Some issues in affirmative action in higher education in South Africa

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to attempt a surfacing of the assumptions and discourses surrounding the affirmative action debate in higher education in South Africa. The article draws attention to two dominant discourses – the first being that of the patriotic university, and the second being that of the global university. In terms of the first idea, the argument is made that the university should be a mirror of the society in which it operates and therefore, an instrument for realizing its most important policies and ideals. The second insists that the university as an institution arises out of an international commitment to knowledge production, and that this framework provides it with its legitimacy. The article argues that neither of these discourses is able to fully understand and engage with the complexities of affirmative action and its ancillary challenges of racism and racialisation. The first subsumes the university entirely within the dominant politics of the day, whatever they might be, while the second extrapolates the university from the society in which it finds itself.

INTRODUCTION
Fifteen years after the advent of democracy in South Africa, the debate around affirmative action as the vehicle for facilitating the transformation of the spheres of employment, study and opportunity in general, has resurfaced with earnest. While the question of affirmative action has never been entirely absent from the South African stage, a distinct movement has taken place in the way in which it is being approached in the current period. Interestingly, when the South African constitution was being discussed the mood asserted for its development depended on the figure and presence of Nelson Mandela, who sought to include anxious white South Africans in the process of imagining the form and nature of the new South Africa (see Adam 2000; Ross 1997, 216; Giliomee and Mbenga 2007, 412). Central to Mandela’s message was the reassurance to white South Africans that their skills were valued. At the same time, however, the new government had to show black people that it was capable of opening up new doors of opportunity. Based on this, the policies of Black Economic Empowerment and Employment Equity, which lay down stringent rules for the inclusion of black people in the economy and their employment were introduced. This, the first phase of affirmative action, was dominated by the politics
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of negotiation at the formal level of government. The country is now in a second phase of the affirmative action discussion where the locus of the debate has shifted to those who are having to execute the policy. Important in this shift is the challenge of interpreting key policy regulations and particularly the meanings they portend of transformation. Should transformation be about race, class, gender, or the nature of privilege and power – however it is constituted? Do numbers matter? If they do, what kind of numbers is one speaking of? How does one think of transformation in relation to South Africa’s past? How has that past been understood and appropriated for imagining the country’s future?

In the labour arena, the tone for the discussion has been set by senior bureaucrats in government, who argue that the issue is straightforward and requires employers to carry out the ‘letter of the law’. The ‘letter of the law’ – as this pronouncement makes clear – emanates from prescriptions in the Employment Equity Act, which have as their long-term end the appointment of people in proportion to the country’s racial demographic profile. Representivity as a racial-numbers proposition, has, as a result, come to inform its approach. In the higher education sector the discussion has proceeded on similar grounds and has manifested analogous concerns about racial demography. It has also, however, come to include a vigorous debate around the vision and justification for affirmative action policies and so, in addition to representivity, has come to include questions of the nature of redress and disadvantage. Commentators such as the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) David Benatar (2007a; 2007b), Martin Hall (2006; 2007), and Zimitri Erasmus (2006; 2007) as well as a wide range of members of the public have weighed in on the various forms of affirmative action and the intentions behind them. The discussion has been heated and contentious, as it has been particularly in the United States (Sowell 1989).

