FAULT LINES

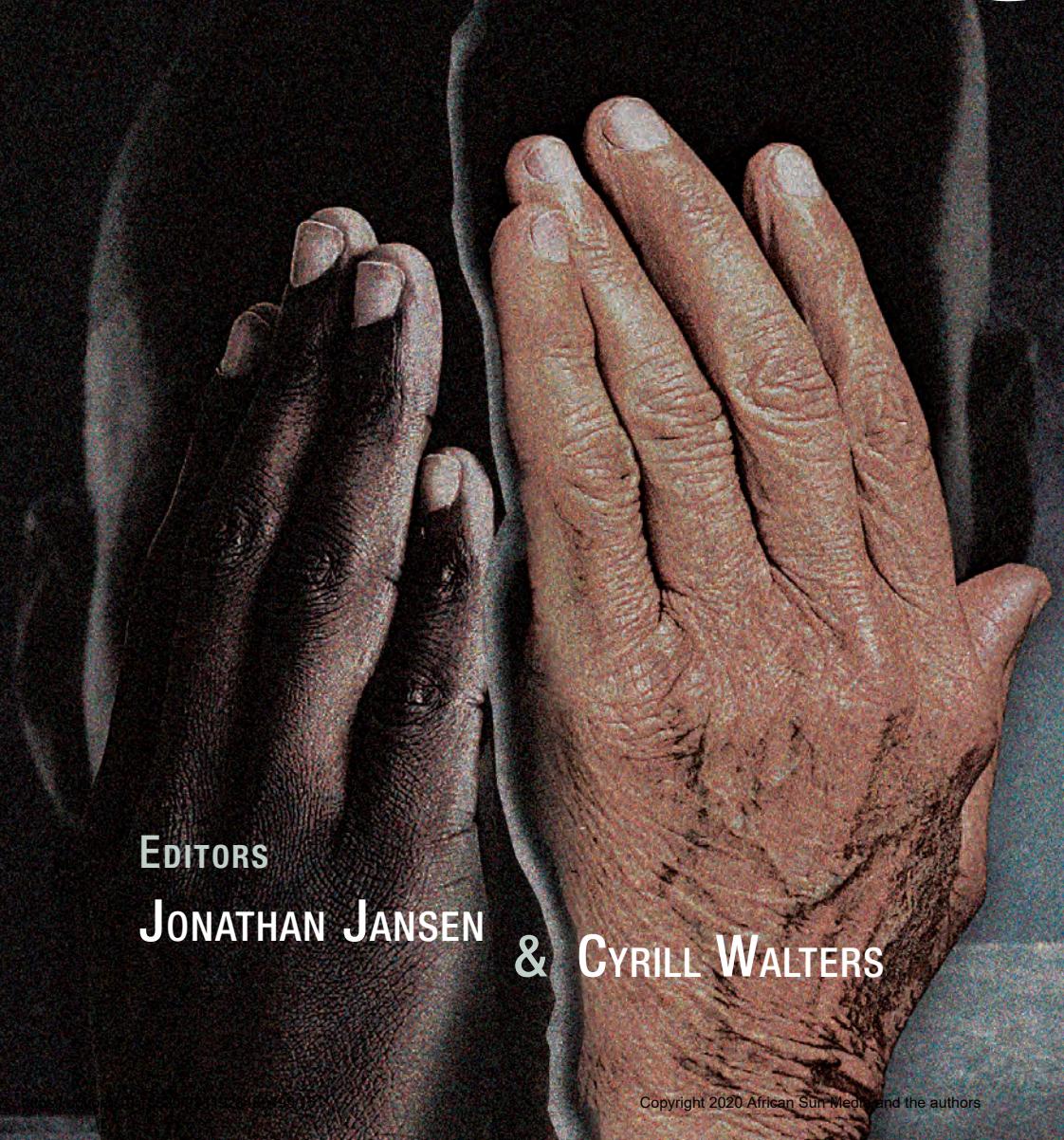## A PRIMER ON RACE, SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

LINES

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Unlearning Race

The 'Introduction to the Humanities' curriculum at Stellenbosch University

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Introduction

Within a very short period of time, the controversial Sport Science article drew intense reaction from senior researchers and executive management at Stellenbosch University, much more than protesting students have been able to evoke at historically white South African universities. While scholars and leaders on campus reacted quickly, it is doubtful whether any of the coloured[1] women who participated in the Sport Science study would have read the contentious article that appeared in an international online journal.

