



More than paperwork: Towards a relational, reflexive, and decolonial ethics in research with black women in South Africa

Mpho Mathebula^{a,*}, Lesego Kgatitswe^b

^a Department of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

^b Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities, Sol Plaatje University, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a decolonial feminist framework for ethical praxis in qualitative research with Black women in South Africa. Drawing on two doctoral studies, one exploring Black women's breast cancer experiences in Kimberley, and the other examining naked body protests as embodied political praxis, we interrogate the gap between procedural ethics and the lived ethical realities of fieldwork. We show how dominant institutional ethics protocols often fail to account for relationality, affect, embodiment, and power in postcolonial contexts. Grounded in Black feminist thought, decolonial critique, African relational ethics, and feminist ethics of care, the paper advances an understanding of ethics as ongoing, situated, and relational rather than a one-time bureaucratic requirement. We argue that ethical research practice must move beyond compliance toward accountability, care, and epistemic justice, particularly in research with historically marginalised communities in the Global South.

1. Introduction

Qualitative researchers are increasingly being called to reflect critically on the ethical dimensions of their research beyond formalised institutional protocols. In the South African context, these reflections become particularly urgent when research is conducted with Black women whose lives are marked by historical and ongoing marginalisation. This paper interrogates the ethical tensions that emerge between procedural ethics, represented by university ethics applications, and the practical, emotional, and relational ethics that surface in the field. Drawing on two qualitative studies, a doctoral study on the health and psychosocial experiences of women diagnosed with breast cancer, and another doctoral study on naked protest as political praxis among Black South African women, we reflect on the inadequacies of dominant procedural ethics in research that is emotionally intense, politically charged, and deeply embodied.

Procedural ethics, while essential for establishing a basic framework of accountability, often centre the researcher's institutional requirements over participants' lived realities (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Haggerty, 2004). Ethics review boards frequently prioritise and simplify informed consent, confidentiality, and “do no harm”, yet these principles are rooted in Western individualistic or positivist and

masculinist and biomedical models. These often clash with the complexities of research involving illness, grief, resistance, and community-based struggles. For instance, while the ethics application process may require formalised consent, it may remain silent on what this looks like in different contexts and its continuity throughout the research. Ethics applications also tend to remain silent on affect, such as the emotional labour of listening and empathising with women who express their fears of dying, or of standing alongside women who disrobe their bodies to protest systemic violence. These nuances and complexities are critical to feminist research and require consideration in the project conceptualisation, ethics applications, procedures, processes and training.

At stake here is not a call for emotional labour to be formally itemised as another requirement within ethics application forms, nor an argument that researchers should predict or quantify emotional impacts in advance as part of standardised risk assessments. Rather, we question the assumption that ethical responsibility can be adequately secured through *a priori* procedural approval alone. The silencing of emotional labour within ethics processes reveals a deeper limitation: institutional ethics frameworks are structured around positivist principles of anticipation and control, while qualitative research unfolds through relational, affective, and often unpredictable encounters. Janesick (1994)

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mpho.mathebula@wits.ac.za (M. Mathebula), bertha.kgatitswe@spu.ac.za (L. Kgatitswe).

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likens qualitative research to a dance to highlight that it is fundamentally responsive, fluid and emergent, rather than predetermined and linear. What is obscured is not simply emotion itself, but the need for ongoing ethical reflexivity as research relationships evolve in practice. This paper therefore aligns with critiques of pre-emptive ethics models and argues for ethics as a lived, processual practice that demands continuous reflection, care, and accountability beyond formal approval stages.

Our main argument is that procedural ethics fall short in guiding researchers through the messy, affective, and politicised terrain of qualitative work with Black women in South Africa. We propose instead a grounded, reflexive, and relational ethical praxis informed by Black Feminist Thought, decolonial critique, and feminist ethics of care. We view ethics not as a one-time bureaucratic hurdle but as an ongoing, contextually situated, and emotionally embedded process. This requires ongoing engagement with ethical issues and quandaries that researchers must continuously navigate (Posel and Ross, 2014).

While a growing body of scholarship has critically examined the limitations of institutional ethics review processes, particularly their emphasis on procedural compliance, anticipatory risk, and bureaucratic governance (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Hammett et al., 2014; Mietola et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2020), these debates have largely emerged from Global North contexts and have not sufficiently centred the affective, relational, and historically situated ethical realities of qualitative research with Black women in postcolonial settings. Existing critiques have highlighted the inadequacy of checklist-based ethics in capturing the emergent and relational nature of qualitative research, yet less attention has been paid to how colonial histories, racialised vulnerability, and embodied political resistance intensify ethical responsibility in the Global South.

The objective of this paper is therefore to extend these debates by examining how procedural ethics frameworks fail to account for the lived ethical realities of research with Black women in South Africa, particularly in contexts marked by illness, political protest, and structural inequality. Drawing on reflexive engagement with two doctoral studies, one on Black women's breast cancer experiences and another on naked body protest as embodied resistance, we interrogate how ethical responsibility unfolds relationally, affectively, and unpredictably in practice. Our aim is not simply to reiterate critiques of procedural ethics, but to advance a decolonial feminist ethical praxis grounded in African relational philosophies, Black feminist thought, and situated research experience.

This paper contributes to existing scholarship in two key ways. First, it foregrounds how coloniality, racialised inequality, and embodied political struggle shape ethical responsibility in ways that exceed dominant procedural ethics frameworks. Second, it offers a decolonial feminist reconceptualisation of ethics as an ongoing, relational, and situated practice rooted in care, reflexivity, and accountability, rather than a one-time institutional requirement. In doing so, we extend current debates on ethics-in-practice by centring Southern epistemologies and the lived ethical realities of research with historically marginalised communities in postcolonial contexts.

In the sections that follow, we first introduce the theoretical frameworks that shape our ethical orientation. We then critically examine the limits of procedural ethics, drawing on fieldwork vignettes to demonstrate how ethical challenges emerge unpredictably in real-world settings. We delve into the emotional entanglements of the research encounter, explore positionality and solidarity among Black women, and confront the ethical complexities of telling difficult stories. We conclude with a call for a decolonial, relational, and reflexive approach to ethics in qualitative research, one that centres care, humility, and accountability over compliance.

