



# On possibility: Exploring the connections between postcolonial feminism and community engagement in pursuit of university transformation

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## Abstract

Higher education institutions have historically enabled and aided epistemicide, or the marginalisation, annihilation and devaluing of the knowledge of those beyond university walls. Twenty-first century universities therefore face the important task of transforming teaching and research in ways that broaden epistemic access, incorporate various knowledge systems, and ensure local relevance. Here, academic feminism, especially postcolonial feminism, and community engagement may provide a way forward, as both projects serve to deconstruct the binary between 'knower' and 'non-knower', contributing to epistemic justice. In isolation, however, these projects have not yet made enough progress in pursuit of university transformation. This essay offers a preliminary exploration of the connections between community engagement and postcolonial feminism, and the ways in which a mutually beneficial relationship between the two may enhance each project's contribution to epistemic justice. It brings together literature on feminism and community engagement, linking this literature to the ideas of postcolonial feminism. Focus on postcolonial feminism specifically emerges from the recognition that universities do not only need to transform, but also decolonise. Ideas put forward in this writing are interspersed with my subjective memories and recollections of my lived experiences, spanning two universities and continents.

**Keywords:** *postcolonial feminism, community engagement, university decolonisation, epistemic justice, subjective experiences*

Feminism is not a philosophy, or a theory, or even a point of view. It is a political movement to transform the world beyond recognition. It asks: what would it be to end the political, social, sexual, economic, psychological and physical subordination of women? It answers: we do not know; let us try and see. – *Amia Srinivasan*

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If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. – *Lilla Watson*

## Introduction

Feminism and community-university engagement appear an unlikely pair, the former beginning as a grassroots social movement and the latter emerging from within higher education institutions as a means of bringing universities closer to the communities in which they are located. Yet both projects appear to hold potential: to deconstruct the binary formulated between the ‘knower’ (i.e., the individual accepted and incorporated into the university establishment) and ‘non-knower’ (the person or community whose knowledge remains marginalised and devalued) and thus contribute to epistemic justice. Both projects also face certain pitfalls, and have thus far been unable, in isolation, to realise this potential.

This essay offers a preliminary exploration of the connections between community engagement and postcolonial feminism, and the ways in which a mutually beneficial relationship between the two may enhance each project’s contribution to epistemic justice in higher education institutions. Ideas put forward in this writing are interspersed with my subjective memories and stories of my lived experiences – these stories span two universities and continents. These stories serve to ground the ideas discussed, but also, because I identify this writing as feminist, they form part of an aim to document women’s experiences, unearth other forms of (subjugated) knowledge, and contribute to social justice (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4). Within a feminist paradigm, subjective experiences can be an important source of knowledge, especially for under-researched areas. Here, stories are a complex and legitimate way of making sense of self and others, and may expand the (often colonially designated) boundaries of what counts as meaningful inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011). Stories shared in this essay represent transformative moments and memories that have impacted my life.

I acknowledge limitations to this approach: my subjective experience may be inadequate as a tool for generalisation to other contexts and individuals. As a white, middle-class woman, I experience a multitude of privileges to which others do not have access. This privilege means that my experiences and interactions with other community members may introduce a power element that I am not fully able to understand. For this reason, I hope that the possibility of this connection between feminism and community engagement continues to be fleshed out by other individuals, associated with universities or the communities in which universities are located and embedded, so that more voices and stories will contribute to a deeper understanding of this topic.

The rest of this essay is structured as follows: I begin by assessing the role universities have historically played in enclosing knowledge, and explore recent engagement about the legacy of this epistemic injustice. Thereafter, I examine the liberatory possibilities as well as failures of feminist and community engagement projects at universities, with specific focus on engaged citizenry or volunteering. Finally, I consider the potential of a

mutually beneficial relationship between postcolonial feminist theorising and community engagement practice in higher education transformation.

## Universities as sites for knowledge enclosure and epistemic injustice

Hall and Tandon (2017, p. 8) reflect that the creation of medieval universities ‘was an act of enclosing knowledge, limiting access to knowledge, exerting a form of control over knowledge and providing a means for a small elite to acquire this knowledge’. They argue that:

those within the walls become the knowers; those outside the walls become the non-knowers [...] The enclosing of the academy dispossessed the vast majority of knowledge keepers, forever relegating their knowledge to witchcraft, tradition, superstition, folkways, or, at best, some form of common sense (Hall & Tandon, 2017, p. 8).

