

# WHO TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ‘REITZ FOUR’? PUZZLING OUR WAY THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

South Africa finds itself in the midst of challenging developments, particularly in the realm of the university community. There is a deep sense of confusion around position-taking, both at the personal and at the social level. This manifests itself obviously, particularly in the university, around political positions and around the broad commitments that individuals and groups choose to make in relation to particular political parties. It manifests less obviously in what would have been relatively un-contentious issues in the past, such as the meaning of patriotism, language, sexual orientation and gender, ‘ethnic’ group and other social or collective indicators such as ‘my people’.

While this confusion often arises when people are called to take positions, every now and then particular events in society as a whole bring position-taking to a point of crisis. We face such a crisis now in the ‘resolution’ of the *crimen injuria* case against four young men from the University of the Free State.

Who is to take responsibility for what happened at the Reitz hostel? Two approaches have emerged in the midst of this. The first, as articulated by Professor Jonathan Jansen, Rector of the University of the Free State, is that the problem is not simply the guilt of the Reitz four themselves. It is, rather, that there are wide layers of institutional complicity in understanding who should take responsibility for the event. To illustrate the point, he argues that the video made by the Reitz four had received an award at the residence for its content. The other approach maintains that the four youths must be held directly and individually responsible for their actions.

My argument is that moral questions such as these are never outside of history. History is a major influence of people’s behaviour. How people position themselves in relation to history, or rather its dominant evocations, is what is at stake centrally. Do they see themselves as subjects of it, or are they able to imagine themselves outside of and independent of it? Are they simply actors in a pre-scripted text, or are they able to determine their own texts? More pertinently, how does personal agency present itself in the presence of racial history? Does ‘race’ pre-determine our diverse repertoires – the stories we can tell, the relationships we might be able to imagine, the postures we might take in relation to good and bad, to our sense of the public and what constitutes our public responsibility?

South Africa is very much still a transitional society. The psychologist Dan Bar-On would argue that we are a ‘quasi-democratic’ nation: a society that has moved very quickly out of its totalitarian state. We have not yet imbibed the values of democracy completely, or discarded the habits of authoritarianism. In his study, *The indescribable and the undiscussable: Reconstructing human discourse after trauma*, he explains that people do not simply change their identities and values as political or social changes occur.<sup>1</sup> He makes the point that the citizens of these quasi-democratic societies have to invent a new discourse for themselves to ‘release or reinvent the flexibility to doubt and ask questions concerning facts and resume the social responsibility abolished earlier’.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of rethinking what the nature of one’s diverse universe is, are issues of the individual and the community, and the relationship of these to each other.

The purpose of this paper is to try to think through the implications of this event for the university.

## THE ‘INCIDENT’: TOWARDS A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

The Reitz incident took place in the beginning of 2007. What actually happened? It is interesting that there is not a comprehensive account of what took place. The story, as it has unfolded, is documented in the video itself<sup>3</sup> and has been viewed repeatedly in a range of different forums. It was shown during the recent trial of the four young men who had made it.

What does it show? The 10-minute video is presented as an ‘initiation-type ceremony’. It makes an argument against the process of integration in the residences. As an initiation ceremony, it is about selecting a suitable Black ‘subject’ who would be fit to join the residence. The subjects are then put through a series of ordeals, ostensibly what ‘normally happens during initiation’, the students explain, to see which of the five workers will win the right to be integrated into the residence. At the end of the video, one of the young men explains: ‘dit is wat ons regtig dink van integrasie’. The point being made is that ‘this is the quality of people who will be brought into the residence. This is the consequence of integration’.

The video begins with a young man explaining what happens on the campus at integration: ‘The Boers lived happily in Reitz until the day that previously disadvantaged [people] discovered the word ‘integration’ in a dictionary. Reitz was then forced to integrate and we started our own selection process.’ He then explains that they decided to ‘integrate’ with the ‘squeezas’ – their hostel workers. To be integrated, the ‘squeezas’ had to go through a series of ordeals. They are seen, in sequential scenes, drinking at a bar, dancing amongst themselves, having to run in a sprint-race to see whether they are

fast enough for the hostel rugby team. They are shown at rugby practice and, finally, they are shown having to eat food from a bowl into which one of the young men supposedly has urinated. It's interesting to note the sense of fun everybody has in the making of the video. The young men laugh often as the workers struggle to drink, eat the food and run the race. The workers themselves laugh often and freely. There is evidence of a great deal of banter. Being encouraged by one of the young men to eat more of the food, one of the women shouts back at him 'jou gat man!' ('your ass, man!'). The workers are given a bottle of whisky as their reward, which elicits great excitement. Just before the end, the woman who 'won' talks about Fridays and having a party. The whole video is presented as a light-hearted affair; everybody is enjoying it. But the experience ends on a serious note: 'This is what we really think about integration.'