The social context that produces offensive research

It is clear that a historically white university like Stellenbosch University cannot separate its research thinking from the thinking that underpins its teaching and community activities. The same academics who do research are the ones who teach students and serve communities. The social, ethical and political values and perspectives that govern research are inextricably linked to academic work, such as teaching and public service. What this means is that the flurry of activity to "correct" research protocols and procedures – such as reviewing the actions of the research ethics committee – could easily overlook other affected areas of university work, such as teaching and learning. It would help, in this case, to locate the spirited debates around the Sport Science article within the social and historical contexts of Stellenbosch as a town and the University as an institution.

Some of the older residents who now live in the area of Cloetesville, where the sports science research was conducted, were living in the central area of Stellenbosch until they were forcibly removed, after Die Vlakte was proclaimed a White Group Area in 1964.[2] People who were classified as "coloured" were displaced from the centre of this historical town to underdeveloped areas like Cloetesville and Idas Valley. Lückhoff Secondary School, which was established in 1937 and had an excellent reputation, as well as dedicated teachers, was the first Afrikaans high school for coloured learners in the Boland. Its closure had a devastating effect on the community life and educational prospects of the residents of Die Vlakte. The impact of the trauma that communities experienced during the forced removals on Die Vlakte is still manifesting in the community today.

The reaction of especially coloured women on the SU campus must therefore not be read as simply anger directed towards one published article. It happens in the context of historical discrimination and trauma that coloured families had endured under colonialism and apartheid. Indeed, some SU women saw the article as inflicting painful memories of ongoing prejudice within a still overwhelmingly white university in terms of staffing and institutional culture. The article therefore reminded the victims of a very present past.

The institutional context of knowledge production

It is well known that the historically Afrikaans universities were run by executives and councils that were allied to the apartheid government. The high level of support that these universities gave to government had a major impact on their academic and management ethos. From their inception, therefore, the Afrikaans universities functioned as instrumentalist institutions. An instrumentalist university takes as its core business the production and dissemination of knowledge for a purpose defined or determined by a sociopolitical agenda. Knowledge is not regarded as something that is good in itself, and hence worth pursuing for its own sake. In this context, knowledge is inextricably linked to power.[3]

As institutions serving the apartheid state, the Afrikaans universities were managed in highly authoritarian ways. This meant that objections to institutional policies and actions, and protests by students or staff over management policies and actions, were not tolerated, for resistance was seen as not only against the university leadership but against the institutional order itself. As Ian Bunting recounts:

> The intellectual agendas of the six institutions were by and large determined by the perception that they had a duty to preserve the apartheid status quo. They did engage in research activities, but much of this had a local South African

focus. A great deal of their research involved policy work for the government and government agencies, and technological work undertaken on contract for defence-related industries.[4]

Today the legacy of this authoritarian management style is still reflected in how some of these universities deal with criticism from their lecturers, support staff and students. This management style can also be observed in the outdated hierarchical structure of the various faculty and university management systems.[5]

Then the dam wall burst

It is not as if there were not any warning signs long before the distressing Sport Science article was published and retracted. Already in 2013, instruments of racial measurement were discovered on the SU campus, causing a major scandal about how the social sciences – and anthropology, then called *Volkekunde* – were taught in the past.[6]

Even more recently, students led an unprecedented protest movement in 2015-2016 against racist institutional cultures and the exclusionary costs of higher education. The small number of black professors, the Western-dominated curriculum, the untransformed symbols of a colonial and apartheid past (such as the Verwoerd plaque at SU and the Rhodes statue at UCT), the privileging of Afrikaans in teaching, and the general alienation of students in the classroom and on the campus – all of these concerns were warning signs that all was not well in the cultures and content of historically white universities like Stellenbosch. Then the Sport Science article placed the University back in crisis even as it was still recovering from the student protests of two to three years earlier.