Historically, higher education institutions have enabled and aided epistemicide, or the marginalisation, annihilation and devaluing of the knowledge of those beyond the walls of universities (De Sousa Santos, 2014). Those excluded include knowers in the Global South, especially former colonies; women, who have historically been denied university education; and other marginalised groups (De Sousa Santos, 2014). Universities create epistemic communities through credentialed discourses of expertise, separating higher education research from other epistemologies, thereby degrading and side-lining knowledge creators and constructors existing outside the academy (Bezerra et al., 2021). In this way, universities contribute to epistemic injustice – a form of injustice that marginalises certain forms of knowledge and denies certain individuals and groups their status as knowledge creators (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Fricker (2007) indicates that two aspects comprise this epistemic injustice. Firstly, *testimonial injustice* emerges from prejudice in the ‘economy of credibility’ whereby some speakers are considered less legitimate as knowledge creators than others (Fricker, 2007, p. 5). Secondly, *hermeneutical injustice* refers to a ‘gap in collective interpretive resources’, putting certain individuals at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their lived experiences (Fricker, 2007, p. 7).

Signs of this enclosure of knowledge, designation of ‘legitimate’ knowers, and narrowing of what counts as ‘legitimate’ knowledge remain prevalent at Oxford, the university from which I write. Oxford’s colleges, where students live, eat, drink, and learn, remind one of fortresses or castles, initially designed to protect the scholars and fellows within, while excluding the community beyond university walls. Hall and Tandon (2017) remark of their experience visiting Oxford that:

One enters the college in question through a low doorway, only accessible to students and fellows and their guests [...]. While staying in the college, the connection between the enclosing of previously common land for private purposes and the creation of walled places for learning became disturbingly apparent (p. 8).

This distinction between ‘knowers’ within the confines of colleges and ‘non-knowers’ beyond these confines continues to assert itself, reflected in the city’s sharp physical, economic, and social divides.

Here, I recently completed a Masters in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, a notoriously underfunded (in 2016, there were no salaried posts for this MSt at Oxford, and in 1993 the slogan ‘Women’s Studies: Oxford’s cheapest faculty’, was printed on badges worn by Oxford’s Women’s Studies Committee) but wonderfully subversive subject at one of the original sites for the enclosure of knowledge (Duan, 2016). My time at Oxford has been enhanced by my participation in and leading of *Uncomfortable Oxford* walking tours in the city. These tours open discussion and engagement about Oxford beyond its ‘dreaming spires’, about its failure or lack of willingness to engage with the community surrounding the university, and the various forms of exclusion and alienation that current students, whose social identities mean that they were previously constructed as ‘non-knowers’, face. From his position atop Oriel College on Oxford’s High Street, the notorious statue of Cecil Rhodes looks down on students and community members passing by.

The vantage point from my *alma mater* in South Africa is not dissimilar, the two institutions linked by their connection to the figure of Rhodes. Initially funded by the Rhodes Trust, Rhodes University, located in the city of Makhanda, emerged as an institution designed to ‘extend and strengthen the Imperial Idea in South Africa’ (Currey, 1970, p. 12). Even in the ‘postcolonial’ and ‘post-apartheid’ moment, many members of the Makhanda community, where the university resides, lack access to Rhodes University, both as knowledge consumers, in terms of gaining admission to the university as undergraduate students, and knowledge constructors, with respect to the lack of esteem and belonging they may experience even after becoming members of the university. The university has established various programmes to ameliorate and transform this exclusion, which I elaborate on later in this essay, but problems related to belonging and alienation may persist.

This experience is not unique to Rhodes University. In South Africa, Bezerra et al. (2021) argue that this epistemic injustice continues to manifest as an apartheid of knowledge, where only privileged groups are allowed to partake in the country’s production of knowledge. Recent student activism, represented by the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements respectively, has begun to make visible and challenge this injustice, and notably calls for decolonisation and universal access to higher education (Bozalek et al., 2018). Demands for free, quality, and decolonised education have ushered in a period of ‘national [...] soul-searching’ about the function of universities in post-apartheid South Africa (Brink, 2021, p. 5).

