An Intersectional Approach on Habitus Adaptations in Academic Writing

Understanding Black and People of Color First-generation Students' Experiences through Memory Work

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Abstract:
Attaining the appropriate cultural skills in higher education can feel troubling. The university is a historically exclusionary place which, once only open to white cisgender heterosexual men, has only slightly changed in terms of whose knowledge counts within its sphere. This article explores academic writing from the perspective of Black and People of Color first-generation students and analyzes how the category of race together with socio-economic status influence the students' experiences of adapting to the academic domain. By drawing on the expert knowledge of three students from the University of Vienna and using the qualitative method of memory work, we were able to detect shared experiences of structural racism and classism that influenced the strategies used in academic writing: throughout their studies, the students transitioned from self-alienation and shame to self-affirming forms of expression that mirrored their resistance against the hegemonic, white knowledge system. Early exposure to racial othering at school was perceived as highly formative of the students' self-images as writers. This study serves as a contribution to the analysis and critique of epistemic violence in white educational spaces. It has direct implications for the changes that universities should take on to dismantle their deeply embedded racism and classism.

Keywords: habitus adaptation, academic writing, Black students, Students of Color, first-generation students, social inequalities in academia

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Introduction

While I write
Sometimes I fear writing,
Writing turns into fear,
for I cannot escape so many colonial constructions.
 - While I Write by Grada Kilomba (2015)

In her poem "While I Write", Grada Kilomba expresses her fears, for she cannot escape colonial structures within which her body is seen as one that cannot produce knowledge. As a Black female scholar, she moves in spaces, including the university, where a body like hers is not supposed to be seen, where a voice like hers is used to being silenced, and where a speech from someone like her is not supposed to be given. She moves in white spaces where she is constituted as a non-belonging "Other". Indeed, universities are not neutral places that create objective, impartial knowledge, as is often suggested by faculty, staff, and students themselves. They are institutions that produce and reproduce hierarchical structures and privilege and disadvantage along the categories of class, race, gender, and dis/ability. Thereby a certain habitus is sustained and expected of students, which also translates into how students approach scientific thinking and writing. As illustrated by Kilomba, such a habitus must be inhabited by certain bodies that usually present as white, cisgender, male, and able-bodied. Should a body deviate from this standard presentation, it is deemed as incapable of knowing.

In this article we argue that class and race play a central role in how we experience the university, cultivate our abilities in scientific knowledge production, and acquire necessary skills for academic writing. We acknowledge that the university is a space that upholds white, patriarchal structures that follow a colonial logic of knowledge production and epistemic violence, the consequence of which being that more disadvantaged students acquire a different kind of subjective conception of themselves as academic writers in comparison to students with a more privileged position. The article explores how our experiences in different bodies as well as with differing class backgrounds inform our writing in academia. We ask: (1) How do the categories of race and ethnicity together with social class/socioeconomic status influence the experiences of Black/People of Color[1] first-generation students' experiences of adapting to the academic domain–a domain that privileges white, western,

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1   "Black people" and "People of Color" are written with an upper-case "b" or "p" and "c" to signify that "Black/People of Color" is a social, cultural and political self-reference. Moreover, It is meant to center the knowledge of Black people and People of Color in this article.

heteropatriarchal, and colonial values and rules of conduct? and (2) How do one's life experiences so far impact academic writing and conceptions of one's self as a writer? To answer these questions, we carried out a participative inquiry into the experiences and perspectives of three students from the University of Vienna, using a method called memory work.

What is the point of conducting a study like ours? The initial hope was that working with the participants, whom we will refer to as "experts", would lead to fruitful conversations not merely about Black/ People of Color first-generation students' experiences in the academic domain, but also about the implications such experiences can have for changing the circumstances which universities provide for first-generation students and academics, in particular Black/People of Color students and academics. We believe that Black/People of Color students and academics' voices should incite and guide critical reflection among the entire university staff, especially university teachers and writing mentors. It is necessary to take account of the diverse social positionings we are bound to have in higher education and tackle the discriminatory, violent structures of scientific knowledge production. Hence, based on the knowledge brought forth by the experts, we have submitted a list of proposals at the end of the article, addressing how safer spaces and general support in academic writing could potentially look like for Black students and Students of Color from working-class, non-academic families. We would hope that any educational institution that is truly interested in advancing equality, diversity, and inclusion within their own walls would be highly interested in such a list.

This article begins by presenting the state of research on the social inheritance of education in Austria and previous studies' findings on the wide-ranging effects of structural racism against Black students and Students of Color in educational spaces. It then introduces the theoretical framework and key concepts chosen for the study. Here we detail, on the one hand, how class-like social structures and inherited cultural capital inform the so-called habitus adaptations in higher education and, on the other hand, address the initial insufficiency of the concept of habitus through the critical lens of intersectionality. Subsequently, we will provide a description of the method, memory work, and discuss the main findings of the study the analysis. Finally, we will conclude the article with the aforementioned list of proposals for potential changes universities could introduce to avoid racist and classist practices of teaching, academic writing, and increase the support for non-white students without academic family histories. The very end of the article also includes further reflections on the aptness of the used method for this particular study as well as thoughts on our personal involvement and positionality in relation to it.