Strikingly, despite the heat and contention, the discussion in higher education has left many of its participants with persistent feelings of dissatisfaction. Distiller (2007, 1) for example, asks, ‘why is transformation proving to be so difficult ...?’ At the heart of the difficulty, she suggests, are ‘assumptions ... (and) problematic discourses ... ’ (ibid.). But what are these assumptions and discourses? What is meant when commentators such as she talk about ‘difficulty’? This difficulty, it is suggested here, has to do with an opaqueness, a certain level of occludedness in discourse that may be found in other parts of the world, such as, for example, the United States, but which takes distinct form in South Africa. What gives this opaqueness/occludedness its character is its profound racialisation. Whether it is by design, conspiracy, presumption, or even sheer naïveté, racial assumption circulates inside of, is beneath, on top of and around what people have to say and how they behave to such a degree that there is little that is not covered over and determined by it. Extraordinary about it is its naturalization within the interstices of the everyday. It fills every vacant space. It infects these to the point where its contagion is experienced, narrated and analysed as a kind of base-line ontology. It is, in Jansen’s (2009) now memorable phrase, ‘in the blood’. In the process, it is rendered completely unable to reveal itself to itself. It is as it is, just so.
It is the purpose of this brief article to attempt a surfacing of the assumptions and ‘problematic discourses’ in this process of racialisation and to explore their nature. The argument is made in closing that they profoundly limit the horizons of what South Africans can see and imagine. This is especially the case with respect to their ability to imagine a social order which is against a racialised sense of self. Disconcertingly, this is so even in the depths of the academy. The affirmative action discussion is thus, foreclosed by the very terms it is intended to act against. It is suggested, even if this situation and its accompanying dynamics might have resonance elsewhere in the world, that it constitutes a peculiarly South African problematic. This problematic presents itself for scholars of social difference and its production and reproduction as a space from, and out of which one might read:

- the particular sociology of knowledge of the country, including the ontological and epistemological strategies it has spawned, and
- the relationship of the academy to the world of the everyday and particularly the role of intermediaries and interpreters – intellectuals – within this space.

The urgency for doing this kind of ‘reading’ work lies in the need for the revitalization of critical engagement in race discourse in South Africa and other parts of the world where the issues of difference arise. The urgency also arises for South Africans where the need exists for the rehabilitation of the knowledge project of the university as a deeply human project, as opposed to a project of only its ‘guardians’, however those guardians define themselves – be it ‘white’ or ‘European’, or, admittedly less often so, ‘black’ or ‘Afrocentric’.

THE CARTOGRAPHIES OF OCCLUSION

During the apartheid era the ‘sciences’ of making maps and social portrayal – cartography, history, archaeology, anthropology, political studies, for example – succeeded in making invisible the pasts and presents of people of colour. Mapungubwe, for one, known to archaeologists at certain universities in the 1930s, was only allowed to enter the formal arenas of scholarly and public awareness in the closing years of the 1990s. History itself was, and in some ways is that which is manifest in textual evidence and, therefore, on these terms, only begins in South Africa in 1652. The country remains in the complex dynamics of this occlusion in which the production and reproduction of what might be said or not said and how that which is said or not said is managed. In the process, a certain form of encoding takes place in discourse, which operates as, almost, the ultimate basis of marking off groups of people from one another. Race, as the primary symbolic hermeneutic, in which this encoding and marking happens, presents itself as the major object of either signification and/or desire of this process. It becomes, in that irrational space it occupies, a zone of intense confusion. It explains everything and nothing. In its presence everything appears, at once, utterly self-evident, but, upon closer inspection, filled with nothing. It is both everything and nothing.
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The stimulus for this article comes from a long-standing interest in developing an analytic framework for explaining the dynamics around this occlusion and the effects of attempts at both recovering and displacing it in the social sciences. The article, however, against this much larger ambition, is entirely exploratory.

Towards a surfacing of this peculiarly South African occlusion the point that needs to be made is that the nature of the discursive scapes one is looking at is uneven, inconsistent, incomplete, always in formation and, as a result, figured in contradiction. Despite this, it has come to constitute a regimental and disciplinary hold over explanation both within and outside of higher education itself. It is however, its basic, unarticulated and yet naturalized nature that is the fundamental issue to be engaged. It is the unarticulated naturalization, the article suggests, that has come to provide the debate with its essential discursive tension. This tension feeds off its presence but persistent ineffability. Compounding the tension, as with all ideology and discursive manoeuvres, the occlusion that is experienced is not single, nor is it a unity such that one can distil from it principles of coherence (see Foucault 1972, 22). It is, however, held together by presumptive gestures of ‘knowing’ – or being ‘in the know’ – which circulate within particular communities as signals of recognition. The work done by the manoeuvre/s is to endow a setting cartographically, or in the terms of higher education in the political and social demography of subjects. What this mapping does is position, locate, relate and, ultimately, classify. Its outcome is to:

- sometimes provide hard causal explanation for the sociological topos of higher education, how it works, such as why, for example, it is an inclusionary/exclusionary space; or
- sometimes serve as an alibi or strategy of avoidance, as Sheehan (2007, 90) has argued, for other issues that may not be mentioned.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to attempt a surfacing and a deconstruction of these understandings towards a larger understanding of the nature of this discursive platform. The article works with these understandings as an initial attempt to show the nature of their politics for the purpose of clearing the ground in an attempt to move the discussion of rights and justice forward.

Two individual discourses are suggested and are examined below. There are, of course, more. In surfacing these discourses, it is important to make clear that they do not have an empirical status in the sense that they constitute clearly articulated, documented and, critically, even accepted, realities in higher education. They emerge rather as tropes read off the discursive landscape of the sector by the author in the course of his engagement with it. Their status is therefore, entirely propositional.

The first discourse is that the university as a social site is located in and takes its politics from the broader society in which it finds itself, a kind of ‘from the outside-in’ view of how higher education works. The second is in opposition to the first, but co-exists with it and has to do with the emplacement of the South African university.
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in a globalised setting, making it a global and therefore decontextualised enterprise with little obligation to the local context. This is a move that takes its integrity from the supposedly intrinsic character of the university and shapes up as a ‘from the-inside-outwards’ discourse.

Each of these discursive elements is framed in tension constructed as each is in politically and socially strategic ways. The ideas operate off various synthetic solidarities. These solidarities reflect the valences of power existent in the South African society and sometimes take a racial or class character and sometimes loose coalitions formed around beliefs or principles.

The different ideas are presented below in no specific order of precedence.

**DISCOURSE ONE: THE UNIVERSITY AS A MIRROR OF SOCIETY**

An idea promoted in many countries around the world society is that the university should be a mirror of the society in which it operates. This is an idea that has regularly been invoked by both those in power and those outside of it. Those in power want the university to reflect their interests and to be made in their image. Those who feel marginalized decry its antagonism towards them and want the university to change to reflect their own interests.

Historically, the higher education system in South Africa has taken its dominant character directly from this idea. The Extension of Universities Act of 1959, which instituted racialised universities, was premised on the ideal of creating institutions, which would reflect the segregated character of the apartheid society. In the post-apartheid era, a key consideration in the idea of the transformation of the university is that it does not reflect the new South Africa. The important point to make about this idea, whether it is expressed from a position of power or powerlessness, is that the university should take its character from the society in which it is located. The ‘outside’ should be in the university. There are many ways in which this idea is expressed. An indication of how it is currently articulated inside the academy is evident in the published work, both the evidence and the arguments, of scholars. Important about this current articulation is its critique of what the university is not, and that it still resembles the old apartheid past. A random indication of what these are and how they are articulated is listed below. The italicized markings introduced into the texts are those of the author:

- I contend that most PWUs (Predominantly White Universities) are engaging in a barely disguised battle to maintain the status quo. (Raditlhalo 2007, 5).
- ... group identities on campus still reflect the apartheid legacy ... Many students come to Wits expecting to enjoy the pleasures of a “rainbow nation”: a perfect non-racial harmony ... The reality is that “There isn’t ... really this sort of rainbow nation theme here”. In the contrary: “There is a lot of groups: Chinese people with people, Blacks with Blacks (and so on) ... .” (Cross and Johnson 2008, 311).
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- Interviews with medical students here revealed a world divided into these three camps strongly suggesting racially homogeneous settings that mirrored apartheid divisions were the norm of comfort. (Erasmus 2006, 415).

- Socialisation patterns are determined largely during early childhood when young children are socialized into female and male roles and responsibilities. This is then confirmed in the “masculine ethic” prevalent in higher education institutions. (Cassim 2005, 660).

