

# Thinking with affect, embodiment, care and relationality to do and teach critical research differently

## Abstract

Drawing on experiences of research, and teaching research, and other current scholarship within local critical, decolonial and feminist research, I argue the importance of a more nuanced application of reflexive practices in research. Located in the larger project of social justice in higher education and critical feminist psychology, the paper reflects on the continued dominance of extractive and representational practices in the humanities and social scientific research in general. It also explores the limitations of normative critical reflexivity in qualitative research. Qualitative research does not necessarily avoid repeating epistemologically violent practices and outcomes, and claims of reflexivity may obfuscate these. The article shares some thoughts about how we may disrupt normative research practices, through our work in the university with scholars and in our own critical psychological research, to destabilise dominant forms and pedagogies of research. In arguing for the reinvigoration of nuance and vigilance in the multi-layered politics of our research, the paper suggests the centrality of embodiment, affect, care and relationality in efforts to disrupt problematic practices and outcomes of normative research. The paper also explores two possible avenues of innovative methodological work in research and in teaching research which works through alternative modalities foregrounding such embodiment, affect, care and relationality. These include the participatory-active research of photo-voice, and transversal collaborations across the knowledges of scholarship, art and activism to co-construct knowledge and “think with” our research and pedagogical programmes.

## Tamara Shefer

Women's and Gender Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535, Cape Town [tshefer@uwc.ac.za](mailto:tshefer@uwc.ac.za)

## Keywords

affect, embodiment, ethics of care, feminist, pedagogy, reflexivity, relationality, epistemic violence

## Introduction

When I was studying towards an Honours degree in Psychology at the University of Cape Town some decades ago, a group of us who were critical and feminist psychology advocates had to strongly motivate to undertake a *qualitative* research project for our research papers. Such methodologies were not considered “proper” psychology. This was a few years after the emergence of a critical psychological discourse challenging the conservative and racist discipline and profession of South African psychology. It was also around the time that PINS (1983) published its first edition. At the time, it was not normative in the mainstream psychology canon to engage in anything but quantitative methodologies, considered to be the only form of scientific research in this “wannabe” science of psychology. Fortunately, the last few decades have seen a vibrant and thriving critical psychology in South Africa. Qualitative research methodologies are increasingly common and considered “scientific” in most psychological teaching and research spaces, albeit not without sustained effort. Yet, there is very little critical reflection in psychology and other social science disciplines on how we practice qualitative research, what our research does, and how it is deployed. Of course, there is much in the history of qualitative research that questions the ontological and epistemological framing of our research. This includes early work on participatory active research (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Reason & Bradbury, 2006) and a relatively large grouping of community and critical psychological practice in South Africa that has been directed at social justice and socially relevant research that serves communities and social transformation (such as Suffla & Seedat, 2004; Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Seedat & Lazarus, 2014; Lazarus, 2018). Notwithstanding these areas of focus, much of the human and social sciences research that is conducted in contemporary South Africa remains located within a colonial, patriarchal logic, that continues to shape academic practices and research in general. In spite of 25 years of transformation efforts in higher education in South Africa post-1994, the extent to which we have *radically* reconceptualised and decolonised practices of scholarship in disciplines and practices is still a pertinent, increasingly urgent question, along with what this means for research.

In this paper, I draw on some experiences of teaching and doing research on intersectional gender and sexuality, to think about what it means to do critical, decolonial, feminist research that resists hegemonic practices. In particular, I argue the importance of going beyond reflexivity, which has been seen as the cure-all for qualitative, feminist and critical scholars trying to negotiate the power relations inherent in and resulting from research practices. This means challenging the extractivist and representational logics of research which are tied up in exploitative practices, as people’s lives and experiences are “mined” for research purposes. Such a challenge is bound up with disrupting the privileges of the researcher, scientist,

“expert”, and “troubling” the binarisms of expert-participant, while centring situated knowledges, embodiment and affect. The paper acknowledges that, rhetoric notwithstanding, scholarly practices, including both pedagogies and research, continue to reflect inequalities and serve to reproduce and rationalise dominant power relations. A growing normative framework, shaped by neoliberal capitalist concerns which promote individualised, consumerist, and self-promoting models of scholarship, arguably further undermines critical social justice goals. This paper shares some thoughts about how we may reconceptualise normative research practices, through our work in the university with students, scholars and in our own critical psychological research. Destabilising dominant forms and pedagogies of research, which rely both on authoritative expertise of the researcher and disempowerment of the “subject” of research and teaching, is key to this project.

## **The project of transformation in higher education and its implications for critical psychological research**

Transforming our scholarship and normative practices in higher education, both research and pedagogical, has been a long project in South African universities, both prior to and post-apartheid. Such efforts have been further mobilised by activism within the larger Fallist student movement to “decolonise” South African higher education, which urged scholars to re-think “transformation” efforts (Mbembe, 2015a, 2015b; Badat, 2016). Despite efforts at material and *epistemological access*, (Morrow, 2009; Muller, 2014) and social justice pedagogical practices (for example, Leibowitz et al, 2012; Bozalek et al, 2018), higher education in South Africa remains characterised by multiple forms of discursive, social and material difference and inequalities, which shape exclusionary and unequal practices both in and outside the academy (for example, Badat, 2009, 2010; Badat & Sayed, 2014; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; DHET, 2008; Msibi, 2013; Pattman & Carolissen, 2018; Soudien, 2010; Tabensky & Matthews, 2015). In spite of over 25 years of social justice goals in higher education, many silences, gaps and failures remain present. The neoliberal project of “diversity”, as the primary thrust of much of the transformation policy and practice in the university, has further undermined critical and radical efforts to reconceptualise the university, its research and practices (Tabensky & Matthews, 2015; Pattman & Carolissen, 2018).