What else is known? The incident becomes the subject of a national outcry, leading to the establishment of a Ministerial Committee of Enquiry into transformation in higher education. The four young men are suspended from the University. In 2009, it is announced that the matter will be taken to the Equality Court. At his inauguration as Rector of the University of the Free State, Professor Jansen announces that the university has decided to forgive the students, thus re-igniting the matter all over again. He explains that everybody has been consulted. The new Minister of Higher Education steps in and, with his new Director-General, complains that they have not been consulted. The previous Minister of Education, who was present at the inauguration and spoke in honour of the occasion, privately expresses surprise. SASCO, a national students' organisation affiliated to the ANC, weighs in and calls for Jansen's resignation. In July 2010, in a three-day trial presided over by a magistrate, the young men's case is presented by a celebrity lawyer, Kemp J. Kemp. They are found guilty of *crimen injuria* and fined R20 000. They are also sentenced to jail for six months, but this is suspended for five years on condition that they do not commit another act of *crimen injuria* within that time period.

What else is there to consider? We come to know what the young men look like. Their photographs are regularly shown – R.C. Malherbe, Johnny Roberts, Schalk van der Merwe and Danie Grobler. After the trial, Kemp tells the world that they are remorseful and have accepted that they have made a mistake, but their intention was not to cause any harm: 'They are indeed remorseful,' he says, and maintains that they had told the truth, although it could have been detrimental to their case.<sup>4</sup> Kemp continues that the men knew the workers well and had explicitly told them not to swallow the mixture, even though they are seen to spit it out, which makes the men laugh.

We also see images of the workers. Strikingly, however, while present at the trial, they are never actually heard. Their side of the story is never told, their names mentioned only occasionally. It is said afterwards when the sentence was handed down that they were satisfied.

The whole trial process appears deeply mediated, almost orchestrated. The students never speak for themselves. They are never heard directly, except through interlocutors. It seems the workers tell people who are close to the new rector that they went along with it because it was fun, but that they later came to understand how humiliating it was.

The consequence of this mediation is that very little is known about what really happened. How the video was conceived and what went into its conceptualisation is not known. The students were not asked the obvious question, 'what were you thinking when you constructed this scene?' One has no access to what is in their heads. There is, likewise, no sense of the workers' own involvement in the incident. One does not really know, aside from the regularly repeated statement that they came into it voluntarily, what their state of mind was and what they understood the intentions of the video to be. One has no idea of

the state of their complicity. Like much of our own contemporary history, it is interlocutors who interpret the story, much as South African history is interpreted by key people such as Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and others.

### RACIAL SIDE-TAKING: REACTIONS TO THE EVENT

The reactions to the event, and particularly the sentence, bring us directly to what is at stake in the issue. Was the sentence appropriate? Was justice seen to be done? Has the matter been brought to a close? What does the whole event say to us as a country about ourselves? Should we take, individually, and as groups, any responsibility for what transpired? What lessons are there for the universities, in particular the University of the Free State and its community as a whole?

Clearly, there are two levels at which the matter is of consequence. The first is the large question of identity and difference – the nation, the people, the community, as human beings – its future and our own individual positions in relation to it. The second is that of our positions as scholars within the academy.

At the first level, most of the reactions to questions of our identity - who we are as human beings - result from deeply racialised attitudes. Those who respond to it, respond essentially as self-declared Whites or Blacks. As in other cases with racial overtones, this elicits fierce reactions. However, the reactions appear to have little to do with the substance of the incident itself. Those who self-declare or who position themselves as Whites, proceed from a range of positions of 'Whiteness'. On one side is a stance that 'Whiteness' is under attack. Another is less racist, but informed by fragile 'Whiteness' nonetheless. They start from an unproblematised association with the young men based on a White connection. What the young men did wrong, from this point of view, is a matter of some debate. The dominant position is that the whole incident was essentially an innocent one: 'It was a PRANK. That's all. Not a "crime against humanity", for Pete's sake. Harden up!'"<sup>5</sup>

Against this, a Black defensiveness is a difficult position to avoid taking:

*This is not the run-off-the-mill (sic) crimen injuria where one neighbor curses at another for eg. It is far different from that and rightly illicit (sic) a public outcry. These students aren't kids and it isn't a prank. Maybe to us it is funny, but to most people of colour it isn't... U and ur kind (my emphasis) expect blacks to reconcile on your terms. Racism is no longer racism. Racism is no longer racism, u give it all kinds of other names (pranks, mistakes etc), and this is an illustration if (sic) the denialism that is killing any prospect of true reconciliation. The failure by yourself other whites to condemn this behavior is tantamount to condonation thereof.<sup>5</sup>*

What is interesting about these postings is a discussion in which there is some attempt to open it up, and there is even evidence of give and take. There are instances where participants back off when they are shown to be incorrect and also, in a few instances, contributors acknowledging good points that others make. It ends up, however, as a contest of white versus black, a juxtaposition of white guilt against black guilt, the beam in your eye versus that in mine, White racism against Black racism.