These calls for decolonisation and transformation deserve attention, especially at the universities that were initially conceptualised as mechanisms to further imperial agendas. Universities created during the colonial and apartheid periods were designed to protect white hegemony and educate an elite minority. A racial hierarchy underpinned higher education institutions whereby ‘white’ (historically advantaged institutions) and ‘Black’

or 'Bantustan' (historically disadvantaged institutions) were categorised in a hierarchy dictating the quality of knowledge transacted at universities, the government resources directed at institutions, and the quality of graduates produced (Lange, 2021, p. 277). These universities face the important task of transforming learning, teaching and research in ways that broaden epistemic access, incorporate various knowledge systems, and ensure local relevance (Bawa, 2021, p. 197). Beyond South Africa, Hall and Tandon (2017, p. 13) argue that twenty-first century universities need to transform into *knowledge democracies*, which acknowledge and affirm multiple epistemologies, emphasise the importance of open access for the creation and sharing of knowledge, and build, transform and apply knowledge for human development for all.

## Feminism in higher education: transformative possibilities and pitfalls

The shift towards a knowledge democracy requires broadened participation and responsiveness to societal needs (Bawa, 2021, p. 197), recognition that various forms of knowledge generation occur outside of university walls, and an orientation by higher education institutions towards social justice in their teaching and research efforts.

Challenges to universities' monopoly over knowledge production, and alternative, more inclusive imaginings, are not new. Before taken up by the academy, for example, feminism was a social movement concerned with understanding and dismantling structured power relations and intersecting systems of oppression (Webb et al., 2007, p. 238). Feminist theorisation historically represents a form of knowledge production emerging from outside of higher education institutions, from which women were denied access. Rooted in activism, feminism begins with an understanding of the self as an agent of change, and a commitment to dismantle the various interlocking systems of oppression that keep women in subordinate positions (Webb et al., 2007, p. 243). Since this inception, feminism has become a multifaceted and somewhat nebulous term with respect to its varieties and their competing self-definitions. Furthermore, feminism no longer exists only as a social movement. It has become a discipline (Women's/Gender Studies) or sub-discipline in most universities (Webb et al., 2007, p. 238).

Quinn (2005, p. 11) argues that universities are paradoxical spaces for women and the women's movement. Higher education institutions have been 'bastions of hegemonic patriarchal practices', and sites for the epistemic exclusion of women (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 391) but simultaneously these sites provide opportunities for women to resist patriarchy and challenge their subordination. Within the academy, feminist scholars have played an important role in university reform by making visible institutional discrimination and biases in university structures. They have challenged what counts as 'legitimate' knowledge (and who counts as 'legitimate' knowers), and have made the academic political, taking the normative stance that research and teaching should be orientated towards social justice (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 392).

In this capacity, the feminist project at universities can be deconstructive, aimed at dismantling the binary between 'knower' and 'non-knower', and displacing university hegemony over knowledge production. This transformative potential indicates that feminist teaching and research at universities may play a role in orientating twenty-first century higher education institutions towards social and epistemic justice.

This possibility, however, remains largely unrealised. In various cases, it appears that, rather than deconstructing this binary between 'knower' and 'non-knower', academic feminism has reinforced it. Postcolonial feminists have highlighted the ways in which mainstream feminism located in the academy has contributed to women's subordination. In *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty (1988) draws attention to the production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular, monolithic subject in Western feminist texts. To depict women's oppression as a universal phenomenon, Western feminists writing in the 1980s constructed this 'Third World Woman', ahistorically defined outside of the social relations of her context, and denied agency (Mohanty, 1988, p. 72).

This reductive and homogenous construction objectifies women in these contexts as powerless victims, unable to speak for themselves (Mohanty, 1988, p. 72). In addition, this construction is built in opposition to a liberated Western woman, who paternalistically 'saves' the Third World Woman, in a similar fashion to how imperialists infantilise the colonial subject (McClintock, 1995, p. 44). This version of feminism sits comfortably in imperialist projects and institutions, failing to live up to its subversive and radical promise.

A truly liberatory feminism requires a more inclusive and intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991, Collins, 1998), which recognises the interconnected nature of categories like race, gender, class, and nationality, and the interdependent systems of discrimination arising from them. Individual experiences cannot be understood through a master identity such as gender; these structures are not independent variables, as one oppression is constituted by and of the other (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Drawing on this Black feminist conceptualisation, African postcolonial feminist Tamale (2020, p. 44) argues that there are connections between colonial institutions and gender hierarchies, and both oppressive systems require deconstruction in pursuit of true liberation. Where certain groups remain marginalised, liberation is not complete.