State of research

Despite the rise of the general level of education in Austria, educational mobility between generations has remained rather weak in the country. In other words, educational opportunities such as the attainment of a formal degree from an institution of higher education still greatly depend on the social background and educational level of one's parents (Statistik Austria, 2018, 1). To illustrate this, consider the data from a European- and USA-wide comparison of the intergenerational persistence of educational attainment in 2008 where Austria, among other European countries, was ranked as the third highest country. This indicates that children in Austria with higher educated parents have increased chances

of obtaining a higher education (Fessler, Mooslechner & Schürz, 2012). Backing up this finding, in 2016, 57 percent of 25- to 44-year-olds from academic families in Austria obtained a higher education degree whereas only 7 percent of 25- to 44-year-olds from educationally disadvantaged, non-academic backgrounds did (Statistik Austria, 2018).

When educational structures are not able to offset the effects one's social background has on one's educational opportunities, or worse, when educational structures reinforce such effects, we can use the term "(social) inheritance of education" (Arbeiterkammer Oberösterreich, Bildungsmonitor 2020, 4) to describe this phenomena. Inequalities (re)produced by the educational system derive more or less directly from differences in material wealth possessed by actors, discrimination based on factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and residence, as well as social background. Social background contributes to an individual's development not merely through economic wealth handed down within the family but also through the inherited social and cultural forms of capital that inform the development of one's habitus (Arbeiterkammer Oberösterreich, Bildungsmonitor 2020, 4).

A series of studies have examined and theorized the unique experiences and challenges Black people and People of Color face in higher education. In their research conducted in South-Africa, Lindi Liversage, Luzelle Naudé, and Anja Botha (2018) found out that during their first year of university, Black students from non-academic families experienced the overwhelming emotions of feeling lost, stressed out, and unprepared for the demands of the academic environment. The sources for these feelings were not only academic (having to work extremely hard to succeed, for example) but also interpersonal (feeling intimidated by and uncomfortable around people at university). Having to navigate a white, western-dominated university space as a Black student meant being subjected to racism, which resulted in troubling experiences such as the fear of losing one's ethnic identity in the process of adaptation (Liversage et al., 2018).

Due to being confronted with violent, racist experiences at predominantly white universities, Black students and Students of Color face "minority status stress" more often than other racial groups (Cokley et al., 2013). "Minority status stress" describes "the unique stressors experienced by minority students, which may include experiences with racism and discrimination, insensitive comments, and questions of belonging on a college campus" (McClain et al., 2016, 102). Moreover, as indicated by Shannon McClain and their colleagues' research, together with minority status stress, a so-called "impostor phenomenon" (also known as "imposter syndrome") negatively affects Black students' psychological well-being. The "impostor phenomenon" refers to a subjective feeling of being an intellectual "fraud", which is linked to experiencing difficulties in acknowledging one's accomplishments, feeling disbelief at one's intellectual abilities, guilt about achieving success, self-doubt, and a fear of failure (see McClain et al., 2016, 103-104). In line with these findings, the Black graduate students interviewed by Steven Stone and colleagues (2018) reported that, in addition to intellectual self-doubt, they would also question the quality of their academic writing (p. 510).

Contributions to this topic in German-speaking regions of Europe have demonstrated how racism and the remains of colonialism have similarly penetrated higher education. Racist, ethnocentric discourses can be found in university curricula and materials used in teaching (Angerer et al., 2021; Unangst &

Martínez Alemán, 2021). The neoliberal, performance-oriented reorganization of universities has made it more difficult for students in precarious life situations to get by and has eventually hindered students' engagement in critical discussions and confronting racism at university (Angerer et al., 2021). Universities' hiring practices continue favouring white applicants. Their attempts to "diversify" faculties remain insufficient, for the equality or diversity policies practiced by the institutions omit structural and intersectional discrimination (Satilmis, 2019, 103) and privilege white cisgender women (Unangst & Martínez Alemán, 2021). Meanwhile, networks established by marginalized groups are excluded and invalidated (Unangst & Martínez Alemán, 2021). According to an Austria-wide report by IDB (Initiative für ein diskriminierungsfreies Bildungswesen), approximately 10 percent of all reported cases of discrimination in educational spaces take place in higher education institutions, scoring third highest in their statistics. Out of all forms of discrimination taken into account by IDB, racism was found to be the most common: 82 percent of all discrimination was grounded in racism, followed by sexual orientation (7%), ableism (6%), sexism (4%), and antisemitism (1%) (IDB, 2021, 7-9). A report published three years before distinguishes between certain racisms and suggests that most of the racism experienced in the educational field is either "anti-muslim racism" (50%) or "racism based on skin color and ethnicity" (49%) (IDB, 2018, 15).

Yet, to our knowledge, qualitative studies that explicitly address the experiences of Black/People of Color students and academics from non-academic family histories are rare in German speaking regions. Most of the time, studies either focus on or derive from Anglo-American settings and do not distinguish between Black/People of Color from academic families and Black/People of Color from non-academic families, perhaps because belonging to a racialized minority is often thought to correlate with a lower socio-economic status and an according educational level. In Austria, research on the topic does not really exist as there is generally no far-reaching, differentiated discourse on race to be found. One reason for this is that Austria does not register race as a standard statistical variable. Instead, race and racial signifiers are most of the time discussed through terms like "migration background" (Migrationshintergrund), "origin" (Herkunft), "skin color" (Hautfarbe), "German as second language" (Deutsch als Zweitsprache), or "non-native speakers" (Nicht-Muttersprachler*innen). Especially the language skills of children with a native tongue other than German remains a heavily politicized topic. The problem with these terms is that they lump together a great variety of people regardless of their differences in social position and power: white people, Black people, and People of Color, just generally anyone who is not Austrian or from Western Europe. Also, the usage of "skin color" specifically plays into the idea that Blackness is a biological signifier and not a construct. As long as discourses on race and ethnicity are reduced to questioning whether a certain word is racist or not, addressing structural problems remains difficult. (see Black Voices, 2022, 2)

Theoretical framework and key concepts

To illuminate as well as problematize the process of Black/People of Color Students' adapting to higher education, we will use the theoretical concepts of cultural capital as well as habitus and embed them within the analytical framework of intersectionality that has originated in critical race studies and Black feminist scholarship.

