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# Breaking white silences in South African-Dutch collaboration in higher education

## Auto-ethnographic reflections of two “university clones”

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to show the complex positionality and the complexity that comes with the study of whiteness in South African higher education by Dutch, white academics. This complexity stems from the long-standing relationship between Dutch universities, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VUA) in particular, with their South African counterparts, which predominantly supported apartheid with reference to a shared religious (Protestant) background.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper rests upon a literature review of the development of South African higher education, and an assessment of the prominent role played by the Dutch Vrije Universiteit in support of the all-white, Afrikaans Potchefstroom University (presently North-West University). The authors, who are both involved in the institutional cooperation between Vrije Universiteit and South African universities, reflect on the complexity of this relationship by providing auto-ethnographic evidence from their own (religious) biography.

**Findings** – The paper reflects the ambiguous historical as well as contemporary contexts and ties that bind Vrije Universiteit to South African universities, especially formerly Afrikaans-speaking ones. The ambiguity is about the comfort of sharing an identity with formerly Afrikaans-speaking universities, on the one hand, and the discomfort of historical and political complicities in a (still) segregated South African society on the other hand.

**Originality/value** – This auto-ethnographic paper breathes an atmosphere of a “coming out” that is not very common in academic writing. It is a reflection and testimony of a lifelong immersion in VUA-South African academic research relations in which historical, institutional, and personal contexts intermingle and lead to a unique positionality leading to “breaking silences” around these complex relations.

**Keywords** South Africa, Diversity, Auto-ethnography, Whiteness, Academic cooperation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Two white, male, seasoned, organization-based ethnographic researchers from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (official acronym VUA, informally often referred to by its old acronym “VU”), the Netherlands, have for many years been involved in researching transformation and issues of diversity in South African higher education (Kamsteeg, 2008, 2011; Kamsteeg and Wels, 2012). Our research stands on an institutional tradition of long-standing relationships between VUA and formerly Afrikaner universities in South Africa, in particular Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, now known as North-West University (NWU). VUA was founded in 1880 and from the very first day it has had this relationship with Potchefstroom and the Afrikaner “reformed brothers” in South Africa (cf. Schutte, 1986, p. 7), a relationship wrought with complexities and complicities (Wels, 2014). It is a tradition and space in which we were intellectually brought up, did our PhDs, and have been spending all of our academic lives.

In 2004, a major restructuring in the field of higher education officially marked the end of the separate education of white and non-white students at South Africa’s universities. Free access and redressing the vast number of other inequalities from the past were the



challenging tasks for these institutions from that point onwards. Yet, the expected cultural change – which the ANC government has labelled “transformation” – did not happen. It took the 2015 university protests by the born-free generation of students, starting with the Rhodes-Must-Fall movement at UCT and the subsequent “decolonize the curriculum” and “Fees-Must-Fall” initiatives, to make clear that the process begun in 1994 and accelerated since 2004, had not yet brought about the promised transformation, academic freedom (Higgins, 2013), and equality for all; the domain of knowledge creation, transmission, and production in South Africa remained largely white in complexion.

In this context of ongoing contestations which we describe and interpret as part of our auto-ethnography in part 1 of this paper, we, two senior white male social scientists, are doing research on higher education in South Africa on the wave of the noble perspective of required transformation and social justice for all. It is research that almost inevitably places a strong focus on the “culture of whiteness” that still pervades most of South African institutions in higher education, and comes with unarticulated privilege and entitlement (cf. Conway, 2016; Higgins, 2013; Jansen, 2009; Steyn, 2001; Tabensky and Matthews, 2015), often through “white ignorance” (Steyn, 2012 in Conway, 2016). In part 2 of this paper – again auto-ethnographic but more up close and personal in nature – we reflect on our own multiple “cultures of whiteness” (in upbringing, institutional traditions, and intellectual environment) in relation to these contestations. This is an “auto-ethnographical reflection [...] (p)resented as a ‘Confessional Tale’ (Biaett, 2012, p. 65), or, more precisely, a confessional tale of ‘auto-ethnographic reflections on life and work’” (cf. Ellis, 2016; Van Maanen, 2011), in search of an answer to the fundamental question of whether we are still able and in a position to contribute to the ongoing debates in higher education in South Africa. It is almost a play of words, as the line between telling confessional and auto-ethnographic tales is thin indeed. This implies that we do not provide a methodological overview of doing the actual organizational ethnographic work. In this paper we focus on the tales, constructed over the many years of our individual (observant) participation (cf. Moeran, 2009) in South African higher education and combined ethnographic endeavors. Hence, what follows is predominantly a set of tales emanating from our “auto-ethnographic sensibilities” (cf. Neyland, 2008).