One of the key elements of the *vervreemding* (alienation) of black students on historically white campuses has to do with struggles for academic access and success. The educationalist, Wally Morrow, is critical of the assumption that students will realise their academic potential once they are admitted to university and simply make use of their chances.[7] He proceeds to make an important distinction between formal and epistemological access to the university. Whereas formal access relates to conforming to the formal admission requirements of the university, epistemological access is about the unequal access to knowledge, when poor, black students are compared to those who are privileged by race and class.

To address the realities of students' unequal educational backgrounds, Ian Scott and others have appealed to higher education institutions to widen their educational structures and approaches to account for the disparities in the social, economic and educational backgrounds of students.[8] For this purpose, academic development programmes were seen as one response.

Rationale for EDPs at South African universities

Academic Development Programmes (ADPs), also called Extended Programmes or Extended Degree Programmes (EDPs) in places like Stellenbosch, were established with the explicit purpose of redressing the racial inequalities in higher education that still existed long after the official end of apartheid. Their aim, therefore, was to broaden access to students with academic potential who were disadvantaged socially and educationally because of the past.

In the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University, EDP students do their first academic year over two years. In their first year, they take two of the compulsory five mainstream subjects, and three academic support subjects or modules. In their second year, they take their other three compulsory mainstream subjects and continue with one academic support subject. The academic support subjects were meticulously designed so that EDP students can flourish in a caring university environment that provides optimal academic and emotional support.

One of three academic support subjects or modules EDP students take in their first-year, 'Texts in the Humanities', focuses on academic writing and the different writing conventions of the various subject fields or disciplines. The second academic support module, 'Information Skills', familiarises students with basic computer skills and programmes that are needed to succeed in any mainstream subject. And the third module, 'Introduction to the Humanities', is aimed at broadening students' world views and providing the intellectual foundations for further studies in the humanities. The broad-based, interdisciplinary curriculum addresses the unequal access to powerful knowledge that has characterised university education in South Africa in the past and that still excludes marginalised communities in the present.

When it comes to addressing the unequal access to powerful knowledge, one must acknowledge the common perception that students must meet specific academic literacy requirements before they can enter higher education.[9] Socially powerful institutions, such as educational institutions, tend to support dominant discourse practices, each with their own type of literacy. Normative academic socialisation approaches aim to identify the existing academic conventions and to induct students into using these conventions.[10]

By contrast, vernacular literacies, found in people's everyday lives, are less "visible" and are generally regarded as "inappropriate" for university education. What is important for meaning-making, however, is that people should be able to use their range of literacies in different contexts to enable communication, solve practical problems or act as a memory aid, and in some cases, do all at the same time.[11]

Lea and Street distinguish three overlapping and complementary models of academic literacy that are important in addressing students' unequal educational backgrounds in teaching and learning.[12] The premise of the Study Skills Model is that students need to learn a set of skills that should help them to transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy from one context to the other. The Academic Socialisation Model, on the other hand, proposes that the disciplines use different genres and discourses. Consequently, when students learn the subject-specific discourses of the various disciplines, it should enable them to reproduce or mimic those academic discourses.

A third model, the Academic Literacies Model, focuses on relationships of power, meaning-making, identity, agency and authority in the learning process. It encourages lecturers to establish what students already know and to build on that in teaching them academic literacy.[13] So, for example, in the Academic Literacies Model, the many languages of students are not seen as an obstacle but rather as a resource for meaning-making.