2. Reclaiming southern knowledges in ethical debates

Much of the scholarly literature on research ethics, particularly

feminist ethics of care, has been shaped by voices and institutions located in the Global North. While thinkers such as Carol Gilligan (1993), Joan Tronto (2020), and Nel Noddings (2003) have contributed foundational ideas about relationality, care, and responsibility, these frameworks often assume social contexts rooted in liberal democratic traditions and individualist moral reasoning. As a result, Northern feminist ethics can struggle to account for the lived realities, historical burdens, and collective ontologies that characterise many communities in the Global South.

In South Africa, for example, the ethical dilemmas encountered by researchers working with Black women from marginalised communities cannot be fully understood through frameworks that prioritise individual consent, neutrality, and emotional regulation. As our fieldwork revealed, ethics is not only about "minimising harm" or ensuring confidentiality; it is also about responding to the emotional labour and care of shared pain, the political meaning of protest, and the everyday violence of institutional neglect. These dimensions of ethical life demand a broader, more contextually grounded ethical framework, one that draws on Southern knowledges, including African philosophies of relationality, Black feminist traditions of resistance, and decolonial critiques of knowledge production.

African philosophies such as *Ubuntu* or *Botho* emphasise interdependence, shared humanity, and community-based accountability. These values challenge the Western focus on autonomy and individual rights and instead prioritise care, empathy, and mutual responsibility. In research contexts, this means that ethical practice should not be limited to informed consent forms or post-interview referrals. It must involve building trust, being present in times of vulnerability, and recognising that the research relationship itself can be a site of solidarity and healing.

An additional limitation of procedural ethics emerged in relation to institutional referral requirements. Although participants were provided with referrals to hospital-based psychological services, several did not follow through with these referrals. Participants described barriers including the cost of transport to urban hospitals, long waiting lists, and the limited availability of psychologists at local clinics, where services were often offered only on specific days. While referral to professional psychological services is an important ethical safeguard, these requirements assume the availability, accessibility, and cultural relevance of such services. In under-resourced contexts, such assumptions risk rendering ethical protocols aspirational rather than practically meaningful.

These experiences highlight the need for researchers to propose support pathways that are viable within participants' socio-economic and socio-cultural realities. For some participants, sources of care embedded within community life, such as pastoral counselling through churches, were more accessible and experienced as meaningful forms of support. One participant who later passed away received sustained emotional and spiritual care from her priest, underscoring that ethical responsibility cannot be reduced to referrals grounded solely in Western clinical models. Attending to relational, culturally grounded forms of care invites a broader rethinking of what counts as ethical support, and whose knowledge and institutions are recognised within research ethics frameworks.

African feminist scholars have long challenged the universalisation of Western gendered and ethical frameworks, offering contextually grounded analyses of power, culture, and resistance on the continent. Amina Mama (2007, 2011) critiques liberal feminist ethics that detach gender from political economy and colonial histories, while Oyewùmí (1997) problematises Western assumptions about gender, individuality, and social organisation that underpin many ethical norms. In the South African context, Pumla Gqola (2015) foregrounds Black women's embodied knowledges, pain, and pleasure as central to ethical and epistemic reckoning. Together, these scholars situate ethics within African feminist traditions that centre history, relationality, and lived struggle, strengthening the case for a decolonial ethical praxis grounded

in the Global South.

Similarly, Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2013), bell hooks (2000), and Taylor (2018) foreground the politics of voice, affect, and situated knowledge. They argue that ethical research must centre the lived experiences of Black women, not only as data sources but as epistemic agents. For these scholars, emotions such as anger, grief, and love are not distractions from ethical reasoning; they are essential to it. In our own work, we found that listening with care and sitting with discomfort were not just methodological strategies, they were ethical acts of witnessing and honouring lives that are too often dismissed or pathologised (see Kgatitswe, 2025; Mathebula and Canham, 2023 & 2026).

Importantly, reclaiming Southern knowledges does not require a strictly geographic understanding of “South” and “North.” As decolonial scholars have long argued, epistemic marginalisation is shaped by positionality within colonial power structures rather than by physical location alone. Indigenous scholars working in settler-colonial contexts such as Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand are often institutionally located in the Global North while speaking from positions historically excluded from dominant Eurocentric knowledge systems. Their work contributes key ethical insights grounded in relationality, care, land, and collective responsibility that resonate strongly with Southern and decolonial ethical traditions.

For example, Husdon's (2010) articulation of *whakapapa* as a Māori approach to research ethics foregrounds ethics as inherently relational, intergenerational, and accountable to community rather than reducible to procedural approval. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise and Blaise (2021) challenge colonial logics embedded in educational and research spaces, arguing for ethical practices grounded in relational ontologies and attentiveness to place, history, and more-than-human relations. Extending this work, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise (2021) conceptualise feminist ethicality as something that emerges through ongoing, situated encounters, what they describe as *worlding through complex stories*, rather than as a fixed set of ethical rules determined in advance. Engaging Indigenous scholarship from settler-colonial contexts thus expands, rather than dilutes, Southern ethical frameworks, highlighting how relational and care-based ethics are articulated across diverse colonial histories while remaining united by shared struggles against epistemic domination.

Yet despite these rich traditions, ethics literature and Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols continue to reflect Positivist and masculinist assumptions about what counts as ethical. For instance, the preference for emotional distance and professional detachment in many ethics guidelines is based on the idea that objectivity ensures fairness (Taylor, 2018). But in the Global South, where researchers often share social, racial, or geographic ties with their participants, neutrality is not only unrealistic, but it may also be unethical (Pillow, 2003; Smith, 2021). Maintaining distance can reproduce the very power hierarchies that decolonial research seeks to challenge (Denzin, 2010).

