# The Arhythmic Pulse of Transformation in South African Higher Education

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## Abstract

This paper makes the argument that South Africa is an important site for understanding how universities are engaging with the questions of change and transformation. It argues that what it means to be human is a more intense question in South Africa than it is in most other parts of the world. It tries to show how this theoretical space is being opened up in the South African academy and uses the experience and examples of key interventions within the higher education sector such as the new Reitz Centre at the University of the Free State, and the Centre for Non-Racialism and Democracy at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. By working through the examples, the article makes the argument that these new initiatives are important for scholarly efforts elsewhere in the world on the question of human development. This is especially so in the emphasis South African universities are placing on the question of race. The article argues that the challenge facing this South African effort is its relative neglect of questions of epistemology and forms of knowledge that fall outside the mainstream Western model.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, transformation, race and racism, epistemological shifts, universities and social change, education policy

## Introduction: Something Amiss in the Modern University?

A small group of scholars around the world has begun an important discussion about the role of the university in the issues of social, cultural and economic progress (see for example Santos 2007). The central issue the

scholars raise is the meaning of the term 'development' and the role of the university in relation to this. Escobar, one of the more prominent scholars within the discussion, argues that the impetus that

> moved me to write about the 'invention of development' … in the late 1980s is still very much there: the fact that, as I see it, development continues to participate in strategies of cultural and social domination, even if academics might have a more nuanced view today of how these strategies operate (Escobar forthcoming: 1).

The view of Lessem and Schieffer (2010b:3) is that there is something 'amiss' in the modern university. They suggest that there is no 'integrity, authenticity, or indeed 'alternity', in the social 'scientific' education that, say, a Senegalese or Syrian receives' (Lessem & Schieffer 2010a:1-2). The concern that this group of scholars expresses is that universities, in general, promote a narrow view of what kinds of human knowledge is valuable (the epistemological question) and a similarly narrow view of the ideal human subject (the ontological question). Against this, what is needed argues Andreotti (2010:5) is a 'reconceptualisation of knowledge and learning in educational policies and practices in contemporary 21st century societies' that is inclusive, respectful of all our social and cultural differences and which is aware of the dependent relationships humans have with their wider natural and physical environment.

Because of the interest of these scholars in questions of interdependence among people, and among people and their natural environment, I refer to them as 'epistemic and ontological ecologists'. Human development for them is a much deeper question than simply economic development. They are interested in an understanding of development which is transformative. Central to this transformation is human beings' understandings of themselves and their interdependence, and an awareness of the power of knowledge in processes of transformation. They are critical of forms of knowledge which lead to hierarchy and notions of superiority and inferiority.

In this article I argue that South Africa is an important site for understanding how universities are engaging with the issues raised by the ecologists, particularly as they pertain to social inclusion. In comparison with

most higher education systems elsewhere in the world, there is a vibrant discussion underway around transformation and what universities should be doing for changing the world. I suggest that South Africans are making an important contribution in the areas of social difference, and especially that of race. South Africans are also making important contributions in the areas of teaching and learning (Bradbury 2010; and Morrow 2009). Their approaches are novel in two respects, in opening up the questions of conceptual access and in developing critical new approaches to the mediation of knowledge. It is, however, South Africa's contribution to the theoretical areas of ontology and epistemology that is the focus of this paper. It tries to show how this theoretical space, which the South African academy is opening up, is important for the epistemic and ontological ecologists. But it also argues that the area which the social ecologists have made their strength, an appreciation of the knowledge systems of the 'other', remains a major challenge for South Africa. South African contributions, I suggest, are dominated by ideas of modernism and modernity. They have difficulty in working with knowledge forms and knowledge claims which fall outside the particular modernist imagination. 'Development', as a result, is understood almost entirely in economic terms.

