

## **A New Vision of the Postcolonial**

***Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela***

**(Address at Rhodes University Graduation, 12 April 2019)**

Let me begin by congratulating all of you who are graduating this evening. I would also like to extend my warmest congratulations to the parents and extended family members. Your children have given you a special gift. Each of them will come up on stage, and return to their seats walking tall, treasured certificate in hand. It is a moment that marks the opening up of new horizons full of possibilities, of various roles that you will play as agents of change in these challenging times. It is a great honour for me and a wonderful pleasure to share this special occasion with all of you.

I am grateful to you Professor Maylam, and deeply touched by the very warm introduction you have prepared. To be able to weave the fabric of my life—the personal and the professional—in such a thoughtful manner fills my heart with deep gratitude. Thank you. Vice Chancellor, Dr. Sizwe Mabizela, thank you so much for the honour you have bestowed on me by asking me to speak at this special ceremony. Above all, I am conscious of the acknowledgment that the Members of the University Senate conferred upon me when they recognised my work as

deserving of the honorary title of Doctor of Laws. I receive it with deep gratitude, fully aware at once of the honour and challenge that the title represents, coming from this great university whose motto calls on its alumni to lead, and to be the light that shines.

This for me is a very special occasion. You have gathered from Professor Maylam's remarks that I am no stranger to Rhodes University. 37 years ago when I arrived as a mature Masters Student to study for my Clinical Psychology degree, having already practised for a few years as a social worker in the rural region of Maluti, I soaked in the experience of being a student again and gained immeasurably from a range of experiences that were both painful and wonderful. It was the early 1980s, and especially in this region, a time of great upheaval that shook the very foundations of our lives. For many of my contemporaries the issues were felt in deeply personal terms. Yet this was for me the university where I learned to question, to embrace contradictions, to think.

When I graduated, it never occurred to me that I would return to the graduation stage to be honoured in this special way, and to be counted among the heirs of a great heritage of excellence that many colleagues before me have bestowed upon us. All of you who are graduating today are joining the ranks of many distinguished alumni of this university.

The political time of your special event tonight is not very different from the graduation ceremonies of my generation. The only difference—a crucial one—is that apartheid was declared by the International community a crime against humanity. You, too, are receiving your degrees at a time of extraordinary upheaval in our country and the world, created in large part, by irresponsible leadership and the greed and runaway corruption that it has produced. Our country is haunted by this post-apartheid predicament—the brutality of corruption that has allowed the continuing exclusion of millions of South Africans from the full enjoyment of hard won rights that promised a “better life for all”. Twenty five years after the declaration of freedom in our country, perhaps it is time for us to name this theatre of insidious violence in terms of its transgenerational consequences on the lives of millions of South Africans—*a crime against humanity*. As many of the young people we have encountered in our research with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation on transgenerational trauma in Langa, Bonteheuwel and Worcester have described their experience of “freedom”, it is a time of great betrayal.

And so, I have mainly two messages for you this evening: First, go out there into this world of ours and take your place as leaders of stature, and maintain your vigilance in raising your voices in matters of justice and fairness—about important matters of principle. Play whatever role

you will take on with the force of moral stature, and with grace and dignity. At the same time, however, I hope you continue searching for that unique balance between your right to express outrage, with reason and moral wisdom. Do not be afraid of even a little critical awareness of your views—to interrogate your position more closely and to dare to transcend the comfort zone of your beliefs.

Throughout the ages universities have been important centres in our societies for creating knowledge. In our South African context, they have also been centres of exclusion, limited access. They have played a role in sustaining and perpetuating certain intellectual and academic cultures. My second message therefore is that for those of you who will be returning to conduct your research in postgraduate studies or postdoctoral work, reclaim your right to be here. Throughout your scholarly pursuits, question accepted assumptions that have become enduring frameworks that force us to view the human condition from a specific perspective, which limit our understanding of what is possible in human relationships in ways that do not take into account the unique lessons from our own contexts.

The undergraduate years are a time of learning how great scholars have defined the world of knowledge production. Now it is your turn to go beyond these canons, to venture into new intellectual frontiers and to

establish a new legacy of knowledge production in the many fields of the Humanities represented here this evening.

