam-Webster, n.d., *Threshold*, viewed 21 July 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threshold>.
- Mncube, P., 2019, *The rainbow nation of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu is dead*, viewed 05 September 2021, from <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/the-rainbow-nation-is-dead-20190523>.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S., 2013, *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonization*, CODESRIA, Dakar.
- Painter, N.I., 2010, *The history of white people*, Norton & Co, New York, NY.
- Quijano, A., 2000, 'Coloniality of power and eurocentrism in Latin America', *International Sociology* 15(2), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>
- Schwartz, N.A. & Von Glascoe, C.A., 2020, 'The body in the mirror: Breast cancer, liminality and borderlands', *Medical Anthropology* 40(1), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2020.1775220>
- Sesanti, S., 2016, 'Afrocentric education for an African renaissance: Philosophical underpinnings', *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy* 62, 34–40.
- The Archival Platform, 2018, *A ground of struggle: Four decades of archival activism in South Africa*, viewed 05 September 2021, from http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/183/2018/archives_activism_report.pdf.
- Trading Economics, 2021, *South Africa unemployment rate*, viewed 02 May 2022, from <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/unemployment-rate>.
- Van Aarde, A.G. & De Beer, S.J., 2019, 'In memoriam: Vuyani Shadrack Vellem (25 December 1968–4 December 2019)', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(3), a5917. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5917>
- Vellem, V., 2007, 'The symbol of liberation in South African public life: A black theological perspective', PhD thesis, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, University of Pretoria.
- Vellem, V., 2014, 'Spirituality of liberation: A conversation with African religiosity', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2752>
- Vellem, V.S., 2015, 'Unshackling the church', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #3119, 5 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.3119>
- Wayne, C. & Grogan, B., 2018, 'Abjection in Dambudzo Marechera's The House of Hunger', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 55(2), 104–119. <https://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-9070/tvl.v55i2.1884>
- Wels, H., Van Der Waal, K., Spiegel, A. & Kamsteeg, F., 2011, 'Victor Turner and liminality: An introduction', *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34(1–2), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2011.11500002>
- Winant, H., 2001, *The world is a ghetto: Race and democracy since World War II*, Basic Books, New York, NY.