Student activism since 2015 has poignantly foregrounded the way that material and symbolic geographies of universities, together with the curriculum itself, are implicated in the exclusion and marginalisation of many students, staff, and forms of knowledge. Current activism of young South Africans, both inside and outside the university, has highlighted the affective, material and body in challenging continued intersectional inequalities in higher education and more broadly in South African contexts (for example, Pather & Boulle, 2019; Gouws, 2017; Shefer, 2018, 2019b; Xaba, 2018). There has been

widespread activism against racism, poverty, sexual violence, and exclusions of queer people, amongst other intersectional foci at many of the universities over the last few years. Along with this, the activism of queer, decolonial, feminist students in particular, such as the transcollective<sup>1</sup>, has powerfully foregrounded the intersectionality of racism and class inequalities with gender, sexuality, and other marginalities and subalternities (Xaba, 2017; Gouws, 2016, 2017, Shewarega, 2018; Shefer, 2019a). Such emphases on the lived material and subjective experiences of being at a university have been largely neglected in the social justice focus on classroom pedagogy and curriculum in the “transformation” project. Students’ use of embodied and affective activist performance serves as a powerful reminder that it is not only curriculum and institutional “cultures” that require decolonising. Rather, attention towards the lived and embodied experience of being and doing higher education is called for.

Normative research practice, both in what scholars model and in what they teach, remains locked into colonialist and patriarchal logics (Tuhwai Smith, 1999). Postcolonial feminist critique of the problematic representation of subalternity by privileged researchers (Spivak, 1988) is still salient, resulting in misrepresentation and epistemological violence (Mahmood, 2001). Psychology and other social sciences have a long engagement in reproducing and rationalising dominant privilege and social injustice, as was shown in critical psychological critiques of apartheid, well represented in *PINS* and other local journals such as *SAJP*, and reinvigorated in contemporary contexts of the feminist, decolonial project in psychology (for example, Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019; Boonzaier, Kessi & Ravn, 2019). Critical feminist scholars have increasingly exposed the problematic way in which research directed at sexual practices, which has proliferated in South Africa in the light of HIV and high rates of gender and sexual violence, has reproduced and bolstered racist, classist, gendered and other forms of inequality. This has been illustrated both in the methodologies employed and in terms of the dynamics and impact of such research at an ideological and political level. The recent example of a local piece of research on age and education-related effects on “cognitive functioning” was an extreme example of the “everyday racism” (Essed, 1991) of social scientific work. The study was publicly renounced by the Psychological Society of South Africa (Psyssa), amongst others, for drawing “on colonial stereotypes of ‘coloured’ women, and portray[ing] them as intellectually deficient, making broad, reckless and injurious generalisations on the basis of a flawed methodology” (Dano, 2019). While the piece was rapidly retracted by the journal, such research and its problematic impacts are the tip of the iceberg of the political damages and violences of normative social sciences research.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Fallist movements began in 2015, including a strong grouping of queer and feminist activists who were particularly vocal in foregrounding the intersectionality of sexual and gender justice goals. Notable in the context of higher education is the work of the #transfeministcollective, including their performative activism at an exhibition at the University of Cape Town commemorating the anniversary of the #Rhodesmustfall movement, which succeeded in disrupting the exhibition and foregrounding queer activism as part of the decolonial movement (see also Shefer, 2018, 2019).

Critical psychologists, as with others engaging in qualitative, feminist and social justice research, have relied heavily on notions of reflexivity in attempts to subvert the endemic power imbalances in research, with an “expert”, authoritative researcher and “subjects” or participants (as we prefer to call those we do research “on”). The very language of research, even when packaged in more progressive vocabularies, exposes the ever-present privilege of the one who does research, who represents others’ narratives, also often furthering their own careers on the basis of knowledge about others’ challenges and hardship. As Nagar (2013: 3) articulates,

*“When the structure of knowledge production largely disallows research subjects from interrogating, evaluating, or dislodging the knowledge produced by the academic expert, the status of academic researcher as the ‘true intellectual thinker’ remains undisturbed, along with the hierarchies that elevate theory, research, and academic knowledge production to a higher plane than method, community-based dialog, and non-conventional academic writing.”*

No one is innocent. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to step outside of such practices, especially within the relentless neoliberal industry of research and research meritocracy that scholars are forced to comply with in order to succeed, or even get a job.

Another attempt to shield ourselves from abuses in and through research has been the focus on ethics and the setting of institutional ethics boards to regulate and discipline researchers. Like other social and human sciences, psychology has become increasingly focused on research ethics, which in most cases has unfortunately devolved into a regulatory system of tick-boxes. This is experienced by many, especially those of us involved in research related to gender, sexuality and other “sensitive” topics of inequality and violence, as a policing of critical and non-normative research (for example, Posel & Ross, 2014). The result of such narrow interpretations of what it means to do ethical scholarship is an obsessive focus on instrumental practices of research ethics, rather than a thoughtful consideration of the politics of our research, in impact and practice.

