# ‘Feminist Decoloniality as Care’: Alternate Paths to Supporting Black Women’s Academic Identities and Fostering Critical Social Cohesion

**Ingrid Bamberg**
**ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1930-7216**

**Ronelle Carolissen**
**ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7113-0246**

**Saajidha Sader**
**ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5796-0625**

**Relebohile Moletsane**
**ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8493-7479**

## Abstract

With the neo-liberal policies they have adopted, South African higher education institutions, like other institutions globally, place a relentless material and psychological burden on academics. Still ravaged by histories of colonialism and apartheid, and the cross-cutting systems of patriarchy, women continue to be underrepresented at various academic levels in universities. The competitive, individualistic, gendered corporate university model tends to undermine women’s performance in research, teaching, community engagement and leadership. We draw on a current participatory and collaborative research project that explores neoliberalism, gender and curriculum in higher education. The project uses the notion of ‘feminist decoloniality as care’ as a self-affirming tool to examine the underrepresentation and positioning of women academics in higher education. Reflecting


Print ISSN 1023-1757; Electronic ISSN: 2519-5476; DOI https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2021/v28n2a8

on the early phase of a research and development project that involves a group of women academics from three South African universities, we aim to illustrate how feminist participatory methodologies as decolonial praxis might enable a re-positioning of the self and foster a community of practice that challenges the neoliberal and colonial patterns of power in universities.

**Keywords**: academic identities, care, feminist decoloniality, gender, higher education, neoliberalism, participatory methodology, social cohesion

## 1 Introduction

The challenges faced by women at higher education institutions, as students or staff, are regularly documented in the literature. However, scholarship on higher education in low-income countries remains scarce (Morley 2011), and data and literature on gender in African higher education are minimal (Mama 2003; Swartz *et al.* 2018), especially when considering professorial positions in teaching and research and senior management positions (Idahosa 2019). In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (2019) reports that only 4 out of 26 higher education institutions are led by women. Furthermore, only 42% of academic staff members holding PhDs were women, of whom only 29% were professors, 41% associate professors, and 46% were senior lecturers. Of particular relevance to our discussion in this article, is a 2019 report that suggests that the University of Cape Town, which is consistently ranked top among South African universities in world university rankings, had only 76 (31%) women professors. Of those, only 15% were black South African women (Swingler 2019). The project we discuss in this article focuses on the combined marginalising effects of race and gender that render black women the most underrepresented and less likely to flourish in academia.

We are a group of black women with different educational paths and experiences in academia, comprising two professors, a lecturer, and an early-career academic with a previous career in international development, each with 20 or more years of experience in their domain. By 'black', we do not mean a biological feature only, but rather the colonial social constructs attached to it that have been present in our lives and professional journeys. We recognize that 'black' is a complex notion: it is related to the categorization of individuals around imposed identities rooted in coloniality and

expressed in the social construction of race, a construct that is social and therefore varies from one society to the other. The social constructs inherited from coloniality generally make us all black, while the singular classification inherited from apartheid would divide us as Coloured, Indian, African and White. We are black and diverse: our formative educational histories and our professional experiences in education cover different transnational boundaries from South Africa to France, including intermittent sojourns on the African and North American continents and in the UK. Yet, we are the lived illustration of what the decolonial feminist Maria Lugones (2007; 2010) demonstrates: imposed racialized identities fluctuate in space and time, but remain the permanent manifestation of colonial power and domination.

The apparent fluidity in space and time of imposed racialized identities conveys subtle nuances. On the one hand, in a group like ours, they generate diversity and complementarity. On the other, they could also lead to division due to their overt or covert hierarchies, privileges and oppressions, forms of recognition and disqualification intersecting with gender, class and academic status. In other words, for us, being 'black' women academics means recognizing a similar journey of intersectionality as a lived experience, and uniting in resisting imposed identities in a creative, constructive and resilient fashion.

As we are all first-generation academics, we share common gendered and colonial experiences within higher education, either we ourselves, or through our students and colleagues. We are also products of the system: we have earned our legitimacy by following the route of meritocracy. This institutional validation, combined with our professional experience, does play a role in whether and how we perform our agency. It has allowed us to know the codes and the language necessary to get access to funding, to get involved in projects that enhance our capacity to navigate the system creatively and help others to do so. We are conscious of the way the neoliberal university and its performance-driven modus operandi are likely to bring competition and disconnection among black female academics rather than professional sisterhood (see Moodly & Toni 2017; Swartz *et al.* 2018). Literature suggests that black women academics perform their work in the same gendered and racialised paradigmatic context as any other black women in any industry. As subalterns who create the conditions for others to raise or consolidate their socio-economic and academic profile, generally those from the dominant group, black women carry an invisible work over-

load in the workplace (Vergès 2019).

Through our respective fields of expertise and practices, we dedicate ourselves to social justice in education. Our project *Neoliberalism, Gender and Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education: Feminist Decoloniality as Care* (FemDAC)[1] is premised on our common understanding that an inclusive higher education institution, characterised by values of critical social cohesion, views the progress and well-being of underrepresented women academic staff and students seriously. Our aim is to disrupt the way our academic identities are constructed by the colonial and neoliberal higher education setting: in competition rather than in collaboration; in acceptance of subalternation rather than in agency; in individualism rather than cohesion; in internalising oppression and isolation rather than uplifting the self through solid professional connections, care and well-being. Instead of marking our shared positionalities of institutional oppression as victimhood, our work and connectedness constitute a process of reclaiming our collective being through critical reflexivity and deep *care*. If feminist theoretical concepts such as *intersectionality* (Crenshaw 1991; Davis & Maldonado 2015; Hill-Collins 2009) have been applied to researching gender-related issues in African academia (Morley & Lugg 2009; Morley & Lussier 2009), beyond a theoretical framework, decolonial feminism gives space to the praxis of what we have come to call 'feminist decoloniality as care', a creative praxis of social cohesion.