- ... (T)he main barriers to advancement (of people of colour and women) were the unchanged interpretation and meanings associated with definitions such as career advancement and merit; and the work ethic ... . One explanation for this continued trend is that the status quo has been maintained because the power relations have remained intact, and it is these power relations which underlie the stubborn resistance of senior positions to change. (Ismail 2007, 80–81).

- Ultimately, it is a very difficult environment to work in, [and] even more difficult to progress and develop, due to the attitude that, as a non-white academic, you are not going to flourish. I refuse to fight any more, as they are just not going to change – their attitudes remain the same, their beliefs remain the same. I thought they would change for the better. However, I find it extremely difficult to move on within this oppressive environment. They are not happy if you flourish, therefore they refuse to support and mentor you to become the best you can be. I know I can do better and achieve more. However, this Faculty is not helping me achieve my goals. I feel as if I were just a number hired to fill quotas. According to their mindset, as a number, I should not progress or take up any of the more important positions within their Faculty. They still want to pass down their legacy to white males and females, as no visible transformation has taken place. (Anonymous interview) (Department of Education 2008, 62).

- Racism is prevalent on campus, as is male chauvinism. The perception is that this is an Afrikaner institution – for example, the graduation ceremony has not changed. It is assumed that it is a Christian institution (UFS meeting with staff in Department of Education 2008, 68).

- Now, if we all agree and hopefully I believe you do, that, because of their nature and the duty they perform to society, universities are meant to be microcosms of society; meaning that they should model or rather influence the society we should live in; they must act in a manner that society appreciates and; this includes in their endeavours to explain complex things, resolve complex phenomena, provide solutions, foretell the future based on verifiable schema of facts and knowledge, etc.

If we agree and I hope we do, that, universities must perform this duty outlined above then, are you saying implicitly, by your decision, you and the university, that moving into the future, this is how society should resolve racism and acts of racism? (extract from open letter to Jonathan Jansen, David
Outside of the formal literature itself the idea of how the university is constituted amongst individuals and groups who would see themselves as being marginalized is marked by a distinct disillusionment. This disillusionment is expressed in remarks which could go along the following lines:

- This development (it could be an appointment of an academic, a policy decision, a ceremonial occasion, a decision to fund a line of research or one of a long list of routine events that take place in the university) is further evidence of how little this place has changed. It is just the *same old people doing their same old thing*.
- These people (essentially referring to white people) have no understanding of the *changed conditions* in this country. They have no self-consciousness?
- These challenges are to be expected given our history. These people haven’t changed.

The university in this narration is, in its varied registers and inflections, in Althusserian terms, a *determined* site (see Sheehan 2007, 90). It cannot be anything other than what the broader society, in what are deemed to be its constituent parts, its substantive character and its propelling politics, would frame for it.

The idea that the university should be able to be read off, and is legible, in these socially determined terms has a number of entailments. These are that the university as a typically legacy South African institution is:

- unavoidably racist and is centrally implicated in the production and reproduction of racism and inequality;
- characterised by deep differences of power, which have been historically encoded in racial (and gendered) terms;
- encumbered by the difficulty of marking itself off from the society out of which it has emerged,

but that, as an institution of the new South Africa, it needs to look like this new country.

**DISCOURSE TWO: THE GLOBAL SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY**

An idea that remains powerful in the South African higher education landscape is that of the university as an institution which arises out of an international framework – a universalism – against which it finds its most important source of legitimacy. In this argument the university is not a *proper* university until and unless it is recognized as such through the processes and rituals put in place to measure and understand excellence by the global community. These rituals and measures need to be in place...
as *a priori* conditions for the university to operate as a university. The academic, similarly, only has status and standing when recognition is conferred upon him or her through an internationally recognized process. In these terms the South African National Research Foundation’s rating of scholarship based on international opinion is deeply significant. It matters not much what the local everyday environment, dominated by short-sighted politicians seek. What really counts is how the world of peers, preferably those in the international domain, think of what the institution and the individual within it are doing in terms of the internalized habits, rituals and dispositions of what counts as a university and as an academic inside of it. This point of view resonates powerfully throughout the higher education community in South Africa but is often perceived to be the kind of ‘talk’ that distinguishes privileged members of the academy, mainly those who are white.