Cultural capital

For Pierre Bourdieu (2002 [1986]), capital and its distribution among people in certain moments of time represent the way the social world is organized: it is not organized by accident, equality of opportunity, or fair competition but rather by the persistent force of capital that is "inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible" (280). Cultural capital is one of the three "fundamental guises" (reference) of capital, the other two being social capital and economic capital. Cultural capital involves certain kinds of knowledge, specific ways of thinking, education, cultural objects like books or instruments, and educational qualifications (ibid., 282).

Cultural capital is inherited, takes longer periods of time to accumulate, and can be directly convertible into monetary value. This makes the transmission of cultural capital "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" (ibid., p. 282) and shows that attributes such as ability or talent–often mistaken for outcomes of mere individual effort or mental capacity–are, in fact, the results of intergenerational investments of cultural capital and time. The educational system sanctions the hereditary transmission of cultural capital and thus reproduces social structures such as class-like divisions in society. Hence, there is no such thing as absolute equality of opportunity granted for each child, pupil, or student (see ibid., p. 282). This makes cultural capital a great source of social inequality that has the power to either further or inhibit one's social mobility.

Social class remains one of the most influential and persistent contributors to a person's access to, success in, and experience of the educational field and labor market (Lehmann, 2014; Stephens et al., 2014; Ma & Shea, 2021). In their study on first-generation students from a Swedish university, Biörn Ivemark and Anna Ambrose (2021) demonstrate how college students with weaker inherited cultural capital go through more challenging habitus adaptations when adjusting to higher education. The authors argue that besides cultural capital transmitted during early childhood primarily through family, capital acquired later in life through contact to middle-class social environments with stronger cultural capital also affects these adaptations (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021, 192). The findings of the study further suggest that the different outcomes of adapting to the higher education environment depend on the "sociocultural strain" (reference) experienced by students. "Sociocultural strain" refers to a person's negative emotions deriving from a subjective experience of being different from others based on one's social background (ibid., 195).

Habitus

In its embodied form, cultural capital becomes incorporated into a person's body as an integral part of their "habitus". Habitus can be described as "a subjective but not individual system of internalized

structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 1977, 86). It involves "the socially structured system of dispositions embodied within social agents that organizes and generates their perception, judgment, and action at a largely instinctive level" (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021, 193). In other words, habitus could be explained as the manifestation of the social in the individual subject ("Körper gewordene Soziale") through their mostly unconscious actions and ways of thinking, being, and perceiving of things (see Krais & Gebauer, 2002, 5). Thus, how people adjust to new social environments and experience "fitting in" or not "fitting in" depends on their habitus and social positioning in a given space, both of which are fundamentally informed by the form and amount of cultural capital that is passed down in their family (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021, 193).

Kilomba (2010) reminds us of the limitations Bourdieu's concept of habitus has when we take a look at Black people or People of Color adapting to white spaces as racialized "Others". When the aspect of race is taken into consideration, the suggested unconscious intuitiveness of "fitting in" through one's acquired habitus is unveiled as being flawed :

> When Bourdieu and Wacquant claim it is 'like fish in water' when habitus come to encounter a social world of which it is the product, they as *white* males are forgetting that the relation racialized 'Others' have to this knowledge is conditioned. One is indeed at odds with the social world of which one is a product, for this world is *white*. (Kilomba, 2010, 34, Footnote 8)

Blending into the academic world is restricted for Black subjects because, in a white world, Blackness is always construed in relation and as inferior to whiteness. In this context, habitus adaptation as such can never be fully completed. As Nkweto Simmonds (1999) argues, she "cannot be, as Bourdieu suggests, a fish in water that 'does not feel the weight of the water, and takes the world about itself for granted'", because the world she "inhabit[s] as an academic, is a white world" (51). This world has a problematic relationship with Blackness: it ascribes to Nkweto Simmonds a marked, marginalized, "non-white" existence, which always stands in conflict with its surroundings. At the same time, whiteness remains unmarked, undefined, and, thus, unproblematized. Accordingly, she cannot help but feel the weight of the water on her body, for her body deviates from the norm of whiteness. (see ibid., 51)

Intersectionality

As is evident from the above, socioeconomic status or social class do not pertain to one's journey in the academic domain alone. To scrutinize the underlying exclusionary mechanisms of the university, we cannot only draw on class or capital, but must seek an intersectional approach. The term intersectionality was introduced into academia by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins to describe how overlapping social categories or identities such as class, race, and gender, as well as intertwined systems of power, namely capitalism, racism, and the patriarchy, interact with each other to shape our experiences of oppression (see Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1998). The concept itself, however, had already been discussed by numerous Black feminists long before, just not explicitly by the name of "intersectionality". Already as early as in 1851, Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved

woman, abolitionist, and women's rights advocate, highlighted the intersection of gender and race in her famous speech "Ain't I a woman". In the speech, she spoke out on equal rights of all women by emphasizing womanhood and Blackness and the racialized position of Black and (formerly) enslaved women. Equally, the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbian socialist activists established in 1974, articulated their central political goal as follows:

> The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppression that all women of color face. (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977)

The social categories or identities that intersectionality simultaneously addresses do not simply add to each other, nor can they be used in isolation: "[S]tructures of disadvantage do not exist independent of one another but are constituted by multiple and intersecting relationships of power" (Atrey, 2018, 869). Black women, for instance, are not disadvantaged by race or gender alone but by both of them simultaneously. By understanding the structures of disadvantage and experiences of oppression intersectionally, we can leave behind essentialism as neither "the" woman, nor "the" Black person have universal experiences. (see ibid., p. 869). Likewise, neither "the" first-generation student, nor "the" Black student or student of Color have universal experiences.

