

Transformation of Community-based Research in Higher Education

An African Decolonial Feminist Revisiting of the “Coloured Women” Article

Ronelle Carolissen

Psychology, Stellenbosch University

Nadine Bowers du-Toit

Practical Theology and Missiology, Stellenbosch University

ABSTRACT

University transformation assumes social justice foundations that include equity, recognition, asymmetries of power, representation and voice. In this article we revisit, as a case study, the notorious “coloured women” article published by a team of white women researchers from Stellenbosch University in March 2019. The authors perpetuated stigmatising deficit narratives about Black women where “coloured” women were depicted as a homogeneous, intellectually deficient group. The university appointed a formal investigation committee (FIC) to investigate the claims of inherent racism and sexism lodged against the university, the ethics committee, and the authors of the article. We discuss the narratives inherent in the final institutional outcome and their implications for research engagement with marginalised communities. We discuss, through decolonial feminist and critical diversity literacies lenses (CDL), four narratives: the “sweeping under the carpet” narrative, the “kiss and make up” narrative, the “race as taboo” narrative and the “missing persons” narrative. We consider the challenges that remain; institutional racism, dealing with this case from a perspective of minimising institutional risk, the misrecognition of deep-seated internalised racism, an interrogation of personal and institutional ethics in community-based research. Transformation in research cannot be a legal procedure only. Personal and institutional reflexivity should inform meaningful restorative interventions.

KEYWORDS

decolonial, feminist, critical diversity literacies, community-based research, race, gender, reflexivity

Stellenbosch University (SU) academics Nieuwoudt, Dickie, Coetsee, Engelbrecht and Terblanche (2019), in an infamous article, wrote that “Colored women in South Africa have an increased risk for low cognitive functioning as they present with low education levels and unhealthy lifestyle behaviors”. The resounding global anti-racist protest and academic critique against this article culminated in a petition supported by over 10,000 signatories that led to the international journal editors of *Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition* withdrawing the article from its publication.

There were numerous critiques that focused on multiple methodological and ethical flaws in the study. The study was considered poor because it transposed Western assessment measures onto South African populations, ignored culture fair assessment standards and used non-standardised versions of assessment instruments on local populations, a key error in psychological assessments (Hendricks et al., 2019). Most of the outrage, however, was directed at the article content. It was accused of racial essentialism and dehumanising coloured women and all who are marked by and identify with the colonial apartheid label of coloured South Africans. The ethical procedures that purportedly allowed such an article to come into being were severely criticised, as was the Humaniora ethics committee of the university (Thumbran, 2019). In response to this local and global public outrage, the university appointed a formal investigation committee (FIC) to investigate the claims of inherent racism and sexism lodged against the university, the ethics committee and the authors of the article. In June 2020 the FIC pronounced that “the article was not aligned with the Research Ethics Committee (REC) approved protocol”, that “the REC was not guilty of any wrongdoing” because “there had been no indication to the REC that the results of the study would be presented in terms of racial generalisations” and that “the FIC could not find any deliberate intent to mislead the relevant role players, nor any malevolence behind the writing of the article—the researchers naïvely regarded the content of the article as compatible with the research trends in their discipline”. (<https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Lists/news/DispForm.aspx?ID=7426>). These findings were reported as being accepted by the various bodies internal and external to the university. The matter was deemed to have been concluded when the university adopted numerous preventative recommendations that included awareness and sensitivity training as well as aligning the university with global ethical codes and guidelines for conducting research in poor communities. While the ethics committees have indeed reflected deeply on these events and have incorporated multiple revisions to research ethics application processes, some aspects about community-university research relations and their intersections with race and gender remain unexplored.