This article explores how a critical reinvestigation of black women's identities, and a social cohesion practice might address these challenges. It first reflects on the adversities that limit black women's progress in acadmia, then questions the conventional approach to social cohesion rooted in liberal policy practice, and finally suggests a contextualised and critical perspective. Using 'feminist decoloniality as care' as a lens, the article draws on our current participatory research project that focuses on the link between neoliberalism and gender in academia. The project aims to show how, as a self-affirming tool for analysis and praxis, 'feminist decoloniality as care' might help us explore the underrepresentation of black women in academia, and to address the challenges they face, give them a safe space to navigate their identities and build critical social cohesion among them.

[1] The project is funded through the Andrew Mellon Foundation grant: G-180 7-06023

## 2 Black Women in Academia: Challenges and Obstacles

While South African universities, due to a policy framework that inscribes gender equity, have seen an exponential growth in the number of black women in the past ten years (Department of Education 1997; Republic of South Africa 1997; 1998; 2013), the everyday experiences of black women have continued to be negative. Much research tends to focus on the roles of women in society and their impact on women's access to and success in higher education (Moodly 2015; Shober 2014). While this is important, research on the ways in which black women navigate the symbolic violence and disrupt the reproduction mechanisms of patriarchal social relations in institutions are understood, remains minimal. Exceptions include the recent book, *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou *et al.* 2019), which presents personal reflections and accounts of black academics' experiences at South African historically white institutions. The book builds on the local and global literature that highlights black women's accounts of their negative experiences of exclusion or marginalisation (Divala 2014; Johnson & Thomas 2012; Owusu-Kwarteng 2019). However, the agency inherent in multiple stories by black academic women about their academic identities is encouraging (Kiguwa 2019). They make visible the strategies they employ to work towards disrupting deficit narratives about them in higher education and reimagine ways of reshaping institutional cultures to make institutions their academic and professional homes. It is therefore appropriate to review some of the core challenges that black women experience at neoliberal higher education institutions, both globally and locally. Premised on our understanding that liberal conceptions of social inclusion may be detrimental to developing confident, self-assured black women academics (Kiguwa 2019; Magoqwana, Maqabule & Tshoaedi 2019; Thunig & Jones 2020), we consider the ways in which black women academics navigate institutional cultures and their exclusion mechanisms.

Black women's experiences in higher education are not monolithic. There are multiple ways in which different aspects of socially constructed identities intersect to produce particular experiences of black womanhood in academia. These intersecting identities include, for example, age, academic rank, motherhood and many more. Significantly though, neoliberal practices that intersect with patriarchal socio-cultural expectations and other contextual factors demand that academics satisfy various research, administrative,

teaching and community engagement responsibilities. These demands have become non-negotiable and are intimately tied to individual career identities and sense of self-worth. More research and teaching outputs, increased administrative tasks delegated to academics, reduced institutional resources, coupled with unacknowledged invisible labour unrecognised for promotion, are commonplace. In some instances, the pressure put on women in academia, including workloads and stress, has been deemed similar to that put on women in the corporate sector (Muberekwa & Nkomo 2016). In this highly competitive context, individualisation of effort is valorised. Yet 'successful' academics are not self-made. Their careers often depend on teamwork and the ability to claim space for themselves to do research. These acts are infused with institutional power and become complicated in the case of black women navigating academic spaces.

One of the factors that inhibit women's progress in higher education include gender stereotypes (Shober 2014) that normatively define who female academics are. These understandings are internalised by all, including black women, leaving them feeling constantly vigilant to resist deficit narratives. Myths about the angry black woman (Doharty 2020), their incompetence, but also black women's strength and resilience abound (Swartz *et al.* 2018). Coupled with the expectation to remain emotionless or 'suck it up' (Doharty 2020), these myths often lead to high levels of anxiety for black women (Kiguwa 2019). These myths are intensified by deficit inspired tropes that affirmative action, rather than merit, brought them into academia. Lack of mentorship (Moodly & Toni 2017) and solidarity among women, and competition are also evoked as part of their challenging professional journey. Such prejudices can be coupled with low or no job-grade increase despite no negative professional appraisal (Muberekwa & Nkomo 2016; Shackleton, Riordan & Simonis 2006). Numerous researchers have argued that in the context of diversity as a professed ideal in academic institutions, black women are often exploited in branding campaigns (Thunig & Jones 2020), while simultaneously experiencing misrecognition (Kiguwa 2019). Black women are also marginalised in publishing and key academic meetings, including in editorial boards and as keynote speakers or lead researchers (Morley 2018; Moletsane, Haysom & Reddy 2015).

In spite of these multiple challenges, available literature also reflects affirming strategies that black women use to navigate academia. These include developing collaborative and supportive networks with other black

women (Kiguwa 2019) that acknowledge their strengths as producers of knowledge (Mabokela & Magubane 2004) that can speak back to misrepresented constructions of black womanhood in academia (Khunou *et al.* 2019). These collaborative networks might offer some hope for social cohesion to occur in a still divided South Africa, where diverse groups of academic staff and management teams have only recently been forced to work together through mergers and to navigate institutional cultures that are still in transition.

## 3 Social Cohesion in Higher Education Institutions

The highly referenced 2008 Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (the Soudien Report) about the progress made in transformation and social cohesion in higher education institutions highlights various acts of racism, sexism and discriminatory behaviours at universities (DOE 2008; CHE 2009). To address these, the imperative for universities and other social institutions has been the pursuit of social cohesion as a common good. The report, however, ignored the subtle violence of the doctrine of managerialism associated with neoliberal policies and practices and therefore displays a limited vision of social cohesion.