### *Part 1: South African-VUA educational bonds: a history of silence*

In this first part, we will give a brief historic overview of the development of higher education in South Africa, with an emphasis on the protests that started with “Rhodes-Must-Fall” in March 2015. Following that, we will zoom in on the one South African university that VUA has known from its foundation in 1880, NWU. In a subsequent cultural analysis, we will then comment on the institutional journey toward transformation at NWU and pay special attention to how the various institutional actors, including students, provide significance to these changes. We will end this part by focusing attention on how VUA has, largely “silently”, networked itself in such a way as to become part and parcel of the (white) part of South African institutions of HE.

### **Higher education in South Africa: a state of permanent turmoil**

From the official apartheid years, 1948 onwards, till the restructuring of higher education in the post-apartheid years, and on through the post-Rhodes-Must-Fall years of massive student protests in 2015 and 2016, South Africa’s higher education has been in turmoil. University campuses across the country were damaged to various degrees, causing occasional closings, and suspension of classes and exams. The fundament for these protests was laid in the apartheid era, which saw the establishment of a higher education system based on inequality, with disproportionately scattered institutions varying a great deal in size, student enrolment, research capacity, funding, quality of management, etc. The major divide was between historically advantaged (“white”) institutions (HAIs) and historically

disadvantaged (“black”) institutions (HDIs), which resulted from the regime’s interventionist policies aimed at establishing racial separation in tertiary education as elsewhere in society. Since 1994 the government and its successive Ministers of Education have viewed education, and higher education in particular, as a vehicle for effecting societal transformation and redressing the legacy of apartheid, based on the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education, which gave the government comprehensive powers to plan, control, restructure, and refund the entire sector (Council on Higher Education, 2007; Jansen *et al.*, 2002; Jansen, 2003). The central objective of this project was to redesign the higher education landscape (Council on Higher Education, 2000) and do away with a system that was primarily based on race. A National Working Group (NWG) (2002), installed by the Minister of Education in 2001, in its “The restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa”, proposed a far-reaching and concrete programme of merging institutions to bring about transformation, equity (for staff and students), sustainability, and productivity (see also Balintulo, 2003, p. 457ff); the building of new institutional cultures and identities beyond the racial and ethnic past was envisioned (Jansen, 2003, p. 9; Tabensky and Matthews, 2015). Both the HAIs and the HDIs protested against the Ministry’s top-down approach, but by 2004 the government-mandated merger program had effectively reduced 36 institutions of higher education to 23: 11 traditional universities (offering theory-oriented degrees), six universities of technology (offering vocational diplomas and degrees), and six comprehensive universities (offering a combination of both qualifications). Concretely, universities across the spectrum were merged in such a way that there would no longer be a need to use the label of “historically disadvantaged” (NWG, 2002), which painfully reminded of the apartheid past.

We will not fully describe the changes in the landscape but will only give a brief overview of those “white” universities that were forced to merge with “black” or “Indian” universities (for a more extensive overview, see Kamsteeg, 2008, 2011). The three universities in the Cape Town area – the University of Cape Town (“white” English speaking), University of the Western Cape (“coloured”, mostly Afrikaans speaking), and Stellenbosch University (“white” Afrikaans speaking) – managed to avoid being merged, even though Stellenbosch University in particular was an all-white, apartheid-abiding place. In the Gauteng area, the Rand Afrikaans Universiteit merged with two smaller black institutions in 2004 and became the University of Johannesburg. The University of Pretoria (UP) largely escaped the merger operation, but not the obligation “to transform.” The University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein merged with the black campus of Venda University from the former Qua Qua homeland. The English speaking University of Natal merged with the “Indian” University of Durban Westville, into what then became the University of KwaZulu Natal. The institution perhaps most affected by the changes was the Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwijs in the Afrikaner rural heartland of the North-West Province, the former Transvaal, which was merged with the “black” former homeland University of the North-West (UNW) in Mafikeng (near the Botswana border) to become the NWU in 2004. It is with “Potch”, as the rural town in the North-West Province is popularly known, that Vrije Universiteit has always maintained close relationships since the founding of both institutions in the nineteenth century (Van der Schyff, 2003; Van Eeden, 2006). The history and the present day state of this historical tie will be the subject of the next section.