Increasingly, feminist and critical researchers, especially those inspired by new materialist thinking and the post-qualitative shift in research, are re-thinking reflexivity, seeking ways to resist “othering” and privileging that is enmeshed in normative forms of research, whether quantitative or qualitative. Scholars argue the importance of going beyond the knee-jerk reflexivity of simply naming ourselves as subjects of privilege or marginality, across the usual identity markers of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, dis/abled bodies/minds, and so on (Pillow, 2003; Lenz Taguchi, 2013; Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). This calls for an ethics of care, relationality and acknowledgement of our entanglements with each other, across

all differences but not disavowing them. Emphasis is placed on reconceptualising research that more authentically engages with and subverts the power and possible abuses of research founded on and reinstating the authority and expertise of the “disembodied conquering gaze from nowhere”, the “god trick” that Donna Haraway (1988: 581) described in her argument for *situated knowledges*. Importantly, the call for acknowledging knowledge as always already embodied and situated is not only about critiquing empiricist notions of objectivity, but is a call for researchers to be responsible for our “truth claims”. Authors working with qualitative reflexive methodologies are increasingly asserting the complexity of dealing with reflexivity, arguing, after Spivak, for a “vigilance from within” (Pillow, 2003: 177).

A key concern for scholars is that reflexivity does not become an end in itself, devolving to an emphasis on the subjectivity of the researcher. Gore (2018: 115) argues that “our task as feminist scholars is not simply to recognise our own subject positions, voices, differences and privileges but also to consider how to use these insights in engaged, practical ways to work across difference”. She suggests that “careful attention to power and positionality when rooted in alternative ways of (un)knowing and practices of feminist solidarity offers a way of navigating the reflexive morass and of *ensuring that reflexivity does not displace a focus on the untold*, that is, on the voices of the disenfranchised, the oppressed or the marginalised” (2018: 116, emphasis added).

Richa Nagar (2013: 3), drawing on Avery Gordon’s (2008) work on hauntology, goes beyond the focus on the reflexivity of the researcher in relation to the research participants to argue for a methodology that,

*“resists the assumed distinctions between subject and object of knowledge, between fact and fiction, between presence and absence, between past and present, between present and future, between knowing and not knowing and commits itself to learning from ‘that which is marginalized, trivialized, denied, disqualified, taxed, and aggrieved’, and it commits itself to ‘redistributing respect, authority, and the right to representability or generalizability – the right to theorize’ – a right which Gordon argues, ‘entails the capacity to be something other than a local knowledge governed or interpreted by a putative superior’ (Gordon, 2008: xviii).”*

Suggesting that all research is about telling stories, and that how we tell our stories matters, Nagar (2013: 5) foregrounds co-authoring stories through collaborations across differences and diversity for richer and more ethical and just practices of research:

*“Collaborative storytelling allows co-authors from varied locations to draw upon and scrutinize their multiple – sometimes conflicting – experiences and truths*

*while exploring, enhancing, and elaborating upon how these interconnect with 'expert' knowledges."*

Halleh Ghorashi (2013), working with migrant women in the Netherlands to co-produce knowledge about migrancy towards disrupting the dominant nation-state narrative, provides a rich example of such relational, dialogical storytelling as method. Ghorashi (2013: 16) argues the value of polyphonic writing, which "involves the ways that the production of knowledge is negotiated throughout the process of writing by giving agency to the multiple voices that it constitutes". This shows how the dialogical process of storytelling and writing produced "relational multiple narratives" while allowing for a sharing of authorship and the power that represents.

Nagar argues further that such collaborative scholarship requires "radical vulnerability", which offers a deeper process of reflexivity as political and personal ethical engagement with research. Nagar (2013: 13) suggests that as an:

*"engagement with questions of power, privilege, and representation, co-authorship in alliance work demands that all the authors question their own complicities with the violence of colonial histories and geographies and with capitalist relations of power; as well as their own embeddedness and investments in and relationships with institutional reward structures, markets, and celebrity cults."*

This constant questioning, Nagar argues, should always be part of ensuring accountability and responsibility within shifting, complex and nuanced layers of possible complicity in the violences we attempt to challenge in our scholarship.

Nagar's concept of "radical vulnerability" takes forward a growing emphasis on the productive value of working with the multi-layered vulnerabilities of research (Behar, 1996; Page, 2017) in thinking about alternative practices of scholarship and practising critical research that goes beyond the normative limitations of reflexivity. Page (2017: 14) proposes "vulnerable writing" and "vulnerable methodologies" to speak of the vulnerabilities of "not-knowing" within research and the centrality of engaging with the complexities of ethical research:

*"As well as exposing the fragility of knowledge assembly, a vulnerable methodology might be closely positioned with questioning what is known, and what might come from an opening in not knowing. This involves questions of ethics: the ethics involved in modes of telling, the sensory and affective responses to the material production of research, and the forms of violence committed in narrating the stories of vulnerable others."*

“Radical vulnerability” for Nagar refers to ethical and relational research which is clearly facilitated by direct collaborations across different sectors and privileges, such as collaborative efforts between universities and activist organisations. However, “radical vulnerability” is useful in thinking through all forms of knowledge-making as forms of intra-action (Barad, 2007), as always complex entanglements, as always political and personal. In the classroom, for example, “the most radical site of possibility in the academy” (hooks, 1994: 12), collaborative knowledge-making is already present, if we open up this reframing. In such a conceptualisation we are urged to think carefully, and with care, through and with diverse and multiple knowledges across time and space, especially those that have been undermined and marginalised (such as indigenous knowledges) and face our complicities and resistances.