To reclaim Southern knowledges in ethical debates is not to reject the contributions of Northern feminist scholars. It is to question their uncritical universalisation, and to insist that ethical theory must be accountable to the contexts in which it is applied (Mignolo, 2007). Southern knowledges bring with them a long history of navigating survival, resilience, and refusal under colonial and postcolonial conditions (Lugones, 2010; Wynter, 2003). They offer models of ethical practice rooted in community, history, and struggle, rather than abstract principles (Chilisa, 2012). If ethics is to be decolonised, it must begin with the question: Whose ethics? Whose knowledge? Whose lives are being centred in our ethical reasoning? For us, reclaiming Southern ethical frameworks means listening to the wisdom of Black women in South Africa who have long practised care, courage, and critical insight in the face of systemic marginalisation. Their knowledges are not supplementary to ethics, they are central to it. Ethics must not be a one-size-fits-all model exported from the North. It must be reclaimed, redefined, and re-rooted in the moral, historical, and relational

landscapes of the Global South.

Our argument builds on, and extends, a substantial body of recent scholarship that has challenged static, compliance-driven models of research ethics. Across disciplines, scholars have conceptualised ethics as ethical-responsibility and relational accountability rather than procedural adherence (Kraftl, 2016; Hammett et al., 2014). Others have foregrounded ethics as dynamic, negotiated, and responsive to the unfolding realities of fieldwork, particularly in contexts marked by inequality, vulnerability, and asymmetrical power relations (Mietola et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2020). Feminist and posthuman scholars similarly conceptualise ethicality as emergent through relational encounters rather than secured through anticipatory governance, emphasising ethical responsiveness, care, and situated responsibility (Karmiris, 2022; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise, 2021).

While these interventions have been crucial in rethinking ethics beyond proceduralism, they have largely emerged from Global North contexts and have seldom centred the historically and affectively charged realities of research with Black women in postcolonial settings. Our contribution lies in extending these debates through a decolonial feminist lens grounded in South Africa, foregrounding how colonial histories, racialised vulnerability, embodied protest, and affective labour intensify the ethical stakes of qualitative research and demand forms of ethical reflexivity attuned to Southern contexts. This analysis extends earlier work on affect, embodiment, and resistance in women's naked protests in South Africa, which positions the body as a site of political speech and ethical vulnerability (Mathebula, 2022, 2023, 2026).

3. Whose harm? Whose safety?

Institutional ethics protocols are commonly framed around the identification and mitigation of harm, yet what constitutes “harm” and whose safety is prioritised remains a contested and uneven terrain. It is important to acknowledge that contemporary research ethics processes are not monolithic. Across many institutional contexts, ethics committees increasingly encourage researchers to engage critically with positionality, power relations, and the situated nature of knowledge production, particularly within qualitative, feminist, and participatory research traditions (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003). Ethical review practices therefore vary widely, and in some cases explicitly recognise that research is relational, value-laden, and ethically complex rather than neutral or detached.

Our concern, then, is not that ethics review boards uniformly demand neutrality or emotional distance, but that dominant ethics governance frameworks remain structurally oriented toward individualised, anticipatory, and event-based understandings of harm. Even where reflexivity is encouraged, ethical risk is most often conceptualised in terms of immediate psychological distress, reputational damage, or physical danger occurring within discrete research encounters (Mietola et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2020). What remains marginal in many ethics processes is sustained attention to structural violence, historical harm, and the cumulative effects of inequality that shape participants' lives long before and long after the research encounter itself.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the ethical labour involved in mediating emotional relations during fieldwork, navigating intimacy and disclosure, and grappling with responsibility when leaving the field, including questions of attachment, withdrawal, and the afterlives of research relationships (Ellis, 2007; Hammett et al., 2014; Wood, 2006). These interventions underscore that ethical practice is inherently messy, ongoing, and situational rather than resolvable through procedural foresight alone. We align with this work while arguing that questions of “whose harm” and “whose safety” must be extended beyond interpersonal dynamics to include the ethical implications of conducting research in contexts shaped by structural neglect, racialised vulnerability, and ongoing social violence. For Black women in South Africa, harm is not an episodic risk introduced by research

participation, but a lived condition produced through intersecting histories of capitalist colonialism, patriarchy, and institutional abandonment, forms of harm that ethics review processes are often do not recognise or address.

The relations and sense of responsibility that researchers have (particularly as a Black woman academic) do not end with the research. Harm for black women from marginalised communities is a continuous reality, one that is embodied and lived. Understanding harm in this context is complex and nuanced.

To practise ethical research, we must move beyond compliance-driven frameworks and ask deeper questions: Whose safety are we prioritising? Who defines harm? And what does it mean to care in contexts of inequality and resistance? These questions are a call to rethink who benefits from research, and whose pain and resistance we are responsible to.

4. Theoretical framework: Black Feminist and decolonial ethics

Our ethical stance is rooted in Black Feminist and Decolonial Frameworks, which collectively challenge dominant paradigms of knowledge production in social research. These traditions reject the notion of value-neutral inquiry and argue for the centrality of positionality, relationality and care in knowledge generation. Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Barbara Christian have long critiqued the epistemic violence embedded in “objective” research paradigms. Collins (2013) encourages researchers to engage in intellectual activism by reflecting on the meaning and implications of their work, especially when working with marginalised communities. For Collins, scholarship and activism are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interconnected forms of resistance and truth-telling. Similarly, Beth Taylor (2018) argues for rejecting objectivity in favour of a Black feminist methodology that centres empathy, disclosure, and shared understanding.

Black feminist ethics also focus on relationships as an important way of knowing and doing what is right. Carol Gilligan (1993) talks about the ethics of care, which means making moral choices by thinking about how they affect others. Joan Tronto (2020) adds a political side to this, showing how care is connected to power and fairness. María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) speaks about “matters of care,” showing that care involves feelings, responsibilities, and actions. From this point of view, doing research is not just about collecting information. It is about forming relationships and being emotionally and morally responsible in those connections.