With the merger project, tertiary education in post-apartheid South Africa entered a new and indeterminate phase in which, according to Jansen (2003, pp. 157-159), four major transitions were meant to be made: the eradication of racial inequalities (among the staff and students); bringing the HDI’s severe governance and management crisis to an end; reversing declining student enrolment rates; and diminishing the chronic fragmentation and huge financial, staffing, and research capacity imbalances caused by the apartheid government’s

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goals and strategies in relation to higher education. Yet the social and cultural effects of the past were clearly (and, by focusing on “governance”, perhaps deliberately; see Council on Higher Education, 2004) underestimated, as well as the extent to which particular groups and institutions had vested interests to defend. It was to be expected, after so many years in which the government’s explicit steering role had been the organization of separation, that a deliberate transition toward a united, transformed system would meet resistance and prove time consuming.

Although the face of South African universities has slowly, and arguably superficially (cf. Tabensky and Matthews, 2015), become more representative of South African demographics – with more students of color entering formerly white space since 2004 – deeper down in the organization of the university, a “culture of whiteness” has prevailed, only because the transformation of the staff did not follow suit with the students: the staff and leadership of the universities remained largely unaltered and white, which in its turn created a bias in the recruitment of new staff. The curriculum also added to this flavor, with a heavy dependence on local Afrikaans or Western scholarship. Most universities therefore have remained “white spaces” in manifold ways (Department of Education, 2008). Internationally, European universities such as Vrije Universiteit could continue to cooperate with South African partners embedded in this globally white tradition. The profound changes in South African higher education scarcely seemed to affect or change the continuity of VUA-South African collaboration, with this difference, that now VUA was not criticized for it, but seen as “progressive” in its focus on an African country, while so many other universities around the world turned their gaze toward China. In the Netherlands, the University of Groningen was, for instance, the first Dutch university to start a campus in China, in Yantai, Shandong Province[1].

At the universities, though, tensions were slowly building up, as the much-enlarged student population (mainly black), experienced a very slow pace of change (Department of Education, 2008). More than 20 years after apartheid and 10 years after the restructuring of higher education, now the free-born (after 1994) students decided to protest and refute the progress of transformation claimed by the institutional leadership. The ensuing movement rapidly gained momentum and managed to bring several institutions practically to a standstill by the end of 2016.

It had all begun with a very symbolic act of anti-racialism at the University of Cape Town. The statue of Cecil John Rhodes – banker and miner, founder of the university and the countries that are now Zimbabwe and Zambia – had remained on its pedestal at the University of Cape Town, and that too 20 years into the “New South Africa”. On 9 March, Chumani Maxwele threw human excrement on the statue and his action drew attention to the taken-for-granted institutional culture of whiteness at UCT, as exemplified in a later statement by what became known as the Rhodes-Must-Fall movement: “The pain of one black student led to an action that implicated the university community and South African society at large. An action that called into question the neo-colonial situation that is suffocating our country. The pain of a single black student, the pain of millions of black South Africans has now culminated into the movement known as Rhodes-Must-Fall. And indeed, the Rhodes statue that represents the blood and sweat of Africa’s children is finally falling” (RMF in Voskuilen, 2015, p. 33). Bringing the statue down marked a new era in higher education. March 2015 is generally regarded as a “wake-up call” in South African higher education.