### **Beyond representation: participatory methodologies**

So, what does it mean to do critical research *differently* in psychology or other social sciences? Proposing new orthodoxies of research and outlawing others merely repeats the power game implicit in traditions of scholarship and should be treated with caution. However, the critical thoughts on reflexivity and vulnerability explored above do point to openings for creative, experimental and participatory ways of working in knowledge-making. One path clearly emerging that resists the representational and extractive logic of the dominant canon of psychological research is to work in participatory and active ways. For example, such research methodologies have a long history in community psychology, and other social justice (trans)disciplinary emphases that seek to centre marginalised voices (see Sonn et al, 2017). Notable in this respect is the growing body of recent work in feminist, critical and decolonial psychology that draws on photovoice methodology as one form of participatory research that centres participants, equalises researcher and participant, and serves to contribute to community and social development. The work of eminent local psychology scholars like Floretta Boonzaier and Shose Kessi, who have initiated a Decolonial Feminist Psychology Hub at the University of Cape Town (UCT), is one important forum opening up possibilities to rethink hegemonic research practices and disrupt objectifying discourses in psychology (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). Photovoice has been a favoured methodology in this respect, deployed in various local contexts, in and outside of the university, to both research and resist exclusionary, “othering” practice for those marginalised in various southern and global southern contexts. This includes Black students in Eurocentric white universities, poor students at historically disadvantaged universities, gender and sexual non-conforming and queer young people in racist, homophobic and heteronormative institutions, to name a few (e.g. Bradbury & Kiguwa, 2012; Ngabaza et al, 2015; Zway & Boonzaier, 2015; Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Boonzaier & Kessi, 2018; Boonzaier & Mkhize, 2018; Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Ngabaza, Shefer & Clowes,

2018). As a number of authors in diverse disciplines have argued and illustrated, the centring of young people and the privileging of their voices, agency and participation in (re)thinking research and pedagogical practices, is a critical project in global/local social justice efforts (Pattman, 2013; Artz et al, 2017; Nduna & Kiguwa, 2017; Adam et al, 2018; Boonzaier & Kessi, 2018).

Working on a third year research methodology course at a local university in South Africa, the University of the Western Cape (UWC), we found that students valued the course not only for strengthening their understanding of and skills development for research, but also the way in which it engaged their own experience and situatedness, while contributing towards challenging personal and social injustices (see Ngabaza et al., 2013, 2015; Clowes, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2017; Shefer et al, 2018). The research module, which has attempted to be participatory both in the development of research capacity as well as in the research conducted, has for some years engaged authentic learning (Herrington, 2005; Herrington & Herrington, 2005; Shefer & Clowes, 2015) and enquiry-based learning through a feminist, qualitative, participatory, active photovoice methodology. Every year, the course focuses on an area relevant to students' lives, such as the experience of safety/unsafety on campus, and includes student-researchers as both researcher and participant. Besides being co-taught and teaching participatory active research methodology through authentic learning and social justice pedagogical practices, the project is always linked to a "real" research project, with collaborators outside the university and sharing the findings in public settings and forums. Key to the course is an appreciation of the knowledges that students bring and the goal of developing their scholarly identity so that they may think and practice themselves into a sense of and confidence in their own scholarliness. We encourage students to think about publishing from their findings and have modelled this through student-staff co-authored publications (Ngabaza et al, 2013, 2015) and through other publications which reflect on both the pedagogies and the content of the material (as cited above). Posters from students' photos and narratives are also exhibited every year in the library. The sense of having an impact beyond the course is achieved as others can engage with their findings, including university management who usually attend these exhibition openings. Anecdotally, some of the students have gone on to engage in activist and organisational activities through their participation in the course, such as starting a campus-based project for students with disabilities, mirroring the outcomes of similar projects in local and Southern African contexts (see Feminist Africa, special issue, edited by Bennett & Chigudu, 2012). Although the course has a team of lecturers, who ultimately have the authority to pass or fail the student, the co-production of knowledge and of knowledge that *matters*, in that the findings are shared publicly and published, facilitates a participatory pedagogical and research practice.

## Art and performativity in research entanglements

While there are multiple ways of engaging in participatory research methods, as outlined above, there is also increasingly a turn towards performativity, art and activist work in critical research and pedagogical practices, which has much potential for a critical practice. Dialogues between university-based practices of research and art and activism provoke a transgression of the boundaries that are the foundation of the colonial university, with its Cartesian divide that privileges the mind and rationality while devaluing and erasing the body and affect. There are multiple ways in which art and activism may be engaged in research and pedagogical practices of research in the university.

In our scholarly practices in a Women's and Gender Studies Department at UWC, emerging out of an emphasis on the personal as political, we have had a long engagement with performative and artistic methodologies. As part of a research project<sup>2</sup> which has focused on challenging the disjunctions between art, activism and scholarship, and arguing art and activism as scholarship, we have increasingly engaged in collaborations across the terrains of art and activism, as well as pedagogical and research practices that embrace performative and artistic modalities. The value of collaborative, participatory classrooms using art-based methodologies is well articulated by this undergraduate student who shared the way in which a performative, artistic installation strengthened the scholarly knowledge on the course:

**3<sup>rd</sup> year student** (2016): *"The experience of sharing installations enhanced my knowledge of the concepts we have dealt with because it gave us an opportunity to apply our theoretical knowledge of the concepts into real life issues. When applying concepts into real life case studies it helps one understand the concepts much better than to just simply study the theory."*

Students working with performativity and art also explored and valued the vulnerability evoked, as emerges in the narrative of a postgraduate student who participated in a course in 2018<sup>3</sup> that included an artistic installation as a key assignment:

**Postgraduate student** (2018): *"Thinking on the past year, and all I have been exposed to and learnt I am grateful for the various ways in which we interacted, shared and*

---

<sup>2</sup> The New imaginaries for an intersectional critical humanities project on gender and sexual justice is a 5-year Andrew W. Mellon funded research project located in the Women's and Gender Studies Department, Faculty of Arts, UWC. The project includes a particular focus on the generation of feminist, decolonial and social justice scholarly practices, both pedagogies and research; and the development of an archive of pedagogical, activist, performative and artistic interventions that disrupt normative intersectional gender and sexual injustices and marginalisation.