In this article we discuss the narratives inherent in this final institutional outcome and their implications for research engagement with marginalised communities. While these findings may conclude a particular legal process, some questions remain unanswered. We draw on the outcomes of the FIC investigation in the context of debates on university transformation to suggest that dominant narratives are often meant to bathe our collective consciousness and contribute to erasure and “forgetting”. While this may happen unwittingly, its material effect is that the experiences of marginalised women and those relationally and symbolically connected to them, are likely to remain unheard. It is therefore important

that remembering and reinserting counter-narratives that jolt our collective memories are foregrounded. Conceptually we draw on African decolonial feminisms and critical diversity literacies (CDL) to discuss four narratives: the “sweeping under the carpet” or white innocence narrative, the “kiss and make up” or forgiveness narrative, the “race as taboo” or race-blind narrative and the “missing persons” or invisible Black women narrative. We consider the challenges that remain; institutional racism, dealing with this case from a perspective of minimising institutional risk, the misrecognition of deep-seated internalised racism, an interrogation of personal and institutional ethics as they relate to community-based research in marginalised communities. We also highlight the challenges associated with preventative interventions that offer training for anti-racism as a solution to naïve racism. We suggest that transformation in research cannot be a legal procedure only, but that personal and institutional reflexivity should inform more meaningful restorative interventions that include university–community engagement and consideration of relationality. It is important to consider the importance of an African decolonial feminist lens and CDL when considering erasures.

(African) Decolonial Feminist Lenses

Quijano (2007) developed the term “coloniality of power” to describe how knowledge, identity and subjectivity are controlled to dominate marginalised or oppressed people. Decoloniality is thus important in memory making for oppressed people. It aims to understand and dismantle colonial relations by the ways in which knowledge is produced, and who produces knowledge about marginalised peoples’ identities and subjectivities in collective memory-making practices. Like Maldonado-Torres (2016, p. 10), we understand decoloniality not only as efforts to rehumanise the world but also interrupt categories of difference which contribute to violence that destroys humans and nature: it is crucially important that decoloniality produces “counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world”.

Decolonial feminism (Lugones, 2010), too, constitutes a pursuit of justice and the restoration of human dignity for all. It is marked by four central characteristics in universities. It focuses on rehumanising misrecognised and marginalised groups and foregrounds gender as a key cipher of inequality in power asymmetries (Ipadeola, 2017; Mirza, 2014). Key to decolonial feminisms is the politics of knowledge and knowledge production. Decolonial scholars aim to disrupt the hegemonic dominance of Euro-American knowledges and advocate ecologies of knowledge that recognise the value of all knowledges (Santos, 2014). Geo-spatial location and context is key to decision making about appropriateness and relevance of research interventions. This is an important stance adopted by African decolonial feminisms (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Chilisa et al., 2017).

Researchers often engage in “othering ideologies” which privilege Western knowledges, essentialising or minimising marginalised peoples’ knowledge in deficit ways. They also use Western criteria and values to measure and talk about non-Western men and women, who often do not share the ontologies of Western research, researchers and knowledge. This

results in researchers failing to produce nuanced and complex accounts of marginalised community members' lived experiences, the ways in which they experience oppression and how they resist those oppressions (Chilisa, 2020).

(African) Decolonial Feminisms and Critical Diversity Literacies

Some of the key features of African decolonial feminisms reverberate strongly with Critical Diversity Literacies (CDL). While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider a detailed analysis of the points of connection and differences between CDL and African decolonial feminisms, it is important to acknowledge some overlaps in respect of the article under discussion.

Critical Diversity Literacy can be defined as “an informed analytical orientation that enables a person to “read’ prevailing social relations as one would read text, recognising the ways in which possibilities are being opened up or closed down for those differently positioned within the unfolding dynamics of specific social contexts (Steyn, 2015, p. 381). It is a way in which we come to understand how to read bodies, texts, institutions and social spaces, amongst others through filters of difference such as race, class and gender. CDL is important to consider in higher education contexts, since “diversity training” is often offered as a solution to dealing with overt racisms as reflected in the article. CDL also speaks to what deep institutional transformation may entail.