With this model in mind, the 'Introduction to the Humanities' is based on three key strategies that help to "unlearn race": student-centredness, multilingualism and the primacy of student knowledge and experiences.

Student-centredness

When we consider the politics of knowledge at South African universities, it is important to reflect on how knowledge is constructed, and which teaching and learning model will make provision for students' intellectual contributions.

In traditional university teaching that uses the didactic method, or the transmission mode of teaching, the lecturer is presented as an authority who transmits established facts and ideas to students. These established facts and ideas form part of traditional discourse, which reinforces "the inherited, official shape of knowledge".[14] The dialogic method presents a different model of learning and knowledge, where engaging in dialogue is understood as part of our process of becoming human, a moment where humans come together to reflect on their reality, and to exchange ideas as to how to act critically to transform their reality. According to Freire, dialogue as a way of learning is ultimately a debate about epistemology, i.e. what counts as knowledge.[15]

Multilingualism

In the multilingual teaching model that has been developed for the 'Introduction to the Humanities' course, technical terminology and definitions are developed in

the three official languages of the Western Cape (English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa) in four different modules that introduce students to foundational concepts in the Humanities. This is deliberately done to accommodate students who are not fluent in academic English. The multilingual teaching and learning practices are aimed at providing epistemological access to students to increase their chances of achieving success in their first academic year of study.

Students have three lectures and one small-group tutorial per week. The first lecture of the week functions as a language support period, where the technical terminology of the subject field is explicitly taught and tested. In the two weekly lectures that follow, students therefore do not encounter the trilingual technical terminology for the first time, and they are able to engage in dialogues about the subject content by using the terminology. Whereas the technical terminology of a subject field is often an obstacle to students who have to learn in academic English, EDP students do not have this unnecessary barrier.

During the one weekly tutorial, students engage in small-group discussions about the subject content in their mother-tongues. To make this possible, tutors are appointed who can speak isiXhosa and English in the one tut, and Afrikaans and its different varieties in the other tut.

In the lectures there are two interpreters, one for Afrikaans and one for isiXhosa. The motivation for using students' mother tongues is to facilitate understanding, to validate their cultural and linguistic identities and to give them a tool to express themselves confidently in a class of predominantly English mother-tongue speakers.

Once students are familiar with the technical concepts and their definitions in their mother tongues, they are encouraged to ask critical questions in the tutorials and lectures, and to make contributions from their own cultural, linguistic and traditional backgrounds that can enrich the course content and enhance their fellow students' and lecturers' world views.

Since most of the students in the EDP come from marginalised South African communities, it is important to work consciously against the internalised oppression that characterises communities that have been supressed for prolonged periods. 'Internalised oppression' refers to the internalisation of conscious or unconscious attitudes regarding inferiority by the targets of systemic oppression. Although target groups cannot oppress themselves in the same way they have been oppressed, they can practise internalised hate against themselves or their own oppressed communities.

Students' knowledge and experiences

Students' knowledge and experiences inform the intellectual foundations of the 'Introduction to the Humanities' course and provide a solid foundation for scientific thinking. What this means is that the incoming students are not seen as "in deficit", as in traditional ADP programmes, but as rich in knowledge and experiences that can and should form the springboard for new learning (see the chapter by Cecilia Jacobs in this book).

In their very first module, 'The Roots of Humanity', students are introduced to those concepts that were used to justify racism, slavery and classism. These include concepts like biological essentialism, Social Darwinism, scientific racism, National Socialism, and eugenics.

In addressing the consequences of a colonial past, this broad-based humanities curriculum instils in students a historical consciousness that accounts for the often overlooked link between discrimination in the past and new manifestations of discrimination in the present. Students learn that science has repeatedly been abused for political purposes, to justify racism, genocide and xenophobia, which makes the notion of scientific objectivity a relative concept.