### TAKING SIDES OUTSIDE OF RACE

The first position taken comes from the Human Rights Commission (HRC) which has placed a request for an order to the Equality Court to declare the students guilty of unfair discrimination by act and omission. It requires that the students apologise to the four women and to all Black people, and that the students pay punitive damages to each of the women in the amount of R1 million.<sup>6</sup>

The second position is offered by Pierre de Vos in his blog who asks, after the sentence was pronounced, 'But is it not all too

easy?' He notes in his blog that there was a collective sigh of relief 'from our leaders and from many members of the public: we can all now get "closure" about this "tragic" or "disgusting" incident'.<sup>7</sup> He raises important issues. Punishing individuals who have broken the law, he says, is a good thing, but, he continues:

*By punishing the four, the rest of us can give a sigh of relief and go on with our lives. We do not have to wonder what kind of country produced these men, what kind of family structures, what kind of religious instruction and schooling, what kind of economic system which maintains a stark divide between bosses and servants were in place that made these men think that it was perfectly capable to humiliate fellow human beings: women, the mothers of children.<sup>7</sup>*

De Vos goes on to compare the process of the trial and the sentence it determines, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which approached the problem of apartheid 'as if only a small number of white people in South Africa were the perpetrators of apartheid and only a small number of black South Africans were the victims'.<sup>7</sup> He goes on to pose the problem of that of all Whites – whether they voted for the National Party or not, whether they once signed a petition to free Nelson Mandela, 'or made friendly chit-chat with the woman cleaning your house,' benefitting from apartheid 'by declining to enjoy its benefits.' Likewise, he continues, many Black South Africans do not want to 'think too hard about the apartheid days... because they feel guilty and humiliated by the past and their role in it. They want to forget how so many collaborated with the apartheid state.' He concludes by saying 'maybe the stark reality is that there is a bit of the Reitz 4 in all of us middle-class South Africans (of all races)'.<sup>7</sup>

De Vos's position and the way he goes about getting to his main point is not unproblematic. Neither is that of the HRC. Both remain in the vortex of racialised thinking, attributing to all South Africans racial identities; even when they are against the effects of racial logics, it is race that is invoked. It is important to ask to whom the HRC's apology is due. What repositioning is asked of us by it? Where will this repositioning land us when we have done what they have suggested? But De Vos's point, nonetheless, is powerful ('maybe there is a bit of the Reitz 4 in all of us') and brings us directly to the question of how we move beyond the determined racialised positions that our history places us in. How do we move beyond our history?

### WHAT ROLE FOR THE UNIVERSITY?

It is at this time that the university and its citizens confront a great crisis. Essentially, it is required to take a position. Is it possible for the universities and the individuals inside them to enunciate a position for themselves which is not governed by racial history? Is it possible to approach the question of Reitz and what it is about, outside of the tragedy of South Africa's history?

We need to begin thinking deeply about the concept of the university and particularly what we understand by it. There are two contending dominant ideas about this.<sup>8</sup> The first idea is that the university as a social site is located in and takes its politics from the broader society in which it exists; 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 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 university institutions and shapes up as a 'from the inside-outwards' discourse.

Each of these discursive elements – the ways in which the idea of the university is articulated and justified – is positioned with respect to race in critical ways. In the first idea, the university has to look like the society in which it is set. This is the patriotic university. The effect of this discourse is to empty out the space of the university and to fill it with the content and substance of

the quotidian. This is patently unsatisfactory as a reading of the discourse.

The second idea begins from the premise that the university, as an institution, arises out of an international framework from which it derives its most important source of legitimacy. This view, the inside-out view, presents itself as a space that is ontologically defined outside of 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 apart from the everyday citizens. The university members, particularly its high priests – its professors – are thus a community apart, inured to the dross, the contumely, the prejudice, the venality, the myopia of the everyday world. Their internal rules of formation have protected them from the world of race and racism: they are above it.

### RE-POSITIONING THE UNIVERSITY

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. 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 develop a social criticism. We need to develop one that is profoundly alert to the shifting relationship between cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination, and which 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 the dominant project of race and class. It has the potential of opening up ways of seeing that take us beyond the stereotypical ways in which difference is understood. Critically, it unmasks 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. This is what the seduction of Reitz is. This is where we are the Reitz Four.

How do we give up our Reitz personas, subjectivities and take position as post-racial subjects? It is by developing a dialogue with ourselves consciously in the first instance. It is about coming to an understanding of ourselves, our identities, through historicising our own subject pathways. Historicising our pathways is not simply tracing those superficial elements of our identities, our biological genealogies and bloodlines, but tracking our discursive lines of development, our beliefs and commitments and being able to engage with these in their full complexity. It is from this point of departure, of knowing ourselves deeply, that we begin a process of transcending our histories.

The university is critical in this process. It is supposed to be a space of intense self-reflection and critique. It has to offer a way forward in modelling for society what it means to think and act for the public good. Its citizens need to be guided by this special sense of mission and identity. It is this, then, that also helps us understand where the trap lies in the second discourse. 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. Tragically, however, it does not see how this model of academic citizenship that it offers is an alibi for the preservation of White privilege. It cannot see how its declared autonomy is an undeclared defence of whiteness. This is where one wants to argue that the major legacy issues of race have been inadequately addressed. The unarticulated issue that hovers in the background of the debate, both here 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 project 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 its 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 characterise the forms of knowing, sharing and using knowledge. Ultimately, it is this that 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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