In light of these opening comments on development and of the questions of what it means to be human and the knowledge forms which will promote human development, it is important to assess the South African contribution to the discussion. How are the South Africans contributing to the epistemic and ontological ecologies debate? Are they in tune with or in a different step to the discussions that are taking place elsewhere in the world? What are they doing that is not being done elsewhere in the world? What are colleagues discussing elsewhere in the world which the South Africans would urgently need to be looking at or are not emphasizing sufficiently?

It is important, in opening up the discussion of transformation, to make clear that the essay does not deal with the discussion of racial representivity, particularly as it is understood demographically in South Africa. This it is acknowledged here is the primary interest of many in the discussion and is addressed in contributions such as that of the DoE (2008). The purpose of this contribution is to focus on what the major actors in the landscape are thinking, with respect to the key conceptual issues which

confront them. The essay, in these terms, is a review of what these conceptual foci are.

## The South African Development Conundrum – Is it Economic, Social or What?

There is widespread agreement amongst many in South Africa that the society is in difficulty. In terms of the Gini Co-efficient, the standard indicator of economic equality inside a country where 0 indicates complete equality and 1 complete inequality, the measure for the South African population in 1987 was 0.66. Out of 57 countries included in an international assessment at that time, South Africa came last (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 433). The country performs as poorly on a range of other well-being indicators. These reflect the level of the social challenge confronting the country. Race and class are central. After 1994, inequality within the white population remained basically unchanged but had increased respectively by 21% and 17% amongst those classified African and coloured. In 2004 three-fifths of African people were living below the poverty datum line with some 4.3 million, 9% of the population, living on less than a dollar a day (Giliomee & Mbenga 2007: 433). In 2010, in terms of the Gini Co-efficient, South Africa became the most unequal society in the world (Nzimande 2010: 1). Unemployment figures are high with estimates veering from 20% to 40%. With a population approaching the 50 million mark (49.9m) 22% are deemed to fall below the poverty line (*The Sunday Independent* 19 December 2010:19). Six million individuals pay 95% of the income tax revenue earned by the state (Bishop 2010:21). The number of individuals on one form or another of social welfare is 14,000,000. The income profile of the formal workforce is skewed by low-incomes. Only some 6,700,000 of the formal workforce falls in the middle-income category of R 50,000 to R 300,000 per annum, with more than half of this category of workers earning less than R 120,000 per annum. The bulk of the country's workers falls in the low-income category, earning under R 50,000 per annum. Recent reports suggest that half of credit-active South Africans are classified as being 'impaired' in credit terms, i.e. they have payment statements reflecting arrears status on three or more accounts or have credit judgements against them (all the

statistics reported above are drawn from Bishop 2010:21). Linked to this learning achievement at the school and the university level is low (Lehola 2010:21). Drop-out rates in the educational system are high:

> A large proportion of children fail to pass Grade 7 by the age of 15 and Grade 9 by the age of 17 years. Estimates also suggest that 3.3 million of young people in the age category 15 to 24 were not attending educational institutions and had not completed their secondary education. More than a third of them cited poverty as the reason for the condition in which they find themselves (Lehola 2010:21).

The quality of life for most people in the country as a result of these conditions is dire. Two statistics reflect the gravity of the situation. The first is that life expectancy at birth in 2010 was estimated to be 51.5 years, compared to the figure of 55.8 years that it had been in 2000 and into the high sixties ten years before (*Sunday Independent* 2010: 19). These mortality rates reflect the catastrophic impact of HIV and AIDS on the country. Alongside this, the findings of various tests of South African children's literacy and numeracy reveal what can also only be described as a national crisis. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study Repeat (TIMMS-R) placed Grade 8 South African learners 44% below the mean scores of all participating countries. South African pupils, moreover, came last in the list of 39 countries and attained a mean score of 275 out of a possible total of 800 marks (Howie 2001:18). South Africans, using these statistics are dying young, without ever, moreover, as benchmarking tests suggest, having mastered the basic skills of reading and writing. The problem is clearly more than simply economic. It is a problem, as Amartya Sen (1999:14) would say, of human flourishing. It is fundamentally economic, but it is evident also in anti-social behaviour. Many young South Africans have issues with violence.