When the Sport Science article was published, EDP students were doing a module titled 'Becoming Human: Troubling Gender, Sexuality, and Race'. After the controversy around the article erupted, the decision was taken to devote one week to a discussion of the article, as well as the various responses to it. Students received several articles to read that were written in response to the Sport Science article.

As is the case with their other modules, students had received a technical terminology list with 32 gender terms and 32 race-related terms, both translated into Afrikaans and isiXhosa. In this technical terminology list, the basic concepts necessary to engage in a critical and informed discussion about the topic of race or gender were listed and defined. Students had done one of their regular assessments on the terms and definitions to establish whether they had grasped the meanings of the concepts and if they could explain the ideas or concepts.

The next step, which was educationally more challenging, was to establish if students could apply the concepts in new situations, or use the newly acquired information in a new way. It was surprising how students were able to use the concepts to engage in a critical discussion about the Sport Science article, even though some had probably only rote-learned the terms for an assessment earlier in the week. Students were able to apply successfully during class discussions of the Sport Science article such terms as 'biological essentialism', 'implicit (hidden) bias', 'invisibility' and 'structural oppression'.

Grappling with the meanings of race in the aftermath of the troubled publication

Students who self-identify as coloured and who come from disadvantaged communities felt downhearted in the tutorial discussions that white researchers could make judgements about coloured women's cognitive abilities (or intelligence[16]), while it was clear that there were many successful professional coloured women, especially at Stellenbosch University, whom they regarded as role models and who had successful careers as academics. Some said that they had to overcome many social challenges in their own communities to come to university. Others were concerned about what the lay public would think of them as coloured students if established researchers made such claims about coloured women's potential.

Students were thus baffled when an English-speaking student who self-identifies as coloured noted that she did not think that the Sport Science article was all bad, and that one should look at the intention behind the article, or what the article endeavoured to achieve. She did not feel informed enough to evaluate the research methodology of the researchers, but she felt uncomfortable about the fact that ethnicity was linked to cognitive performance and that intelligence was portrayed as innate and unchanging. However, she pointed out that there were women who self-identified as coloured who have had poor educational opportunities and whose quality of life has not improved in the new South Africa. There should be social interventions to provide optimal professional support to these vulnerable women. The fact that the article has now led to a race row might even discourage researchers from undertaking research on vulnerable communities in future.

A student who self-identifies as a transgender man noted how he used to hate his own cultural group, the coloured people, for how they treated him as a transgender man. Since he read the articles on coloured identity in this module and discussed the issue in his tutorial groups, he realised that there are other, open-minded coloured people in the class with whom he could identify. He realised that coloured people are good enough as they are. They do not have to change to become another group.

In the dialogic teaching and learning model employed in the 'Introduction to the Humanities' course, students' own intellectual contributions and their own lived experiences are valued. The content of curricula, as well as the teaching methodology, is thus regularly reviewed to ensure that it remains socially relevant and responsive to the changing diversity profile of students in the EDP.

In 2016 and 2017, video recordings were made of students' oral contributions, and these videos now form part of the course content. Curriculum renewal was thus informed by the students themselves. The 2019 EDP group was fascinated to listen

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to the race-related issues that were raised by their peers in earlier years that were so similar to what they were still experiencing in their own communities. What was significant about watching the video contributions in 2019 was that students were now watching the videos against the backdrop of the Sport Science article.

When the concept of 'colourism' was raised for the first time by students in the 2017 videos, I asked several established researchers and lecturers at SU if they had ever heard about the concept, but none had at that time. That experience illustrated why curricula must be designed in consultation with students in the courses that we teach. Students have lived experiences that can enrich the curricula and that can help lecturers and researchers to avoid working with over-simplified dichotomies (like black and white). Colourism is a form of prejudice or discrimination based on skin tone amongst members of the same race, in which people are treated differently based on their lighter skin tone or shade because of the social status, privilege, and opportunity that is associated with a lighter skin colour. The black author and activist Alice Walker defined the term in her 1983 *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*[17] as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their colour".