The nature of the idea of international standing is powerful in both the formal and the informal economy of debate in South Africa. Formally, examples of how the idea is expressed are reflected below:

- ... Who wants the marginalized economic *losers of the world*, (say Africa south of the Sahara) on their team? (Bitzer 2002, 23).
- National governments are increasingly proclaiming education as the key to success or *survival in the global economy* ... and in this respect the goals of education and learning are directly related to the world’s economic needs. (ibid.).
- ... *(T)he knowledge-based society poses tremendous challenges to how South African and higher education institutions operate. These institutions now have to function more and more internationally* ... . Thus, investment in skills, technology and learning is required. (Holtzhausen 2002, 50).
- It is also clear that South African ... higher education institutions are caught up in a complicated situation, namely *globalised versus Africanised knowledge* ... A paradigm shift between people and the environment is needed, determining which side of the pole the chameleon will be. (ibid., 51).
- At present *South African higher education does not have a choice of going global or not; it has become part of the global village* ... . The implication is that for an institution to survive in a global village, it has to be good at everything it does. (Nkopodi 2002, 75).

In addition to the formal literature, the idea of external validation through peer review and operating in the international domain is one of the most critical features of the informal discourse of contemporary research-led academic communities. The nature of this discussion is marked by statements such as:

- the only thing that matters is my standing in the research community. This standing depends on my visibility internationally.
- Research is not about what government likes or not. My academic freedom to both research what I am interested in and to address it in ways that are
recognized as excellent by the international community is the most important issue for an academic.

• Standards are not derived from what the local people think. They come from what the global community values.

• My reputation as an academic is what I have struggled hard to win. The respect of my international colleagues is what I will defend.

The significance of this way of thinking is evident in the quality assurance mechanisms instituted by structures such as the Council for Higher Education through its Higher Education Quality Committee.

**MAKING SENSE OF THE NATURE OF OCCLUSION: TOWARDS THE PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY**

In beginning to assess the significance of these two discourses, the key question that remains relates to the main burden of work of the university – its core business – and what distinguishes it from other kinds of social activity. In assessing this discussion, it can be argued that the tension that is described in the discourses above produces difficulty precisely because the discourses present themselves as finished ideas able to identify, encompass and resolve the full amplitude of the spaces of explanation that they are called upon to address. It is here that their presumptive approaches need to be made clear and apparent.

The presumptiveness of the first discourse is manifold. It begins, however, with the uncoupling of the university from its fundamental mission as a site of knowledge production. In presenting the university as simply a conveyor belt of social relations, it erases the formative socialization experience which the university, through virtually any experience of critical study, makes possible for students. This serves then to extract from the experience of the university that which makes it distinctive. Thereafter it is able to go to the next level of presumption which is that the university is no different to any other agency of public activity. The people who inhabit it are, following this line of reasoning, no different to the inhabitants of any other site of social engagement. They are, in their understandings of the world, in their grasp of relationships between people and between people and the physical world no different to employees in, say, a government public space.

What is the conclusion which this line of reasoning produces? In its contemporary register, essentially articulated by people who feel marginalized, its essential conclusion is accusatory. To the extent that the university is like any other public space, it is as racially susceptible as anywhere else. It is incorporated into the structures and the schemas of the everyday and manifests all the vulnerabilities of the everyday. As a South African place it is, therefore, indubitably a racist space.

What is one to make of this? It seems that what this kind of discourse does is to empty out the space of the university and to fill it with the content and substance of the everyday. This is patently unsatisfactory as a reading of the discourse.
The immediate effect is to ignore the complexity of the social juxtaposition of the university and the wider world itself.