Social cohesion is generally considered to be constituted through processes and practices that facilitate a common sense of values, purpose, consensus and belonging. Evidently, social cohesion is largely conceptualised as addressing the collective and as a remedy against individualism. Particularly embraced in the policy-making sphere, it is seldom contested, as it assumes liberal western notions of cooperation, trust and belonging. In a colonised country like South Africa, where individual identities were negated by an oppressive regime, contemporary narratives fostering social cohesion can impose dominance, assimilation and negate contestation and difference (Harris 2013). Contestation and engagement are crucial for shared understanding and encourage opportunities for criticality (Young 1990).

Interestingly, the Soudien Report highlights how the University of KwaZulu-Natal approached its pursuit of social cohesion as a 'healing' process. This suggests a conceptual model of social cohesion that goes beyond the collective dimension. Our research (described below) interrogates the extent to which the seemingly collective interest born by a neoliberal

institution should prevail upon the individual. We postulate that the self, resistance and critical thinking can co-exist with social cohesion if it allows marginalised academic identities to flourish through creative and constructive contestation. From this perspective, conceptualisations of social cohesion should include strategies for reasserting the social identity of the individual, their agency and their relationship to a togetherness which is humanely, and not institutionally defined (see Kiguwa 2019). Furthermore, decoloniality research is seen as a threat to social cohesion[2] in some countries. We assert that in the South African context, imprinted by colonial legacies, normative understandings of social cohesion need to be re-evaluated through contextualised lenses such as decoloniality.

## 4 'Feminist Decoloniality as Care'

The philosophical framework we have adopted in our work, 'feminist decoloniality as care', merges the concepts of decolonial feminism (Lugones 2007) and feminist care ethics (Tronto 1993) as central to our ways of being in the world and our engagements in knowledge generation. This involves challenging and changing the legacy of coloniality, which refers to the individual and collective adoption of structural systems of power that remain intact and pernicious in contemporary society and institutions. Central to the concept 'coloniality of power', developed by Quijano (2007), is the control of knowledge, identity, and subjectivity to subjugate marginalised people. Decoloniality thus implies understanding and dismantling colonial relations as reflected in knowledge generation that draw on positive framings of identity and subjectivity in collective historical and contemporary memory. Like Maldonado-Torres (2016:10), we understand decoloniality as,

> efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-know-

[2] This is the case in France. See the response from the Frantz Fanon Foundation to a position paper against decolonialism signed by 80 psychoanalysts and 80 prominent intellectuals. https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/reponse-fanonienne-au-manifeste-des-psychanalystes-sinsurgeant-contre-lassaut-des-identitaristes-dans-le-champ-du-savoir-et-du-social/

> ledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world.

This, for us, is what contributes to building inclusive universities, and enhancing social cohesion among those who work together therein.

The legacy of dispossession and violent subjugation on which colonization depends is often described as *racial* subjugation and exploitation, with gender as a source of oppression fading into the background. In this context, drawing on Quijano's concept of 'coloniality of power' as well as the work of black and postcolonial feminists such as Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) on gender, race and colonization, Lugones foregrounds 'coloniality of gender' to critique the modern colonial gender system. For Lugones (2007), this illuminates the ways in which the colonial gender system and its intersections with racism attempts to subjugate black women (Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Mendoza 2016).

As a concept, decolonial feminism embraces justice and has four broad aims in higher education contexts. Firstly, it aims to establish a rehumanizing imperative by foregrounding misrecognition struggles and gender as power asymmetry that structures our experience (Ipadeola 2017; Mirza 2014). Secondly, it seeks to interrogate the politics of knowledge and knowledge production and to disrupt the dominance of hegemonic Euro-American knowledges as opposed to ecologies of knowledge (Santos 2014). Thirdly, it aims to centre geographical location, appropriateness and relevance of the curriculum. Of particular relevance to this paper, decolonial feminists aim to foreground critical feminist pedagogies and methodologies such as critical reflexivity, power asymmetries and the value of standpoint or lived experience. These are the aspects of decolonial feminism that underpin our work. Further, drawing on the work of Joan Tronto (1993), our work is underpinned by an ethic of care. Fisher and Tronto (1990) define care as an activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Fisher & Tronto 1990: 40; Tronto 1993:103). Tronto assumes a relational care ethic: humans, the environment and other beings are dependent on one another and that all humans are vulnerable and in need of care, but also able to give care (Tronto

2017). For Tronto, care is not merely an individual activity but an institutional, systemic activity, democratic caring.

Care has often been critiqued as paternalistic as it reinscribes power asymmetries when we decide on the nature of care for others, and parochial when we decide to care only for those similar to us (Tronto 1993). Tronto's four moral elements of care and their respective phases are a useful tool for conceptualising non-paternalistic care. Phase one requires *attentiveness* to a need which involves caring about someone or something, and empathy. Phase two involves *responsibility*, or taking on the task or burden of responding to an identified need, while phase three involves caring *competence*, and phase four describes *responsiveness*, to the needs of the person. Added in her later work (Tronto 2013), the fifth element, *solidarity*, expects us to take collective responsibility, where citizens should be seen as potentially both receivers and givers of care in society.

Informed by this pedagogical framework, the aim of our five-year project, FemDAC, is three-fold: 1) to create a community of practice (CoP) that involves a network of women academics from five public universities (three in South Africa and two in the USA) in collaboratively developing scholarship on the nature and influence of gender and neoliberalism on their research and teaching capacities; 2) to examine the ways in which these women understand and contribute to scholarly debate about the competing discourses of neoliberalism and gender inequality on the one hand, and debates around decoloniality, decolonization and transformation in higher education on the other; and 3) to explore the ways in which these women understand, respond to and resist the gendered and neoliberal policies, structures and processes in universities, particularly the ways in which this is reflected in their scholarship, curriculum development and decision-making, and community engagement. Importantly, through research and collaborative practice, our project seeks to identify strategies and resources for enhancing social cohesion among the group members within and across sites, supporting the women and strengthening their capacities to influence curriculum decision-making and change (Moletsane & Mabokela 2018).

