Introduction

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The first issue of this special edition examined the praxis of transformation practitioners in the complex context of higher education. The tension between “activism” and “employee-ness” was noted as a particularly important dynamic that practitioners navigate, and the issue provided some insight into how they do that.

This issue continues and deepens that theme. It extends the tension beyond the university to the relationship between the university and its publics and captures the discord between multiple and varying agendas within and external to the university. Transformation is not a homogeneous and unitary exercise, and especially in the context of higher education in South Africa it serves multiple agendas that have varying intended purposes.

There is a clear need for transformation to be grounded in scholarship. At the recent ACUS Africa Colloquium: Self-Reflexive Solidarities in Techno-Rational Times (2–3 November 2022), Crain Soudien argued that our insufficient intellectual engagement with the complexity of the “afterlife of apartheid” in the university sector has meant that the project of transformation is being reduced to oversimplified actions. This technocratic turn has resulted in a reductionism, providing limited scope for contestation, debate and importantly, imagination.

At the same conference Premesh Lalu argued that “petty apartheid”, which he defines as the “operation of racial interpolation that traps certain life forms into near mechanical existence by blocking pathways to the enchantments of freedom” (Lalu, 2002, p. 4), overrules and subsumes the intellectual which is reduced to mundane daily lived experience. In this trap lies psychological and affective investment in apartheid identities, which if left unexamined reduces transformation to a crude, essentialist identity politics, which serves to incessantly re-entrench apartheid in the struggle to move beyond it.

This is not to argue that identity politics are no longer important in the contestations of power in our society, and institutions. As Younge (2019) argues, “identity politics” have been the most powerful force for the development of a politics informed by marginal people, providing “essential” insight into the nature of oppression and privilege and the foundation for emancipatory politics. However, he argues that “essentialism will kill us all” because, as he points out, “appeals to the innate, fixed, pure and essential nature of any identity are the stock-in-trade of any fundamentalist and generally have the same effect—to isolate one particular group from the rest of the human race” (Younge, 2019, p. 9).

Although there is a general acceptance that transformation in higher education should be located in scholarship, as Soudien argues, when this scholarship challenges the authority of identity based lived experience, rather than a robust intellectual engagement...
of that experience, and with it the space for imagining alternative ways of being, beyond apartheid logics, contestation is shut down. The reductionist and technocratic approach to transformation being adopted by higher education in South Africa is perpetuating the shutting down of intellectual spaces for engagement of identity in meaningful ways, resulting in selective silencing, and fewer opportunities for imaging ourselves beyond the logics of petty apartheid. As James Baldwin (1991) reminds us: “Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed.”

In this issue, the authors are currently situated within academic disciplines and transformation management structures within universities. Their articles range from grounded research through to a critical analysis of the academic discipline, its environment and the governance of transformation of management process. The scholarship of transformation takes an academic form within this issue, yet all contributions draw intentionally from transformation praxis. As with the first issue this issue articulates the foundational principles of applied research and critical analysis, to engender new ways of thinking and doing transformation work. Transformation work, even when designed according to the best local and global practice, can lead to paralysis in the face of ideological contestation and/or resistance of what transformation work purports to be or not to be. This is due to the lack of a comprehensive compliance and regulatory framework, and as we will argue in this issue, a lack of related, robust intellectual engagement. Without these, characteristics of questionable research protected by academic “freedom” and leadership resistance to the transformation methods of inclusion, employment equity and diversity, remain unmoved by the transformation agents in the university.

The contributors in this issue share an analysis of their positionality in their respective universities or their positions in relation to their research; this analysis of position matters—particularly where the scope of academic freedom provides a wider and acceptable berth for critique of the institutions by authors outside of the university or academics in this issue. However for non-academic practitioners within universities, the writing is cautious. As transformation practitioners within the university environment, the authors’ writing reflects the duality of “dancing within the flames” as their contributions unearth the political and internal resistance towards meaningful transformation change within the university environment. Their contributions identify the practical tools they are able to (or allowed to) use to invoke change with both the academic and social transformation programmes in the university.

Mvalo’s article emphasises the age-old tension between the utility of the university in relation to the transformation objectives articulated by DHET. These objectives have focused entirely on the practical ends of transformation. This has reduced transformation work to activities and interventions rather than positioning transformation as part of the academic objectives of the university, which would have produced synergy between the intellectual scholarship of transformation and its practical application within the university.
environment. The critique by Mvalo about the current form and structure for transformation governance demonstrates how this disjuncture has resulted in continued resistance towards the governance of the institutional forum. As a result of this disjuncture between transformation work and the academic objectives of the university, the contributors in this issue raise important questions about the future for transformation in South African tertiary institutions: Are universities producing research that provides solutions for South Africa and Africa's social and economic challenges and is this research elevated to lobby the structures (in national government) to enact change (Thyssen, 2022). This model was tested during the COVID pandemic where government took guidance directly from academic research and professionals in South African medical research, in order to enact change nationally to curb the impact of the COVID pandemic in the country.