These descriptions indicate clearly that the country is in a development crisis. While it is doing well at some levels, it is confronted by the challenge of how to put its institutions and its resources to use in stemming the worst manifestations of poor education, ill-health and a general sense of social malaise. Against this background, how the country and its universities are coming at this crisis is important. There are innovations

taking place in the system which place it at the forefront of the higher education and transformation discussion. In some respects, as will be suggested below, South Africans are opening up the discussion of higher education and change in ways which are distinctly absent and certainly muted in the rest of the world. The contribution it is making with respect to race is crucial. At the same time, there are embedded difficulties inside the system which limit its capacity to fully recognise and take advantage of developments which are taking place elsewhere in the world.

## The Institutional Transformation Response in Higher Education – An Activist State?

Confronted with this social landscape, how is the South African higher education sector, its administrators in the state, its intellectuals and the universities, approaching the crisis and why is it important for the world to pay attention to what is happening here? It is important because the urgency of the question is possibly distinctive in higher education world-wide. There are few higher education systems anywhere in the world where the questions of development are so much part of the everyday experience of what it means to teach and work in a university. There are few systems, moreover, where the universities and those who govern, including the state, and those who teach within them are being called to take positions around the complex questions of modernity, culture, and knowledge and its role in creating a new social system. There are few systems where the state is playing such an activist role in the discussion of where the universities ought to be going.

What then is the value of this intellectual and administrative ferment? One view, that of Irish academic Helena Sheehan (2008), is that it has amounted to very little. After extended study of the approach to transformation in South African universities, Sheehan (2008:68) concluded unhappily that she could not 'avoid a sense of massive disappointment and defeat' after reading extensively and visiting many campuses across the country. She asked, plaintively, what 'had happened to whole atmosphere of being challenged to reconceptualise the world and change it. Where had it gone?' (2008). The jury is out on whether the conclusion to which Sheehan comes is correct. In the wake of the Ministerial Committee into Transformation in Higher Education Report (MCTHE DoE 2008), the

country found itself fiercely divided with many echoing the kind of comment that Sheehan had made and that was contained in the MCTHE Report, and others deeply offended by what they saw as unsubstantiated allegations of racism (see HESA 2010; and UKZN 2010).

There are two major kinds of initiatives that have emanated out of the South African higher education community in relation to issues of development of which the world needs to be aware. The first relates to issues of discrimination, the legacy issues of racism and social cohesion, and the second to teaching and learning. This paper, as indicated above, will concentrate on the first.

With respect to the issues of discrimination, the South African higher education system and its oversight structures are awash with initiatives. These initiatives began, of course, with the very inception of the new South African state in 1994 when the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) was appointed in 1994 to make proposals as to how the sector could be transformed. Since then, over the last 12 years, the sector has been the subject of intense policy and academic review[1]. In reporting in 1996, the NCHE made several important proposals. These related to massification, responsiveness of higher education to its social context and increased institutional co-operation. This report was followed by a White Paper (1997) and a Higher Education Act (1997) in which the principles of equity and redress, democratization, effectiveness and efficiency, *inter alia*, were stressed. Out of these came key innovations such as the Institutional Forum, a structure established in each university, for the purpose of monitoring and advising universities' councils on question of transformation, and, in 1999, a

[1] See *inter alia* Badsha and Harper (2002); Bunting (1994); National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) Report (1996); Department of Education (1996); Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2000; 2004); Republic of South Africa (RSA) (1997); Beckham (2000); Cloete, Muller, Makgoba and Ekong (1997); Cooper and Subotzky (2001); Cloete and Bunting (2000); Cloete, Bunting and Bunting (2002); Thaver (2002; 2003); Mji (2002); Van Heerden, Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2001); Imenda, Kongolo and Grewal (2002); Taylor and Harris (2002); Cloete, Pillay, Badat and Mehojo (2004); CHE (2004); Bundy (2006); Steyn and De Villiers (2006); Jansen *et al.* (2002).