<sup>3</sup> The course referred to was entitled Decolonial Feminist Methodologies and was framed in social justice pedagogies, allowing for the appreciation of embodiment, affect through play, art and creativity, while attempting to destabilise the normative binaries of teacher-learner, intellect-art, rationality-affect and scholarship-activism. The narratives shared here were from students of 2018 who gave permission for their reflections in the course evaluation and their research journals to be drawn on. Appreciation to Dr Nadira Omarjee who co-convened and conceptualised much of this course.

*experienced learning ... I appreciate that it is an awakening and unlearning of oppressive behaviours, and all change is painful and beautiful. I hope that this piece [referring to the class project which was an installation of their choice] resonates with at least one person to find a kinship to the inherent power that we all have within us and to mobilise this power regardless of external influences."*

Students particularly appreciated that the course allowed them to generate an artistic, performative installation that was experienced as having both an affective and scholarly impact. They articulated how the installation they generated reflected and extended the literature engaged with on the course yet captured this and shared it in an accessible way that all can relate to and gain from:

**Postgraduate student** (2018): "*I gave a lot of me to the practical [referring to the class assignment which was an installation] and it gave me joy to create and not have to write all the time. Also, in the end **it was great to see the work was accessible and impactful not just to me but to people passing by. This proves how we can take the hidden treasure in academia into the world using accessible ways of spreading knowledge**"* (emphasis added).

An important spin-off of teaching and practising research that foregrounds embodiment and an ethics of care is that it allows student-researchers to work with their own vulnerability, potentially facilitating a healing process, while also developing a sense of agency and scholarliness. The narrative below flags the more subjective benefits of such practices for self-care through an ontology of relationality:

**Postgraduate student** (2018): "*The module gave me another perspective of looking at things, where I was depressed the module helped me to be kind to myself and not stress a lot about things... I wrote a poem that is part of a bigger project with two other classmates. The poem is quite simple and it captures my journey that **people's experiences connects us with one another. And that is what I wish to always do, be kind to myself when writing and reflect on why I do it a certain way and how that might impact others. I think, this is what a researcher is all about**"* (emphasis added).

It is not only through our pedagogical practices related to research that we can establish a rich engagement with knowledges across the university and civil society as part of a critical, decolonial project. We can also do so by thinking with and through artistic and activist installations and acknowledging how they make new knowledges and are pedagogical practices. Rosemarie Buikema<sup>4</sup>, a renowned feminist scholar focusing on

---

<sup>4</sup> This quote appears in Buikema's (2017) book in Dutch, shortly to be translated by the author.

art and representation, reflected on the installation that Sithembile Msezane performed at UCT while the infamous Rhodes statue, with the coloniality it represents, was taken down. Buikema (2017, 147) noted the scholarly contribution of this long and arduous performance, as Msezane performed for the entire few hours that it took for the cranes to remove the statue, within a large and emotional crowd. Msezane's performance, she argues, "inserts both academy and art into an activist performance, creating an image which *forever links the de-colonization movement's critique of imperialism and patriarchy in an innovative and thought-provoking way*" (emphasis added). In this provocative installation, Msezane (2017), whose work is directed at the erasure of African women in art and the larger political imaginary, generated a pedagogical and scholarly intervention that extended understandings of the enmeshment of patriarchy and coloniality. Her installation laid bare the entanglements of colonisation and continued coloniality and patriarchal power with appropriation, exploitation and extraction of land, culture and nature. This is but one example of the value of thinking with activist and artistic productions and interventions towards projects of social justice.

Richa Nagar (2013) also suggests a further angle on the role of the university in resisting the "ivory tower" exclusionary practices that are so endemic to historical and current contexts of higher education. Nagar reminds us that resources in the university may be deployed and made accessible to promote knowledges excluded from recognition in the same way, providing a further rationale for the value of transversal, transdisciplinary research and pedagogical practices (2013: 10):

*"We need to make interventions through which the privileges and resources afforded by the academy can be mobilized to advance knowledges from sites that are systematically excluded, illegitimized, or rendered invisible in the dominant 'class system of the intellect.' Writing through academic spaces allows us to push the predefined assumptions and boundaries of what is legitimized as important knowledge."*

This may refer to research collaborations, but equally suggests collaborations that mobilise physical and symbolic resources of the university. Examples include collaboration in hosting exhibitions in the university space, such as an exhibition held in 2019 at UWC, co-hosted by the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) and the department of Women's and Gender Studies through the above-mentioned research project. The exhibition, entitled "Alikeness embodied: Representations of sex work" included various mediums, and mostly involved sex workers as participants and artists in their creation, including photo self-documentaries (a form of photo voice) and other art works to challenge damaging stereotypes of sex work, while also sharing their experiences, desires and agency.

Mark Gevisser (2019), reflecting on the exhibition, cites one of the SWEAT participant-artist's photo narrative comment on the agency she experienced in being able to take her photo as she wanted. Gevisser poignantly elaborates the importance of proliferating "cultural productions" such as this collaborative exhibition:

*"Given the depredations of sex-workers' lives, documented in all these projects, it will never be enough; certainly not until sex work is decriminalised and violence against all women in SA recedes. In this context, the sound of SWEAT roaring is a glorious one because it represents some of the most marginalised people in our society claiming their space; taking control of (or at least having a say in what happens with the camera)."*

Being able to offer university space for this exhibition facilitated co-constructed knowledges across diverse sites. It also speaks to the role of the academy and the deployment of its space and authority to promote social justice causes, allowing "for research funds to be utilized for enabling practices that seek to redefine expert knowledge" (Nagar, 2013: 10). The exhibition is a powerful piece of scholarship too; located in the central atrium of the UWC library, it performs pedagogically as well, sharing situated knowledges of an oppressed group with a larger public, inspiring an affective and intellectual engagement for all who moved through the library. As articulated by one of those who viewed the exhibition in the library: "*The exhibition is amazing! Its mindblowing and has changed my perspectives a lot! Thank you! :)*" (anonymous commentator on commentary board at the exhibition).

