

SASA Presidential Address

Higher Education: Power, Practice and Discourse

26 June 2016

Rhodes University

Bomama nabo Tata, Sons and Daughters of Africa and our International Visitors.

Dumelang.

Ngi njabulela o ginamugela to the 23rd annual congress of the South African Sociological Association. It is interesting to welcome you to this University which I understand is in the process of changing its name – this name change is an important undertaking, making Rhodes University an important space for the deliberations of our 2016 congress. Since the Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2014 the higher education question has acquired greater and broader significance than what we saw in the 1976 uprisings. What is noteworthy with the RhodesMustFall, the FeesMustFall, RhodesSoWhite, OpenStellenbosch and TransformWits, movements and emanating debates is the call for uprooting the multiple practices and discourses of power that has maintained coloniality, in a dispensation claiming democratic values and justice.

At the centre of these movements for fundamental change I have found Decolonial theory to be a significant tool as it dismantles the logics that maintain privilege and perpetuate inequality in the South African Higher Education sector. Decolonial theory is good at unmasking the hidden, and making visible and in turn uprooting the various erroneous logics and practices that have rendered the higher education sector unequal and unproductive in its attempts to fundamentally transform and benefit humanity. Unsurprisingly, calls to decolonise the University have led to discomforts, fear and attempts to hold on to what is. These are observed in the many attempts to exclude and silence those interrupting the notion of a well-functioning higher education sector. These exclusion are however historical and clearly visible in the practices and institutional cultures of many of our Universities and Sociology Departments.

In an attempt to illustrate how race, class, gender, nationality and heteronormativity intersect to maintain the status quo, I will draw on personal experiences and broader observations of the higher education sector. I am most interested in highlighting how the unequal practices that maintain patriarchal power and white supremacy are most visible in the continuing precarious position of black woman in the academy – their experiences are an illustration of the enduring erroneous logics of coloniality, that, '*black women are not woman*'¹. Their low numbers in faculty and their minority status in the professoriate is a case in point. Most Universities have one to two black woman professors, with the majority of them occupying lecturer or tutor positions. What is surprising is that black women are the majority in lecture halls. Why are we therefore failing to priorities their entry into faculties as staff and senior members? Can we

¹ Lugones, María. Toward a Decolonial Feminism. *Hypatia* vol. 25, no. 4

continue to claim that they are having babies and therefore? Is it still productive for us to not check our exclusionary practices and discourses on why these numbers remain low?

For example at the 2015 congress - *Contours of Violence: Manifestations, Interventions and Social Justice*, we reflected on the various forms of violence and how it manifests in everyday South Africa. The congress was significant in laying the foundation for the theme and reflections intended for this congress. My paper at that conference was on how structural violence is one of the contributing factors to *why black women are MISSING in the South African Higher Education sector*. Unfortunately but not surprisingly at the end of my talk an incidence ensued with a fellow sociologist that aimed to empty-out the experiences of black woman that I had shared. My interpretation of her actions is that she intended to put me in my place as I was not qualified to speak, most importantly her intervention was an illustration of how unchecked privilege works to continue the status quo. Again her reaction was a question on who is a Sociologist and what is warranted as relevant sociological knowledge. I share this to illustrate that Universities and Sociology departments have a lot of internal work to do to address historical power imbalances, and to acknowledge that, that work will be difficult and uncomfortable.

On the question of what is sociological knowledge in South Africa it is important to note that what was and is still largely considered sociological theory is in line with western practices. Even though in his 1984 presentation to the SASA congress Celliers argues that, *'all men are intellectuals therefore we can say all people are Sociologists and all people ask sociological questions and provide sociological ideas'*. However the notion that all people are sociologists is not reflected in sociological teaching practices and most importantly in what we have for many years considered a suitable sociological curriculum. In a paper on Decolonising Sociology in South Africa, Mangcu argues that black perspectives on race should be placed at the centre of the sociological curriculum. This paper engages with student's calls for a curriculum that speaks to their needs and relevant to their societies. The question is therefore, how do we go beyond the exclusionary epistemologies that have centred the western way of knowing even when 'all people are sociologists'? Is what Mangcu suggesting possible? Are we going to just tinker at the margins of the discipline to make the current questions go away? Or are we going to do the hard work that decolonisation demands?

I hope this congress with its 197 papers will start the process of asking the hard questions and maybe also begin to map the various ways we could begin to check ourselves, relearn and change. It is worth noting that fifty percent of the papers to be presented in the coming few days are by students, this is a significant number and shows the significance of the questions of this congress and the contributions students have to make in the development and remaking of sociology. It is also important to note that twenty percent of papers for this congress are to be presented by international scholars. I hope we will be able to draw from the international experiences they will share as we seek to make a sociology that reflects our society and satisfies our needs.

I thank all who will present their papers during this congress, and I wish all of you an engaged two and a half days.

The 23rd Congress of the South African Sociological Association is now open - let's engage.

SASA President 2015/2016

Grace Khunou