# 5 Our Research Project

## *5.1 Methodology*

Our aim is to understand and resist the influence of gender and neoliberalism

on our research capacities and to promote our leadership in curriculum transformation in higher education institutions. We use research and *praxis-based workshops* (Carolissen *et al.* 2020) that draw on a qualitative participatory pedagogical methodology to create spaces for dialogue and reflexivity. Our approach specifically uses *arts-based methods* such as biographical letter writing, drawing, collages and photo-voice innovatively to engage women in examining their understandings and experiences of neoliberalism in higher education. We also engage participants to reflect on the conceptual and theoretical debates in relation to their personal and professional growth.

Letter writing as an example of a method used in reflexive inquiry helps to explore the often disregarded emotional dimensions of women's experiences of inequality, their (re)memories and their hopes and sense of possibility within the higher education space. Biographical methods also help to make 'theoretical sense of social phenomena' (Apitzsch & Siouti's 2007:3). It also encourages understanding and interpretation of experience across national, cultural and traditional boundaries, as well as individual action and engagement in society (Bornat 2008:344). While we acknowledge the challenges related to interpreting biographies produced in different social-cultural contexts (Apitzsch & Siouti 2007), we harness them to create spaces in which women can collectively develop deep understandings of the issues and to develop strategies for addressing them.

The artefacts such as biographical letters, photovoice and drawing exercises that participants produced in the workshops, and their subsequent collaborative analysis are aimed at capturing the iterative, non-linear processes of meaning-making, identity formation and change processes. These activities take place within a context of co-support, co-mentoring, reciprocity and cohesion and generate resources and data (conceptual, material and practical) for collective scholarship among participating women. Once artefacts are produced, they are photographed and placed in a shared drop-box facility for easy access for all project participants. Participants can then use the resources to develop personal professional development plans, with research and curriculum development as key focus areas. In the last phase of the project (2024), mentors will be appointed for the participants to refine, implement and monitor their professional development plans, for those aspects of their plans that were not realised during the funding period of the project.

## *5.2 Research Process*

We started our project with an inception meeting and training involving the research teams from the five collaborating institutions (two in the US and three in South Africa) in February 2019. At this weeklong meeting, we first revisited the objectives of the project, since they were vague and unfocused in the research proposal. Secondly, we brainstormed the ways in which our project would challenge the status quo. To address the academic competition and alienation among women in universities, we planned to collaborate and establish a network of women or community of women scholars who would work together in unveiling and addressing the often unwritten rules of engagement in academia, and importantly, to prioritise self-care. We concluded the meeting by developing a schedule of activities for the four-year project including workshops, international exchanges, conferences and mentoring plans. Each country team would implement these activities (described above) in their particular context, and we would come together each year (as a transnational team) according to the schedule we had developed. We had to extend the project by one year because Covid-19 brought the project to a standstill. We resumed the project on virtual platforms in 2021. In the following section, we report and reflect on some of the detail of the South African workshop content and how specific participatory methodologies were employed.

In total, we recruited 23 black women academics from various disciplines, 15 from universities in KwaZulu-Natal and 8 from a university in the Western Cape, all early-career academics, within a few years after obtaining their PhDs or still completing their doctorates. After co-researcher participants had been recruited, we organised our first national workshop held in Durban from 13 – 15 September 2019.

The aim of this workshop was to introduce the participants to the project, and to one another; and to introduce them to the theoretical and conceptual framework, 'feminist decoloniality as care'; and to the pedagogical and methodological approach of the project. The latter involved an introduction to participatory methodologies, including drawing and collage-making. To illustrate, in the collage-making workshop, the participants were given the prompt: 'Create a group collage that responds to the question: What does academic work look like for me?' (see Figure 1 for an example of a collage created from the project).

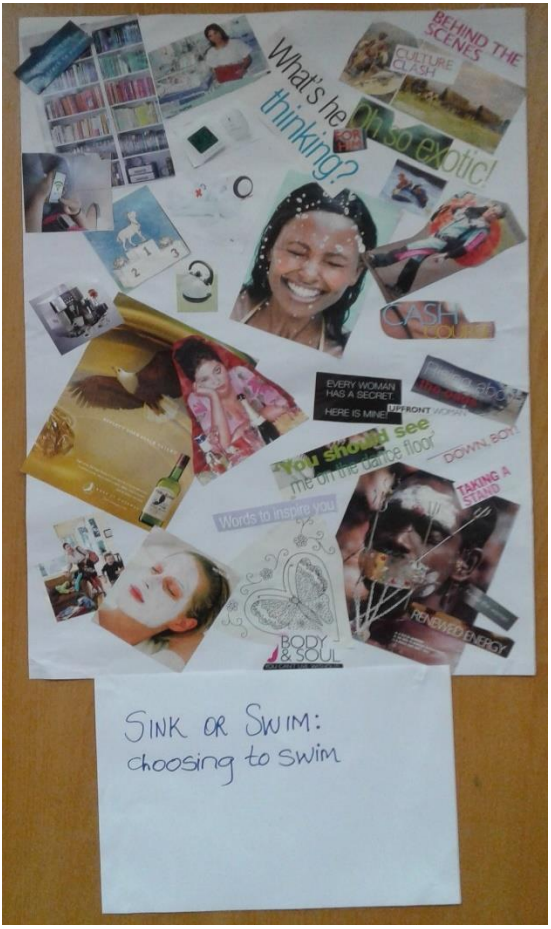


**Figure 1. An example of a collage**

This is an example of a collage that was made by a small group. They specifically focused on the unrelenting pressure of being an academic in their description of their collaborative experience as 'sink or swim'. What was already significant was their determination to 'choose to swim'. The resolve evident in this group motto resonates in other group artefacts. The discussion following this activity included who the key role players are in higher education institutions, what factors (including people, spaces, policies) facilitate

or inhibit women's participation and success in these institutions, and what sources of support exist or need to be developed to address these challenges.