The Rhodes-Must-Fall movement sparked an enormous response worldwide, including the white spaces of Oxford University, still proud of it being the European epicentre of the Rhodes legacy in South Africa, with the “Rhodes House” as its monument, original home of the Rhodes Scholarship[2]. In a way, Chumani Maxwele’s protest, consciously staged and performed, broke the “white silence” at the heart of the “culture of whiteness”: a silence that stood for hegemonic “normality” and academic quality; a silence that legitimized and took

the culture of whiteness for granted. In its wake the Rhodes-Must-Fall movement generated a series of other student protests at many other South African universities, of which the most well known is probably the Fees-Must-Fall movement that flared up in October 2015 and which forced South African President Zuma to declare on 23 October that student fees would not be increased in 2016[3]. The students not only protested on behalf of themselves, but this movement also protested against the low wages and outsourcing of cleaning and security services on campus, which is why part of the staff also joined in the protests[4]. Protests continued, and are still continuing in 2016 at various campuses, with the anti-rape protests at Rhodes University attracting a lot of media attention[5]. The students labeled Rhodes institutional culture as a “rape culture”, accusing its management of not taking adequate measures and actions against sexual offenders. The local elections of August 2016 saw a further loss for the ANC party[6] (the presidential elections are in 2018), and the student protests still have not calmed down[7]. Interesting to note is that the particular framing and wording of the 2015-2016 protests, and the responses of the South African police and government toward them, very much resembles the way in which the apartheid government at the time responded to protests and student attempts to make schools and institutions of higher learning, and as a result the country at large, “ungovernable”: intimidation, rubber bullets, and tear gas.

Funneling down, what do these contexts mean for the Dutch-South African historical relationship of academic cooperation between what is now NWU and Vrije Universiteit?

### **A traditional white bulwark: from PUKKE to NWU**

With the ANC governmental restructuring of the South African higher education landscape in 2004, the former Afrikaans universities such as the UP, Rand African University, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, the UFS, and the University of Stellenbosch ceased to exist as exclusively white academic places[8]. Yet, as in many other sectors, institutionalized, racialized thinking and practice have not magically disappeared from these institutions. In this section, we will see that whiteness – a culture of whiteness – still weighs strongly in one particular former Afrikaner University: NWU.

The NWU came into being on 1 January 2004 after a brief, but intensive, preparatory period under the chairmanship of Theuns Eloff. The process involved a merger of the former Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE), located in Potchefstroom, as well as its Vanderbijlpark Campus (90 km eastward), and the former University of the North-West (located in Mafikeng) in the former homeland University of Bophuthatswana (200 km to the west on the Botswana border). Officially the university now has three campuses: Potchefstroom, Mafikeng, and the Vaal Triangle (Vanderbijlpark), and a student enrolment of almost 70,000 (including a significant number of distance learners, largely registered in Potchefstroom). The federalist structure of the three-campus university is dominated from the old Potchefstroom University with a traditionally white staff and student population. The former university had grown out of the Burgersdorp theological school in the early twentieth century, and predominantly served the descendants of the white Afrikaner Boer population that had inhabited the Transvaal region since the nineteenth century. The almost totally black campus of Mafikeng predominantly attracts students from the surrounding rural area, including many students from Botswana. The smallest of the three NWU campuses, based in the Vaal Triangle (a highly industrialized area), has a mixed staff and student population and has long been a Potchefstroom satellite. In 2004, much to its own surprise, it was assigned independence from Potchefstroom. The latter remains in many ways still NWU’s dominant campus, if only because it hosts the administrative hub and institutional office. In the South African higher education landscape, NWU is often labeled as the outcome of strategic negotiation between white local administrators and the ANC government.