Intersectionality is a heuristic device which "focuses awareness on people and experiences—hence, on social forces and dynamics" (MacKinnon, 2013, 1020). Intersectional positions are dynamic as are the particular experiences of each individual person. Through intersectionality we can reveal the various forms through which the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy oppresses, silences, and exploits people. Employing intersectionality as a theory that is rooted in a Black radical tradition should be understood as an intervention against the hegemony of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

As our article aims to shed light on how Black/People of Color first-generation students relate to academic writing, it is worth noting that writing has long been a tool for Black/People of Color as well as other marginalized people outside of academia to make sense of their lived experiences. Many, such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldua, have written about the importance of critical thought and analytic writing about those lives that have often been devalued or pushed into oblivion. Some Women of Color inside and outside academia use creative ways of (scientific) writing to name, theorize, and analyze their realities which are influenced by their social positioning at the intersection of multiple oppressions. Audre Lorde, for example, encouraged Black women in the working class to write poetry because

> it is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. Over the last few years, writing a novel on tight finances, I came to appreciate the enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. (Lorde, 2002[1984], 113)

Lorde understood writing to be a necessary tool to reclaim one's own voice and to create an individual form of expression in order to resist the oppressor's narrative, and not believe what white people write about oneself. However, to acquire academic writing and researching skills takes time that many working class Black people and People of Color simply do not have. To view academic writing from an intersectional perspective can reveal the elitist and exclusionary practice that scientific research can be.

Method

The method chosen for the study was inspired by memory work, a social constructionist, participative, and qualitative method that is used to collectively analyze individually written memories. Memory work was originally developed for feminist inquiry of women's socialization in the 1980s. Its pioneers, a group of German feminist and socialist researchers including Frigga Haug, attempted to provide a framework that would build a bridge between theory and experience and help understand the processes through which women become part of society. The method has since gained resonance among researchers and has been applied to and further developed, modified and specified in other fields of research as well. Within this method, engaging with one's memories is fundamental to the construction of one's identity (see Onyx and Small, 2001, 773-774).

Sampling procedure

The selection of participants was based on the following two sampling criteria: the experts should identify as Black/People of Color students or academics and be the first ones in their families to attend higher education. Overall three students from the University of Vienna between the ages of 20 and 30 years participated in the study. All of them were contacted through personal connections. Even though it was expected that further variables such as gender, sexuality, dis/ability, or age could cross the axes of race, ethnicity and social class in the study, it was not in our interest to include these aspects into the predefined set of sampling criteria.

Since the focal points of our research on the experiences of Black/People of Color first generation students differ from those initially set by Haug and her colleagues, we decided to loosely follow their methodological approach rather than strictly adhering to it. After all, we were not interested in tackling the category of gender as our primary interest, but to explore the ways in which the interplay between race, ethnicity and social class and related experiences of discrimination, exclusion and disadvantage influence the students' experiences of academic writing.

Doing memory work

Meanings of actions and events are negotiated collectively. They "are not found in the actor's head but in the common meanings which she/he [sic!] negotiates in interaction with others—both then at the time of the episode and now in reflection" (Crawford et al., 1992, 53, cited in Onyx and Small, 2001, 776). However, as lived experiences are personal and personally memorized, they often appear as singular and unique. Among other things, they depend on factors such as time and place, social class, gender,

age, dis/ability, ethnicity, and race of the experiencer (Haug et al., 1999, 43). Yet, individual lives share many (potential) commonalities, all lives are highly regulated by "a whole series of imperatives: social pressures, natural limitations, the imperative of economic survival, the given conditions of history and culture" (ibid., 44), all of which are collectively produced. As argued by Haug and her colleagues, it is only in this collective production that an individual experience becomes possible in the first place (ibid., 44). Through memory work, one can explore and theorize individual constructs rooted in the social world: first, through isolated reflection on one's own memories and, then, through a collective examination of and confrontation with them.

The current study was conducted in three phases: (1) individual reflection on memories through writing, (2) collective examination of memories in a group setting, and (3) participative analysis and theorization of the material from phases 1 and 2. To evoke memories and start off the writing process in Phase 1, the experts received an assignment sheet with two opening questions (see Appendix) chosen by the writers of the article. The questions were accompanied by a short description of the study as well as a guide explaining how to proceed with the task. Due to difficulties in finding a suitable date for Phase 2, Phase 1 lasted more than four weeks.

In the beginning of July 2022 all experts finally came together to reflect upon their experiences based on the texts they had written. This group exchange (Phase 2) took place in a private room at the University of Vienna and lasted two and half hours, including a few breaks in-between. During the exchange, the writers of the article tried to remain in the background by asking as few questions as possible, moderating the conversation and making notes. In order to create the safest, most comfortable, natural, and fruitful conversational setting possible, the group exchange was not recorded, filmed or transcribed. In Phase 3, insights acquired from the group exchange in Phase 2 were summarized, evaluated against the background of the theoretical framework and finally sent to the experts for their consent and suggestions for further modifications.