Decolonial feminist thinkers like Sylvia Wynter, María Lugones, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni focus on *epistemic disobedience*. This means refusing to follow Western ways of thinking that ignore or erase knowledge from non-Western cultures. Decolonial ethics call us to question and break down the power systems left by colonialism, especially in how knowledge is valued. These scholars support ethical approaches that are based on local ways of knowing, shaped by people's own histories and lived experiences. An important part of our ethical practice is *ethical reflexivity* (England, 1994; Denzin, 2010; Pillow, 2003). This means the researcher must keep thinking carefully about their own power, position, and influence throughout the research. Ethical reflexivity does not look for easy answers. It accepts uncertainty, contradictions, and the discomfort of being open and vulnerable. As Oakley (2013, 2016) and Stacey (1988) explain, feminist research challenges the idea that research can ever be neutral. Instead, it calls for ethical responsibility that includes emotional, intellectual, and political awareness.

4.1. Coloniality of ethical protocols: procedure, review, and knowledge governance

Ethical review processes in academic research are widely framed as necessary safeguards against harm, designed to protect participants'

rights and dignity. Yet when situated within colonial histories and postcolonial realities, these protocols often reproduce the very inequalities they seek to mitigate. Drawing on decolonial scholarship, we argue that research ethics, as institutionalised within universities, are shaped by what Lugones (2010), Wynter (2003), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describe as a colonial matrix of power, a system that privileges Western epistemologies, liberal individualist subjects, and biomedical moral frameworks while marginalising relational, communal, and embodied ways of knowing.

At the core of this critique is the concept of epistemic violence, understood as the silencing or erasure of non-Western forms of knowledge and ethical reasoning (Spivak, 1988; Wynter, 2003). In the South African research context, this violence is evident when ethics protocols are modelled on Euro-American biomedical norms that prioritise individual consent, emotional neutrality, and procedural compliance, often without adequate attention to how harm, vulnerability, and consent are culturally, historically, and socially constituted. While principles such as “do no harm” and “informed consent” are important, their implementation frequently rests on assumptions about the human subject as rational, autonomous, and individual, assumptions that Wynter (2003) reminds us are historically specific rather than universal.

It is important, however, not to treat ethics review boards (IRBs) or research ethics committees as monolithic entities. South African IRBs share many structural features with those in the United Kingdom and other Global North contexts, including their biomedical heritage, risk-management orientation, and legalistic accountability frameworks Schrag (2010); Stark (2019). At the same time, ethics reviewers themselves exercise varying degrees of agency within these systems. Reviewers' responses are shaped by disciplinary training, institutional culture, and familiarity with qualitative, feminist, and decolonial methodologies. Moments of discomfort expressed by reviewers, such as those encountered in our own research, should therefore not be read simply as individual conservatism, but as productive sites where the limits of procedural ethics become visible.

In our studies, reviewers' unease emerged not in response to reflexivity as such, but at the point where affect, embodiment, and political vulnerability exceeded what procedural frameworks could comfortably contain. Lesego was required to minimise emotional risk in interviews with women diagnosed with breast cancer, despite participants describing these encounters as affirming and connective. Similarly, Mpho's research on naked body protests generated discomfort among reviewers who interpreted emotional and physical vulnerability primarily as ethical risk, rather than as a deliberate and powerful form of political expression. These moments illuminate what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes as the coloniality of being and knowing, in which knowledge governance systems struggle to accommodate embodied, spiritual, and relational forms of ethical life prevalent in many African contexts.

Existing scholarship has extensively critiqued the dominance of risk-centric and anticipatory ethics governance, particularly its limitations for qualitative research conducted in contexts of inequality and historical violence (Hammett et al., 2014; Mietola et al., 2017; Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2020). Our cases do not simply reiterate these critiques. Rather, they show how African feminist and decolonial ethical orientations, grounded in relational care, affective labour, and embodied resistance, come into tension with institutional ethics processes structured by colonial and biomedical epistemologies. In echoing Lugones' (2010) call for epistemic disobedience, we argue for an ethical praxis that moves beyond checklist-based compliance toward contextual, relational, and reflexive forms of accountability. Ethical research, in this view, cannot be judged by paperwork alone, but by how it sustains dignity, affirms lived experience, and resists epistemic injustice for Black women researchers and participants alike.

4.2. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and ethical governance in the Global South

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), or Research Ethics Committees, as they are often called in South Africa, play a central role in regulating research and protecting human participants. However, despite their stated aim of safeguarding human dignity and ensuring responsible conduct, IRBs in the Global South often replicate colonial logics and neoliberal accountability systems that prioritise institutional protection over participant empowerment. As scholars such as [Schrug \(2010\)](#), [Mamdani \(2012\)](#), and [Ndlovu-Gatsheni \(2018\)](#) argue, the ethical regulation of research must be understood within broader histories of colonial knowledge production, in which research was used as a tool of control, surveillance, and extraction.

IRBs are often structured according to Euro-American bioethics models that assume an individualised, depoliticised subject, capable of rational consent and disengaged participation. These models rarely account for the complexities of researching in communities affected by structural violence, historical trauma, and collective forms of knowledge and being. In postcolonial contexts like South Africa, the legacy of apartheid, economic inequality, and systemic racism means that research participants often engage with research in ways that challenge the assumption of the autonomous, consenting subject. For instance, participants may see research as a form of care, advocacy, or even survival, not merely as a neutral transaction.

Furthermore, ethics committees are frequently positioned as compliance mechanisms, embedded in bureaucratic systems that prioritise institutional liability and global reputational risk. This creates a tension between ethical research and ethical *governance*. IRBs may reject or delay proposals that engage with politically sensitive topics (e.g., protest, race, sexuality, state violence), while privileging projects that fit neatly within biomedical or technocratic models of harm reduction. In this way, IRBs in the Global South are often more accountable to international research funders or university legal departments than to the communities being researched. In our own research experiences, IRB processes often required us to downplay or depoliticise the emotional and affective dimensions of our work. Lesego was required to submit a detailed risk management plan for interviews with Black women cancer patients, framing emotional expression as a risk to be contained, rather than a healing or relational process. Mpho's project on naked protests raised concern about nudity and emotional distress, despite the fact that the participants were politically aware, consenting adults whose protests were already public. In both cases, the IRB's discomfort with affect, embodiment, and Black women's pain highlighted a deeper anxiety about losing control over what counts as "ethical."