In the videos, students shared their experiences of how they experienced discrimination at the hands of their own cultural groups in, amongst others, Langa, the Eastern Cape, Bonteheuwel, Kraaifontein, Heideveld and the Cape Flats. Students repeatedly referred to "proximity" or "assimilation to whiteness" and "the white gaze".

One student from Langa noted that, as a black person, one can never win. If your English is too good, you sound "white"; if your English is too "black", you sound like a township girl. Furthermore, people from her own cultural group use offensive terms like "yellow bone", "coconut", "banana" and "boere" to denigrate others for having too light a skin tone.

A student whose mother comes from Congo and whose father comes from Jamaica noted in the 2017 video how everyone in her home province wanted to be white. People used skin bleaches that were very bad for their skin, but they did not mind, as long as they could have a lighter skin colour. She was familiar with the insulting terms like "yellow bone" and "coconut", because of her English accent and perceived "proximity to whiteness".

In 2019, before the Afrophobic attacks, I invited the Congolese student back to talk to students about her experience of living in South Africa as a "foreign national", even though she has lived here all her life. She said that all her life, she had thought that she was a South African. Until the Afrophobic attacks in 2008.

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Then South Africans forced her to realise that she was a foreigner. She knows the term *amakwerekwere*, which is the slang word for foreigners and especially illegal immigrants. In contrast to what some activists had said in the past, she was now convinced that black people can be racist. In the class engagement with students, the distinction between 'xenophobia' and 'Afrophobia' was clearly illustrated. While 'xenophobia' refers to an extreme dislike or fear of foreigners, their customs and their religions, 'Afrophobia' refers to a range of negative attitudes and feelings specifically towards black people or people of African descent around the world, which include an irrational fear, antagonism, contempt and aversion. In the South African media, the term is used to describe the negative attitudes of black South Africans towards black African immigrants.

A student from an African country who has lived in South Africa since her childhood said that she feels more at home in the coloured community than in the African country where she comes from. When she arrived at university, she reached out to students from this African country, but they told her that her accent and looks were not the same as theirs and that she could therefore not be one of them. She said that she now felt that she suffered from "impostor syndrome", another term that was defined for students in their race-based terminology list. However, no one had used the term in this context before. 'Impostor syndrome' can be defined as feelings of inadequacy that persist despite clear signs of success. "Impostors" suffer from chronic self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or clear proof of their competence.

When students inform the curriculum in this way with their own lived experiences, using the trilingual technical terminology as a starting point, it is possible to have a more nuanced discussion about the various degrees of racism that affect their everyday lives. At the same time, one is overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of racism in South Africa, in Africa and in the world after listening to the students' contributions.

When good intentions are undermined by race essentialist discourse

What was left out of the many SU symposia, seminars and lectures on the Sport Science article was the perspective of the five authors – the supervisor and her four postgraduate students. I sought an open discussion with the authors of the article. Unfortunately, only one was available to see me. She was completely traumatised by how the academic article was received by established researchers after all the work they had invested in the project.

It emerged that a sports science student had enrolled for a PhD in 2014. He insisted that he wanted the community of Cloetesville, with its historical lack of resources, to benefit from his research. A comprehensive research project followed after he successfully concluded his PhD, with the research participants of successive research projects in Cloetesville benefitting from his research.

Two doctoral students then undertook their research with the explicit aim of benefitting historically disadvantaged women in the Cloetesville suburb. The PhD students and biokinetics interns had regular meetings with the Cloetesville women and motivated them to adopt healthier lifestyles. They measured their vital signs (body mass, blood pressure, glucose levels, and fitness) regularly, encouraged them to do regular exercise, to adopt healthy eating habits and to take better care of their health in order to minimise their chances of acquiring dementia or Alzheimer's at an early age. It was explained to them that these diseases can cause loss of memory and other mental disabilities that can severely impact on their independence when they are older and might still want to live on their own.