The second part of the workshop introduced participants to other participatory research methods including photo-voice, letter writing and autobiographical writing. The prompt for letter writing was: 'Write a letter about what you would like to get out of the FemDAC experience'; for photo-voice it was: 'What are your experiences of being an academic and a woman on campus?' (see Figure 2: Photovoice poster example); and for autobiographical writing: 'Using a timeline, write a short autobiographical story addressing the question: What important events have brought you to this point in your life?'. These prompts aimed to engage the participants in collaboratively interrogating the influence of gender and neoliberalism on women academics' participation in higher education.

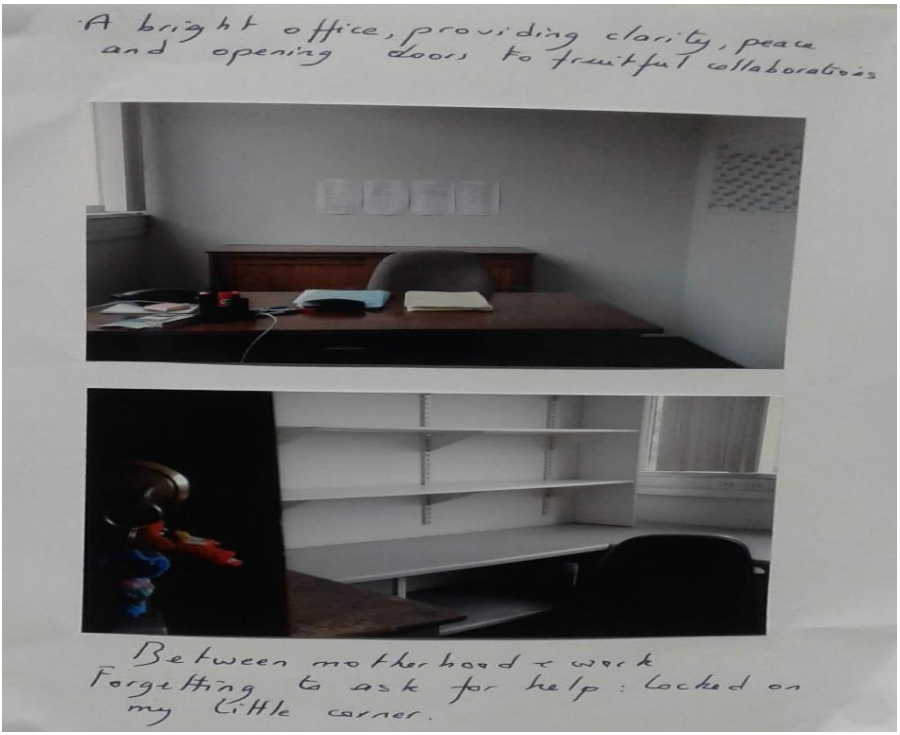


**Figure 2. An example of a photovoice picture**

In this example of a photovoice picture, the participant ideates about her ideal academic environment and describes her experience as a woman and academic as constrained by 'her not asking for help' when balancing motherhood and work. She feels 'locked in her own little corner'.

Using these visual artefacts, we made sense of the ideology and corporate ethos of neoliberalism, showing that the personal feeling of underperforming is shared by others, and that overwork and competition are an essential feature of neoliberalism. From these discussions, we concluded that the feelings and consequences (mental, physical, and relational) related to such overload are inherent to the neoliberal paradigm, that focuses on reducing expenses and on seeing the individual as a performer rather than as a human being.

The last activity engaged the participants in drafting their individual five-year professional development plans, including plans and timelines for promotion and publication plans. The workshop concluded with agreements to hold follow-up meetings in each of the regions, with the research team as facilitators and co-researchers. These regional meetings aim to address issues raised and needs identified by the co-researcher participants and to build group cohesion. Reflecting on the workshop, participants identified the following words that described their experience of the workshop: understanding, thoughtful, thought-provoking, developing, healing, revitalising, inspiring, hopeful, questioning, loving, acceptance.

Unfortunately, with the advent of Covid-19 and the related restrictions in March 2020, we could no longer have face-to-face meetings and had to resort to online meetings. The virtual meetings, due to the negative impacts of the pandemic on individuals and their families, very quickly became a space of support, where we could share our experiences, our anxieties and general effects of the pandemic on our personal and professional lives. We did not only focus on the negative impacts, but shared and celebrated our individual achievements, like publications or awards of scholarships. Given the negative consequences of the social isolation, like loneliness that many began to experience, we and our co-researcher participants saw this space as critical. In 2021, we are carving a way to get back to the project activities, albeit virtually. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp have also facilitated communication among the group members, ensuring that we stay informed about each other's wellbeing, academic achievements and challenges.

What have we achieved after two years? Our analysis is that the project, while disrupted by Covid-19 restrictions, has had three broad outcomes. *First*, the inter-regional workshops and the regional meetings have enabled us to establish a Community of Practice (CoP) within and across our three institutions. This CoP enables co-learning among co-researcher participants and the research team, and builds our understanding, skills and strategies for addressing the challenges we encounter in terms of gender inequality and the influence of neoliberalism on women academics. While we cannot claim that the various outcomes for individuals are directly linked to their participation in the project, we have learned of group members publishing their first academic paper, a few being promoted, and others completing their PhDs. Moreover, FemDAC gives them access to a network and new forms of social capital within the higher education environment.