This reveals what [M'charek et al. \(2014\)](#) call the "moral economy of ethics", system in which ethics is less about relational accountability and more about institutional order, control, and risk aversion. In this moral economy, the IRB acts as a gatekeeper of legitimate knowledge production, often marginalising research grounded in feminist, decolonial, or activist approaches. Critics such as [Chattopadhyay and De Vries \(2008\)](#) have also highlighted the asymmetrical power dynamics in global research ethics, where "universal" standards, often designed in the Global North, are imposed on researchers and communities in the Global South. These standards may be ill-suited to contexts of communal decision-making, local spiritual beliefs, or socio-economic precarity. Yet researchers who propose more context-sensitive approaches often face extra scrutiny, delays, or outright rejection.

To move forward, we argue for a transformative ethics governance model that.

- Recognises the legitimacy of alternative epistemologies and ethical traditions, including African relational ethics and Black feminist care ethics.
- Prioritises meaningful community engagement over procedural formalism.

- Treats ethics as an ongoing, context-specific process rather than a one-time compliance hurdle.
- Centres the lived realities, knowledges, and needs of participants, especially those from historically marginalised communities.

In South Africa, this means IRBs must not only be more inclusive in representation but also rethink the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie their criteria. What counts as harm, care, consent, and knowledge must be debated *from within*, not dictated *from above*. Ethical research in the Global South requires more than ticking boxes; it requires reflexivity, humility, and the political courage to let go of colonial scripts of governance.

5. Methodology: researching with and alongside black women

This study used a qualitative research design rooted in Black feminist and decolonial epistemologies. These frameworks shaped our approach to both data collection and ethical engagement, recognising that knowledge is produced through relationships, emotions, and context. We drew from two doctoral projects: Lesego's study explored the lived experiences of socially diverse Black women with breast cancer in Kimberley, South Africa, while Mpho's study examined the affective and political dimensions of naked body protests by Black South African women. Research in such emotive, embodied, and politically fraught spaces demands more than adherence to procedural ethics. It requires reflexive, situated, and relational ethical engagement. Below, we present vignettes that reflect the emotional and ethical complexity of our fieldwork and the ethics clearance processes that preceded it.

The vignettes presented in this paper are drawn from the authors' respective doctoral research projects, both of which employed qualitative methodologies and received full institutional ethics approval. Rather than serving as representative data excerpts or forming part of a formal analytic comparison, the vignettes were purposively selected as *ethically salient moments* that illuminate tensions between procedural ethics and lived ethical practice. Following [Guillemin and Gillam's \(2004\)](#) notion of "ethically important moments," we revisited our doctoral fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and reflexive journals to identify encounters characterised by heightened emotional intensity, ethical uncertainty, or relational negotiation. The vignettes were constructed through careful reflexive engagement with these materials, prioritising ethical insight and contextual richness over exhaustiveness. This approach aligns with feminist and decolonial methodologies that foreground reflexivity, positionality, and ethical accountability, particularly where the aim is to interrogate ethical processes rather than to conduct secondary data analysis ([Pillow, 2003](#); [Ellis, 2007](#); [McGowan, 2020](#)).

5.1. Negotiating ethics and institutional protocols

Institutional ethics committees often prioritise risk management and harm avoidance through checklists and formalised procedures. Yet our research realities could not be fully captured by these frameworks.

Vignette: Lesego - Negotiating Institutional Expectations and Feminist Commitments

Applying for ethical clearance for my doctoral research raised tensions between institutional protocol and feminist ethics of care. I was asked to anticipate and control emotional distress in participants. But how does one predict the affective depth of a conversation about illness, pain, and survival? I wrote detailed risk mitigation plans and committed to referrals to support services, but I also had to insist on the value of emotional expression. For many women, the interview was the first time anyone had asked how they were really doing. The Ethics Committee to some extent wanted boundaries. I wanted connection. This process reminded me that ethics is not just paperwork, it's a relational practice. I saw how biomedical research norms

continue to shape ethics processes, often in ways that discount the experiential, embodied knowledge Black women carry. I had to advocate for a different kind of care, one that is grounded in empathy, attentiveness, and shared vulnerability.

Vignette: Mpho - Framing Emotion as Method, Not Risk

When I submitted my ethics application for my study on naked protests, I was met with apprehension. “Nudity? Protest? Emotionally disturbing content?” The committee was fixated on risk, what might go wrong. But I wanted to reframe that. The women I spoke with had already lived through the risk; they had already undressed before police, before cameras, before the state. What they needed now was to speak, to reflect, to be heard. I explained that emotional intensity was not a by-product of the interviews, it was part of the methodology. Affect was the very thing I was studying. I included debriefing procedures, yes, but I also emphasized the power of storytelling as healing. I had to assert that vulnerability, mine and theirs, was not a danger to be contained but a route to deeper insight and mutual recognition.

These vignettes reflect how we had to advocate for an ethics of care that recognises emotion not as a risk to manage, but as a vital part of feminist research. We reframed affect as a valid form of knowledge and positioned our emotional vulnerability as part of our ethical engagement with participants.

5.2. Fieldwork and emotional labour

The reality of research with marginalised Black women is that it is emotionally charged. As Black women researchers, we were not neutral observers but co-present bodies in intimate and affective exchanges.

Vignette: Lesego - Listening to Pain, Holding Space

I often describe my interviews as both encounters of deep listening and containers of collective pain. My research with twenty-three socially diverse Black women in Kimberley, women from mostly working-class backgrounds, urban and rural communities, and different cultural and linguistic groups, was more than data collection. It was about being present with women who had carried so much, often in silence. I remember how Tebogo came to me through another participant, eager to share her story. Her openness was humbling, yet the emotional weight was heavy. I was and still am deeply affected by the passing of four women in the study. One of their friends, also a participant, wept during our follow-up as she mourned not only their deaths but the loss of a community of care they had built during their cancer journeys. These encounters made me reject any idea of detached neutrality. Instead, I chose to practice an ethics of care and empathy, honouring each woman’s humanity, pain, and resistance.