Memory work was particularly suitable for our study as it disrupts the classical division between the "subject" and the "object" of research, the "knower" and the "known", the "experimenter" and the "subject". Accordingly, the researcher positions themselves as part of the research group[2] and the participants of the study become active "co-researchers" of the study (Haug et al., 1987, cited in Onyx & Small, 2001, 775). In the case of our research, the experts contributed to all of its phases apart from the groundwork and the writing of the article. Memory work thereby enabled the experts to have ownership of and power over their own experiences and the way they were narrated and presented in the article. It was also our hope that the method would work as an emancipatory and mutually empowering reflection process for the experts.

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2   It is important to note that positioning one's self as part of the research group does have underlying limitations in the current study as the second writer (EL) of the article is white and therefore cannot claim the knowledge and experiences presented in the study as their own or as similar to their own. How we went about this issue during Phase 2 in particular was by excluding EL from contributing to the group exchange and assigning them the task of detailed note-making.

Analysis

We have now arrived at the part of the article where the results of the three phases of memory work merge: individual writing, the group discussion based on it and the theoretical considerations and interpretative associations made afterwards by the writers. The focus lies on the meanings that the experts themselves gave to their experiences of the university and academic writing. The analysis follows the chronological order of issues discussed in phase 2 only loosely by focusing on the most significant topics of the discussion. These happen to present a timeline of events, self-observations, and changes in feelings and attitudes towards academia and writing, starting from childhood and ending with the present. The chapter begins with a recollection of memories from the school years, which were highly formative for the experts' educational biographies. It then continues by exploring the very beginning of university studies, feelings attached to it, as well as the most common strategies deployed to adapt to its demands: imitation, alienation, and play with identities. Finally, the chapter covers a period later in the studies where the experts started questioning the very system of knowledge they were supposed to conform to. Here we will be able to read how the effort to adapt is transformed into resisting the academic field, especially through writing and the recognition of specific emotions through it. The collective "we" used in the analysis is selective in that it marks a perspective from a racialized position, which, in addition to the experts, is personally shared by only one of the writers of this article (SH).

"When thinking about university and academic writing, I feel exhausted.
I have had to lower my expectations."

> *"I had zero idea what it would mean to study, but I knew that studying*
> *or having an academic degree would be highly valued by society."*

As university works as an extension of school, how we experience higher education later on in life is closely related to the experiences we have had in the educational realm prior to it. Our expectations of university education might be rather high at first, for an academic degree is hoped to provide economic safety, increase one's societal value , and provide a new, "diverse" and "inclusive" learning environment . Yet, these initially positive expectations must often be lowered as the university comes to show itself as quite the opposite of a cradle of knowledge and mind-broadening, critical thinking. Rather, as will become evident in the discussion below, mechanisms of exclusion familiar from school linger on at university and end up having significant consequences for the wellbeing and subjective self-perceptions of Black students and Students of Color. We thus come to associate academic writing with feelings of being jaded or exhausted, frustrated, stressed, and isolated.

"Would I get a better grade if I just had a different name?"

> *"As a child you don't know what is going on. All you*
> *know is that you are just not good enough."*

The exclusion of racialized minorities as a group less capable of knowing begins early on in life. Dividing children into knowledgeable and less-knowledgeable groups based on race, ethnicity and migration biography is deeply embedded in the Austrian school system: Who is automatically considered an in-group member at school due to their proximity to the norm, a German-speaking white child from a

middle-class background, and who has to "earn" their place among the so-called "normal" pupils? Who has to work extra-hard in order to be considered as equivalent to the norm ? Who is ascribed a culture- or language-based inferiority and a presumed incapability of blending in? Who, in the end, is expected to adapt to whom?

Already our young selves wondered if we would have been graded better at school had we had a different, white, name. This illustrates our early developed awareness of being seen fundamentally different or "less than" when being observed or judged by white people. In his seminal work "The Souls of Black Folk", William Edward Burghardt Du Bois describes such an awareness or psychological state as "double-consciousness". According to Du Bois (1994 [1903], 8), double consciousness is "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". It is a conflicting situation within the body: "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (ibid., 8). As explained by Tiffany Joseph and Tanya Golash-Boza (2021), such a "two-ness" within a subject is created in "interaction between the self and the larger society" (6) where the subject is exposed to "racist and xenophobic treatment in social interactions and from larger institutions and structures'' (7). Consequently, despite being officially or legally acknowledged as a member of a society, one can socio-culturally experience at most a limited belonging to it (see ibid., 6). In other words, we can officially attend educational spaces "just as anyone else", whilst simultaneously recognizing ourselves as non-belonging "Others" in them.

"I was told that my German is not good enough even though I know it is."

> *"Our whole class was divided into pupils with migration background and pupils without migration background. We would then learn German in isolation from each other."*

"These systems just work against you. [...] You are alone, and you just simply have to cope."

Racism and coloniality permeate every aspect of our lives and systemically show up especially in educational spaces. In former colonies schools played the role of assimilating local children to the culture of their colonizers while alienating them from their own culture, systems of knowledge, traditions, and communities. White students in Europe, for their part, were taught about their own racial and cultural superiority, omitting the horrors committed in the colonies (see Kessé 2018, 19). The heritage of colonial rule manifests itself in the present-day school system's racist and classist "inclusionary", or rather, assimilationist practices. In the course of such practices, school teachers often assume a direct correlation between a child's "migration background", and/or lower socio-economic status, and insufficient German language skills without first considering the child's actual skills. Not only does this create an obvious segregation between two allegedly incompatible groups of children, but it also homogenizes children "with migration background" as if each child does not have their own individual set of skills, knowledge, or needs. Consequently, a child can be perfectly fluent in German and be doing very well on school assignments, but be nonetheless sent to a so-called "German as second language" group (Deutsch als Zweitsprache /Deutschförderklasse).