In response to an exhibition for the 10 year anniversary of the *Proudly African & Transgender* exhibition (see also Muholi & le Roux, 2014), also displayed in the UWC library during August 2019, comments from viewers spoke to the importance of positive representation of marginalised identities and groups, both at a personal and political level, as in these examples:

*"This work is absolutely amazing. I am trans, I am proud and I feel represented. Hope to see more."*

*"It is refreshing and high time that sexual minorities such as trans people are being celebrated in such a beautiful way in their own words. It is good that Africa knows and respects that you exist beyond mainstream white reality shows. You are living and breathing humans. You are beautiful and loved."*

## **Concluding thoughts**

"As I have long felt, feminist methods are ultimately practices of care", says Yasmin Gunaratnam (2020), in her cover remarks on releasing a special edition of *Feminist*

Review on research methods for free access during the challenging days of COVID-19. In thinking about doing research differently, in taking our critical efforts through qualitative research further than mere gestures at being politically correct, care, responsibility and relationality are key to beyond-reflexive efforts to reconceptualise critical qualitative research (see also Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009). The kinds of methodologies suggested here, both through reviewing contemporary critical psychological research innovations and in sharing material from courses and research projects, all speak to care and relationality. They also centre embodiment, the senses and affect, and a thoughtfulness about what we do and how we do so in our research through an engagement with our shared and subjective vulnerabilities.

Psychology as a discipline of research and practice has a long history of governmentality over subjectivity that has tended to rationalise and bolster existing privilege, power, subjugation and oppression. While South African psychology has directed decolonial efforts at the curriculum, bringing in more local and African-based knowledges, and made some important changes in the historically white-dominated profession, there has arguably not been enough rethinking of the tools of our knowledge-making. Qualitative research in critical psychology frameworks has perhaps assumed an innocence on the basis of being oppositional to empiricist, positivist forms of research. Yet, qualitative research does not necessarily avoid repeating abusive and epistemologically violent practices, and reflexivity is not a panacea but may act to obfuscate problematic practices and outcomes. I have argued here the importance of reviving a cautious, ever-vigilant engagement with our research and its processes and outcomes, and a reinvigoration of participatory forms of research that allow for more nuance in the complexity of power in research and knowledge. I have also suggested the value of engaging with current popular and dynamic knowledges, through dialoguing and collaborating with activism and art in contemporary South African contexts to co-construct knowledge and “think with” our research and pedagogical programmes. While it is important, as mentioned, not to set up new orthodoxies of how to do research, being creative and working with creativity in ways that appreciate and engage embodiment, affect, care and relationality are key to ensure that we do not repeat the colonial and patriarchal logics endemic to normative research.

## **Acknowledgments**

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded project **New imaginaries for an intersectional critical humanities project on gender and sexual justice** (Grant no: G-31700714). Thanks to Karen Graaff for rigorous editorial assistance.

## References

Adam, K, Zinn, D, Kemp, H & Pieterse, C (2014) Humanising research through research: The inclusion of student voice in curriculum renewal. **Education as Change, 18(1)**, S63-76, DOI: [10.1080/16823206.2013.877352](https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2013.877352).

Artz, L, Meer, T, Galgut, H & Muller, A (2017) Participation in practice: a case study of a collaborative project on sexual offences in South Africa. **Feminist Review, 115**, 79-96.

Badat, S (2009) Theorising Institutional Change: Post-1994 South African Higher Education. **Studies in Higher Education, 34(4)**, 55-467.

Badat, S (2010) *The Challenges of Transformation In Higher Education And Training Institutions In South Africa*. Development Bank of Southern Africa, 8.

Badat, S (2016) Deciphering the meanings, and explaining the South African Higher Education student protests of 2015-2016. <https://mellon.org/resources/shared-experiences-blog/south-africa-protests/>. Date accessed: 30/06/2016.

Badat, & Sayed, Y (2014) Post-1994 South African Education: the Challenge of Social Justice. **The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 652(1)**, 127-148..

Barad, K (2007) **Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning**. Durham: Duke University Press.

Behar, R (1996) **The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart**. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bennett, J. & Hope, C (eds) (2012) Special Edition: Researching sexuality with young women: Southern Africa, *Feminist Africa*, 17.

Boonzaier, F & Kessi, S (2018) Challenging representations: Participatory research engagements with young people in postcolonial contexts. In Shefer, T, Hearn, J, Ratele, K & Boonzaier, F (eds) **Engaging Youth in Activism, Research and Pedagogical Praxis: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives on Gender, Sex, and Race**. New York and London: Routledge.

Boonzaier, F & Mkhize, L (2018) Bodies out of place. **South African Journal of Higher Education, 32(3)**, 81–100. [http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2514](https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2514).

Boonzaier, F & Van Niekerk, T (eds) (2019) **Decolonial Feminist Community Psychology**. Basel: Springer Nature.

Bradbury, J & Kiguwa, P (2012) Thinking women's worlds. **Feminist Africa**, **17**, 28-47.