African decolonial feminisms and CDL share an understanding that hegemonic power is unequal, and operates materially and symbolically, depending on axes of difference and social locations. This means that white middle-class women academics will have considerably more social power than coloured women who live in a low-income community. Moreover, hegemonic positionalities at the Centre (i.e. white women researchers) are more likely to have the power to define those constructed as “the Other”. Like African feminist decoloniality, CDL also focuses on the intersections of structural oppressions, how they are entrenched and resisted to reimagine or reframe alternative futures (Steyn, 2015). A further key overlap that is relevant to this article is the way in which institutionalised oppressions are re-enacted through institutional arrangements.

Dominant Narratives About the Article

Numerous narratives have emerged since the black Easter of 2019, when news of the article first appeared. Public outrage has subsided since the findings of the FIC, yet some unfinished business, and what this means not only for our institution but also for all higher education institutions thinking about research in and with marginalised communities, remains. The narratives that we will discuss are the sweeping under the carpet narratives, kiss and makeup narratives, race as taboo narratives and the missing persons narratives.

Sweeping under the carpet narratives

During April/May 2019, it felt as if our university's reputation was scalded because of the notorious article. Not only were the researchers questioned, the university was subjected to

public ridicule, and we, as Black women academics, also historically labelled as Coloured, were often asked “how can you work for such a racist institution?” Narratives of “risk management”, “reputational risk”, “negative social media” proliferated as smouldering embers of memories of Stellenbosch University’s racist past were reawakened, a figurative rubbing of salt into old wounds. There was a flurry of commentaries, radio interviews, colloquia and books—all focusing on the article. And then there was silence, with some news that an investigation was being conducted. The outcome of the report lingered and in June 2019 was published on the university website. Dominant narratives that emerged were ones foregrounding legal expertise and legal defence. There was no wrongdoing on the part of the ethics committee, the researchers were “naïve” and therefore perhaps needed to be absolved from their personal responsibility to communities. Suggestions for training interestingly focused on research procedures: responsible conduct, research ethics and consensual guidelines for researchers. Again, these interventions, while important, seemed like a case of misplaced focus. Were we sweeping under the carpet the core issue of engaging with communities, not only in relation to research but also teaching and social impact? What were the implications of focusing on research when this was (and remains) an opportune space to think about institutional racism, its manifestations and how it was possible for this kind of research to be brought to life ... in 2019? To what extent were the cries of community rage and erasure attended to and to what extent do many staff at our university, especially those who are labelled “coloured” suppress seething anger? These are the very questions that are central to transformation discussions at universities, but which are less often engaged in public debate.

“Kiss and make up” narratives

One of the many narratives since March 2019 was that the researchers returned to the women who were study participants, and they came to a joint agreement that the researchers’ intentions were honourable and that they did not intend to denigrate their dignity or diminish their worth. It was noted that the women commented that the researchers were always nice and kind.

There are multiple levels at which this kind of “kiss and make up” narrative conceals the dynamics of power that operate when particularly white researchers enter historically and currently oppressed communities. Centuries of colonialism, racism and sexism converge onto Cloetesville, and similar communities and an internalised inferiority imprinted on the psyches of the oppressed is deeply felt. This is referred to as internalised oppression. What this means is that when white people enter poor communities and pay attention to poor black women who typically bear the brunt of triple oppression: racism, sexism and classism, they often quickly become enamoured by white “niceness”.

Secondly, we also assume sometimes that individualistic interventions, such as talking to the 10 or 20 or 30 women study participants directly, may extinguish the fiery community rage licking at the periphery of the campus—and sometimes its lecture halls. Even if the study participants are forgiving, the minimising, insulting and paternalistic brushstrokes of research painted all women who have ever been labelled “coloured” as cognitively deficient. This included us, as authors of this article and many of our mothers, aunts, nieces and

