

Proposal:

Stellenbosch Transdisciplinary Institute for Race and Racism Studies (STIRRS)

About:

The call for reckoning with the Stellenbosch University's history and current role in racial inequalities and enduring hierarchies in South Africa came to a head in 2022 following two incidences of racism on campus. The Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Racism at Stellenbosch University followed, and in its final report (the "Khampepe report"), outlined recommendations to creating an anti-racist, equitable, and inclusive university community. The report emphasized that this aim requires the participation of all members of the Stellenbosch community, working across differences.

As such, STIRSS operates from a 'problem-led' methodology, where addressing the problems — namely of racism, racial inequality, and enduring hierarchies in our institutions, community, and society — dictate our approaches and methods to knowledge creation. This methodology centres the problem over disciplinary-specific concerns and requires innovation, creativity and inclusive participation. The problems outlined below require the input of a range of stakeholders — researchers

Mission:

The Stellenbosch Transdisciplinary Institute for Race and Racism Studies (STIRSS) aims to foster transdisciplinary research on issues of racial inequality in relation to human sciences, technology, and the institutions of knowledge creation. Our mission contributes to the vision of Stellenbosch University as "Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognized as excellent, inclusive and innovative, and advancing knowledge in service of society" (Vision 2040, 2018).

Aims:

- To conduct innovative research (see below Research problems)
- To build capacity amongst research staff and faculty
- To offer training and consultation
- To be a platform for interdisciplinary research across the university

Research problems:

In line with our problem-led approachⁱ, we outline several research problems and questions to which the STIRCSS will explore:

- **Life Chances:** Ruth Wilson Gilmore has described racism as "the production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death." Health

inequalities via racial categories are a consistent feature of South Africa and indeed globally. Working across the humanities and health sciences, the Life Chances research stream explores the manifestation, reproduction, and potential pathways to address racial health inequalities in South Africa. This may include the social and political determinants of health, environmental racism, and health policy.

- **Stellenbosch Futures:** A critical feature of the Khampepe report is emphasis on the need to transform the culture of the institution. Of course, Stellenbosch University is embedded within a town and region with a historical and political legacy of racial inequality that manifests in everyday life. Moving the problems addressed by the CIRCoRe process into a research question, Stellenbosch Futures aims to explore the intersection of the institution and the city and how racial inequity is embedded and reproduced via infrastructural racism (see Salamanca and Silver, 2022). This research stream will bring together humanities scholars with urban planning, civil engineering, municipal stakeholders, and community members.
- **A Better Science:** The problem of race and other forms of human categorisation within science and technology are in part produced by the institutional, methodological, and ethical shortcomings of our disciplines. Thus, re-thinking science, technology, and institutions of knowledge-creation is not only a project of social and racial justice, but an endeavour to create better and more ethical science. This research stream works traverses philosophy and science and technology studies and includes stakeholders in various disciplines that are interested in methodological and ethical innovations in their fields.
- **Chair in Race, Culture, and Higher Education Transformation:** Within the centre, there shall house a Chair that focuses on the issue of race and other intersectional categories in institutions. This shall also be the focal point for inward looking activities, that is, a reflexive research approach to transformation at Stellenbosch University as well as other institutions.

Motivation and Rationale:

In South Africa, as in other contexts, racism gained legitimacy and widespread traction through scientific knowledge and research (Dubow, 1995; Kuljian, 2016; Roberts, 2011). The colonial and apartheid histories of academic disciplines, institutions, and scientific approaches to knowledge production impede contemporary transformation efforts (Jansen & Walters, 2020). Recent events at Stellenbosch University (and within the higher education sector of South Africa broadly) point to a need to address the politics and practices of knowledge production (see Auerbach & Jansen, 2023) and develop innovative approaches that align with the aims of social transformation.

The 2015-2016 student protests fomented a call for the decolonization of knowledge at university institutions. While most responses to these calls have focused on the need for decolonizing the university *curriculum* (see Jansen & Walters, 2022) and the demographic makeup of students and staff, fewer efforts have focused on the production of knowledge itself within university institutions. There is a tension between most transformation efforts — geared toward student learning and experience — and the vision of Stellenbosch University as a “research-intensive university.” We are in no way diminishing the transformation efforts geared toward student belonging, experience, and learning; these are the foci of the Khampepe report. However, we aim to fill a gap in the transformation of research itself. Research is both a primary function of the university and feeds into curriculum reform and student experiences, as students become researchers-in-training through postgraduate studies.

The Khampepe report points to the need for all members of the university community to participate in transformation efforts in an overarching fashion and that the university community is “missing opportunities to communicate, connect and understand one another in terms of similarities rather than difference” (2022, 19). The recent conference on “Controversies on the use of race and other human categorisation in the South African higher education sector” at Stellenbosch University brought together a multidisciplinary group of university members to speak on the issue. While a successful step in starting the conversation, it highlighted the necessity of speaking across disciplinary siloes in order to foster research that, both in aim and methodology, serves transformation efforts. Many of these issues have been reiterated in a series of workshops hosted by CIRCoRe Workstreams 3 and 4 during October 2024.

STIRSS affiliates and researchers will address the legacies of race-thinking across the sciences and institutions of knowledge creation as well as the continuing effects of racialised inequality in the production and politics of knowledge, technology, and innovation and the institutions therein. The centre’s approach draws from interdisciplinary approaches that explore the ways “structures of inequality shape and are shaped by science and scientific inquiry” (Pollock & Subramaniam, 2016, 952-3). STS, more broadly, critically engages with the context, politics, and histories of scientific inquiry. For our purposes, it provides a useful grounding body of theory, as well as a focus on the institutions and politics of scientific knowledge production, innovation, and the production and uses of technology.

Significantly, this would inaugurate STIRSS as the first dedicated STS research centre in Africa, placing it in conversation with institutes such as the Parker Centre on Race and Racialisation at the University College of London and the Science & Justice Research Center at the University of California Santa Cruz. This would situate STIRSS as a global

leader in addressing critical questions of racial inequality and the role of science, technology, and the institutes of knowledge-creation.

ⁱ Here, we draw on multiple scholars of transdisciplinarity and science studies. Patricia Leavey (2011) describes the problem-led approach and the role of transdisciplinary research in addressing questions of social justice that emerged in part from science studies critique that knowledge is situated and power-laden. Max Liboiron and colleagues at the CLEAR Lab in Canada have outlined a new model of anticolonial science practices in plastic and pollution research (Liboiron, 2020; Liboiron, Higgins & Tolbert, 2024; Yanchapaxi et al, 2022). Pollock and Roy (2017) outline their *Working Group on Race and Racism in Biomedicine* and the importance of multidisciplinary discussions.