Council for Higher Education (CHE) which was established to advise the Minister of Education on a broad range of issues relating to higher education. The first and most crucial piece of advice provided by the CHE focused on the questions of the size and shape of the sector. This report provided the framework for the restructuring of the sector. In terms of it, a number of institutions were closed, merged and/or re-organized (see Jansen *et al.* 2002).

After the size and shape review process the state initiated a Ministerial Committee on Progress towards Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions. This move was in response to events that took place at the University of the Free State in February of 2007 when a group of four young white men harassed five black custodial members of staff (see Soudien 2010). With the publication of the Ministerial Committee's Report (DoE 2008), a whole range of other activities has been initiated. Amongst the most important of these was a national summit for higher education convened in April 2010 by the Department of Higher Education and Training, at which the key issues of transformation were discussed. The Summit itself generated a slate of proposals, the most important of which was the establishment of a Higher Education Stakeholder Forum as a consultative body for the Minister (Pampallis 2011).

The Minister of Higher Education and Training also recently appointed a task team to develop a 'charter aimed at affirming the importance of human and social forms of scholarship' (MacFarlane 2010:42). The leader of this task team, Professor Ari Sitas, writing to universities ahead of visits of the team to their campuses, explained its aims:

> this is an opportunity to create a powerful, positive, affirmative statement on the humanities and social sciences, and to emphasize the role of the humanities in creating responsible, ethical citizens. This charter would serve to define a post-apartheid trajectory of scholarship sensitive to South Africa's immediate and long-term developmental needs as a key society in Africa and the 'global south' (Sitas 2010).

In assessing the significance of these moves made by the state, one needs to remember how intensely the state is driving a human capital agenda.

Despite everything else that the state is, the higher education sector has a state department which is intensely involved in arguing for a humanist orientation to the work of the universities. The Minister himself has argued that

> now is the time for the teaching of and research in social sciences and for the humanities to take their place again at the leading edge of our struggle for transformation and development (Macfarlane 2010:42).

## The Intellectual Response to Transformation in the Universities – Two Steps Forward for Humanity…?

In addition to these state initiatives, a number of other developments have occurred at the national level. An important discussion was facilitated by the Academy of Sciences around the future of the Humanities in South Africa in 2010 (see www.assaf.org.za) as part of its study on the state of humanities in South Africa. Higher Education South Africa (HESA), an association of vice-chancellors, has also established a focus group to look at the question of transformation in the sector. But it is within the universities that important institutional, programmatic and research moves have existed for a long time and new ones are being made. A wave of appointments of new vice-chancellors, beginning with Salim Badat at Rhodes University in 2007 also brought a sense of urgency to the question of what universities could be. At his inauguration Max Price at the University of Cape Town committed his principalship of the University to transformation (see Price 2010). Russell Botman, at the University of Stellenbosch, similarly, initiated what he called the 'Pedagogy of Hope' campaign at his inauguration (Bisseker 2010: 47). Malegapuru Magkoba at the UKZN instituted, in response to the MCTHE and a governance reflection process at the University, a campus-wide consultation around transformation and the production of knowledge (UKZN 2009).

Existing critical initiatives within the country include the seventeen year old History Seminar at the University of the Western Cape. A pioneer in the project of reimagining the humanities in South Africa, the seminar was established in 1993 in the wake of responses to the hegemony of European and North American frameworks of analysis (Weintroub 2010:46). Explicitly