daughters. This included the many brilliant women labelled coloured who never had the opportunity for formal education *and* those who were educated and mastered groundbreaking achievements. R (first author) remembers that this story about the article surfaced at about the same time that her gynaecologist of 24 years died, after a short illness. During her lifetime, she had been labelled coloured. R remembers how the grief at her death mingled with the simultaneous outrage at the audacity of her implicitly being painted “stupid” by “naïve” researchers, fuelled many to pen endless opinion pieces to express their disgust at *our university*, not individual researchers. The symbolism and representation of individual researchers being synonymous with the institution is real. When we do research in communities, we are seldom individuals. We are Stellenbosch University and therefore we cannot only be seen as individuals who provide individualistic responses focused on the participants alone. We must engage with the broader community, whether it be through honouring our promise to “engage in training” to possibly circumvent “naivete” or to ensure that “social impact projects” are evaluated ethically. Critical diversity literacy scholars have noted how exceedingly difficult it is, especially for many white people, to engage meaningfully in diversity training, with some feeling despair about the transformative potential of this work (D’Angelo, 2018; Nair, 2020). This makes the value of preventative interventions focusing on diversity literacy debatable. Perhaps these interventions should be formally evaluated among staff who attended and those who did not attend diversity training. Perhaps the cultivation of a relational ethics, as suggested by Le Grange (2019) and Chiliza and Ntseane (2010) should be considered but may be as tall an order as expecting deep engagements with CDL as discussed by Steyn (2015).

Race as taboo narratives

Due to the impact of this study and critique—which included the “article smacks of racial essentialism” and could be viewed as “scientific racism” or “race-based science” and that the findings of the “research are painful to women of colour” because of its “racist ideological underpinnings”—both formal and informal discussions regarding the notion of race as a variable in research took place (Le Grange, 2019, p. 10; cf. Shange, 2019). During the initial outrage regarding the article, the question also emerged whether race in research was now forbidden, a “taboo” subject, due to the sensitivity of research on race and the dangers of using race as a biological marker. Hendricks, Kramer and Ratele (2019) note, for example, that “where race (or ethnicity interpreted as colour-based) is used as a variable or an ‘explanation’, politically constructed racial categories are reproduced, thereby perpetuating stigma, discrimination and racism” (p. 308). They, therefore, specifically warn of what they term the “careless use” of racial categories to “reduce human lives and experiences to neatly defined classification schemes” (p. 310).

It is worrying that according to the press release on the FIC report from the then Vice Rector: Research, it was reported that “the FIC could not find any deliberate intent to mislead the relevant role players, nor any malevolence behind the writing of the article—the researchers naively regarded the content of the article as compatible with the research trends in their discipline” (Cloete 2020). Le Grange (2019) identifies Western empiricism as privileging only two senses—sight and hearing (observation and listening)—which runs the danger of

ignoring the kind of pain and hardship endured by the women in the study, as it ignores other senses such as feeling in a way that clearly does not take account of the deep racial trauma experienced by women of colour—not only the participants, but also those within broader society who raised their voices in public protest. While it could also be noted that the press release certainly does not deny the notion of race, there are substantial shortcomings in its discussion of race and communities in the press release. In this update on the report and its key findings, there is furthermore no acknowledgement of the racial trauma inherent in this study, only that “it caused serious offense” (Cloete 2020). In its reduction of the transgressions to the ignorance of individual researchers, there is certainly a hint of the single “bad apple” discourse at its root (Ahmed, 2012, p. 48). This discourse focuses on the transgressions as singular, rather than as systemic. The latter is borne out by the Transformation Report (2020) where feedback from attendees—following the presentation by the researchers on the university’s response to the study, noted that “the issue of systemic racism at SU is far from resolved, and the institution has not started to address it adequately” (p. 26).

The press release of the Vice Rector: Research (Cloete 2020) certainly indicates that post the report, preventive steps are being taken by SU which include some anti-racist proposals. However, this is not the dominant discourse found in this press release, which names this research as an “unfortunate incident” rather than a racist incident. In our presentation to the Stellenbosch University Transformation Indaba (2020), which is based on first-hand reading of the Formative Investigative Report, we highlight the fact that the report itself is “dominated by a legal narrative, foregrounding legal expertise and legal defense” (p. 19), but that this focus was misplaced.

