

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Ubuntu's Space for White Allyship

GERDA VAN DIJK

*Dear Higher Education,*

I am a White, Afrikaans-speaking woman, daughter of a Dutch immigrant father and an Afrikaner mother. I am a White woman born on land that is not my own – does not belong to my people, does not share my people's history. In actual fact, before 1994 my people were responsible for the oppression, segregation, murder and other human atrocities visited on the indigenous people of this land – the Khoisan comprising the Khoikhoi and the San people as well as the Bantu people who arrived in South Africa in the 3rd century from the Congo basin. Europeans would visit these shores from 1488 and a Dutch colony would be settled here in 1652.

The point being, that White people came to South Africa and through a process of systemic racism, colonised and dehumanised South Africa's indigenous people. My own identity work only started late in my academic life. Being the product of White privilege, I never questioned that I would not receive the best primary and secondary education, nor did I wonder whether I would have entry into my chosen tertiary institution, or whether I would obtain employment in my chosen career directly after completing my studies. None of my reality was presented to be as the product of choice or with any sense that by being White, all these were available to me. Being academically astute meant that I was headhunted for positions, and I would comment that I have been blessed to never have had to seek for employment – employment always found me. I had incredible mentors along the academic road, and they were all white men. When I became an associate professor (in South Africa you promote to associate professor after you obtained your PhD degree and written articles, supervised postgraduate students, and obtained funding), I was the 3rd White woman in South Africa's history to become a professor in my academic discipline. All this led to hubris and a very inadequate understanding of identity and life's purpose.

My academic journey took me to a smaller town in another province, away from family, away from the known university, away from the church I was born and raised in and dropped me in an environment which I found hostile. I came to the self-realisation that the hostility I was feeling was me being tested on all aspects of identity – being a woman who was unmarried and hence had to be a lesbian, being Afrikaans mother tongue speaking and hence had to be conservative, being a woman in an academic environment and hence could not possibly be a professor, being a woman in a reformed church and hence would be subservient to the men who knew better. I was none of those and struggled with why people would perceive me as fitting into that mould. I struggled and fought – I fought the men in the church, I became a manager among men in my academic institution, I associated with colleagues who were anti-establishment and deemed radical in their beliefs. I questioned, but I did not yet know what the right questions should be. My questions all related to 'attacking the system' but by 'attacking the system' I continued to perpetuate the binary logic which upheld it. It is only recently that I have started asking questions about White privilege, and cultural competence no longer seeking solace in superficial stances against oppression but asking questions where I experience great discomfort.

Dr. Robin DiAngelo made me aware of how I negated my race as an integral part of my experience. I did not have race and could therefore, not be a racist. I did not have any real sense of a racial identity. I used platitudes such as "I have Black friends", "my domestic worker is like my sister" and through it all I never recognised that I should

confront my own discomfort with my race before acknowledging anything else. DiAngelo profoundly brought this home for me when she stated “That I can live my whole life in segregation. In fact, if I followed the trajectory that my loving parents laid out for me in my good neighborhood, in my good school and my good college and my good career, in which I would ideally rise to the top, I could easily never have any consistent, on-going, authentic relationships with people of color, and not one person who guided me ever conveyed that there was loss”.

I sit with that loss – what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie referred to as the “danger of the single story”. Without me recognising it, I was living a single story even though I thought I was liberal and open-minded. I did not acknowledge how my own race made it possible for me to be in that position of privilege screaming oppression. While DiAngelo argues that the binary perpetuated by negating race and racism finds its way into language, behaviour and patterns, taking it beyond the individual experience helped me to understand racism as a system of unequal power, a system that is reinforced because I use the language that perpetuates this. My argument here is that this negation is found in every intersection of a person’s life – whether it is race, class, culture, sexual orientation, geographic location – it does not matter, the system of inequality is simply not seen in its intersectional manifestation. By not seeing the intersection – my own and others’ - I perpetuate what can most easily be ‘othered’.

What would my point be to higher education?

First, teach cultural competence. Teach how messy and wonderful identity is within a space where the collective recognises the important contribution of the individual in all their intersections.

Second, support and champion those of us who see ourselves as White allies with the understanding that we know where and how we fit into being an ally.