Some of my own work has been about challenging accepted wisdoms about transformative possibilities in the aftermath of massive traumas. I have done so by returning time and again, not to the writings of great philosophers and religious or political theorists, but rather to the unique stories of people who themselves have gone through a season of darkness and despair—from irreparable historical moments that have been illuminating. The lessons from these historical moments show that it is possible to build a new vision of the postcolonial, one that is informed by—as Rwandans say, “home-grown” ethics rooted in and productively informed by cultural practices. It is a vision espoused by among others, Steve Biko himself, who implored us to return to our roots to find ways of reclaiming our sense of being human.

I have just returned from a week in Rwanda with a small group of colleagues, listening, being deeply mindful, and observing what it means to live with the memory of the devastation that befell that country at exactly the same time that ours was experiencing the birth of hope. In the past, I have also had the opportunity to participate in a workshop in which young Rwandans presented their research on various aspects of the post-genocide period in their country. It is amazing to me how young researchers and scholars in Rwanda are living the vision of decolonial

epistemic engagement, using their own context to open up the space of new knowledge production. One of the studies discussed in the research workshop that was co-hosted by Aegis Trust and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London was based on an encounter in a facilitated group process between a woman survivor of the genocide and one of the men who perpetrated this crime. The woman described the horrific scene of mass killing that she survived during the genocide in Rwanda. She then told the group that the last time she saw the man was in a church where he shot and killed families who had sought refuge in the church. “His hands are full of the blood of an incredible number of the Tutsi he killed in the church,” the woman said. “He was like a killing machine ... and I am sure he honestly does not know how many Tutsi he killed.” Her testimony led to uncontrollable sobbing in the room. The man then crawled out of his chair and went to kneel in front of the woman, sobbing, expressing remorseful regret. The young researcher explained that after some relative calm, the woman, now standing next to the kneeling man, extended her hand and helped him to get up. She then embraced him and told him that she did not want to think of him as a killing machine, but “as a fellow human being and brother.” According to Hyppolite, the researcher reporting on this encounter, the two of them “stood in an embrace with arms folded tight across each other’s backs.”

This is recognition of the other that is bestowed not from the distance, but from a place of proximity to the other's lifeworld. It is an "experience-near" that opens up the possibility of an embodied recognition that seeks to repair the brokenness of the other— because now it has become—*it is like*—one's own brokenness.

These are experiences that open up opportunity for us to explore new avenues of critical inquiry. President Kagame of Rwanda said in a recent speech that Rwanda is showing that restoration of human bonds is possible. He said that Rwandans have been asked to put their emotions "in box." But in reality this is not possible, and so invocation is held at the same time as the annual national commemorative periods of mourning. This is a radical approach to mourning trauma, and it plays out in ways that we do not have time to explore in this paper. A group of woman we spoke to last week during our visit to one of the communities described it thus: "During the period of commemoration, we want to connect with the loved ones that were killed, and at this time we disengage from dialogue with the people who killed our loved ones." And in response to the question how long the disengagement lasts, the response was that it ends with the end of the commemoration, "and we reconnect again and concern ourselves with the project of rebuilding our community for the sake of a transformed society for the sake of our children."

Hannah Arendt wrote about “the banality of evil” as a condition that creates an impossibility—that creates an unbridgeable divide. I was hardly 10 years old when her views became an established canon for what is possible in the aftermath of mass atrocity. And here we are, witnessing just the opposite in these stories that offer us the possibility of a new vision of the postcolonial, one that if nurtured and sustained through social justice programmes aimed at truly repairing the past, can restore the young generation’s hope for change.

If the level of depravity that has been captured most compellingly with Hannah Arendt’s phrase “the banality of evil” is fostered in an environment in which inhumanity against others thrives, then it should be possible that relationships that foster thoughtfulness and a sense of being human reproduce themselves in our relational world. This, I think is what bell hooks implies when she writes that the struggle for social changes in the aftermath of historical violence should not simply be about condemning dehumanization. Rather, it should also involve finding new ways of reclaiming our sense of being human: Black subjectivity, she argues, should be “an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualisation.” The capacity to place ourselves in the position of an other who wants to re-enter the And



James Baldwin crystallises the inherent contradiction in this message when he says, to paraphrase: “Facing history does not mean that change will happen; but change cannot happen unless the painful past is faced.”

We should not forget that these are precisely the ideas that were embodied in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which saw the emergence of emotional certainty and moral imagination, in an effort to imbue the realms of law, justice and politics with a relational cultural ethics that recognised the possibility of the humanity of perpetrators and beneficiaries of privilege—for the sake of a transformed conception of society.

This is a challenging time to have graduated. At the beginning of this speech, I referred to you graduands as a special gift to your parents. You are also a gift to this political time to help restore a new vision for our future.