The first view, the outside-in view, explains the nature of the South African university, and particularly its racialised and racist practices, in terms of the university just being another site of social practice in the country. The university is a social mirror of the broader society, made in its image. It is no more or less than any other site of public activity. In its everyday practices it provides a way of understanding the South African society. In this view the subjects of the university are *sui generis* South African subjects. They have, therefore, all the attributes of the everyday subject. Racialised as those subjects are, so, therefore, the university comes to amount to a racialised space.

The second view, the inside-out view, presents itself as a space that is ontologically defined away from and independent from the wider society. It takes its rules and modalities of formation not from the society in which it is located, but from the shaping and habit-forming discourses of the disciplines, which constitute the university. Subject formation in the university thus sets its citizens in this republic of knowledge apart from the citizens of the everyday. The university subject, particularly its high priests, its professors, are thus a community apart, inured from the dross, the contumely, the prejudice, the venality, the myopia of the everyday world. Their internal rules of formation have protected them thus from the world of race and racism. They are above it.

Predictably, the first view seeks, as it does for the wider society, the deracialisation of society. In this view the university is a project which is in need of reform or revolution. The second view denies that it is in need of any kind of reform. It is the outside world that is broken, not the university. It understands its own project best and any form of outside interference is a threat to its own sacred rules of formation. What is more, it is the role of the university to be taking its holy knowledge to the outside. It is the obligation of the university to be reshaping the broken nature of the outside world.

Neither of these views, I suggest, is able to recognise the multiple social contingencies that enter our processes of making meaning, including our own investments in these positions. Neither is able to grasp the distinct and specific position which the university occupies in the modern era, much less the role of the university in the turbulent space of a world which is in rapid and constant change. The first seeks the university to take its mandate from society. It needs to become an institution of patriotism. Without this patriotism it is out of step with developments in society. Mandated by the change that has taken place in society, the university must now reform like the society itself. The second view asserts a non-negotiable autonomy from society for the university. Society, constituted on the authority of everyday knowledge, cannot begin to comprehend the nature of the specialised knowledges, which exist within the university. It cannot, therefore, have any jurisdiction over the university. The university must manage itself according to its own internal rules and regulations.
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Towards a new space

In attempting to move to a more self-conscious theoretical position (one which is aware of how we take position within the structures and narratives of our own social analyses), it seems that we need to be developing a social criticism that is profoundly alert to the shifting relationship between cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination and that can deal with the dominant rationalisations of self and other. Such an approach would need to be aware of how much the ways in which we speak, our theories and languages of description are mobilisable for projects of dominance, whatever the nature of dominance might be.

In the South African context this self-consciousness must involve the capacity to reflect on the different ways in which the hegemonies of race and class are reinstated into the university and to open up ways of seeing that take us beyond the stereotypical ways in which difference is understood. It must seek to unmask the arbitrary ways in which the mark of the stereotype is assigned to each of us, particularly the racial, class, cultural and gender values that are supposed to define who we are. It must assist us in exploring new productive spaces and modalities in thinking so that we might confront those processes of social and individual meaning-making which animate our lives – culture – and to recognise how those processes, in their innovativeness, continually produce new forms of oppression and emancipation and how, and this is an important point, each of us is implicated in these processes. From such a position we might develop a project of emancipation that is fundamentally conscious of the complex ways in which we are positioned and position ourselves. We can begin to see each other in our heterogeneity and to deal with, and not disavow, the proclivity within us to ‘other’ as we socially identify. The power of such an approach is to force us to realise the limitations of consensual and collusive theories of community embodied in notions of race, class, gender, culture and so on.