The way in which current understandings of non-racialism continue to underpin notions of race in South Africa most likely contribute to racial injustice or prejudice not being centrally placed in the press release and that colleagues at the Transformation Indaba remain dissatisfied about the ways in which systemic racism is addressed. Dladla (2017) suggests that the “dominant conception of non-racialism which appears to prevail in South Africa today is conceptually akin to what philosopher on race Theo David Goldberg (2009) has called anti-racialism” (p. 104). As opposed to the notion of anti-racism, this understanding supports a view of “the somewhat idealised falling away of the categories of race” which ultimately “leaves the effects of an unjust history undisturbed” and does “so in the name of a suspect racial justice”. Perhaps non-racialism is an ideal towards which we must strive, as described in the South African Constitution and it is indeed regrettable that race continues to persist in ways that limit us from “thinking about society beyond racial categories” (Hendricks et al., 2019, p. 309). Nevertheless, “colour-blind” non-racialism (or post-race discourse) which is on the rise ignores the way in which Black people have and continue to be, systemically disadvantaged and discriminated against. In a country where our material and social realities remain tied to the construct of race, to ignore it is to ignore the way in which inequalities within institutions in society, such as universities, are still part of the ongoing legacy of neo-colonialism and white supremacy. It is also to deny the pain of the past and the ways in which it continues to be reproduced in the present—more especially with regards to the most marginalised in society, such as women of colour identified as of “low socio-economic status” (cf. Rankin-Wright et al., 2020, p. 6).

At minimum, the lack of addressing the issue of racism more overtly in the press release of the report's outcome reveals a lack of understanding or blindness with regards to how racism operates. Furthermore, the Stellenbosch University Transformation Report (2020, p. 19) indicates that in a presentation by us as authors, which initially analysed the report and presented these findings for internal consumption, there was a greater focus on "research procedures and processes for the responsible conducting of research and ethics" in the Formal Investigative Committee report, than there was on the personal responsibility of researchers or committees such as the Research Ethics Committee (REC) to be anti-racist. At maximum, it reveals a deliberate omission, which ignores the need to address qualitative dimensions of transformation within research at the University of Stellenbosch—as outlined in SU's own Transformation Plan (2017) which emphasises the need to acknowledge the ways in which implicit bias operates. Qualitative transformation is defined as:

Those dimensions of transformation that have to do with the presuppositions, prejudices, attitudes and behaviours and intellectual frameworks that determine institutional processes and practices. These subconscious beliefs and attitudes often advance discrimination in terms of race, socio-economic standing, age, nationality and so forth and form part of the institutional culture. The profound change and renewal of institutional culture is at the heart of qualitative transformation. (p. 6)

The press release largely implies that a technical approach to the issue has been adopted. There is positive mention made in the press release (Cloete 2020) of steps being taken by the university which include "training to raise awareness related to anti-racism" and "the development of consensual guidelines for researchers regarding research dealing with racial categories" however, the press release takes little account of "how racism gets reproduced" in institutions such as universities (Ahmed, 2012, p. 44). It could be argued that the nature of press releases is intended to be brief, however, rather than naming the "elephant in the room" and integrating and emphasising the importance of *anti-racist* practice in research as central to the university's response, the release instead focuses on the restructuring of committees and tightening approvals with regards to research instruments and guidelines. These are important actions. However, they do not account for the ways in which "colonial difference inheres in many so-called scientific studies conducted on all those who, under colonialism, began to be classified as Black people and the so-called 'people of colour'" (Hendricks et al., 2019, p. 311). Tate and Bagguley (2017) note that minimal meeting of legal obligations in anti-racist research praxis is not uncommon in universities where post-race discourse undergirds praxis—even if there are well worded policies and mission statements (p. 290). Moreover, Tate and Bagguley (2017)—drawing on Carolissen and Bozalek's work—argue that these "post-race" and "colour blind" approaches indicate the ways in which neo-liberal racialisation has indeed taken hold in societies such as ours (p. 293). Both Le Grange (2019) and Hendricks et al. (2019), therefore, argue that what is really needed is ultimately for a decolonial approach to research praxis that is prepared to go as far as holding researchers accountable when they "depart from anti-racist, anti-sexist, African-centred, Southern-facing, and other critical ontologies and epistemologies, to uproot historical seeds of racism and discrimination" (p. 311). Therefore, universities should be careful to absolve