Boonzaier, F, Kessi, S & Ravn, A (2019) Editorial: Psychology and society in dialogue with decolonial feminisms: Perspectives from the global South, Volume 1. **PINS (Psychology in society)**, **58**, 1-3.

Bozalek, V & Boughey, C (2012) (Mis)framing higher education in South Africa. **Social Policy and Administration**, **46(6)**, 688-703.

Bozalek, V & Zembylas, M (2017) Diffraction or reflection? Sketching the contours of two methodologies in educational research. **International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education**, **30(2)**, 111-127.

Bozalek, V, Braidotti, R, Zembylas, M & Shefer, T (eds) (2018) **Socially Just Pedagogies in Higher Education: Critical posthumanist and new feminist materialist perspectives**. London: Bloomsbury.

Bradbury, J & Kiguwa, P (2012) Thinking women's worlds. **Feminist Africa**, **17**, 28-47.

Buikema, R (2017) **Revoltes in de Cultuurkritiek**. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Clowes, L, Shefer, T & Ngabaza, S (2017) Participating unequally: Student experiences at UWC. **Education as Change**, **21(2)**, 86-108.

Cooper, S & Nicholas, L (2012) An overview of South African psychology. **International Journal of Psychology**, **47(2)**, 89-101.

Dano, Z (2019) Stellenbosch study on coloured women 'draws on colonial stereotypes'. Cape Argus. <https://www.iol.co.za/capearthargus/news/stellenbosch-study-on-coloured-women-draws-on-colonial-stereotypes-22166233>

DHET (2008) **Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions**. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training. [http://uscdn.creamermedia.co.za/assets/articles/attachments/21831\\_racismreport.pdf](http://uscdn.creamermedia.co.za/assets/articles/attachments/21831_racismreport.pdf).

Essed, P (1991) **Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory.** Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Gevisser, M (2019) Art and the politics of innocence and guilt. **Business Day**, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e4bd9b958d7396dafa689c6/t/5e7b57aee5c39b733ffe007d/1585141699481/art-and-the-politics-of-innocence-and-guilt.pdf>.

Ghorashi, H (2013) Bringing polyphony one step further: Relational narratives of women from the position of difference. **Women's Studies International Forum**, 43, 59-66.

Gobodo-Madikizela, P (2009) Exploring the ethical principle of social responsibility and other ethical issues in the context of the mental health professionals' response to xenophobic violence in Cape Town. **Psycho-analytic Psychotherapy in South Africa**, 17(2): 79-101.

Gordon, A (2008) **Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination.** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gore, T (2017) Reflexivity and queer embodiment: some reflections on sexualities research in Ghana. **Feminist Review**, 120, 102-119.

Gouws, A (2016) Young women in the “decolonizing project” in South Africa: from subaltern to intersectional feminism. Paper presented at the Nordic Africa Days Conference 2016, Uppsala, 23-25 September.

Gouws, A (2017) Feminist intersectionality and the matrix of domination in South Africa. **Agenda**, 31(1), 19-27.

Gunaratnam, Y (2020) Issue 115 on Feminist Methods free to view for two months. [https://femrev.wordpress.com/2020/03/25/issue-115-on-feminist-methods-free-to-view-for-two-months/amp/?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://femrev.wordpress.com/2020/03/25/issue-115-on-feminist-methods-free-to-view-for-two-months/amp/?_twitter_impression=true).

Haraway, D (1988) Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. **Feminist Studies**, 14(3), 575-599.

Herrington, J (2005) Authentic tasks in e-learning designs. **Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development**, 2(2), 1-8.

Herrington, A & Herrington, J (2005) What is an authentic learning environment?, In Herrington A & Herrington J (eds) **Authentic learning environments in higher education**. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

hooks, b (1994) **Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom**. New York & Oxon: Routledge.

Kessi, S & Cornell, J (2015) Coming to UCT: Black students, transformation, and discourses of race. **Journal of Student Affairs in Africa**, **3**(2), 1–16.

Kessi, S & Boonzaier, F (2018) Centre/ing decolonial feminist psychology in Africa. **South African Journal of Psychology**, **48**(3), 299-309.

Lazarus, S (2018) **Power and identity in the struggle for social justice: Reflections on community psychology practice**. Basel: Springer Nature.

Leibowitz, B, Swartz, L, Bozalek, V, Carolissen, R, Nicholls, L & Rohleder, P (eds) (2012) **Community, self and identity: Educating South African students for citizenship**. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.

Lenz Taguchi, H (2010) Images of thinking in feminist materialism: Ontological divergences and the production of research subjectivities. **International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education**, **23**(5), 525-542.

Mahmood, S (2001) Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. **Cultural Anthropology**, **16**(2), 202–236.

Mbembe, A (2015a) Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive. WiSER Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf>.

Mbembe, A (2015b) On The State of South African Political Life. <http://africasacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics/>.

Morrow, W (2009) **Bounds of Democracy: Epistemological Access in Higher Education**. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Msibi, T (2013) Queering the transformation of higher education in South Africa', **Perspectives in Education**, **31**(2), 65–73.

Muholi, Z & Le Roux, G (2014) *Queer & Trans Art-iculations: Collaborative Art for Social Change*, **Agenda**, **28(4)**, 9-19. DOI: [10.1080/10130950.2014.970393](https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2014.970393).

Muller, J (2014) Every picture tells a story: Epistemological access and knowledge. **Education as Change**, **18(2)**, 255-269. DOI: [10.1080/16823206.2014.932256](https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2014.932256).