A final critique of the disciplining of feminism is about its disengagement from politics. Feminist academics may be detached or unwilling to engage with audiences outside the university establishment, often for fear that their work, already considered less legitimate than other university subjects, will not be valued by other academics if presented in a way that makes it more widely accessible (Webb et al., 2007, p. 238). Building on this idea, a further critique is that feminism has become overly theoretical and philosophical, creating a gap between the theorists and the individuals and communities they aim to serve (Webb et al., 2007, p. 238). In some ways, feminist academics are pinched at both ends, as, since entering the academy, they have had to contend with the notion that their work is anti-intellectual, and too political for the academic establishment.

Mohanty (2003, p. 523) argues that feminist pedagogy, to live up to its liberatory potential, 'should not simply expose students to a particularised academic scholarship but that it should also envision the possibility of activism and struggle outside the academy'. In this respect, there is still a way to go, and perhaps it is here that community engagement may provide insights.

## The emergence of community engagement at higher education institutions

In comparison to feminist thinking, which emerged as a social movement and was only later incorporated into the academy, community-university engagement, and engaged citizenry therein, emerged from within university structures. Community engagement refers to a range of frameworks at the university-community-society interface. Within universities, community engagement practices generally have three different streams to produce a holistic offering of opportunities; engaged citizenry or volunteering, service learning, and engaged research. These streams indicate a conception of community engagement that is not separate from teaching or research, but an integral part of both these components of higher education. Engaged citizenry as a component of community engagement is the focus of this essay: while usually understood as volunteering by students in communities, engaged citizenry more broadly encapsulates the extra-curricular, mutually beneficial interaction between students and their surrounding communities.

In its ideal form, community engagement, and engaged citizenry therein, builds bridges, nurturing reciprocal relationships between university and community in a way that complicates the binary construction of 'knower' and 'non-knower' (Webb et al., 2007, p. 238). Community engagement highlights collaboration between higher education institutions and their communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and development in the context of sustainable partnerships.

With respect to transformation imperatives, and the pursuit of epistemic justice, the strength of community engagement appears to be its potential to frame universities as *permeable* institutions, where the walls and boundaries of the academy become porous (Stuart, 2021, p. 126). Community engagement, which emphasises the co-creation of knowledge for and with communities, may disrupt the dichotomy between insiders (students and faculty) and outsiders (the broader community) of the academy (Stuart, 2021, p. 142). Reciprocal practices in knowledge production, embodied by engaged research practices specifically, may bring universities and communities closer together, helping to cultivate a knowledge democracy (Keet & Muthwa, 2021, p. 223). Like academic feminism, community engagement appears to hold transformative potential to subvert and deconstruct the binary between 'knower' and 'non-knower', orientating the twenty-first century towards social and epistemic justice.

However, this potential also remains unrealised. This failure is reflected in manifestations of community engagement in universities in South Africa and around the world. Often,

staff and students frame community engagement and engaged citizenry specifically as an act of service, assuming a 'patronising flavour of benevolence' (Brink, 2021, p. 2). Engaged citizenry or volunteering frequently becomes synonymous with helping others and focuses on the individual or community rather than the underlying structures that cause social and epistemic injustice (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002, p. 231). The prevalence of outreach, charity-based and deficit models means that volunteering continues to be associated with 'missionary expedition[s]', where volunteers come to the aid of helpless and often nameless victims (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002, p. 232). As is the case in Western feminist constructions, this version of volunteering reinforces 'knower' and 'non-knower' distinctions, sitting comfortably in imperial institutions.

Holdsworth and Quinn (2012, p. 392) label this version of engaged citizenry 'reproductive volunteering'. Under this framework, universities promote volunteering as a way for students to become employable, for universities to improve relationships with communities, and for community partners to benefit from improved resource access (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 388). Universities position this version of volunteering as a 'win/win' activity (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 387). Holdsworth and Quinn (2012, p. 387) argue that this portrayal hides critical tensions about class privilege, community, and the role of higher education in maintaining unjust systems. Rather than making universities more permeable to their communities, it reinforces the distinction between the individual student and the assumed homogeneous community and fails to acknowledge the power relations between and within these groups.