post-colonial in its approach it sought to put the question of 'how to do history' squarely on the table. The historiographies of domination, it argued, were incapable of opening up the questions of the making of the complexity of human subjecthood. The next important development was the establishment of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), an interdisciplinary institute in 2001 at the University of the Witwatersrand (Posel 2002). An early important intervention of WISER was to host a conference on 'The Burden of Race? "Whiteness" and "Blackness" in Modern South Africa'. Since the establishment of WISER, important new initiatives have come into being at the University of Western Cape with the establishment of the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) in 2006, a successor structure to the Institute for Historical Research, and the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town in 2010. Significant about the newer institutes is their interest in the role of the humanities in dealing, as at CHR 'with questions of war and the everyday, cities in transition, violence in transition … and aesthetics and politics' (http://humanities.uwc.ac.za) and at HUMA with what it means to be human. Similarly intentioned research interventions have been established at the University of Stellenbosch where a symposium on being human was initiated by the retired theologian and scholar, John de Gruchy.

Six important institutional developments worth noting in the country are taking shape at the Universities of the Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Witwatersrand, Cape Town, the University of South Africa and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. What is significant about these interventions is their explicit engagement with the legacy questions of the country, particularly those of race. The oldest of these is iNCUDISA, the Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies of Southern Africa at the University of Cape Town. Its central purpose is framed as being to 'conduct … and publish … research which aims to build capacity to meet the challenges of diverse societies through research and education' and 'aims to further social justice and deepen democracy' (http://incudisa.wordpress.com/about/).

Three new initiatives which have come into being in the last three years are the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity (CCRRI), based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Apartheid Archive Project at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Centre for the Advancement of

Non-Racism and Democracy (CANRAD) at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). The primary interest of the CCRRI is to study 'race thinking and changing identities', for the purpose of understanding and discussing 'the epistemological, moral, cultural and other bases for perceptions of human diversity and difference' (http://ccri.ukzn.ac.za/). Its most recent symposium focused on the continued use of apartheid's racial categories in the supposedly post-race constitution of the new South Africa. The Apartheid Archive Project is a research initiative which has as its main objective 'examin(ing) the nature of the experiences of racism of (particularly 'ordinary') South Africans under apartheid and their continuing effects ... in contemporary South Africa' (http://www.apartheidarchive.org). An off-shoot of the project has been the creation of an antiracism network which has drawn the leading anti-racist intellectuals in the country into a semi-formal relationship which has actively opened up questions of race and social difference and the role of higher education in the undoing of the country's racial legacy (antiracism@ lists.wits.ac.za). CANRAD was established in 2010 as an explicit project of the University's Vice-Chancellor and has as its focus the building of a non-racial orientation to knowledge production and the ideal of advancing transformation through fostering difficult dialogues. The youngest of the initiatives is the establishment of the so-called Reitz Institute at the University of the Free State (UFS). In the beginning of 2010 the UFS announced its intentions of establishing an International Institute for Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice on the site of its Reitz Residence where four young white men abused five black custodial members of staff (http:///www.ufs.ac.za/dl/userfiles/Documents/00000/128_eng.pdf). In describing what the Institute would do one of its founding documents explained that

> it is vital to the transformation of universities in South Africa that the scholarship of teaching, research and public engagement confronts the histories, policies and practices that have shaped and constrained the intellectual and social mandates of these places of higher learning. In various ways, all of the 23 South African universities are products of colonialism and apartheid; their staffing profiles, student bodies, curricula and assessment practices bear the traces of their

racialised histories (http:///www.ufs.ac.za/dl/userfiles/Documents/00000/128_eng.pdf).

Initiatives that have curricular implications but which draw from the same impetus to further an engagement with the questions of social difference and particularly the country's racial history include the Grounding Programme at the University of Fort Hare, the Project for the Enhancement of Research Capacity (PERC) at the University of Cape Town and the South African Research Chair Initiative (SARCHI) in Development Education at UNISA. The Grounding Programme was born out of a deep process of introspection at the University of Fort Hare about the nature of the curriculum in a country beset with developmental challenges. After intensive internal consultation the University made the following commitments, based on the objectives of the Grounding Course (University of Fort Hare 2007):