In this context, our own perception and knowledge about our skills rarely make any difference when teachers are already beforehand convinced otherwise. We are repeatedly told that our German is not good enough, sometimes to the point that our chances of graduating or getting into another school are at stake. This, together with the fact that complaining about discrimination is met with belittling and disbelief by white adults and school staff, can turn time spent at school into a state of continuously having to withstand the unjust circumstances we are subjected to. The lack of agency here is overwhelming.

"In the beginning, I felt like I had to be grateful for the mere opportunity of being at university."

"What I took with me from school was that I cannot speak German."

"I tried to be silent and actively as inconspicuous as possible, for I was afraid of not being able to understand, let alone answer questions directed at me. [...] I would sit in the back of the class, stay silent and try taking as little space as possible in discussions."

"People laugh at you and do not take you seriously [...] They see you discussing topics at uni but never back you up. In this context, people do not believe you when you defend yourself against others' wrongdoing. [...] Having to constantly defend yourself costs a lot of energy."

So what do our experiences at school have to do with university and academic writing in particular? First, racial discrimination continues in clear, overt ways at university. Being vocal about racial injustices or topics that irritate white supremacy is met with disinterest or denial by university teachers and disbelief, ridicule, or silence by other students. One of the privileges of whiteness is to be able to ignore racial injustices and not having to confront inequalities. For us, academia feels like a violent space. Second, having to undergo structural racism at school–whether it be in the form of presumed incompetence or lack of certain knowledge, being segregated from other children on the basis of racial signifiers, or receiving worse grades and harsher critique than white pupils even when performing similarly or better–leads to the internalization of racial or cultural inferiority, a feeling of being just not good enough. This feeling is then taken along to and reinforced by higher education.

Being brought up with the feeling of always being "behind" when it comes to language skills and knowledge in comparison to white peers leaves behind a negative self-perception and insecurity that can show itself in the effort to be as inconspicuous as possible at university. We might try taking little to no space in class discussions, stay quiet, sit in the back row behind everyone else while feeling anxious about potentially not being able to understand or let alone answer questions directed at us. In addition to having to make ourselves almost invisible in university spaces, we are also expected to feel and show infinite gratitude for the mere opportunity of being there.

"I began asking for feedback on my texts only late in my studies, for writing is filled with so much shame for me."

"Academic writing is like individual sports."

Internalized negative self-conceptions translate to academic writing especially in the form of shame. We associate the feeling of shame with writing, sometimes to the point where we avoid asking for any feedback on our texts. Academic writing can then turn into something that almost feels like an

individual sport: We write in isolation, at home, and without any interaction with or help from others, which causes mental struggles and feelings of being lost. Furthermore, the pressure to perform in a certain way through academic writing can be so high that we take each assignment too seriously. This can happen especially in the beginning of our studies where we have not yet been prepared for the academic etiquette required of us. This can automatically contribute to an increased amount of stress. Consequently, we are not only continuously othered in educational spaces based on our race or ethnicity (see examples given above) but may also have had little to no access to the cultural capital necessary for adapting the right kind of academic habitus. To survive university, we should first have the opportunity to train and repetitively be confronted with the specific skills that are needed in academic writing.

In light of the information we already have about the social inheritance of education and its functioning in Austria that lead to an inherently unequal education system for non-white students from non-academic backgrounds, it seems unsurprising that not all students are set up for an equal start in higher education and writing academic texts. As we know, academic writing is challenging for everyone in the beginning. However, when social reassurance, a network of people with an academic background, and self-confidence are missing, it becomes even more challenging. The lack of financial security furthermore reinforces the anxiety about having made the wrong career choice by studying. At the same time, failing or quitting university confirms the fear of being out of place in academia and not belonging to academic spaces.

The resources that our parents and family can offer are crucial when it comes to closing the necessary gaps in knowledge and language skills that otherwise are not covered by the educational institutions themselves. Yet, a common misconception is that families can thereby be divided into families that possess knowledge and families lacking thereof. In German-speaking regions, an adjective that is often used to describe the latter is "bildungsfern", literally referring to someone or something that is "remote", "distant" or "far away" from education and, consequently, from knowing, too. When we speak about students who, in their childhood or adolescence, did not acquire the language, cultural knowledge, and ways of speaking, writing, and thinking that are cultivated among the academics of the white majority society, the focus is too often on the supposed incapability of our parents or care-takers to pass down the "right" set of skills for us to academically, socially, and economically succeed. More reasonable and interesting would be to scrutinize the dominant value system that assigns certain languages less value than others and recognizes certain knowledge as part of education while denying other forms of knowledge the quality of being intelligible as knowledge in the first place. In the end, if we are to speak about cultural capital in this context, we must begin by asking: Which knowledge counts as a valuable asset and cultural capital in society? What kind of knowledge and skills are "far away" from education and what kind of knowledge and skills stand "close" to it? Whose knowledge and skills are they? Who can teach them and who must learn them?

"When writing, I would copy white Germans or Austrians and how they write.''

"The language used in academia is a foreign language in itself [...]
a foreign language used mostly by white people."

"Appropriating the language is more
like a method of survival."