Vignette: Mpho - Feeling the Fire, Carrying the Echoes

My research on the affective dimensions of naked body protests introduced me to women who had fought battles with their bodies as their only weapon. I sat with protesters from Dobsonville whose acts of resistance still reverberated through their voices and gestures decades later. One interview stays with me. The participant recounted the moment she undressed in protest to defend her home from forced removal. As she spoke, I felt her sorrow, rage, and defiance ripple through me. I left that interview emotionally flooded, numb, shaken, and in awe. That night, I went to church to soothe what had been stirred. The afterlife of protest had found a home in me. This work made it impossible to remain objective or unaffected. I was moved, bodily, spiritually, and politically. The emotions we carry as researchers are part of the data too.

These moments of witnessing illness, loss, defiance, and resistance shaped how we conducted, analysed, and wrote about our work. We saw

empathy not as a limitation, but as central to an ethical and epistemologically rigorous research process.

6. From procedural ethics to relational ethical praxis

Both doctoral studies underwent rigorous institutional ethics clearance processes at a South African university, requiring detailed accounts of methodology, consent procedures, risk assessments, and data protection. While such processes are necessary, they are increasingly recognised as insufficient for addressing the ethical complexities that emerge in qualitative research practice, particularly in contexts shaped by inequality, illness, and political struggle (Hammett et al., 2014; Mietola et al., 2017). What procedural ethics frameworks struggle to anticipate are the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of ethical responsibility that unfold in the field.

In the breast cancer study, participants signed formal consent documents outlining their rights and the purpose of the research. Yet the ethical intensity of the research only became apparent during interviews, when women cried, disclosed fears of death, or spoke of abandonment by families and institutions. No procedural form could prepare the researcher for the moment a participant passed away months after an interview, or for the ethical labour and care of holding grief, guilt, and responsibility in the aftermath. These experiences exemplify what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) describe as *ethically important moments*, moments that demand reflexive judgment rather than procedural compliance (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; McGowan, 2020).

Similarly, in the study on naked body protests, ethics approval focused primarily on anonymity and confidentiality, offering little guidance on how to engage ethically with the emotional exposure, physical vulnerability, and spiritual intensity of protest spaces. The researcher’s own body became ethically implicated, emotionally and politically, in ways that procedural ethics could neither predict nor contain. Ethical research often requires *caring encounters* that unlearn distance and embrace relationality, particularly when participants seek recognition, connection, and dignity rather than detachment (Farsakoglu and Djampour, 2021; Drolet et al., 2023).

These cases do not merely illustrate the limits of procedural ethics; they demonstrate the necessity of understanding ethics as a relational praxis that emerges through affect, embodiment, and ongoing ethical negotiation. Research is not a dispassionate act. It is affectively charged, and ethical responsibility is enacted not through forms and checklists, but through presence, responsiveness, and care in moments of vulnerability (Ellis, 2007; Oakley, 2013; Taylor, 2018).

At this point, we also wish to pause on the language commonly used to describe the ethical work undertaken by researchers in such contexts. The concept of *emotional labour*, while useful in naming the affective demands placed on researchers, does not fully capture the moral, relational, and ontological dimensions of these encounters. As feminist scholars have noted, the term carries an implicit economistic and managerial undertone, framing care, listening, and emotional presence as forms of labour to be managed or expended rather than as ethical relations in their own right (Bondi, 2014; Hochschild, 1983). In the context of research with Black women in South Africa, this framing risks flattening practices that are experienced not simply as burdensome obligations, but as morally grounded relations of care, accountability, and shared humanity.

Drawing on African relational philosophies, we suggest that these ethical engagements are more meaningfully understood through the lens of *botho* (often articulated alongside *ubuntu*), an ethic grounded in relationality, mutual recognition, and moral responsibility to others (Letseka, 2012; Ramose, 1999). *Botho* foregrounds being-with, care, and ethical presence as constitutive of personhood rather than as additional forms of work layered onto the research process. From this perspective, sitting with grief, responding to suffering, and sustaining relationships beyond the formal boundaries of the interview are not forms of “extra”

emotional labour, but expressions of ethical being-in-relation. The difficulty of naming these practices within dominant research ethics discourse thus illustrates a broader limitation of Western epistemologies and vocabularies, which often lack the conceptual resources to apprehend situated African moral worlds (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Wynter, 2003). We offer *botho* here not as a fully theorised alternative framework, but as a critical provocation that exposes the limits of procedural ethics and the language through which ethical responsibility is currently understood.

7. Representation, positionality, and ethical responsibility

Being Black women researching Black women created conditions of both solidarity and ethical tension. Shared racial, cultural, and linguistic identities enabled trust and relational depth, but they also generated expectations of advocacy, emotional support, and material assistance that exceeded the formal boundaries of the research role. These dynamics highlight how ethical responsibility continues long after consent has been obtained, exposing the limits of institutional ethics frameworks that rarely account for shared identity and ongoing relational obligation (Drolet et al., 2023; Few et al., 2003).

At the same time, narrating experiences of illness, protest, and systemic neglect raises ethical dilemmas of representation and epistemic justice. How does one honour participants' voices without reproducing voyeurism or harm? How does one write about naked bodies, terminal illness, and political suffering with dignity and care? These questions are not merely interpersonal; they are structural, shaped by whose stories are deemed tellable and how knowledge about marginalised lives circulates within academic institutions (Spivak, 1988; Wynter, 2003).

In responding to these dilemmas, editorial decisions were guided by participant agency, ethical caution, and reflexive accountability. Stories were anonymised to preserve narrative integrity and political meaning. As Stacey (1988) cautions, feminist research risks over-identification, yet refusing to tell these stories altogether would also constitute an ethical failure. Ethical responsibility, then, lies in navigating this tension with humility, care, and an awareness of the power relations embedded in knowledge production.

8. Reimagining ethical praxis in decolonial feminist research

In this section, we move beyond the personal reflections and field-based vignettes shared earlier to articulate a broader methodological contribution: a reimagined ethical praxis grounded in decolonial feminist thought, Black feminist ethics, and African relational philosophies. Rather than viewing ethics as a regulatory framework to comply with, we propose it as a dynamic, relational, and situated practice that is continually negotiated in the field. This rethinking of ethics does not emerge solely from critique; it is rooted in lived experience, community engagements, and political commitments to justice, dignity, and care.

