

Review

***Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy.* Reitumetse Obakeng Mabokela, and Zine Magubane (eds.). Pretoria: Unisa Press.**

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The year 2004 immersed South Africans in a vast array of celebratory rituals acknowledging the first ten years of democracy since the nation's first racially inclusive elections in 1994. These rituals took diverse forms, ranging from pageantry to mourning, cleansing, projection into the future, and, most important for me, critical reflections on the giant strides taken into democracy. Such reflections included lectures, documentaries, special journal issues and book publications. Mabokela and Magubane's important collection of essays is one such production.

Of the many buzz-words and clichés of the post-1994 era, “transformation” and “equity” are among those most often heard. This is not just because they are in vogue; they indicate that redress remains an important concern for South Africans. These concerns are multiple and often contradictory. For those formerly cushioned by the apartheid regime, the crumbling of their inner circle of power not only signifies loss or disruption in terms of material gains, but also suggests new ways of configuring and experiencing the world informed by African(ist) and at times womanist realities. From a different perspective, those formerly marginalised see transformation and equity as dynamic forces that will enable access to all sectors of South African society.

Those spaces for transformation and equity placed in the public eye have largely been schools, government departments and, to a limited extent, parastatals and the private sector. Indeed, numerous black faces are seen in all the “right” places. However, it is chilling to note that black faces are almost totally invisible in institutions of higher learning, especially historically white ones. Cushioned by the persistent myth of academia's objectivity and detachment, many outside these institutions focused on the numbers of black students being accepted, perhaps now considering this battle to have been won. Nevertheless, reports continue to show that when it comes to the generation and control of knowledge production - that is, on the lecture stands and in faculty and senate meetings - black faces, particularly those of black women, are far and few between, if not wholly absent.

Mabokela and Magubane's text brings this “black absence” into sharp focus, while contesting the notion of universities and technikons as uncontaminated spaces offering superlative knowledge to the leaders of tomorrow. The stories of black women within these apparently “safe” spaces reveal disturbing subtexts of racism, sexism and anti-transformation agendas within the South African tertiary education sector. South Africa's constitution enshrines the equality of women and reminds us that it is not only black academics whose “voices must be heard”, as the title of this book suggests. It is the voices of black female academics, who have been almost entirely excluded from South African academic history, that must be recovered and heard. This omission refers not only to their physical absence, but also to questions concerning the epistemology, methodology and pedagogical validity of their work.

In brief, *Hear Our Voices* comprises eight chapters by black South African women actively involved in academia, both locally and abroad. The essays, with remarkable, albeit not always consistent intellectual rigour, vary from theoretical treatises that attempt to explain the general historical exclusion of black South Africans (and black women in particular) from academia in general, to personal testimonies of journeys across the bumpy terrain of the South African tertiary education landscape. These testimonies are often engaged and

framed within solid theoretical arguments drawn largely from African realities, deconstruction and womanism. Further contributions include research findings from fieldwork undertaken to render visible the endemic structures that continually marginalise black women within academia. A consistent theme throughout these essays is the systematic effort to show how racism and sexism underlie the debilitating practices that pervade women's experiences within these spaces. The value of this work lies not so much in these "revelations", but in the close investigation of the roots of these processes of disempowerment. These are located in real historical experiences, where the founding principles that have persistently lent credence to this discrimination still contribute to the ethos and institutional cultures of the institutions in which black women find themselves at present.

Through exposing not only current realities in these institutions, but also showing how history and tradition continue to inform them, this text invites us as readers, researchers and policy-makers to call for a more nuanced and inclusive implementation of transformation. It also argues for a more critical reading of the concepts of equity and transformation. Ideally, this should contribute to the development of a holistic academic environment, with more transformative possibilities for all involved – those who produce, administrate and receive knowledge.

It is helpful to ask: exactly what are the hurdles that black female academics face within their spaces of employment? Given the history of the apartheid education system in South Africa, the effect and impact of such hurdles differs depending on whether one is in an historically black university (HBU) or historically white university (HWU), and whether the latter is traditionally liberal and English, or conservative and Afrikaans. Mabokela's contribution shows how HBUs frequently use African traditions to enforce sexism and stunt the progress of women. In such institutions, female academics are often perpetually confined to the lower rungs of the academic ladder. This tends to limit the impact of one's transformative contribution. Promotion opportunities at such institutions are limited. The respondents in her survey identified shifting goal-posts and changing criteria for promotion among the numerous barriers they face. Currently, the primary stipulations are senior academic qualifications (Masters or PhD degree), and a good track record of research publications. But many women struggle in this regard, as they are not empowered to publish. Assistance and mentoring from senior colleagues is generally not forthcoming. Excessively burdensome teaching loads, lack of electronic resources and inefficient library services all contribute towards lack of research progress. Thus a vicious cycle is set in place. Those few women who inhabit senior positions, as a result either of their own efforts, or through tokenist appointments, report further problems with breaking through the walls of resistance presented by male colleagues. Women's ideas only hold credibility if re-articulated by male colleagues. Should women propose alternative ideas to men, opposition is often vehement and alarmingly disproportionate.