research such as this as “naïve.” Furthermore, as recommended in the feedback to our presentation at the SU Transformation Indaba (2020), SU staff noted that “we should cultivate programmes that allow staff and students to develop critical reflexivity that is situated historically and personally. Questions such as who am I in relation to this institution, the history of the institution, the history of this country and the histories of others with whom I engage within and outside the institution are crucial in ensuring ethical research relationships” (p. 26). Self-reflexivity is, therefore, central to anti-racist research praxis and it should, therefore, not be about whether research which takes race into account is conducted, but rather how it is conducted and whether it is essentialized or not (Bowers-Du Toit, 2019).

The missing persons narrative

This study was part of the Sunwell project situated in Cloeteville and registered as a community engagement project under the SU Division for Social Impact (<http://www.sun.ac.za/si/en-za/Documents/Reports/Collaboration/Collaboration.pdf>). It is important, then, to note that the key goal of sound community engagement praxis as activities performed by the university and its broader community are “primarily aimed at uplifting or supporting society and/or individuals in need of assistance or engagement” (Bidandi et al., 2021, p. 2). According to Stellenbosch University’s own Social Impact Strategic Plan (2017) issued prior to the study, the researchers should, furthermore have adhered to ethical conduct provisions and “the principle of reciprocity which denotes an impact on both the university and society in a mutually beneficial way in all spheres of society” (p. 15). According to Cherrington et al. (2019) socially engaged scholarship is intended to be characterised by “partnerships for mutual benefit and knowledge sharing” (p. 167) scholars designing socially just community engagement projects should be “mindful of negotiated and renegotiated power dynamics, both within and between multiple communities and contexts” (p. 175). It is fair to state that the ethics measures proposed as summarized in the press release are intended to address ethical social impact research practice, however, in absolving the researchers as “naïve” rather than as flouting policy or at minimum Social Impact/Community Engagement best practice is concerning. Such a statement – despite an acknowledgement of the “offense” the study caused the community at the beginning of the release also silences the concerns and trauma of the community engaged during the study (Cloete, 2020). In fact, one could argue that the affront on the human dignity of the participants in this matter is grossly underplayed in the press release’s summary of the findings of the report. Since the full report was not publicly released beyond the confines of the university, questions remain as to whether the community (both the studied community and the broader community who expressed widespread outcry and disgust) have been informed of the full outcome absolving the researchers. What this narrative does, essentially, is centre the university and the accused students and staff, rather than the community, in such a way that the community becomes “missing persons”—whose pain and agency remain invisible to the institution.

Sariola (2020) notes that in her research on community engagement practices within the field of health research, where Global North researchers conduct research in low- and middle-income countries, such research can be extremely harmful due to the power dynamics that flow from the unequal power differences between researchers and communities.

She argues that, where such power differentials exist, an intersectional approach which recognises the ways in which “gender, ethnicity or race, sexual orientation, ability, and class” intersect encourages researchers to engage in ways that recognise the power differentials created by these differing positionalities (p. 58). While this research was not conducted between Global North researchers and Global South research participants, the dynamics emerging from the racial and class inequality in a town such as Stellenbosch are marked. It is also important to note that, as white women, the researchers are “often seen as loyal, trustworthy, and harmless” and are “therefore granted unfettered and unsupervised control over those below us—usually People of Colour”, thus further imbuing them and the research that they do with symbolic power (Morgan, 2021). Morgan (2021) notes that this “perceived innocence combined with oversight enables our racist practices to run rampant”. Morgan’s theorisation resonates strongly with Steyn’s (2012) concept of epistemologies of ignorance where she argues that being ignorant while having normative power (of whiteness) enables researchers to remain in positions of dominance and entrench their material, symbolic and psychological comfort by being able to define the Other. She argues convincingly that epistemologies of ignorance serve the purpose of social regulation where the terms of the contract are set by white people and institutions.

