

Address to the guests and members of the NWU (Gallery) on the occasion of the Opening of the I AM....Exhibition of Art

Real Change in an Imagined Community: equality, action and social justice.

Prof RJ Balfour, DVC Teaching and Learning

Introduction and acknowledgements

Good evening everyone and welcome to the commencement of Gender Awareness Week at the North-West University. The University is pleased to make tangible its commitment to social justice through a series of events and opportunities that aspire to raise awareness and enrich our consciousness of the role that gender plays in the construction and impact of difference. Gender is also an indispensable part of who we are as people, and given that as persons we are as different as we are similar, it made sense that when we conceptualised this initiative that we thought of a wide range of opportunities for all our students to engage, and so given that each person has as many differences as similarities, the programme is rich and various. I want to acknowledge guest and colleagues of the NWU who made the programme possible:

Prof Jessica Murray (UNISA) who began with our programme at the Vaal Triangle Campus yesterday afternoon as hosted by the Faculty of Humanities.

Prof Maria Frahm-Arp (UJ) who will end the programme as part of the panel discussion on love, gender and family, as hosted by the Faculty of Theology.

Mpho Nkomo Ya Badimo, performance artist, poet and radio personality who is conducting the workshops on poetry on our three campuses;

Robin Opperman, artist and community activist from Umcebo Design, who is conducting the art workshops on the three campuses;

Dr Wemar Strydom from the School of Languages who presented a workshop today on queer theory and its implications for the creation of inclusive classrooms;

Dr Jacques Rothman, from the School of Social Sciences who is exploring the development and resilience of staff;

Dr Conroy Cupido and colleagues, from the School of Music which has organised a special concert celebrating LGBT and women composers next week;

Ms Hannelie Otto, from the School of Communications who is exploring the links between podcasts, representation and identity in workshops offered on our three campuses;

Dr Matthew Moyo from NWU Libraries who has lead the featuring of book exhibitions on gender and diversity on the three campus libraries;

Ms Christina Naurattel from the NWU who together with Mart Gey van Pittius and Leroux Malan are responsible for this wonderful opening event this evening;

Mr Clement Manoko and his team of Louis Jacobs and Moira Muller who supported us so much with the website development and related paper marketing of this event;

Professors Lumkile Lalendle, Rikus Fick, Jacob Semango and Jim Molautsi from the Offices of Student Life on our three campuses who threw their weight behind the initiative;

Members of our SRC and Campus Student Councils who have responded brilliantly and encouragingly to communicate the initiative among students;

And finally, to Ms Edwina Fransman, PA in the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor who together with a team of assistants (Ben and Pule) stepped up and provided the backbone and logistical support for all the arrangements, a big thank you from my side.

We live in communities of our imagination, not least of which is the imagined community of the South African nation. Prominent political scientist Benedict Anderson (2006) described what it means to create, and be part of, an imagined community: "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (2006, 6-7). Community involves imagining and action, creating a sense of inclusion, as well as exclusion, an experience of protection and prosecution. Between the imagined community and the experience of its realism, is always a gap.

Democracies as imagined communities cannot be trusted even as ideals. Both citizens and slaves, migrants and inhabitants, adults and minors, the rich and the poor, men and women have reasons to fear

each other. In fact the history of development of the democratic state is peppered with many legalised forms of exclusion which seem distasteful for us today: the Greek example of a citizens-only democracy some 2500 years ago; America's slaving democracy of the 1800s, England's men's only democracy of the 17th and 18th centuries, or Apartheid's whites-only democracy of the 20th century. Simply put, democracies have seldom embraced the absolute equality of all. And yet democracy remains still the only viable political system in which the rights of citizens can be realised and protected.

In multicultural democratic societies the function of a democracy, in addition to providing for the rights of citizens, is to mediate competing value systems such that these rights are respected. In a theocratic state, in which law is founded to religious values concerning equality, same sex marriage, for example, could not be proposed or accepted. The inequality of men to women, could similarly be justified. The justification of inequalities was not left there, it had legal consequences: what was defined in religious terms as sinful slipped, without much difficulty, into legal terms to become criminal. In South Africa there is a long list of legislation inspired by religious values which landed up in criminalising gender non-conforming persons, same sex attraction, or legitimising discrimination against women in the form of unequal pay for women in professions such as teaching, for example. In a constitutional democracy the powers of church and state have to be mediated and separated. It is fortunate that the struggle for freedom in South Africa was, from its origins, never narrowed to simply a struggle against racism, but a recognition that oppressions often have much in common with each other. It is a strategy of a divisive and socially unjust state to create the impression that there is no solidarity between oppressed groups. Scholarship has shown that it was on the wave of feminist action that many minority groups found their voices and recognised the possibilities for change.

There are two ways in which rights come to be respected by communities: the first is when actions give rise to legal consequence (Barnard, 2007). It is often the case that access to a right comes to be defined in law through the action between parties concerned with the curtailment or denial of rights. This was what French philosopher Jacques Ranciere meant when he said: "the rights of (people) and of the citizen are the rights of those who make them a reality. They were won through democratic action and are only ever guaranteed through... action" (2006, 74).