This uncritical portrayal may mask the fact that engagement does not automatically empower all of those involved (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 391). This approach to building bridges fails to consider why social divides exist in the first place, or how they may be perpetuated by practices of higher education. Perhaps most significantly, this framework implies that students benefit from new skills and enhanced employability prospects rather than from their contribution to social justice that serves them as part of their community (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 386). This framing is reproductive, as volunteer activities do not challenge but instead reproduce and reinforce existing power relations.

Uncritical conceptualisations of the benefits of community engagement may therefore do more harm than good if few students see their service as a contribution to structural change. In addition, feminist scholars are rightly wary of a romanticised community often coupled with charity and service work (Herd & Meyer, 2002). This portrayal has lingering connotations about women's work; outreach by individual volunteers may be seen as doing the socially reproductive labour of universities and shifting the responsibility for the work of engaging with communities away from university leaders. Romanticised depictions of community need to be unpacked and reshaped. We ultimately need to be critical to make visible power relations between communities and universities and disrupt the status quo.

A final obstacle may be resistance on the part of university faculty to the integration of community engagement as a core function of higher education. For many academics and students, it seems that community engagement feels like an 'add on' or 'nice to have'



(Bender, 2008, p. 83), something that takes place if one can find time in the day after the 'joy of research and necessity of teaching' (Brink, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, what often results is a silo model whereby teaching, research and community engagement are falsely separated (embodied by the depiction of community engagement as a third and separate strand of the academic project), and where community engagement is not properly infused in higher education institutions (Bender, 2008, p. 87). Forms of engagement reside on the periphery of our spaces of learning, leaving institutions of higher education unchanged (Bawa, 2021, p. 209). As a result, community engagement does not manifest its potential to challenge the character and orientation of universities.

## **Towards transformation: connecting the insights of postcolonial feminism and community engagement**

The previous paragraphs highlight how academic feminism and community engagement have failed to live up to their liberatory potential in higher education institutions. This does not mean that all is lost. Perhaps, given these shortcomings, connection and collaboration between feminism(s), specifically postcolonial feminism, and community engagement can orientate both projects more meaningfully towards epistemic justice, a more permeable university, and a knowledge democracy.

Another framework for volunteering, and community engagement more generally, envisions a 'deconstructive' rather than 'reproductive' practice (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 393). Rather than positioning volunteers as external to the communities with whom they volunteer, volunteering may emerge from embedded connections with local communities, based on empathy and mutual respect (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 392). This version of engagement allows for volunteering activities to reveal power structures and inequalities and thus potentially create the conditions for their own critique; in this way, one's experience of volunteering is part of one's wider lived experience of injustice (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 393). If universities seek to put into action this deconstructive approach it is not enough to merely send students into communities; leaders and teachers have a duty to turn that practice into a worthwhile learning experience. Engaged citizenry, like all forms of learning, takes place simultaneously within and outside of the classroom, just as knowledge and knowledge creators exist within and beyond universities.

Understanding the social world in which they are engaging requires students to have better knowledge and analytical tools, which universities should seek to provide (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 402). Conversely, volunteering/engaged citizenry and other community engagement forms provide students with knowledge which may expand or challenge academic disciplines, and there should be opportunities for these ideas to become infused within the higher education curriculum, potentially aiding the transformation of universities and individuals (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 402). Thus, rather than promoting volunteering as an automatic 'win-win' activity, Holdsworth and Quinn (2012, p. 403) argue that a more critical interpretation of what we can expect volunteering to

achieve, and who benefits, is timely, as more students are encouraged to volunteer. Volunteering/engaged citizenry should not just be promoted solely because of associated feel-good benefits (particularly regarding employability) but because of its potential to provide opportunities for students to step outside of the protective space of the university and facilitate their awareness of social inequalities as well as other forms of knowledge (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012, p. 403). Student volunteering can either confirm or challenge existing ways of knowing. Ultimately, Holdsworth and Quinn (2012, p. 403) argue, this is its 'most significant function'.