*Secondly*, at the personal development level, to illustrate, on the first day of the first workshop, one of the participants was deeply moved by the fact that she was in a room filled with smart, black women academics. For her, the symbolism of black women's excellence in that room represented a visceral disruption of a lifetime of deficit messages about her and black women's competence in academia. As she asserted, the experience would stay with her for the rest of her life and motivate her to achieve her goals. According to her, being in the group enabled her to speak her mind and feel understood as her experiences often resonated with the group, and as a result, they immediately 'got it'. Another participant observed how being there enabled her to acknowledge her expertise (in a context where she is often made to think that she does not know) and admit when she does not know and seek help without fear of being negatively perceived. These examples of unusual space identification, sense of belonging and trust, of shared values and re-evaluation of the self, touch the core of how as a decolonial feminist project, FemDAC fosters critical social cohesion based on an ethic of care while drawing on decolonial imperatives of developing awareness and action among marginalised and oppressed groups. Instead of seeing themselves as victims, the participants (early career black women academics) have been able to take joint responsibility to build a community of practice that affirms, supports and encourages them to be responsive to each other's needs.

Thirdly, we have started to build an online resource bank for teaching and research, including a decolonial methodology for researching and

developing research and teaching capacity among the women participating in the project. These include not only the literature we continue to collect (books, articles, videos), but also the visual artefacts generated in the project, including biographical letters, collages, and photographs. These will be used as entry points into dialogue and debate on how the neoliberal corporate university positions black women academics and ways in which the coloniality of gender continues to be perpetuated in higher education. In doing so, our aim is to collectively disrupt dominant modern/ western/ racist/ patriarchal ways of producing knowledge, ways of being and doing in order to produce counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to challenge coloniality. Thus, Covid-19 restrictions notwithstanding, we have made some progress in the project towards achieving some of our objectives. We are cognisant of the need to consolidate our collective achievements thus far and have planned further workshops for 2021 so as not to lose momentum or reverse the achievements we have had so far.

Finally, core to the decolonial aspect of this project is our relationships to our own institutional positionality, individually and as a research team, and in relation to our co-researcher participants. We aim to create a safe space by removing hierarchical barriers between ourselves and the co-researcher participants. From this perspective, any member of the group can initiate an activity and facilitate it at any stage of the project. This mindset related to the idea of building a community of practice and to the decolonial values we share (see also, Maldonado-Torres 2016), also implies that the data collected belong to us all and that we can use it for our own development and to collectively write for publication. This means as well that, as researchers, we also participate in the activities and share our stories with our co-researcher participants. In so doing, we aim to eliminate academic hierarchies and democratise our research and development work with our co-researcher participants.

In the colonial, hierarchical and competitive higher education arena, we believe that our approach and values are far from the norm and cannot be left to chance. Rather, they are deliberate, and an essential trait of our conscious engagement and of our decolonial praxis. In this way, our commitment to abolish hierarchies and to co-construct new ways of being, demonstrate our way of speaking back and resisting the influence of the neoliberal university.

## 6 Discussion

While 'coloniality-capitalism' continues to advance and influence all aspects of our social lives, 'resurgences, shifts, and movements towards a decolonial otherwise', towards decoloniality as praxis are emerging globally in resistance to the coloniality of power (Mignolo & Walsh 2018:15). As a relational praxis, decoloniality-as-praxis does not separate scholarship from our embodied and spiritual worlds. Using a 'feminist decoloniality as care' framework, our project FemDAC aims to analyse the challenges to black women's success in three South African universities, and to develop innovative approaches that challenge inequalities that exist in universities, with a particular focus on gender and its intersection with other social differences. The project aims to contribute to social cohesion among the participants, and within higher education institutions and beyond. As a group, we acknowledge our heterogeneity as underrepresented women in higher education. We see that as a strength, especially when we aim to create a safe space for all participants, including ourselves, and where potential hierarchies are abolished. This allows us to deeply interrogate our experiences of coloniality, including neoliberalism, and its perpetuation in and through higher education. Our growing understanding of decoloniality and the decolonial knowledge project that we have embarked on mandates us to be aware of our positionalities, to re-place and perform them in a perspective of care, towards the self and others. The art-based activities of the project are grounded in creativity and freedom with no expectation of performance. They focus on care as they bring awareness of the self in the system and of the self in our collective. We support one another by sharing experiences to find solutions together, by sharing tools for professional and personal development and well-being, and by developing a community of practice to understand, navigate and creatively resist oppressive systems. Building on this, the decolonial praxis that informs our work in the project, enables reflexive understandings of our experiences in the westernised, patriarchal, structurally selective discriminatory and racist corporate university and aims to disrupt and subvert hegemonic subjectivities and discourses (Mignolo & Walsh 2018). Privileging our biographies is underpinned by our belief that an understanding of ourselves and our relationships with and within the institutions we inhabit enables the creation of significant spaces for representation, dialogue and critical participation (Carolissen *et al.* 2020).

We are cognisant that decolonial feminism is work in progress. While we draw on anti-colonial and decolonial feminist thinkers to inform the conceptual framework and our praxis in the project, we aim to work towards contributing individually and collectively to the development of decolonial feminist praxes and to decolonial thinking from an African perspective. With the use of praxis-based participatory pedagogies, we aim to deepen our understanding of the factors that facilitate and/ or inhibit our research and curriculum development capacities in the university. We do so by reflexively interrogating our individual and collective experiences of racism, sexism and other oppressions we experience within and outside the university and use this as a basis for developing counter knowledges and counter ways of being and doing.

Drawing on these insights as a collective, we aim to develop interventions and resources that aim to respond to the symbolic violence perpetrated against us in the intrinsically colonial corporate university. More importantly, the insights will be used as springboards for innovation in the context of the decolonisation efforts currently sweeping the higher education landscape.

Importantly, we hope the impact of the project extends to other women in institutions across the country and beyond. Understanding, challenging and addressing the domination and exclusion of women is crucial. This extends to domination in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres, particularly in patriarchal and often violent communities and institutions. This is an important goal, not just for black women as an oppressed group, but to citizens within and across democratic institutions.