In this sense the university has to foreground its mission of working in the public good. It has to present itself, consciously, against sectional interest. In this sense it has to embody the idea that it is for all. But in doing this it has to be acutely conscious that it is not just an ordinary service provider of a public good. This is where the first discourse misunderstands the university. In bringing reform into the university, on the terms of the dominant social order, apartheid as in the past and now post-apartheid as in the present, the mistake is made of seeing the university as a space of instrumentality. All that is really required of it is that it needs to come to look like the broader society in which it is located and to serve its purpose. The university is, however, much more. It is supposed to be a space of intense self-reflection and critique. In this sense it really cannot look like the society in which it finds itself. The public good interest that it serves cannot be the same, definitionally, as the public good imagined by political power. It has to offer a way forward in modelling for society what it means to be thinking and acting in the public good in ways that exceed party political imaginations. The citizen of the university needs to be guided by this special sense of mission and identity. It is this then, that also helps us understand
where the trap in the second discourse lies. This second discourse believes that it has already discovered the content and substance of the model which needs to be offered to the wider society. It does not see, tragically however, how this model of academic citizenship it offers is an *alibi* for the preservation of white privilege. It cannot see how its declared autonomy is an undeclared defence of whiteness, because this is how the forms of knowledge and its entailed deportments in the university have been appropriated. The tragedy is that the autonomy that is being sought is unable to problematise the history of its own formation. In defending this autonomy the university is defending its right to stay out of questions of the public good, all the public. This is where one wants to argue that the major legacy issues of race have been inadequately addressed. This second discourse cannot see how the substance of what is taught, the modes of deportment of academic life that have been projected as worthy and credible, have histories and how the university as an institution has struggled over the last 150 years of its contemporary history struggled to realise its dream and mission of serving the public good. It struggles to see, for example, how universities all over the world, and South Africa is a good example, have actually and normatively operated on the outside-in principle and how the institution in this country has been actively recruited behind the project of white hegemony. The denial of access to women and people of colour until the early 20s is an important lesson to be confronted. But so is, historically, the appropriation of the disciplines behind the patently racist projects promoted in fields such as anatomy, archaeology, history and many others (see Dubow 2006). And, currently, the incapacity of many disciplines to develop self-conscious critiques of the ways in which their fields of knowledge have been corralled as ‘European’ and ‘white’ and set against other understandings of how the physical and psychical world can be explained (see Connell 2007). When students are inducted into disciplines these are not inconsiderable realities they need to be helped to come to understand. In these terms, the multiple marks of the very society that this discourse seeks to eschew are embodied, unacknowledged, within their discourses.

It is suggested that one of the major reasons for the unsatisfactory nature of the debate on affirmative action, apart from the usual issues of redress and social justice, racism and meritocracy, is that it is unavoidably entangled with the knowledge dissemination and knowledge production objectives of the university – the epistemic relations and methods of enquiry it has helped to generate. The unarticulated issue that hovers in the background of the debate, both in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, relates to the cultural skein that has come to envelop the knowledge project of the university. It is here that one might argue that the fundamental purpose of the university – its epistemic obligation to expand the boundaries of knowledge to allow human beings to transcend their socially defined senses of self – is in a state of weakness. The virtue of this project is its democratising capacity and potential for revealing and bringing into the public sphere the modes through which knowledge is made, appropriated and deployed. Its weakness, stark here in South Africa, is an unarticulated racialisation that has come to surround, accompany and characterize the
forms of knowing, sharing and using knowledge. It is not simply a question of white domination of the university as a demographic issue – it is that at some levels – but a deeper contrivance that the civilisational gift of the knowledge project represents a route to transcendence – in the sense of having the capacity to recognize boundaries around oneself and how those boundaries are constituted – which is epitomized by what are assumed to be white dispositions, cultural attributes, and, in the end white standards. The unarticulated challenge that affirmative action thus constitutes is not just therefore, that of inhabiting the university with people of colour, it is about appropriating the transcendence it makes possible as a consummately human and open-ended gift to humankind, and not, critically, a ‘white’ gift. It is this issue that ultimately stands in the way of the promise of the university. Until this basic gloss – the instantiation of transcendence as an essential white ontology – is uncovered and made apparent to itself, the university is anything but a university. It is simply a cultural machine for exclusion.

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