A common strategy used to cope with academic writing is imitation. This happens against the background of knowing that the primary audience we write for is white by default and that the only available way of writing is restrictive in terms of its language, structure, and contents. The language used in academia is a foreign language in itself and not only that, but a foreign language used by mostly white people. Therefore, especially in the beginning of our studies, we would try to copy white Germans or Austrians and how they write. We would also turn to the internet to find already existing texts, which we could then use as our guidelines. This kind of imitation does not signify some neutral process of adaptation where we end up feeling like fish in the water after some time but more like an essential method of survival at university. It resembles playing with an identity or habitus that is not our own, but must be "switched on" in order for us to be seen or heard as valid, knowing subjects under the conditions set by the hegemonic knowledge system. One of such conditions is, for example, that of "scientific objectivity" according to which researchers or writers are expected to be able to detach themselves from their research in order to make "impartial" judgements without the influence of their own personal situatedness.

"When I write, I put on a mask."

"This is not my style of writing? What is my style of writing?
I have tried copying for so long that I don't even know it myself."
"I always write for a white audience."

But what if writing is closely attached to our emotions and the partial views we have on the world? For us, writing can be very much connected with difficulties and feelings of frustration and aggression. Yet, we are aware of the fact that these and other feelings are not appreciated as part of academic texts. Consequently, when writing an academic text, we must compromise our feelings, put on a mask, and write nicely. In the course of this, our sense of authenticity gets lost and we almost become alienated from ourselves because the role we try to take up whilst writing does not reflect who we are and the bodies we inhabit. Because in academia our motivation to write originates externally, in serving and impressing a white audience, and because we have been trying to imitate someone else's way of writing for so long, we have come to realize that we have not had the chance to get to know who we truly are or could be as writers.

To succeed academically and in other professional settings we must temporarily "become white" or at least try to approximate whiteness through the usage of "masks" we put on while writing. Switching up between different ways of talking, thinking, or writing depending on the social context reminds us of the concept of "code-switching". Through code-switching, we change our social behaviour to match our environment. Studies on code-switching show that non-white students learn early on that they

have to behave in specific ways to be viewed as capable and intelligent by their white surroundings. Otherwise, their ways of expressing themselves are considered "primitive", "vulgar", or "out of place" (see Woods, 2019; Williams-Farrier, 2017). Code-switching becomes even harder when we are not familiar with the codes (norms and rules of conduct) used in academia and at university, which is often the case for first-generation students. This affects our writing process as we are supposed to act in ways that are different from ourselves. Here we start understanding ourselves as deficient, which causes shame and fear. This fear is again grounded in experiences where our knowledge has been constantly undermined and belittled.

"There is only one scientific format that is accepted."

> *"What can even be scientifically written about and what is considered academic at all?"*

*"I know something but cannot
or am not allowed to write freely about it."*

> *"Everything I write is taken apart."*

The importance of teachers, scholars, and scientist who share experiences of intersectional discrimination similar to ours becomes evident when we come to realize that many white supervisors lack significant knowledge of critical race studies, anti-colonial studies, and theories deriving from non-white thought. Emily Ngubia Kessé (2018, 19f) argues that

> this lack of knowledge-spaces around the articulation of my realities as a Black person points directly to denied spaces and negated existences, or what I also refer to as mutilated existence; bodies of color float in (world)space above their own realities without finding a way to dock in the world of knowing and creating.

This is a good definition of the mechanisms of eurocentric epistemic exclusion. As asserted by Noah Sow in her article „The Best in The Belly" (2014), „Universal knowledge™ taught in Germany is still understood as white. [...] In this worldview, the idea that universal knowledge could present itself as non-white must, consequently, be disconcerting" (translated by SH & EL).

Sometimes white supervisors and university teachers even deny the existence of our knowledge or categorize it as too empirical (experience-based) and therefore "not yet theory". Other students are often complicit in devaluing our experiences in that they either stay silent or join in on the abuse performed by the teachers. They claim that knowledge must be objective and universally applicable, implying that a Black or Person of Color writing about their own experiences cannot be writing or coming from a scientific point of view. Writing from our own perspectives as non-white students can lead to confrontations with university teachers. We are easily criticized for insufficient argumentation, and it feels like everything we write is taken apart. We wonder whether what we write is too personal or too intimate and begin asking what we can even write or say in the first place. In alliance with Sow's observations, our knowledge is only valid and worthy as long as we stay objects, not subjects, in its production:

[T]he cultural knowledge of certain groups is devalued while the fragmentary knowledge acquired *about* these very cultures is regarded as *education* and credited to the observers as a high (and as if it were humanitarian) achievement. It is not uncommon for Black/People of Color [orig. supercultural people, "superkulturelle Personen"] to find it difficult to appreciate their own wealth of knowledge amidst the various tricks coming from the repertoire of devaluation of the majority society. (Sow, 2014, translated by SH & EL)

"I have to do a lot of labor in terms of clarifying things and educating others."

"For whom do I even write the footnotes?"

Through our writing we do a lot of educational and clarifying labor, especially through the usage of footnotes. We have come to wonder: For whom do we write the footnotes to begin with and whom do they end up serving? Kilomba (2010, 149) writes about having to do educational labor as a reproduction of the master-slave dynamic. This is reflected in the fact that we need to explain ourselves, teach others about our own experiences. It is expected of us to educate others without compensation. Instead of writing for the sake of our own learning and gaining new, deeper insights, we are obliged to teach others without compensation. Mariam Malik writes about this phenomenon in „Wer lernt (was) auf wessen Kosten?" (Who learns (what) on whose expenses?) through the description of the dynamics in the classroom when one is the only Student of Color. We are regularly made invisible while at the same time being hypervisible. We have to relate and react to whiteness and are often asked to speak about our experiences as racialized and marginalized subjects for the benefits of the white audience. If we name racial transgressions and discriminatory behaviour, we are often met with denial and defensiveness from our white colleagues (Malik, 2022, 26).