Pursuing the goal of gender equity in universities has the potential to subject all structures and processes to a fundamental interrogation necessary for social transformation, thereby valuing our differences and critical social cohesiveness (Aina 2010). Investigating black women's experiences of gender, neoliberalism and coloniality from a decolonial feminist stance not only contributes to our understanding of gender inequity and the factors that perpetuate it, but it also enhances women's capacities for self-development and care. These understandings have implications for public policy decisions in relation to women's development and participation in two spheres: it directly impacts on underrepresented women in research, curriculum decision-making, leadership; and for strategies for nurturing social cohesion in higher education institutions.

## 7 Conclusion

While the employment of black women in South African higher education has increased in the past two decades, their participation in leadership and curriculum decision-making has been limited. This paper reflects on a project that uses participatory research to engage co-researcher participants in collaboratively identifying and developing strategies and resources to address the challenges they face as black women in higher education. The project uses 'feminist decoloniality as care' as both a theory and praxis towards critical social cohesion, and in particular, its potential for enabling black women academics to understand, respond to and challenge the negative influence of gender and neoliberalism on their academic journeys. Embraced as a value, social cohesion is often challenged as a consensual concept compliant to institutional ideologies, like neoliberalism, that hinder identities and decolonial thinking in the name of the common good.

We remain critical of liberal conceptions of social cohesion and acknowledge that 'feminist decoloniality as care' enables critical social cohesiveness as praxis and process. By adopting a 'feminist decoloniality as care' approach we aim to foster a sense of community and build a network of solidarity that recognises the importance of first consolidating the personal and political self. By reconnecting black female academics, we are contributing to critical cohesiveness informed by decolonial praxis. Our connectedness to one another transcends academic boundaries as co-investigators on a research project. We do not simply share an intellectual journey. We affirm each other's achievements; we support one another in all spheres of life; our trust in one another helps us to navigate the institutional racism and oppression that we routinely encounter in university spaces.

In short, we share a cohesiveness deeply rooted in and borne out of a shared experience of institutional racism and sexism, both within *and* outside our respective institutions. We do not have to engage in the emotional labour of explaining to each other why our experiences are experiences of oppression. We all immediately understand.

In the deep knowing of oppression, our agency for emotional connection and reciprocal care is ignited.

This agency, along with our intellectual interests, is what enables us to remain and flourish in a highly competitive and sometimes alienating academic context.

## References

Aina, T.A. 2010. Beyond Reforms: The Politics of Higher Education Transformation in Africa. *African Studies Review* 53,1: 22 – 40. https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0290

Apitzsch, U. & I. Siouti 2007. *Biographical Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective in the Field of Migration Studies.* Frankfurt am Main: Re-search Integration, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, University of York.

Bornat, J. 2008. Biographical Methods. In Alasuutari, P., L. Bickman & J. Brannen (eds): *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage.

Carolissen, R., S.B. Sader, R. Moletsane & N. Mthiyane 2020. Neoliberalism, Gender and Higher Education: Developing Leadership Capacity for Women in South African Higher Education. In International Network on Gender, Social Justice and Praxis. *Stories from Praxis*. Occasional paper, Issue 03. Available at: https://nova.newcastle.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/uon:36585/ATTACHMENT02?view=true

Council on Higher Education [CHE] 2009. *The Response of the Council on Higher Education to the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Council on Higher Education South Africa [CHESA] 2019. *VitalStats. Public Higher Education 2017*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education South Africa.

Crenshaw, K. 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139 – 167. Available at: http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Crenshaw, K. 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review* 43,6: 1241 – 1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Davis, D. & C. Maldonado 2015. Shattering the Glass Ceiling: The Leadership Development of African American Women in Higher Education. *Advancing Women in Leadership* 35: 48 – 64. Available at: https://awl-ojs-tamu.tdl.org/awl/index.php/awl/article/view/125

Department of Education [DOE] 1997. *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Department of Education [DOE] 2008. *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Divala, J.J. 2014. Black Women Academics in Higher Education : In Search of Inclusive Equal Voice and Justice. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 28,6: 2079 – 2087.

Doharty, N. 2020. The 'Angry Black Woman' as Intellectual Bondage: Being Strategically Emotional on the Academic Plantation. *Race Ethnicity and Education* 23,4: 548 – 562. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1679751

Fisher, B. & J. Tronto 1990. Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring. In Abel, E. & M. Nelson (eds): *Circles of Care.* New York: SUNY Press.

Harris, A. 2013. *Young People and Everyday Multiculturalism*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203082980

Hill-Collins, P. 2009. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

Idahosa, G.E. 2019. African Women in University Management and Leadership. In Yacob-Haliso, O. & T. Falola (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77030-7_115-1

Ipadeola A.P. 2017. The Subaltern in Africa's Political Space: African Political Philosophy and the Mirror of Gender. *Journal of Black Studies* 48,4: 391 – 407. Available at: https://journals. sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0021934717696793

Johnson, L.N. & K.M. Thomas 2012. A Similar, Marginal Place in the Academy: Contextualizing the Leadership Strategies of Black Women in the United States and South Africa. *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 14,2: 156 – 171. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422311436305

Khunou, G., H. Canham, K. Khoza-Shangase & E.D. Phaswane 2019. Black in the Academy: Reframing Knowledge, the Knower and Knowing. In Khunou, G., E.D. Phaswana, K. Khoza-Shangase & H. Canham (eds):

*Black Academic Voices: The South African Experiences*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Kiguwa, P. 2019. Negotiating the Academy: Black Bodies out of Place. In Khunou, G., E.D. Phaswana, K. Khoza-Shangase & H. Canham (eds): *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Lugones, M. 2007. Heterosexualism and the Colonial Modern Gender System. *Hypatia* 22,1: 186 – 209. https://doi.org/10.2979/HYP.2007.22.1.186