The determinants of success for such an alternative model are solely dependent on leaders' receptivity towards transformation. In Alves’ analysis the influence of leaders in resisting and enabling change is foregrounded as one of the barriers to success for inclusion. Without reciprocal receptivity, between university and government leaders in their transformation objectives and related resourcing, universities will remain focused on only identity inclusion instead of also focusing on the advancement of knowledge project that is responsive to social and economic justice. The current trajectory of the transformation work within universities arguably remains parallel (and possibly contrary to) the academic objectives of the university which as a result contributes to its de-intellectualisation.

The authors in this issue share that in the face of resistance towards meaningful transformation, networks of solidarity are sought or form organically. What is evident is that the resistance towards an intellectual transformation programme that strikes at the core of Africa's challenges is currently not enacted by most universities. In fact, resistance towards effective transformation work, takes the form of technocratic, managerialism, where multiple meanings and a “wilful disavowing of an alternative approach” enables the comfort found within the current status quo (Motala, 2022). Khan's article reinforces leadership's “wilful disavowing” by sharing a case study of the forced technocratic positioning of an old white man's misunderstanding that the transformation agenda for the university was not one of economic justice or participating in alternative reality, that sought deracialising, degendering and contributing towards decolonial ontology and epistemology. Approaches of curbing, cutting, curtailing, sanitising the transformation programme to one that is palatable, less disruptive, complimentary and complementary to the university academic programme epitomises how even within academic structures the principles that sustain current modalities serve to protect the current status quo and will overtake any argument for an alternative (Han & Butler, 2017). Bowers-Du Toit and Carolissen's article surfaces the techniques used by the institution to protect itself by sweeping away, pacifying and restoring the status quo, instead of assuming responsibility that invokes change and introduces institutional remedies that result in personal and institutional change. It is as if the university space has rendered itself incapable of holding space for intellectual contestation and being a place for finding restorative healing and meaningful change. If universities are unable to do this, who and where does South Africa turn to for this leadership?
Interestingly, the article by De Villiers et al. refers to the same institution as Bowers-du Toit and Carolissen, exposing the highly contested nature of transformation—where one article illustrates how the institution opens up spaces of contestation, the other illustrates how it closes them down. De Villiers explores the institution's formal visual redress project. This project is based on the understanding that public spaces are both multimodal and multivocal, inherently political and contested. It is within these contestations that opportunities for critical dialogue, projects and social processes, create room for reimagining. Drawing from philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre (2010), De Villiers calls for spatial justice within the university’s physical environment, through the decolonisation of the university’s “economy of symbols”, such as building names, statues, etc., that normalise racism, sexism, ablism and other forms of discrimination. It is clear from De Villiers’ findings that these symbolic shifts are felt and have impact on some of the respondents’ experiences of inclusion and exclusion on campus. However, this is not true for all respondents, and there are some who speak to a disconnect between the symbolic and the substantive. De Villers’ article invites considerations for using the spatial environment as a site of conscientisation, debate, critical engagement, as opposed to reinforcing a cognitive dissonance towards these colonial relics by university students, which reinforces symbolism. If universities choose to secure these relics as part of historical and cultural heritage, then the onus is on the university to cultivate these sites into productive spaces of critical and intellectual engagement.

Younge (2019) reminds us that “we should not leave symbols to the symbol-minded” (p. 5) because often they mistake symbols for substance. However, he also notes that “symbols should not be dismissed as insubstantial either” (p. 8). De Villiers reminds us that even when we intentionally create institutional spaces for “contestation”, there are relationships of power at play, because all space is inherently political. Remaining vigilant to these relationships of power requires that we constantly hold the tension of questions such as: “why does it matter, whom does it impact, what difference will it make to people’s lives, in whose name and to what purpose?” (Younge, 2019, p. 8).

**Conclusion**

Effective transformation work cannot be one that is absent from teaching, learning and research strategies—and where it claims to be present, then the indicators of success cannot only be demographic change or student throughput. Authentic transformation, by universities, must result in tangible internal systemic change and, more importantly, knowledge production and application thereof should find relevance and application within South Africa and Africa’s challenges. This issue brings to the fore the undulations of contestation that have affected authentic transformation praxis within universities in South Africa since the Fallist movements in 2015–2017. The authors express a clear warning about how transformation praxis is unprotected in the face of political resistance and technocratic managerialism.

**NOTE**

1. Bearing in mind that all politics are located in social relationships, and inherently an expression of social positioning and identity (Younge, 2019).
REFERENCES