

Identity and Race at Rhodes University

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Introduction

This presentation is a reflection on the relationship between two issues, my identity on the one hand, and how I perceive my role at this institution on the other. It is a relationship underlined by racial prescriptions that I feel are unjustifiably imposed on me. These prescriptions seek to define my location within this environment and hence define the scope of my operations within the institution. This inevitably necessitates asking the following question to enable me to make sense of how effectively I can interact with my environment. Am I a black academic in a white university or I am an academic in a South African University that is in the midst of a changing society from an exclusive to an inclusive setting? In engaging this question I want to come to terms with this tension that seeks to control and define me, as I believe that failure to do so will inhibit me as an individual and a member of society with a valuable contribution to make.

On Being Black

Beyond the fact that I am classified as a black person physically, which is something that I have internalised simply because of the society and world I was born in, there is no other sense in which I feel that I am 'black'.

This is important to grasp right at the beginning because it enables me to fully put myself in charge, by defining myself rather than letting others subject me to their own definitions.

In a behavioural sense, I refuse to be classified as being black and I want to make an example to indicate how this is problematic in our society. In this country, in a political sense especially since 1994, with the eradication of statutory apartheid, to what end is it to talk about black politics?

Within the milieu of a society undergoing transition from apartheid to a democratic society, in which the underlying understanding is to eschew race, how valid is it to hang on to a black perspective? Most of the time, politicians in this country have argued that there is what is called a black viewpoint, which must be articulated and supported by black people in order to change this society. Now the fact of the matter is that black people cannot be lumped together as having a black viewpoint – politics is about choice and it is limited reasoning and indeed nonsensical to argue for a black viewpoint or concretisation of views.

Clearly, black people have different political viewpoints that are spread across the board present in many political parties with different persuasions, from the right wing DA, to the so-called ultra left of Cosatu, SACP, to militant black nationalists such as the PAC, Azapo to the broad church centrist ANC. And this applies to any other community in South Africa.

A conflation of physical and behavioural attributes has been very dangerously exposed by the fallacy of apartheid, and it is wrong to believe that because black people were formerly oppressed; the way to overcome this would be around their blackness. Why should a black perspective work when a white perspective of things failed?

A Black Academic?

There have been acerbic criticisms of black academics in post-apartheid South Africa, in terms of criticising them for not doing enough to influence societal discourse around critical social, political, and economic issues. The contention is that black academics are sitting back and letting what is called the black project suffer in terms of not challenging white perspectives that are against change.

In the same manner as pointed to above, this kind of postulation of the debate around critical issues in contemporary South Africa is riddled with serious misconceptions.

The assumption that black academics have a unilinear way of thinking is to seriously undermine their integrity in terms of carrying out what is their essential duty or occupation, which is to engage with ideas. By assuming that they have to be always in defence of something robs them of their most potent weapon – which is to critically engage with ideas. The resistance to change in South Africa does not require somebody to be black to critically engage it. This is not the burden of black academics, and there is no reason to believe that black academics have more innate power than anybody else to successfully challenge wrongdoing.

And indeed why should it be taken or granted that what has been happening in this country is in the interest of black academics at all? They, like politicians, have varied views of what is happening in South Africa – supportive, critical, indifferent, non-committal, and so on – and they should have the right to be so. To onerously burden black academics by urging that they have to support this or that viewpoint and prescribing for them how they should react to issues is wrong.

The other side of this issue is the extreme end of the spectrum, which is preoccupied with claiming that black academics are not independent in expressing their views. This is usually brought up when they articulate views that others may not like and when these views coincide with what the government might be doing.

In this manner, once again, black academics are demeaned in that they are assumed to have no power of original thought and they just are nothing but lackeys of politicians.

It is amazing how many black political commentators in this country have to qualify their writing by stressing time and again that they are independent. And it is not exactly clear: what black academics should be independent from? Why is it taken for granted that we are somehow bereft of developing our own ideas? To consistently demand us to be defensive in these manner, saps our energy, which can be better utilised elsewhere.

A White University?

In this institution and environment how should I define myself beyond the imposed view that I a black in a white institution? Rhodes is no different from other South African universities that have the legacy of being a 'white institution' – as designated under apartheid terminology. This is a fact, but to what end should this continued conceptualisation of the institution help me to effectively operate in it in these times of change where there are tensions around making society and institutions more inclusive?

In continuing to define myself as a black employee of a white institution I believe that I am incapacitating myself to come to real terms with what I have to do or be in terms of participating in a changing institution.

Thus, for me to make sense of my role in this institution I have to redefine it so that I do not misinterpret its true nature and what I can do to contribute to it changing. Rhodes is a formerly white university in a state of flux and transition into a truly South African university. By conceptualising this institution in this manner I will be much more able to understand my place in it.

Fossilising it in white terms misses the point, because the danger is that one can go to the extreme and seek to change it into a black institution which once again raises the question: of what use will a black institution be when racially defined and conceptualised white institutions are under pressure to change and have failed to be representative of South African society?

The transition of this university into a truly South African and representative institution should go beyond simplistic definitions that are narrow and can in fact indicate regression.

For example, changing the name of this institution, or replacing its predominantly white administrators with black professionals, cannot in and of itself be of significance. A black senior administration that would implement ideas that call for the creation of an elitist institution that is divorced from societal imperatives, that panders to profit at the expense of excellence and scholarship, would for me mean no change at all.

What am I and what Institution am I in?

The question then is to articulate what I am and how I perceive this institution in which I am. If I am not black and this is not a white institution then what am I and how do I define this institution?

I am first and foremost and academic – and my colour and all that it portends for anybody is a non-issue for me. I am in this environment that is concerned with the generation of knowledge for the betterment of society. In this role, I do not seek to be for or against any position, idea or point of view on the basis of its colour designation. The test of what I believe in as knowledge is predicated on whether that knowledge is based on inquiry, debate and critical thought for it to make sense.

My position in society, which has been designated for me on the basis of colour should not impede or arrest me from articulating positions that are based primarily on my own assumptions. For anything that I engaged in, the test is to engage ideas from the perspective of them being untested to being fact through evidence. In this manner I am unshackling myself from those who would want me to take their side no matter what, on the basis that we share the same physical characteristics. In the same manner, I retain the right to criticise or endorse any ideas without fear of being labeled dependent, just because I do not criticise to the liking of others.

This institution needs change and my contribution will be effective if I adopt a critical distance from prescriptions and avoid dwelling on its past legacy. It needs to change from a previously white-dominated exclusivist institution to a truly representative South African institution.

And in making this contribution I should not be hampered by my physical traits to adopt certain viewpoints in adding to the debate on what it should be. Because I am defined as black in a white institution does not mean that the solution of that white exclusivist problem can be found in blackness. The synthesis of the new institution, which will arise from this one, will have to be unshackled from colour designations of whatever form.

Conclusion

I am an academic in a South African institution undergoing change just as society is – my colour should not be used as an index to trap me to articulate any views because my role as an academic is opposed to any prescribed notions of what I am and should be. I should thus have the independence to critically engage with knowledge, to critique that which I am perceived to be from (black world) and that which is perceived to embody wrong (white world). It is only when I am accorded this space to define myself and interpret the environment in which I am in without any strictures that I believe I can make sense of my location in my true environment and be able to make an effective contribution.