Lugones, M. 2010. Towards a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia* 25,4: 742 – 759. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x

Mabokela, R. & Z. Magubane 2004. *Hear our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004492479

Magoqwana, B., Q. Maqabuka & M. Tshoaedi 2019. 'Forced to Care' at the Neoliberal University: Invisible Labour as Academic Labour Performed by Black Women Academics in the South African University. *South African Review of Sociology* 50,3–4 : 6 – 21. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2020.1730947

Maldonado-Torres, N. 2016. Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality. Available at: http://caribbeanstudiesassociation.org/docs/Maldonado-Torres_Outline_Ten_Theses-10.23.16.pdf

Mama, A. 2003. Restore, Reform but do not Transform: The Gender Politics of Higher Education in Africa. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/ Revue de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique* 1,1: 101 – 125.

Mendoza, B. 2016. Coloniality of Gender and Power: From Postcoloniality to Decoloniality. In Disch, A. & M. Hawkesworth (eds): *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.6

Mignolo, W.D & C.E. Walsh 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371779

Mirza, H. 2014. Decolonizing Higher Education: Black Feminism and the Intersectionality of Race and Gender. *Journal of Feminist Scholarshi*p 7–8: 1 – 12.

Moletsane, R., L. Haysom & V. Reddy 2015. Knowledge Production, Critique and Peer Review in Feminist Publishing: Reflections from *Agenda*. *Critical Arts*: *A Journal of South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 29,6: 766 – 784. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2015.1151112

Moletsane, R. & R. Mabokela 2018. Neoliberalism, Gender and Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education. Proposal to the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

Moodly, A. 2015. Gender Equity in South African Higher Education Leadership: Where Are We Twenty Years After Democracy? *Journal of Social Sciences* 42,3: 229 – 238. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09718923.2015.11893410

Moodly, A. & N. Toni 2017. Re-imagining Higher Education Leadership - in Conversation with South African Female Deputy Vice-Chancellors. *Perspectives in Education* 35: 155 – 167. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v35i2.12

Morley, L. 2011. African Higher Education: Researching Absences, Equalities and Aspirations. *Research in Comparative and International Education* 6,4: 341 – 347. https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2011.6.4.341

Morley, L. 2018. Gender in the Neo-liberal Research Economy: An Enervating and Exclusionary Entanglement? In Kahlert, H. (ed.): *Gender Studies and the New Academic Governance: Global Challenges, Glocal Dynamics and Local Impacts*. Wiesbaden: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-19853-4_2

Morley, L. & R. Lugg 2009. Mapping Meritocracy: Intersecting Gender, Poverty and Higher Educational Opportunity Structures. *Higher Education Policy* 22: 37 – 60. https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2008.26

Morley, L. & K. Lussier 2009. Intersecting Poverty and Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 19: 71 – 85. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210903257158

Muberekwa, E. & T. Nkomo 2016. Exploring the Perceptions of Wits Academic Women about Women Empowerment and the Changing Roles of Women in 21st Century South Africa. *Sage Open* 1 – 18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016675014

Owusu-Kwarteng, L. 2019. 'Educated and Educating as a Black Woman' – An Auto/biographical Reflection on my Grandmother's Influence on

my Academic and Professional Outcomes. *Gender and Education* 0,0: 1 – 17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1632811

Oyěwùmí, O. 1997. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Quijano, A. 2007. Coloniality and Modernity/ Rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21: 168 – 178. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353

Republic of South Africa 1997. *Higher Education Act 101/1997*. Cape Town: Republic of South Africa.

Republic of South Africa 1998. *Employment Equity Act 55/1998*. Cape Town: Republic of South Africa.

Republic of South Africa 2013. *Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill 50/2013*. Cape Town: Republic of South Africa.

Santos, B. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Shackleton, L., S. Riordan & D. Simonis 2006. Gender and the Transformation Agenda in South African Higher Education. *Women's Studies International Forum* 29: 572 – 580. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2006.10.004

Shober, D. 2014. Women in Higher Education in South Africa. *Advances in Gender Research* 19: 315 – 332. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1529-212620140000019014

Swartz, S., A. Mahali, R. Moletsane, E. Arogundade, N.E. Khalema, A. Cooper & C. Groenewald (eds.). 2018. *Studying While Black: Race, Education and Emancipation in South African Universities*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Swingler, S. 2019. Black Academics Stay in the System. Available at: https://www.news.uct.ac.za/ article/-2019-08-12-black-women-academics-stay-in-the-system

Thunig, A. & T. Jones 2020. 'Don't Make me Play House-n***er': Indigenous Academic Women Treated as 'Black Performer' within Higher Education. *Australian Educational Researcher* 48,3: 397 – 417. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00405-9

Tronto, J. 1993. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. London: Routledge.

Tronto, J. 2013. Democratic Caring and Global Responsibilities for Care. *Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association* 1 – 10.

Tronto, J. 2017. There is an Alternative: Homines Curans and the Limits of Neoliberalism. *International Journal of Care and Caring* 1,1: 27 – 43. https://doi.org/10.1332/239788217X14866281687583

Vergès, F. 2019. *Un féminisme décolonial*. Paris: La Fabrique. https://doi.org/10.47854/SVRX6559

Young, I.M. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ingrid Bamberg
Researcher (Andrew Mellon Fellow)
Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban
bambergi@ukzn.ac.za

Ronelle Carolissen
Professor of Community Psychology
Department of Educational Psychology
Stellenbosch University
Stellenbosch
rlc2@sun.ac.za

Saajidha Sader
Lecturer
School of Education
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal
Pietermaritzburg
saders@ukzn.ac.za

Relebohile Moletsane
Professor and JL Dube Chair in Rural Education
School of Education
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal
Durban
moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za