Our methodological orientation disrupts dominant research paradigms that centre disembodied, emotionally detached, and supposedly neutral ways of knowing. We align instead with scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2013), María Lugones (2010), and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), who argue for research practices that are explicitly located, accountable, and invested in resisting the coloniality of power, being, and knowledge. What we offer here is a praxis that not only critiques dominant research ethics frameworks but also proposes concrete methodological alternatives grounded in our South African research context.

8.1. Ethics as ongoing, not once-off

Institutional ethics processes tend to frame ethics as a pre-fieldwork requirement: something to be completed, approved, and archived. Our research experiences reject this linear framing. Ethics is not a fixed point but an iterative process that unfolds in every interview, every

conversation, and every moment of uncertainty. We often had to make ethical decisions in real time; when a participant cried, when a painful story emerged unexpectedly, or when we witnessed state failure through the bodies of our participants. These were not anomalies; they were the heart of ethical praxis (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Denzin, 2010).

8.2. Emotions as data, not disruptions

Dominant methodological frameworks tend to treat emotion as bias, a contaminant of objectivity. We insist instead that emotion is central to ethical and epistemological clarity. The tears we held back, the exhaustion we carried home, the grief we shared with participants, these were not methodological weaknesses. They were data. They revealed the stakes of the research, the weight of the stories we carried, and the urgency of doing justice to our participants' realities (Bondi, 2014; Pillow, 2003). This emotional intensity demands not less rigour, but a different kind of rigour, one grounded in presence, reflexivity, and ethical attentiveness (Bondi, 2014; Pillow, 2003).

8.3. Relational ethics as methodological foundation

Relationality is not simply a value; it is a methodological tool. Building and sustaining relationships with participants shaped how and what we were able to know. Participants referred others to us not because we were researchers with credentials, but because we showed up with care, empathy, and accountability. In one case, Lesego was referred to a participant through a friend who had already been interviewed. In another, Mpho was embraced by women whose acts of protest were made legible through shared cultural understanding. These moments indicate that knowledge is produced not in isolation, but in connection, and that ethical responsibility must extend beyond individual consent to collective care (Ellis, 2007; Wilson, 2020).

8.4. Refusal, silence, and withdrawal as ethical acts

Although we did not encounter this, we are aware that in research, participants can sometimes change their minds, withdraw from follow-ups, or express discomfort with certain questions. These do not need to be treated as "gaps" in the data, but as expressions of agency, ethical refusals that deserve to be respected and honoured. Decolonial feminist methodology requires researchers to be attuned to silence, resistance, and the limits of access (Tuck and Yang, 2014; Casolo and Doshi, 2013). The assumption that more data equals better research must be challenged; sometimes, what is not said is as important as what is shared (Abu-Lughod, 1991).

8.5. From ethics of compliance to ethics of solidarity

Our work calls for a shift from ethics as a legalistic checklist to ethics as solidarity, a commitment to standing with participants in their struggles, rather than simply extracting stories for academic gain. This is particularly urgent in research with historically marginalised communities, where mistrust of researchers is often well-earned. For ethics to have meaning in such contexts, researchers must be willing to take risks: to be vulnerable, to be changed, and to be accountable not only to institutions, but to the people and communities they work with.

These principles align with Black feminist commitments to relationality, contextuality, and intellectual activism (Collins, 2013; Few et al., 2003). They also echo decolonial calls for epistemic disobedience and ethical accountability to local histories, struggles, and knowledges. By foregrounding reflexivity, relationality, affect, and context, our ethical praxis offers a decolonial feminist methodology that is attentive to the complexities of doing research in postcolonial, racialised, and gendered contexts. This is not an abstract theoretical position; it is a lived and evolving commitment that emerged through the unpredictable realities of our fieldwork. Our hope is that this contribution not only

challenges the bureaucratic limits of ethics governance, but also expands the possibilities for ethical, grounded, and transformative research with Black women in the Global South.

9. Positionality, power, and the limits of insider solidarity

Much of the literature on feminist and decolonial research highlights the importance of positionality, the need for researchers to locate themselves within structures of power, identity, and history. In our research, we were often seen, and sometimes saw ourselves, as “insiders”: Black women researching the lives of other Black women in South Africa. This shared identity created openings for connection, cultural understanding, and trust. Participants spoke to us in Sesotho, Setswana, or isiZulu without having to translate their realities into academic or “respectable” language. They called us “sisters” or “daughters,” and sometimes expected us to carry their stories not just as data, but as shared burdens. But as feminist scholars such as [Few et al. \(2003\)](#), [Tuhai Smith \(1999\)](#), and [Collins \(2013\)](#) remind us, insider status does not erase power. It can obscure it.

As researchers affiliated with a well-resourced university, positioned within academic networks, and producing work for degrees and publications, we occupied a space of relative privilege, one that is rarely visible during the warm intimacy of the interview but becomes sharply apparent when participants ask: “*What will you do for us with this information?*” or “*Will your research help us get a clinic, or jobs, or electricity?*” These moments reveal the limits of solidarity built on identity alone. They expose the material gap between the university and the community, between theory and lived experience, between the desire to listen and the inability to offer tangible change.

This contradiction sits at the core of much “community-based” research in the Global South. The university is not a neutral space, it is embedded in histories of racial, gendered, and colonial exclusion. South African universities, while now more racially representative in student and staff demographics, continue to reproduce structural inequalities through language policies, funding hierarchies, and Eurocentric knowledge systems. As Black women researchers trained within these institutions, we remain entangled in these systems even as we seek to challenge them. This creates ethical tensions that cannot be resolved through good intentions or shared identity alone.

For example, in Lesego's work with breast cancer survivors in Kimberley, some participants assumed that her presence as a Black woman researcher meant she could advocate on their behalf to health officials. In Mpho's study on naked protests, participants asked whether she could help their daughters find employment or whether the research would lead to infrastructure improvements in their community. These requests were not naïve, they were expressions of hope, anchored in a long history of Black communities engaging researchers and activists as potential allies in struggle. But they also highlight how academic research is often perceived as extractive: stories are taken, dissertations are written, and life in the township remains unchanged. This can be illustrated by one of Mpho's participants who wanted her daughter to be assisted with finding a job as she was participating in the research. When this did not happen, the participant decided to not refer the researcher to other potential participants.