Ahmed (2007) suggests that this is because whiteness is often a point of orientation—a point of “how we begin”. This report reinscribes the point of orientation as largely the actions of white researchers who are placed in a historically white university—itsself what Ahmed would consider a white space, rather than the point of orientation being the harmed community (2007, pp. 156, 157). By declaring the white researchers “naïve” is to reinscribe Whiteness as honest and credible, despite the aforementioned widespread community outrage at the time of the article indicating otherwise and which included searing critique of their flawed methodology (the latter is noted in the press release). A statement by the Cape Flats Women’s movement (Kuljan, 2019) in response to the article, for example, noted the following:

We are the demographic of your study. Life on the Cape Flats is brutal and the challenges we face are endless. We don’t think you can even begin to imagine what kind of mental ability this takes. How do you think our children look at us know that a famous university has declared their mothers to be idiots?

The declaration of naiveté on the part of the researchers, could therefore be viewed as a negation of the lived experiences of the many women of colour who declared the writers of the article to be malevolent through their outcry in the public domain. Moreover, it can also be seen as a negation of the very lives of the participating women of Cloeteville in the study, who—although protected by the anonymity of the study—would have experienced the negation of their person and humanity.

Not only is the community largely “missing” in the press release, the historical nature of racial trauma in communities and the ways in which such a study adds to broader racial trauma is minimized. The participants’ voices are effectively silenced and even co-opted as seemingly complicit in the absolving of the researchers in question.

While one of the recommendations noted in the press release is that social impact projects in future “be subjected to ethics review” (Cloete, 2020), the collegial feedback of SU staff at the SU Transformation Indaba (2020) furthermore, indicates that in undertaking engaged scholarship the focus should not be on compliance solely, but on “in this case restoring, ethical relationships”. This notion of restorative justice in terms of research such as this acknowledges that research is also relational and should be undergirded by justice and not merely compliance. It is encouraging to note that in the Social Impact Report of 2020, the director of Social Impact makes the following point: “It is not enough to say we teach social impact and transformation. We need to learn, apply and measure social impact and transformation. This requires a university deployed understanding of colonialism, colonality and post-Apartheid institutional culpability that helps us set an articulate measurements for social impact in future” (p. 4). Greater accountability towards research subjects—who must be seen as “active subjects with agency and as human beings created with dignity” and involved as stakeholders in the research - is key in making a shift towards more accountable community research going forward (Bowers-Du Toit, 2019).

Conclusion

This article drew on (African) feminist decoloniality and CDL to consider the final outcome of the FIC committee following the investigation into the article by Nieuwoudt and colleagues. We showed how aspects of decolonial feminism and CDL connect to provide an analytical framework for deep engagement that supersedes a dialogue uninformed by CDL and the tired return to diversity training when overt racism surfaces. We argued that this case study shows that several challenges remain for authentic university–community partnerships. These challenges include institutional racism, the dominance of legal perspectives of minimising institutional risk, the misrecognition of deep-seated internalised racism in communities and the ignorance contract on the part of the institution and white researchers. An interrogation of personal and institutional ethics in community-based research are core issues that *remain*, even after the FIC report was produced. Transformation in research cannot be a legal and policy-based procedure only. Deep personal and institutional reflexivity, central to (African) feminist decoloniality and CDL, should inform meaningful restorative university-community interventions that include debate and engagement with communities and the adoption of personal and institutional responsibility to learn about difference, with vulnerability.

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