The second way in which rights come to be lived is through social interaction: in other words, those occasions and events initiated, supported and sustained by civil society and the State to create the conditions for rights to be lived. Universities as part of educational apparatus of the State are called upon, through their curricula to create the conditions in which rights can be both explored and lived. Gender Awareness Week at the NWU is aligned carefully to the University's stated commitment to social justice in recognition of the fact that a socially just society is a genuinely inclusive one in which damaging binaries particularly as these affect gender identity are explored, described, challenged, and changed. Who is called upon to engage, reflect, challenge and change? Everyone. It is not simply a project for the minority or the marginal groups to find expression through seminars, lectures, concerts, panel discussions, workshops and the like: it is for everyone an opportunity to contribute to the change we want to see in our country and as such the solidarity between people, because and sometimes even despite their differences, is the aim of this initiative.

Inasmuch as the NWU recognises Women's Month or Gender Awareness Week, we also affirm our commitment to support many such initiatives, within or beyond our Faculties, involving members of the University and members of our communities. There are a plethora of actions hosted by residences on and off our campuses, student societies, research groups and community groups. All of these are recognised and supported in different ways and if gender or race, autism, poverty, land or leadership are elevated in special ways this is only to signal the University's responsiveness to the need for social change. Gender Awareness Week is concerned with identity, values and ideas.

Eminent African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah states that "ideas (and values) shape the way people conceive of themselves and their projects (their choices)" (2005, 66). Appiah argues that the need for such measures arises from the fact that the simple right to human dignity is not sufficient protection in a State where a group or individual might still be attacked on the basis of not conforming to a group (Appiah 2005, 109). It is the very notion of group conformity that needs to be opened-up in philosophical and social terms within a University and its disciplines because the need for conformity provides 'ideal' spaces in which power, as associated with one gender, but not another, with one colour, but not another, risks becoming unaccountable to its subjects and hence totalitarian, an argument pursued by Hannah Arendt (1973),

another political scientist. The risk as described by Arendt is the gap I mentioned earlier between the imagined and the real community: the gap between aspiration and experience.

For example, because we aspire to equal oppressive and violent acts such as rape have been criminalised, but the reality in South Africa is that sexual violence is widespread. Actions and imagination work hand in hand to change behaviour. In this sense the curriculum is a series of designed interactions which bring together imagination and action such that the former can influence the latter. What we do here matters and can change lives, but it is also at risk. The micro-narrative of transformation in curriculum terms sits uneasily with the macro-narratives concerning structural adjustment economic policies that trap the poorest and most vulnerable groups, especially women and children, into poverty (Weeks, *The world We Have Won*, 2007, 6). There are many unfinished revolutions in our world and the one concerning gender is perhaps the slowest and most uncertain of these, even though the justification of inequality has lost all its moral edges. Values play an important role in the realisation of the imagined because values guide our actions in as much as knowledge and awareness does.

Geoffrey Weeks, and English scholar of gender, describes how values associated with patriarchy have changed in the last 50 years. Weeks argues that the changing nature of family life and relationships, often described in popular terms as a decay of values, social norms and normal networks: father to mother, husband to wife, mother to children and so on have fractured as patriarchy has been challenged. What is revealed is that this fracturing is not a moral issue, but a social one. With greater forms of equality comes greater possibilities of different kinds of relationship in which power is not simply exposed or contested, but also played with, disrupted, troubled. Considered in this light the mass migrations of aftermath of empire, were paralleled with a mass migration away from relationship arrangements in which particular gender categories were privileged in as much as particular categories of race, were not. Oppression is not our norm as a species; freedom is.

Gender awareness week is not the NWU's only response the pressing challenges of our time concerning the need for social justice; there are many such initiatives at the NWU designed and organised to provide members of the University and the community with opportunities to tell our stories of hope and disappointment, dream and desire, to communities of meaning: other people who are interested in imagining and re-imagining who and what we are. The quality of our relationships to one another in this new century is critical and needs work: new disciplines such critical accountancy, environmental education, race and gender studies testify to the response of Universities to the need to recognise the terrible impact of inequality whether in social or economic terms.

In the new NWU the leadership seeks through these important occasions to open up the critical and dialogical spaces, not as a means of giving expression only to the experiences of exclusion and inclusion, but with the aim of moving towards a recognition that the binaries we imagine as essential for the maintenance of me and you, male and female, man and woman, black and white, straight and gay, trans and non-conforming, need never function as justifications for rejection or oppression. We begin Gender Awareness Week appropriately this evening with a feast for the eyes and senses; in an art gallery in small town somewhere situated towards the Southern tip of a complex continent in which the struggles for equality are not yet won, and an equally challenging world in which deep inequalities linked to social, economic and political exploitation persist. Nonetheless, throughout the next seven days multiple possibilities have been created for members of the University to explore many of forms of representation with a view to raising awareness, enriching understanding... and through our interaction and action, changing a small part of our world at NWU. Far from imagining this only as the "world we have won", let us make this "the world we have changed".

I thank you.

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