For the past five years, students from the Department of Sport Science have presented free gym classes twice a week to the women and some of them who needed more intensive health interventions were treated at the Department of Sport Science for free. Ironically, after the furore about the controversial article, the Cloetesville women were still attending the weekly gym classes presented by the sports science students at the time I interviewed one of the authors.

Conclusion

This chapter has made the point that much-debated Sport Science article required a pedagogical response and not simply a "review of ethical procedures" reaction. The racial essentialist thinking that governs research at Stellenbosch University affects teaching as well. At the heart of the 'Introduction to the Humanities' intervention are students who are not only afflicted by everyday racism, but also by struggles for inclusion in the classroom. It is in the classroom where students from diverse backgrounds can unlearn the racism that produces offensive research in the first place. The retracted article also illustrated the importance of defining and critically reflecting on key concepts, like 'cognitive ability', 'intelligence' and 'coloured women', not only within one subject field, like sports science, but also in critical engagement with other disciplines.

Endnotes

1   It is important to distinguish between the racist use of this term to classify people according to their skin colour during apartheid and its use today by people who self-identify as "coloured" and who, both as individuals and as members of a cultural group, demand the respect and human dignity that they were not afforded under apartheid.

2   Hermann Giliomee, *Always Been Here: The Story of a Stellenbosch Community* (Pinelands: Africana Publishers, 2018).

3   Ian Bunting, "The Higher Education Landscape Under Apartheid", in *Transformation in Higher Education*, ed. Nico Cloete et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 2.

4   Ibid., 41.

5   Jonathan D. Jansen, *Knowledge in the Blood: Confronting Race and the Apartheid Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

6   Handri Walters, "Tracing Objects of Measurement: Locating Intersections of Race, Science and Politics at Stellenbosch University" (PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2018).

7   W.E. Morrow, *Bounds of Democracy: Epistemological Access in Higher Education* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009), 36.

8   Ian Scott, *A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education*, ed. Nanette Yeld and Jane Hendry, Higher Education Monitor, no. 6 (Pretoria: Council on Higher Education, 2007), 41; Ian Scott, "First-Year Experience as Terrain of Failure or Platform for Development?: Critical Choices for Higher Education", in *Focus on First-Year Success: Perspectives Emerging from South Africa and Beyond*, ed. Brenda Leibowitz, Antoinette van der Merwe and Susan van Schalkwyk (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2009).

9   David R. Russell et al., "Exploring Notions of Genre in 'Academic Literacies' and 'Writing Across the Curriculum': Approaches Across Countries and Contexts", in *Genre in a Changing World*, ed. Charles Bazerman, Adair Bonini and Débora de Carvalho Figueiredo (Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse, 2009), 395.

10   Theresa Lillis and Mary Scott, "Defining Academic Literacies Research: Issues of Epistemology, Ideology and Strategy", *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* 4, no. 1 (2015): 11, https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5

11   David Barton, Mary Hamilton and Roz Ivanic, *Situated Literacies: Theorising Reading and Writing in Context* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203984963

12   Mary R. Lea and Brian V. Street, "The 'Academic Literacies' Model: Theory and Applications", *Theory Into Practice* 45, no. 4 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4504_11

13   Ibid., 369-70.

14   Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, "What Is the 'Dialogical Method' of Teaching?", *Journal of Education* 169, no. 3 (1987): 14, https://doi.org/10.1177/002205748716900303

15   Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 15.

16   One of the authors of the Sport Science article has insisted that the research team did not test coloured women's intelligence, but rather cognition or cognitive abilities, which refer to one's ability to reason, think outside the box, plan, organise, resist temptation/distraction, etc.

Cognitive skills can be learned (consciously or unconsciously) and therefore can change throughout one's lifespan. Intelligence, on the other hand, is fixed, and cannot be developed, according to the author. If this represents a broader view in the subject field, it clearly needs a critical interdisciplinary discussion.

17   Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

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