- To provide UFH undergraduates with a critical and de-colonising framework in which to see and understand the world, the Continent and themselves.
- To provide a progressively rigorous, responsible and compassionate basis for gaining and applying their knowledge and energies to the world.
- To provide students with a deep understanding of the principles of ubuntu, democracy, liberation and decolonising knowledge.
- To provide UFH students with the confidence to engage in lives of authenticity and dignity linked to the creation of dignified lives for others.
- To provide students with a roadmap about how to use the University space to consolidate their own access to meaningful knowledge, including inculcating a reading and writing culture within the university.
- To provide students with an experience of building a diverse, caring and intellectual community of purpose.
- To provide UFH students and academics with an experience of diverse and humanising pedagogies, as a basis to both support and demand wider curriculum renewal in the University.

Other important initiatives include the PERC programme at the University of Cape Town which grew out of an initiative in 2008 of the Centre for African Studies with Africana Studies at Brown University and the Centre for Caribbean Thought at the University of the West Indies to ground the work of staff members at UCT in the problematics of Africa. With funding from the Carnegie Corporation UCT initiated an innovative set of projects among scholars from the entire spectrum of faculties and disciplines in the Universities which had as their objective the revisioning of the epistemological foundations of their disciplines. The project spawned a number of research initiatives underpinned by the ambition of producing '*new knowledge, which is transformative in that it is appropriate to our position in SA, on the continent and in the world*' (http://www.researchoffice.uct.ac.za/research_development/perc/).

The SARCHI initiative at Unisa is a new initiative which has drawn the interest of scholars from a range of countries. One of its fellows, Howard Richards (2010:2), picking up on his engagement with the chair-holder, Catherine Odora-Hoppers, explains that the goal of the initiative is to 'humaniz(e) modernity', of making

> the university a celebration of what humans are and have been, and will be. Bring modernity's other into the curriculum, not to assimilate modernity's other into the categories the disciplines already have, but to transform the curriculum, transform research, transform community engagement.

Additional developments worthy of mention include the Global Citizenship Programme at the University of Cape Town which has a somewhat more internationalist orientation but which, like the Grounding Programme, seeks to reconstitute the challenge of development in African terms. The Vaal University of Technology is also developing an initiative for the curriculum drawing on the UFH experience.

As this brief review indicates, the sector has significant sites of innovation. These tend to be clustered in particular universities. What is happening at universities beyond this group of institutions is also not inconsiderable.

## But What Do All These Amount To? A Kind of Conclusion

What does it mean, for an ecological sensibility, to have a state which is interested in the humanities? What does the intense interest in the human subject in the South African academy amount to?

The state is clearly a many-headed structure. Its preoccupation is around the challenges of human capital and its concern that universities are not generating sufficient high-level skills for the economy. Whether this makes it, at its base, an essentially instrumentalist state is open to debate. While it is conditioned by a human capital view of what is important for higher education, its awareness of the contested nature of the university and its support for a humanist orientation is deeply important. Strategically, for how universities position themselves, the kinds of levers and influences they can call upon in re-imagining for themselves the position of the state with respect to the humanities is critical. It opens up lines of discourse within the universities that makes the discussion of what the university is for so much more fluid. Even if the dominant approach of the state is a narrow instrumentalist one, the fact that key leaders within the state can see the significance of the humanist imperative is a resource from which South Africans should draw strength. The point to make is that the state is not homogeneous in its address around the questions of development.

Now, what about the discussion around what it means to be human? There is clearly need for a much closer reading of the interest that the intellectual community in South Africa is showing around the question of what it means to be human. Such a reading would need to go into the existing texts, the ones that are aired here and others, such as the journals and books on the subject. But there are already in the founding documents of institutions signs of where the emphases and limits and possibilities of this discussion lie.