Nagar, R (2013) Storytelling and co-authorship in feminist alliance work: reflections from a journey. **Gender, Place & Culture**, **20(1)**, 1-18. DOI: [10.1080/09666369X.2012.731383](https://doi.org/10.1080/09666369X.2012.731383).

Nduna, M & Kiguwa, P (2017) Why do we have sex? Reflections from a stepping stones participatory action research with youth LGBTI in Johannesburg. **South African Journal of Higher Education**, **31(4)**, 167-183.

Ngabaza, S, Bojarczuk, E, Masuku, M & Roelfse, R (2015) Empowering young people in advocacy for transformation: A photovoice exploration of safe and unsafe spaces on a university campus. **African Safety Promotion Journal**, **13(1)**, 30-48.

Ngabaza, S, Dominic, D, Franck, O & Maluleke, R (2013) Contestations of the meanings of love and gender in a university students' discussion. **Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity**, **27(2)**, 128-135.

Ngabaza, S, Shefer, T & Clowes, L (2018) Students' narratives on gender and sexuality in the project of social justice and belonging in higher education. **South African Journal of Higher Education**, **32(3)**, 139-153.

Page, T (2017) Vulnerable writing as a feminist methodological practice. **Feminist Review**, **115**, 13-29.

Pattman, R (2013) Learning from the learners about sexuality in a participatory interview in a South African school, In Francis, D (ed) **Sexuality, society and pedagogy**. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

Pattman, R & Carolissen, R (eds) (2018) **Transforming Transformation in Research and Teaching at South African Universities**. Stellenbosch: SUN Press.

Pilllow, W (2003) Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. **Qualitative Studies in Education**, **16(2)**, 175-196.

Posel, D & Ross, F C (2014) Opening up the quandries of research ethics: Beyond the formalities of institutional ethical review. In Posel, D & Ross, F (eds) **Ethical quandaries in social research**. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.

Psychology in Society (PINS) (1983) **PINS 1**.

Reason, P & Bradbury, H (2006) **A handbook of action research**. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.

Reason, P & Rowan, J (1981) (eds) **Human Inquiry**. Chichester: John Wiley.

Seedat, M, & Lazarus, S (2014) Community psychology in South Africa: Origins, developments, and manifestations. **South African Journal of Psychology**, **44**(3), 267–281.

Shefer, T (2018) Embodied pedagogies: Performative activism and transgressive pedagogies in the sexual and gender justice project in higher education in contemporary South Africa, In Bozalek, V, Braidotti, R, Shefer, T & Zembylas, M (eds) **Socially Just Pedagogies in Higher Education: Critical posthumanist and new feminist materialist perspectives**. London: Bloomsbury

Shefer, T (2019a) Performative activism and activist performance: Young people engaging in decolonial feminist community psychology in contemporary South African contexts, In Boonzaier F & Van Niekerk T (eds) **Decolonial Feminist Community Psychology**. Basel: Springer Nature.

Shefer, T. (2019b) Activist performance and performative activism towards intersectional gender and sexual justice in contemporary South Africa. **International Sociology**, 34(4), 418–434.

Shefer, T, Strebel, A, Ngabaza, S & Clowes, L (2018) Student accounts of space and safety at a South African university: implications for social identities and diversity. **South African Journal of Psychology**, **48**(1), 61-72. DOI: [10.1177/0081246317701887](https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246317701887).

Shefer, T. & Clowes, L. (2015) Authentic learning in an undergraduate research methodologies course. In Bozalek, V., Ng'ambi, D., Wood, D., Herrington, J., Hardman, J. & Amory, A. (eds) **Activity Theory, Authentic Learning and Emerging Technologies: Towards a Transformative Higher Education Pedagogy**. London and New York: Routledge.

Shwarega Hussen, T (2018) ICTs, Social Media and Feminist Activism: #RapeMustFall, #NakedProtest, and #RUReferenceList Movement in South Africa. In Shefer, T, Hearn, J, Ratele, K & Boonzaier, F (eds) (2018) **Engaging Youth in Activism, Research and Pedagogical Praxis: Transnational and Intersectional Perspectives on Gender, Sex, and Race**. New York and London: Routledge.

Sonn, C C, Arcidiacono, C, Dutta, U, Kiguwa, P, Kloos, B & Maldonado Torres, N (2017) Beyond disciplinary borders: Speaking back to critical knowledges, liberation, and community. **South African Journal of Psychology, 47(4)**, 448–458.

Soudien, C. (2010) Who takes responsibility for the “Reitz Four”? Puzzling our way through higher education transformation in South Africa. *South African Journal of Science*, vol. 106, no. 9/10, pp. 1–4. Viewed on 22 January 2019. <http://archive.sajs.co.za/index.php/SAJS/article/view/429>.

Spivak, G C (1988) Can the subaltern speak?, In Nelson, C & Grossberg, L (eds) **Marxism and the interpretation of culture**. London: Macmillan.

Suffla, S & Seedat, M (2004) How has psychology fared over ten years of democracy? Achievements, challenges and questions. **South African Journal of Psychology, 34(4)**, 513-519.

Tabensky, P & Matthews, S (eds) (2015) **Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions**. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press.

Tuhiwai Smith, L (1999) **Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples**. London: Zed Books and University of Otago Press.

Xaba, W (2017) Challenging Fanon: A Black radical feminist perspective on violence and the Fees Must Fall movement. **Agenda, 31(3-4)**, 96-104. DOI: [10.1080/10130950.2017.1392786](https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2017.1392786).

Zway, M & Boonzaier, F (2015) “I believe that being a lesbian is not a curse”: Young black lesbian women representing their identities through photovoice. **Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity, 29(1)**, 96–107.