These contradictions call for a more critical and politically honest understanding of positionality. Solidarity is not a static identity claim, it is a practice that must be earned and sustained through action, humility, and accountability. It requires researchers to ask: *What am I taking from this encounter? What am I offering in return? How is my work implicated in the structures I seek to critique?*

We also recognise that positionality is intersectional. Our identities as Black women may resonate with participants, but our class backgrounds, educational levels, and institutional affiliations create layers of difference that must be named. Solidarity does not erase these differences; it works through them, sometimes uneasily, often imperfectly. True ethical engagement, then, lies not in claiming sameness but in

remaining attentive to difference, and in being honest about what we can and cannot offer.

Finally, we must reflect on how the academy rewards particular kinds of reflexivity. Stories of personal struggle or closeness to the community can be valorised in ethics applications and qualitative write-ups yet rarely lead to structural change in how universities relate to the communities they study. There is a risk that positionality becomes performance, proof of authenticity, rather than a political and ethical commitment to shifting power.

In reimagining ethical research, we must move from performative reflexivity to structural accountability. This means challenging the ways universities define “community engagement,” rethinking what counts as valuable research, and redistributing resources and recognition toward forms of work that are grounded in care, justice, and mutual responsibility.

10. Conclusion: beyond compliance - toward ethical transformation

Being positioned as an “insider” researcher may open doors to trust, recognition, and relational depth, but it does not absolve researchers of ethical responsibility. If anything, it demands more: a sustained attentiveness to complicity, a refusal of extractive research practices, and a commitment to forms of solidarity that extend beyond empathy toward accountability, repair, and transformation ([Collins, 2013](#); [Few et al., 2003](#)). Ethical proximity, as this paper has shown, is not a guarantee of ethical practice; rather, it is a condition that intensifies ethical responsibility.

This paper has examined the persistent gap between institutional research ethics, largely formalised through procedural protocols and anticipatory risk management, and the lived, affective, and relational realities of qualitative fieldwork in postcolonial South Africa. Drawing on two doctoral studies, we have demonstrated how ethics governed by Eurocentric assumptions of neutrality, individualism, and emotional detachment often fail to engage with the historical, structural, and embodied conditions shaping Black women's lives, including illness, poverty, protest, and ongoing forms of institutional neglect. In line with longstanding critiques of procedural ethics ([Guillemin and Gillam, 2004](#); [Hammett et al., 2014](#); [Mietola et al., 2017](#)), we have argued that ethical responsibility cannot be secured *a priori*, but emerges through unpredictable encounters, affective entanglements, and situated judgment in the field.

Our central intervention has been to reconceptualise research ethics not as a bureaucratic exercise in compliance, but as a decolonial feminist praxis grounded in relationality, care, positionality, and emotional accountability. By engaging African feminist thought and decolonial scholarship, we have shown how dominant ethics frameworks reproduce epistemic violence by marginalising Southern ways of knowing, silencing affective and embodied knowledge, and positioning researchers in the Global South as implementers of externally defined ethical norms ([Lugones, 2010](#); [Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018](#); [Wynter, 2003](#)). Reframing the ethical injunction to “do no harm,” we have asked instead: *whose harm and whose safety are prioritised within existing ethics governance systems?* This reframing foregrounds structural violence, historical injustice, and institutional abandonment as ethical concerns that remain inadequately addressed by most IRB processes ([Robinson-Pant and Singal, 2020](#)).

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, within research ethics scholarship, we advance an understanding of ethics as ongoing, relational, and processual, extending recent work on ethics-in-practice and ethical responsibility by situating it explicitly within postcolonial and African feminist contexts ([Karmiris, 2022](#); [Pacini-Ketchabaw and Blaise, 2021](#)). Second, within qualitative methodology, we offer a framework for ethical engagement that treats emotion, refusal, solidarity, and power not as disruptions to research rigour, but as integral sources of ethical and epistemic insight ([Bondi, 2014](#); [Pillow, 2003](#)). Our cases

demonstrate that ethical dilemmas surrounding grief, protest, and vulnerability are not exceptional deviations from ethical norms, but central to research conducted in contexts of inequality.

These insights have implications for the governance of research ethics, particularly within South African universities and other post-colonial institutions. While ethics review boards increasingly invite reflexivity and positional awareness, their structural orientation toward risk containment and institutional liability continues to limit engagement with relational, affective, and historically situated forms of harm (Stark, 2019). We therefore argue for a shift in which ethics committees move from being gatekeepers of procedural compliance toward facilitators of ethical dialogue, spaces that value local knowledge systems, decolonial critique, and community-grounded methodologies.

Moving toward a more just and responsive ethical landscape requires several interconnected shifts. Ethics education must position decolonial, feminist, and African ethical traditions as foundational rather than supplementary, foregrounding relationality, history, and community as central ethical values (Hudson et al., 2010; Wilson, 2020). Ethics committee members require training that extends beyond technical or legal expertise to include sensitivity to affect, power, and positionality. Ethics guidelines must recognise emotional labour, community engagement, and solidarity not as ethical liabilities, but as constitutive elements of ethical research, particularly in work with historically marginalised communities. Finally, ethics must be understood as iterative rather than episodic, supported by mechanisms that enable ongoing reflection from proposal through fieldwork to dissemination (Denzin, 2010).

Ultimately, ethical research is not about perfection or the elimination of risk. It is about responsiveness, accountability, and the courage to remain engaged with complexity. By reclaiming ethics as a relational and political commitment rather than a bureaucratic hurdle, this paper invites researchers, institutions, and ethics committees to imagine ethical futures grounded not in fear of harm, but in the possibilities of care, dignity, and transformative solidarity.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mpho Mathebula: Writing – original draft. **Lesego Kgatitswe:** Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no competing financial, personal, or institutional interests that could have influenced the content or outcome of this research. This article is the result of independent scholarly work and reflects the authors' shared commitment to ethical, decolonial, and feminist research practices.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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