## Recollecting a possibly deconstructive community engagement approach

My recollection of my student experience at Rhodes University illustrates the power of a shift in framing from reproductive to deconstructive community engagement. Four months into my first year of undergraduate study, in 2016, my university became the site for the RU Reference List protest as women refused to remain silent about sexual violence and rape culture on campus. Five months later, I found myself amid Fees Must Fall, a nationwide student protest emerging due to a systemic lack of access to affordable and quality tertiary education. This student activism highlighted that, for many young people in South Africa, higher education institutions do not symbolise an exciting next step in one's life but instead stand out as unreachable ivory towers. I had only before experienced charity-and deficit-based volunteering approaches, and, with injustice laid bare before me, found I had no tools to combat or verbalise the profound sense of helplessness I felt.

A few years later, I joined the Nine Tenths mentoring programme, a flagship engaged citizenry programme serving to equip learners in selected local schools with the tools they need to pass their final Matric examinations to their full potential, and access tertiary opportunities. Learners or 'mentees' are partnered with Rhodes University student mentors who guide them through nine structured sessions that prepare them for their final school exams.

It seems that this framework could easily fall prey to the shortcomings of reproductive and deficit-based volunteering approaches, if Rhodes University volunteers believe that their work is to 'save' learners in local schools. The programme avoids this pitfall in two ways: firstly, its co-management structure means that it is not solely a Rhodes University initiative, but a joint initiative on the part of the schools, the university, and a local education non-government organisation, GADRA Education (McCann et al., 2021, p. 52). Ownership of the programme, decision-making responsibilities, and associated knowledge creation are thus shared. All management decisions are jointly planned, acted upon, and reflected on between stakeholders (McCann et al., 2021, p. 52).

Secondly, Nine Tenths deliberately veers away from charity-or deficit-based approaches to engagement with communities and is motivated by a clearly articulated social justice framework – as well as recognition of the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of

Rhodes University and the Makhanda community. At his inauguration, Rhodes University vice-chancellor, Professor Sizwe Mabizela, re-positioned Rhodes University, such that 'our university is not just in Grahamstown [now Makhanda] but is also of and for Grahamstown [Makhanda]' (Rhodes University, 2019, p. 3). Several mentees in the programme later enrol as Rhodes University students and become mentors themselves, an excellent example of the ways that universities can move to become more permeable to their communities.

During my time as a Nine Tenths mentor, one of my mentees in the programme showed me the power of reciprocal relationships as a way of building stronger communities and societies. I came to the relationship, perhaps still with a reproductive version of volunteering ingrained, expecting she would need me, but this was never the case. She took ownership of our mentoring sessions, and our time together became a space for sharing resources and learning. Over this period, I learned when to guide and offer advice but also when to step back and let her claim the space. Over time, our discussions moved beyond the challenges associated with one's final year of high school, or resources aiding examination preparation. We talked about community, the role of the university in the town, what it meant to aspire towards an institution deliberately designed to exclude you. We discussed what would need to change, and how this transformation could take place. These conversations, occurring in the backs of school classrooms and filled with the possibility of a more inclusive and just education system, felt distinctly feminist to me.

At this stage, Nine Tenths has had success in mitigating at least the physical barrier between university and community. Nine Tenths programme participants generally deliver at least 80 percent of all final year passes produced by participating schools, which has enabled many more students to successfully apply to and attend Rhodes University – the local entrance rate has increased significantly because of the Nine Tenths programme, among other interventions and strategies by the Makhanda community and university (McCann et al., 2021, p. 54). What is less clear, with respect to epistemic justice, is whether those who come from the Makhanda community feel they belong in the higher education establishment, and feel valued as knowledge creators, at an institution still named after one of the world's most infamous imperialists, where traces of its imperial aims are still marked on the landscape.

From this experience, it seems that postcolonial feminist thinking and community engagement both stand to gain from a mutually beneficial relationship with each other, just as universities gain from the relationship they nurture with their surrounding communities. When feminism is linked to community engagement, we begin to move the disciplinary boundaries of Women's/Gender Studies beyond the classroom, merging feminist theory with social action (Clark-Taylor, 2017). This is a first step in ensuring that feminist theorisation remains linked to social justice activism. Therefore, community engagement may aid feminist pedagogy in its attempt to become closer to, and less detached from, the individuals and groups that comprise feminist and other justice-orientated social movements. In this way, feminism may begin to 'envision the possibility of activism and struggle outside the academy' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 523).