The key contribution that the South African discussion is beginning to make is at the level of identity, and particularly the racial inflections placed on identity. This is a very important discussion. The way in which it is unfolding here has deep relevance for the rest of the world. The central relevance lies in the systematic way in which the various projects in the country are beginning to reveal and come to terms with the whole etymology and formation of racial subjecthood. Key moves which have been made in this analytic approach include the idea of racial construction. Working with

the idea of the social origins of categorical terms such as race and the ideological instantiation of these into the world of the everyday, and the range of projects (from the History Seminar at UWC to the Racial Categories Symposium at UKZN), the preoccupation of the South African discussion is with how this process of social construction works. Key advances made in this discussion, ones that have global significance, are the hard-won insights that race as a concept has only that value which society wishes to place on it and that nothing about it, outside of this sociology of imposition, is of inherent consequence.

The politics of the imposition of race, however, are of profound significance. The importance of this development that scholars are making around the issue of race is not sufficiently recognised, even inside the country. Inside the country, as elsewhere in the world, there remains the inevitable defaulting to the naturalisation of race and all the consequent inferences read off this naturalisation. The politics of naturalisation are essentially what projects such as CANRAD and the Reitz Institute seek to engage with. Deliberate reflections of this are being undertaken at centres such as the CHR.

Jonathan Jansen, at the UFS, for example, has come to understand the role of the university in this process. He argues that the university is the pre-eminent beneficiary of the extra-ordinary contribution that the Enlightenment has made to modern civilisation. At the heart of the Enlightenment, which fed into cultural, religious and social discourse in Europe during the 17$^{th}$, 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ centuries, was fundamentally the idea of using knowledge to widen the boundaries of human inclusion, to expand the range of those for whom the label 'human' would come to apply. He recognises how significantly it is to the modern intellectuals and their universities that this burden is effectively entrusted. He recognises also, in the politics of naturalisation how, historically, the higher education system in South Africa has betrayed this mission entrusted to it by history. He is aware of how, instead, it has chosen to turn its face away from this almost sacred mandate and, instead, placed itself at the disposal other agendas. In these terms, the contribution of the South African focus on the human subject is deeply important to the ecologies discussion. It is, however, still a limited ontological discussion.

## Conclusion

Unlike the developments that have taken place elsewhere in the world, with the exception of a handful of provocative projects in the country, such as the SARCHi Chair initiative at Unisa, the CHR project at Unisa, the Grounding Programme at UFH, and the PERC initiative at UCT, the questions of epistemology remain under-explored in the country. It is here that the South African discussion demonstrates its under-developed state. While recognising the limits of racial thinking as the South African discussion does, it remains inside a limited view of the complexity of the subject. This subject continues to be interpreted through the lenses of what Santos (2007) has described as 'abyssal thinking'. The subject is identifiable, interpretable and ultimately dialogically positioned within a view of what it means to be human that is discursively delimited. It lies on the 'right' side of the abyss. This 'right' side is the example provided by Europe. The 'European' subject is developed and has achieved 'civilised' status. On the other side lies a wasteland from which the Western world has already moved. This perspective has immense difficulty entering the world of meaning and the much more nuanced ideas of the individual on the 'wrong' side of the abyss. It has difficulty in recognising the nature of its own perspective of the world and so, profoundly, failing to recognise its own epistemological horizons. The South African discussion, in these terms, is strong and productive to the ontological dimension of the ecologies discussion. It is opening up the question of race to show how deeply problematic hegemonic understandings of race are. But it is weak and under-developed in relation to the epistemological. It makes a powerful contribution to thinking identity into a new and truly post-racial space but it has yet to explore the complexity of a post-racial world. It has much work to do to pick up what the ecologists mean when they talk of the reconceptualisation of the university. It is in going in this direction, it is suggested here that great promise lies for the South African university. This promise is in coming to terms with the full inheritance of understanding and insight that its racial ontology inherited from its apartheid past – that it is now trying to undo – denied it. Much has to be learned yet. This learning will have major implications for what the university does in what it teaches, how it teaches and how it imagines learning might take place within it.

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