What I wished my own university understood is how to create that courageous space for safe conversations around cultural competence. Having a LGBTQI+ statement or a policy on inclusivity in teaching, research and learning lays a foundation and provides an indication that senior management is serious about inclusive education. However, beyond the policy there is very little real conversations – we do not provide space for discomfort, and this is where I want to suggest the use of the African philosophy of Ubuntu as foundational in sitting with discomfort, speaking about loss when a single story is all you know, speaking about experiences beyond your own and delving deep into meaning behind cultural competence.

I have experienced how complex, contextually laden, and rich these conversations might be. My research has taken me to having meaningful conversations with women leaders who navigate their gender and cultural intersection in an almost seamless manner, never questioning what the acceptance of that intersection allows to be preserved. When a Black woman in a senior management position shows assertiveness and direct leadership to her team, she can create and communicate a strong sense of self, of belonging and direction for her team. Yet, this same woman would in a senior management team meeting with her peers take a step back, especially when her line manager is a Black man from the same ethnic tribe as herself. She has no real recollection of doing this consciously – she unconsciously navigates the intersection of tribe, culture, gender, years in the organisation and organisational position in a seemingly uncomplicated manner. Her behaviour does not cause her discomfort, she does not recognise how she contributes to maintaining inequality and does not attach meaning to her behaviour beyond what is acceptable (as dictated by her intersections as well as reinforced by the hierarchical bureaucracy in which she operates).

How would Ubuntu help? Ubuntu is the African concept of human-ness. The concept is traced back to words found in the Shona and Kiswahili languages. Julius Nyerere spoke about Ujamaa which refers to familyhood, but the most meaningful way through which Ubuntu has been explained is through the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (34) who said “When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘Yu, u nobuntu’; he or she has

ubuntu. This means that they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means that my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life. I am human because I belong, I participate, I share. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are”.

This would be the courageous space where conversations around cultural competence can take place. It starts with a small group, with conversations with colleagues around a dinner table where we seek to understand what the intersections are that we live with and why living with them are so important to us. When a colleague’s father passed, his older brother became the head of the family. While his brother, in his own house cooks, cleans and cares for his children, once he enters the house of his father, it would be disrespectful to enter the kitchen. Knowing this, universities should understand how we enter a conversation around cultural complexity without judgement, for the purpose of learning but also for the purpose of collectively discussing whether current intersectional identities and practices promote or actively oppose social justice.

I enter this conversation as a White ally. I adopt an intersectional lens when talking about power, privilege, and social justice. On a micro-level the conversation is around individual intersections, understanding identity and having an ability to critically engage with the social conventions that contribute to identity. On a macro-level I use it to disrupt the system by outright recognition given to racism, homophobia, sexism, and all forms of discrimination working in tandem, working in an intersectional manner to allow light being shined on oppression, and on marginalisation. The truth behind creating a policy which indicates interest in contributing to a socially just system is like placing a band-aid on a shotgun wound. The oppression is felt deeply and hurts the whole person – the policy is merely a document unless uncomfortable conversations can be engaged in without judgement.

Ubuntu offers me this space to be an ally. Ubuntu asks me as ally to, firstly, appreciate that every conversation needs to acknowledge power and how it is dispersed (or not) in this conversation. Secondly, admitting that ‘whiteness’ permeates everywhere and everything – in discussions with students there is a curriculum that I have compiled and to what extent have I ensured that curriculum to be reflective of the voices in the class – how can I ensure inclusivity if my students do not recognise themselves in what they read, see, and experience? Using Ubuntu creates the opportunity for students to see themselves as contributing to what their university will be, accept, acknowledge, and practice because the collective hold each other accountable for honouring the diverse voices. Thirdly, Ubuntu implies social justice as its contribution. If human-ness is its foundation, the process is the discussion of intersectionality, power, inequality and oppression in a courageous space which produces a shift in consciousness, an acceptance of us as multitude social identities and all belonging to a bundle of life. Through self-awareness, education and interaction we do not only demonstrate cultural competence but actively seek the collective understanding and pursuance of social justice.

I know my university has gone through profound changes, from being a White, advantaged institution to an institution that emphasises the value of diversity and inclusion. I want my university to visibly demonstrate its inclusive organisational culture by participating in the co-creation of a foundational, compulsory module reflecting Ubuntu in its pedagogy and cultural competence in its delivery.

*In allyship,  
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## About the author

Gerda van Dijk is the Director of the School of Public Management and Administration at the University of Pretoria. She has been in academic since 1995 and worked at different academic institutions. Her research has evolved from human resource development to management and leadership development to women's development and women's voices in public policy.