Postcolonial feminist theorising may also move volunteering closer to a transformative form of citizenry, providing a systemic view of social problems and a greater theoretical sense of the importance of this action to obtain social justice, especially in former colonies. This moves both groups closer to achieving a nexus between theory and practice and facilitating the shift away from charity and towards justice-orientated approaches. As such, the intersection of feminism and engaged citizenry holds potential to capacitate students to recognise and challenge inequality and injustice in society, contributing to a more transformative educational experience within and beyond the classroom.

Perhaps a starting point could be for the Rhodes University Community Engagement Division to adopt postcolonial feminism as a theoretical framework, to guide its relationship and work with communities, as a means of advancing students' critical thinking about power. This theoretical approach also has practical implications: it would mean a greater emphasis on student reflection, more theorisation and grounding in social justice, and an outright rejection of deficit- or charity-based approaches that fail to challenge or may even reinforce existing unjust power relations. In some respects, a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework is already aligned with and complements the Rhodes University Community Engagement Division's current approach, which has for several years moved away from charity-based models and towards a social justice orientation (McCann et al., 2021, p. 57).

Though uncommon in the literature, the experiences of others who have adopted a postcolonial feminist framework may offer guidance. In Canada, Darroch and Giles (2014, p. 29) reflect on the ways a postcolonial feminist paradigm may enhance engaged research efforts, particularly participatory approaches in health research. These authors argue that a postcolonial feminist approach enables a stronger cognisance of, and challenge to, dominant power relations in research (Darroch & Giles, 2014, p. 29). A postcolonial feminist paradigm may offer a renewed focus on university decolonisation and ensures examination of power dynamics and marginalisation in research practice (Darroch & Giles, 2014, pp. 29-30).

Another interesting case study is that of the Summer Internship on Feminist Community Engagement (SIFCE) at a university in the northeast United States (Clark-Taylor, 2017, p. 89). Open to all undergraduate students, this internship aimed to equip students to become agents of social change through a combination of engaged citizenry with community partners, interactions with guest speakers, field trips, and reading and reflections on feminist community engagement (Clark-Taylor, 2017, p. 89). Students involved in this programme reflected that the overarching feminist theoretical framework better enabled them to build bridges across inter-group differences, make connections between theory and practice, and gain a deeper understanding of the role that power plays in feminist action (Clark-Taylor, 2017, pp. 96-101). Overall, students' experiences demonstrated a development of deeper awareness of self *and* others, as well as an ability to see one's potential to contribute to social justice (Clark-Taylor, 2017, p. 106).

Overall, there are few case studies of other contexts adopting postcolonial feminism as a theoretical framework, and even fewer focused on engaged citizenry or volunteering. Additionally, as can be seen by the cases highlighted above, most exploration of the connection between community engagement and feminism(s) is in the Global North. From the vantage point of my two universities, these insights seem more useful for the University of Oxford than for Rhodes University. Furthermore, these studies do not adequately unpack the possibility of a distinctly *postcolonial* feminist framework for community engagement, for universities both at the heart (University of Oxford) and peripheries (Rhodes University) of Empire, where the decolonisation imperative is most critical. Further studies on the integration of postcolonial feminism and the various forms of community-university engagement, particularly in former colonies and the Global South more generally, would contribute significantly to our understanding of the value of adopting this theoretical framework.

## Final reflections

This essay sought to explore the possibility of collaboration between feminist academics and community engagement at universities, and the ways in which these partnerships may amplify both projects' attempts to further epistemic and social justice. Postcolonial feminism may orientate community efforts towards social justice, maintaining a critical focus on power relations embedded in communities and universities, particularly those initially designed to further imperial projects. Conversely, community engagement efforts ensure that academic feminism does not only exist in a classroom but remains linked to its initial purpose as an emancipatory social movement for all subordinated groups.

At points, I reflected on my own experiences at the University of Oxford and Rhodes University as a means of making sense of some of the concepts explored. These concepts are still in their infancy and will benefit from others adding their own experiences and ideas to this subject. I hope that this engagement continues beyond this essay. The voices of community members and university staff and students are essential in attempts to de-construct and re-imagine higher education institutions. Here, we may begin to re-signify spaces of learning, within and beyond classrooms, not as exclusive spaces, but locations of possibility and resistance.

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