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On 20 October 2015, a group of mostly Afrikaner students of the Potchefstroom campus, NWU, gathered around the statue of theologian and bible translator Jakob Daniel du Toit (also known as Totius) in front of the main building<sup>[9]</sup>. Their goal was to protect the statue from being removed by a group of mostly black students. These black students had recently founded Reform PUK, a collective claiming that the Potchefstroom campus is failing to transform into an inclusive campus with equal rights for black students, and that the campus culture still “[...] exclusively accommodates white-supremacist, patriarchal values interpreted through the vestiges of Afrikaans Nationalism.”<sup>[10]</sup> The Totius statue in their view is an expression of the continuation of a predominantly white culture, as du Toit’s interpretations of the Bible are thought to have been used to justify racial segregation during apartheid.<sup>[11]</sup> In taking offense at the statue, which was only erected in 2009, black NWU students shared the 2015 student protests that started that year with the Rhodes-Must-Fall movement at Cape Town’s UCT. During the events in Cape Town, the Potchefstroom campus’ staff and students held their own debates on transformation and diversity, which became strongly focused on the issue of language policy. The predominantly black students, in opposition to the prevailing Afrikaans medium NWU language policy, advocated for a dual Afrikaans-English medium policy to increase diversity on campus, but this in its turn was met with strong resistance by the majority of Afrikaner students on campus, who considered the new demands as an outright attack on their culture, as they consider language to be the cornerstone of their historical cultural legacy, a view that is shared in most other traditionally Afrikaans universities in South Africa (Jansen, 2009, p. 69).

Afrikaans can be considered to lie at the root of Afrikaner identity and nationalism, as it includes a wide range of socially constructed symbols through which Afrikaners express their cultural identity (Verwey and Quayle, 2012, p. 554). It was the Afrikaans language, for example, that strengthened Afrikaner nationalism after the war during a period of economic difficulty, and loss of power and identity (Jansen, 2009, p. 33), and became the official language that helped the Afrikaner government to not only take control of the political socioeconomic but also the cultural domain (Jansen, 2009, pp. 33-34). According to Jansen, the Afrikaans language survived as the main post-apartheid tool for excluding black South Africans, as “a respectable way of keeping out black people without the burden of having to make nasty racial arguments (Jansen, 2009, p. 36).” Openly racialized terminology gave away to euphemized references to “differences” in culture, language, and group identity (Jansen, 2009, p. 107).

It is the continuation of these practices that made the ANC government pressure higher education institutions to transform themselves into more open and diverse sites, a development that gained momentum particularly between 1997 and 2004 when the number of institutions was reduced from 37 to 23. NWU became one of several institutions in which black and white campuses were fused, but leadership and academic staff largely remained in the hands of vested – white – interest groups. Debates to abolish Afrikaans as the main language in the previously Afrikaans universities was therefore strongly resisted not only by white Afrikaans staff members but also by the white student community and their families for fear of loss of culture and identity (Jansen, 2009, p. 69; Steyn, 2001, p. 25). Education, and its institutions, thus became the “last political space in which [they] defend race, culture, and language (Jansen, 2009, p. 37)”. UCT scholar Higgins (2007a, b) and University of Witwatersrand scholar Steyn (2001) thus speak of an academic – institutional – culture of whiteness. Higgins argues that this institutional whiteness is deeply rooted in the structures and embedded in the “way of life” of a university, from the curriculum, the names of sites and buildings, to any and every joke on campus (Higgins, 2007a, p. 107, referring to Steyn and van Zuyl, 2001, p. 27, 28, 42). Individuals who share this white identity feel at home within this culture and perceive the environment and styles of communication as normal. Yet, it has an increasingly alienating and disempowering effect on individuals who do not feel accepted by the institution due to their lack of whiteness (Higgins, 2007a, p. 106).

In 2015, the newly appointed NWU Vice-Chancellor Dan Kgwadi had to face strong resistance in his attempt to restructure and centralize the university. Reduction of campus autonomy and change of language policy that he finally managed to have approved by the council and senate particularly met with resistance from staff and students of the Potchefstroom campus. As a result of these changes, a 2016 international student at the NWU Potchefstroom campus could write the following message on his Facebook page: “Welcome to the Rainbow Nation! [...] in Potchefstroom you will have the opportunity to experience study life the South-African way”[12]. The positive frame is strongly supported on the campus website which reads that “traditionally [this campus] drew its students from the Afrikaans-speaking community but today embraces a multilingual, multicultural working and teaching environment”[13]. A picture on the same website shows four students of different color, representing the campus population[14]. It looks then as if Desmond Tutu’s image of the rainbow nation as the post-apartheid concept of nationhood and common identification with a new, diverse “South Africanness” (Higgins, 2007a, p. 97; Walker, 2005, p. 133) was also finally accepted in Potchefstroom.