"It is difficult to write when there is always someone there who will take your creativity away"

"I write aggressively, I am mad 24/7."

"I feel a lot of rage."

"Fuck it. Now I say what I think, I am annoyed."

Writing is something we love and regularly return to. However, we are frustrated with the restrictive form of academic writing. These frustrations as well as the fact that creative writing is positioned in opposition to academic writing need to be understood in the broader context of power-dynamics of the white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Writing, specifically creative writing, becomes a way to communicate our critique directly to the white audience and also to write for ourselves, for people like us. Anger and aggression become the driving forces that are slowly replacing shame. Audre Lorde's often quoted line "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" reflects the conflict of adapting to whiteness and simultaneously becoming alienated from oneself, one's identity, community, and knowledge. Thus, the question arises whether academic writing (as we are taught it) is a master's tool or can be adapted to serve our needs.

Demands and conclusions

As mentioned earlier, one of the outcomes of the memory work carried out for this article is a list of demands directed at universities, the University of Vienna included, to improve the conditions of studying for Black students and Students of Color. The following list is a result of brainstorming among the experts at the end of phase 2 and can be broadly summarized into four categories:

Acknowledgment

Universities must acknowledge that they have structural issues that disproportionately affect Black students and Students of Color. The problems Black/Students of Color face must not be trivialized as "private". They are not private but very much public and should be addressed and dealt with as such. Playing down Black/People of Color students' experiences as private makes them seem invisible, small, and trivial.

Employment

Universities must change their employment policies to radically and explicitly prioritize Black/People of Color applicants. At the moment, there are little to no professionally competent teachers at the University of Vienna who would be able to guide and support Black/People of Color students and deal with issues regarding them. White supervisors lack knowledge about critical race studies, anti-colonial studies, or generally theories based on non-white thought. This means that students concerned with the aforementioned topics currently succeed their supervisors knowledge-wise. This arrangement is wrong and must be reversed by getting knowledgeable experts on board. Students deserve competent teachers from whom they can learn. Black/People of Color students should not have to teach their teachers about basic anti-racist, colonial, etc. theories.

Creating spaces

Universities should establish and support special spaces, groups, workshops, and "how to"-events that are exclusively directed at Black/People of Color students. Going to groups full of white people can be difficult in many ways, and, as our research demonstrates, Black/People of Color students are oftentimes left alone to cope with their studies. There should be spaces available for Black/People of Color students where they do not have to get into contact with white people. Universities' lack of a genuine interest in creating safe spaces and support systems for Black/People of Color is enraging.

Financial help

All of the above requires funding. Financial help beyond the insufficient, often inaccessible financial subsidies provided by the state, university, and student associations is needed in order to facilitate Black/People of Color entering and surviving in higher education for those.

Commentary, Segal

Throughout this process I was equally excited and worried about writing of experiences so close to my own. The fear was that, in exposing my truths to a mostly white audience, I would have to omit or change some aspects of my experiences to accommodate their knowledge. I am deeply uncomfortable with writing about my feelings as they are constantly contradicted, questioned, or not believed. Sometimes the feelings of white people who were acting in racist and discriminatory ways towards me were seen as more important than my own. Therefore, being wary of writing about my experiences is probably understandable.. The method of memory work gave me the possibility to share these experiences with people who are also BPoC first-generation students. As I expected, we lived through a lot of similar experiences that illustrate/prove once again that racism and classism are structural problems, something we already know, but are rarely believed. I have long struggled with writing about racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. I found myself writing many other texts on these topics instead of writing this article. I asked myself: How can I be comfortable writing with and for white people to explain why and how we experience racism and classism? To be honest, I am still not comfortable. However, and this is key, I found memory work to be a great method that allows people who experience different forms of violence, discrimination and exclusion to bond. I found accusing the oppressor and demanding reparations to be great tools and even better when backed up by academic writing and scientific research. And accuse and demand we will.

Commentary, Emma

Memory work was a fascinating yet challenging method to work with. For me, the most attractive and at the same time difficult aspect of it was its unpredictability in terms of the distribution of control over the results of the research. Perhaps, or as far as I have come to interpret it afterwards, we may be used to centering ourselves in our research more than we would like to admit. Even though Segal and I could direct the course of the study through our selection of research questions, theoretical frameworks, and the key concepts, we had to accept a certain uncertainty throughout the study, which I personally experienced through feelings of unrest, jitteriness, and positive excitement in my body. I believe finding and making meaning throughout the process was one of the many fundamental moments where the differences in our situatedness and personal involvement as writers became decisive: it was necessary and only right that a person, writer, and researcher who comes from a racialized position of knowledge themselves conducted the study to accurately interpret, validate, and make connections between the co-authors' knowledge, theories, and insights. In our case this person was Segal, not me. I found myself having to re-negotiating my own role in the research many times, sometimes in conversation with Segal, other times alone in my thoughts. The main question that still follows me relates to the entitlement to take part in a study like this, to write about knowledge that is not mine: If I can not fully understand something, if my knowledge about something is necessarily limited, can I still write about it?

Acknowledgements

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