In their study of black women in HWUs, Potgieter and Moleko reveal somewhat similar concerns, as well as another set of problems, often fuelled by racist attitudes. Numerous incidents suggest that some white academics assume or suspect that their black colleagues lack capacity or professionalism. Comments such as "you conduct yourself as a real scholar and not an African one" persist (88) [own emphasis]. The implication – that the life-experiences and traditions of African scholars have no relevance in an implicitly white and Western academic environment – is a deeply disturbing one.

In instances where black women excel, they are often seen as singular or anomalous – different from the rest of their group. Window-dressing is also rife in most HWUs. According to Potgieter and Moleko's informants, successful black women scholars are paraded as "rare finds" at conferences, but funding for "behind-the-scenes" work (such as research for journal publication and further study) is rarely forthcoming. Typically, black women are all too often

appointed for purposes of window-dressing and possibly for soothing of guilt; this while the barriers to deep change remain as immovable as ever.

Various other “discreet” forms of racism are seen, for example, in the ways in which black scholars are sometimes assumed to be experts on the “black experience”, regardless of their area of specialisation (an assumption not made of their white counterparts); they are also often delegated to deal with “black” subject matter, or expected to nurture black students. Outcomes of these kinds of marginalisation and discrimination range from withdrawal (which ensures silence) to resignation. Meanwhile, in public reports, black scholars are often presented as being easily poached by the government and private sector for lucrative appointments. A subtle suggestion emerges here: that black people are more likely to be motivated by greed than by an inclination for rigorous academic work.

Instructive in this text is its engagement with institutional transformation beyond the “faces and numbers game”. Another strong point of this publication is its probing of “institutional culture” as a set of encompassing ideologies that influences curriculum, faculty ethos and other forms of knowledge and behaviour. Magubane presents a sophisticated analysis of how the philosophies of the “founding fathers” of the liberal English-speaking institutions sought to strengthen British imperialist culture and the politics of knowledge of the time. The speeches and letters of wealthy educational benefactors such as Cecil John Rhodes and Lord Milner clearly indicate that these men by no means supported the idea of a black equivalent of an English gentleman of letters. Instead, black men were to be educated only for purposes of supplying cheap labour to the mines and other enterprises in order to further enrich the imperial scions in the African continent. Black women did not even rate a mention. The traces of this kind of thinking linger in the present-day academic sector, where all too often, the idea of a black woman working as a capable knowledge producer in the same league as members of the “old boys’ club” is met with both subtle and unsubtle resistance.

On the surface, the most prestigious of these liberal institutions, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and the University of Cape Town (UCT), seemed to support transformation long before it was entrenched as a constitutional clause. Yet the problems experienced by William Makgoba (Wits, 1995-6) and Mahmood Mamdani (UCT, 1996-8) reveal that even these liberal institutions continue to dig in their heels in response to far-reaching transformation. In brief, Prof William Makgoba, an internationally renowned black scholar deeply committed to speedy transformation, was head-hunted by Wits to be its deputy Vice-Chancellor. Some of his new colleagues (mainly white males) accused him of exaggerating certain claims on his CV. In response, Makgoba made public private information in the employment files of his detractors. They retaliated by pressing for his resignation, claiming that such disclosure represented grievous misconduct. The university was torn apart, with claims of racism and reluctance to transform being hurled at the “old guard” of white academics who instigated the affair. Commenting on the saga afterwards, Makgoba wrote:

My story is part of a long chain of orchestrated patterns to destroy African pride, upliftment and achievement ... underpinned by the white belief that blacks are no good whatsoever.... As a consequence ... there will be no black producers of knowledge or intellectuals, no scholars, there will be no black mentors, role models, and philosophers. How can there be, for we [blacks] are cheats, fraudulent and incompetent (1997: 117).

In somewhat different circumstances, but grappling with similar issues of transformation, race, and academic turf in South African academia, Mahmood Mamdani was tasked with designing a foundation course in African Studies at UCT. As Chair of the AC Jordan Centre for African Studies, he presented a syllabus with a strongly Afrocentric perspective, historical grounding and scholarly sources. He was summarily suspended as Chair. The widely

publicised debate that followed marked a moment of engagement with the intellectual (as opposed to structural) challenges of transformation. Mamdani's experience underlines two of the recurring themes in this book: the need for a vigorous drive towards curriculum transformation that presents Africa through the eyes and realities of its people; and a deep commitment to critique of scholarship on Africa presented by Western scholars.

The high profile of these two African academics made them very visible casualties of the English liberal university system. There is little doubt that many more nameless black men and women have suffered similar or worse setbacks, away from the public eye.

Institutional cultures are of course also articulated in the language of those who hold power. Because language expresses specific world views and power relations, the authority to use language lies in the same hands that hold power. As Gqola, Prins and Abrahams reveal in their contributions, language control goes beyond issues of expression and representation; it includes the question of what authoritative texts and worldviews may be used or expressed.

For Abrahams, this problem straddles the domains of prescribed reading texts, methodological choices in research and representational authority. She outlines this struggle in the current historiography of a nameless indigenous woman. Captured as a slave in the Eastern Cape, she died dehumanised in the colonial pageantry of a circus, and was then further exoticised as a specimen in the Western museum culture, dubbed the "Hottentot Venus". Abrahams consciously subverts representational strategies in the current historiography of Sarah Baartman by insisting that her students cover her exposed body during lectures. From a theoretical standpoint, she supports these gestures by drawing on texts by other marginalised subjects, especially black women, to provide supplementary, yet critical and informative material; texts that still fall outside the standard curriculum. Her pedagogical choices and strategies provide a subliminal critique of the foundations of Western academic practices, where everything has to be subjected to the "all-knowing" gaze of the scientist.

Gqola's work centres on similar issues, yet from a slightly different angle. Her experiences revolve around three different institutions at different times in her life. The historically white institutions where she studied (UCT) and lectured (the University of the Orange Free State – UOFS) revealed in different ways how South African academia resists incorporating African subject matter and methodologies as research tools and models for analysis. Resistance to change was most marked at UOFS, where white right-wing students read her empowering and thought-provoking approach to teaching as a sign of ill-preparedness. Because she incorporated subject matter that was not "canonical", she was suspected of "lowering standards". Unlike the other contributors, Gqola examines instances of backlash against black women not only because of their gender, but also because of their sexual orientation. Her essay raises awareness of how transformation in local institutions of higher learning is resisted along the lines of sexual orientation as well, regardless of the explicit endorsement of gay and lesbian rights in the South African constitution. I find Gqola's mention of lesbian identities radical and powerful. She brings into sharp focus those voices most marginalised among black women: those of black lesbians. It is worth noting that the absence of discussion of lesbian identities in the academe elsewhere in this collection leaves a rather "loud" gap in the voices speaking out here.

Prins' essay recounts her attempts to wrest power from white males in order to research what they viewed as their untouchable terrain: German masculinities. She demonstrates once again how the current academic system uses methods of signification that are not only based on Western male authority, but that also entrench the world-view they represent. Empowered by deconstructive strategies, black feminist thought and African paradigms, she manages to shift from the margins to the centre of dominant knowledge production - on her

own terms. Throughout this struggle, she was constantly reminded of how unsuited she was to this task as a non-mother-tongue German speaker. The vision Prins presents is that of the politics of representation. Although copious volumes of manuscripts have been authored by white scholars (with no knowledge of native languages) on black bodies and lives, it seems to be an unspoken rule that the opposite cannot and must not happen! Her struggle lies with her having dared to undertake a project designed to invert this position.

Having outlined the central concerns of this book, I must congratulate the contributors and editors for offering such critical and reflective material on our education system. Writing from the position of the “double Other”, firstly as women and secondly as blacks, they insert the reader into the corridors of power and knowledge production. Marginality for them, as Stuart Hall recognises, offers a space, not of silence, but rather a productive atmosphere outside hegemonic discourses in which to devise a blueprint for the transformation of South African academia. If the notion of a “carefully regulated, segregated visibility” can be celebrated, as Hall suggests, then we can claim that the weight of apartheid and its repercussions has not crushed or silenced black women. Instead, it has left a legacy of a kind of alterity that allows them to be critical of the very foundations on which apartheid and sexist education were based. This said, I still think a Muslim perspective on institutions rooted in Christian education, and a perspective on the heteronormativity of the South African academy, should have been included in this chorus of the voices. While it is claimed that sisterhood is global (a cliché deconstructed by many scholars), it would be an eye-opening exercise to reveal how hierarchies of the oppressed continue to create and reinforce castes among themselves in their struggle for a share of the pie.

These exclusions notwithstanding, if carefully used, this book will be useful not only for classes in gender and education or sociology of education, but for policy-makers as well, especially those more set on numerical than qualitative transformation. This work could enable them to implement more far-reaching changes in the education sector. The critical stance of this book instructs and challenges us not only to seek African ways of knowing as a basis for our teaching, learning and administration, but also reminds us to remain vigilant to how some of our treasured “cultural” values, if not interrogated, could potentially create other forms of marginalisation within our diverse society.

With detailed and informative notes at the end of each chapter, an extensive bibliography for further reference and an index at the end, the book is commendably user-friendly. I am also grateful that the authors have not tried to write themselves into incomprehension by engaging in the fashionable conventions of highly convoluted, yet obscure verbosity of all too many academic texts. Quotations and references have been used sparingly. The catchy essay titles, true to postmodernist writing conventions, are both performative and at times playful. Language usage is fluid, accessible, yet thoroughly academic.

Nevertheless, this collection is marred by a number of typographical and grammatical errors. This occurs all too often when publishers print works by women in developing countries; it is important that when the voices of women and other marginalised groups finally make it into print, that they are supported by competent and professional editorial teams, and that publishers make proper provision for proofreading and checking. Academic and local presses across the African continent, take note!

Reference

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