Yet the dominant perception of Potchefstroom campus is that it is still dominantly white and that it merely caters to Afrikaners (Ngwenya, 2012, p. 221; see also Kamsteeg, 2008, 2011)[15],[16]. This taken-for-granted culture of white “normality” and its underlying power structures (Steyn and van Zuyl, 2001, pp. 108-109) were explained at a Lustrum conference during the 135th anniversary of Vrije Universiteit in November 2015, where NWU Vice-Chancellor Dan Kgwadi’s keynote speech had to be video-broadcasted, as he considered it unwise to leave his university which at that moment was suffering from violent student protests that had followed a tumultuous year in which both white and black student audiences had been protesting loudly about the announced university governance changes and lack thereof, respectively. In his speech, Kgwadi explicitly asked Vrije Universiteit to support him in his mission to truly transform his institution and turn NWU, and Potchefstroom campus in particular, into a diverse space in reality.

### **Between pride and shame: Vrije Universiteit-South-Africa relations as a history for better and for worse**

Many “white spaces” in South Africa are strongly linked with white spaces in Europe. The formerly English speaking universities have strong connections to universities in the UK: see, for example, the Mandela-Rhodes Scholarship with its center at Oxford University. Many of the formerly Afrikaans-speaking universities have long-standing connections with German and Dutch universities. VUA, a university based on Dutch Reformed principles and founded in 1880, has always had strong relations with Afrikaans-speaking universities in South Africa, and Potchefstroom University in particular. When Abraham Kuyper founded VUA on 20 October 1880[17], there was a letter of congratulations on his desk from the theological seminary in Burgersdorp, later to become Potchefstroom University. The first-ever international student at VUA was from South Africa (1881) and also the first-ever international PhD (1903) was from South Africa. VUA supported the Boer cause in South Africa, as the Boers were considered their “Reformed brothers overseas.” They were not the only ones; around the turn of the previous century, almost the whole of the Dutch population supported the Boers in their war against the British, the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), and VUA was part of that national sentiment. VUA was proud of its connections to the Afrikaners (Wels, 2014).

When the Nationalist Party came to power in South Africa in 1948, and increasingly formalized and anchored apartheid in the judicial system, this support for the Boers and their political successors became increasingly problematic, especially when in 1960 the Dutch anti-apartheid movement became politically very vocal and strong, also at VUA. What had been a source of pride for VUA at its foundation now was increasingly being



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considered by public opinion as something to be ashamed of (Wels, 2014). It became clear that the apartheid system was violating social justice and human rights in major and systematic ways, and that this apartheid was as strongly institutionalized in South Africa's higher education institutions as anywhere else. It can even be maintained that the Universities of Stellenbosch, Potchefstroom, and Pretoria were the places where apartheid had been academically conceptualized, framed, and therewith, legitimized in close harmony with the government, many members of which had studied at one of these very institutions. Over the years, academics from this select group of Afrikaans universities also came to study and lecture at their Dutch counterpart, and vice versa, thus creating an increasingly uncomfortable joint canopy. Only in 1974 did VUA officially cut ties with Potchefstroom University – its closest South African partner – after symbolically making its point already in 1972, by honoring the Afrikaner dissident Reverend Beyers Naudé with an honorary doctorate at VUA (Berkelaar, 2007).

Until the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, announced in the famous speech by F.W. de Klerk on 2 February 1990, there were no official ties between VUA and its South African partners, but informal contacts did remain. This became most clear in an honorary doctorate that was awarded by Potchefstroom University to VUA philosophy professor Dr Henk van Riessen in 1979. Protests abounded, suggesting that he should not accept this honorary doctorate, but he did nevertheless (Thijs, 2005, pp. 157-158). Between 1948, when the National Party came to power, and 1991, when F.W. de Klerk unbanned the ANC and released Nelson Mandela, 58 South African PhDs graduated at VUA. In that same time period, 226 students from South Africa did their studies at VUA. The Chairman of the Board of VUA between 1979 and 1996, Harry Brinkman, studied at Potchefstroom during the course of his studies in the 1950s. He started as a member of the Board in 1972, the year of the honorary doctorate to Beyers Naudé. It seems clear then that, in a way, VUA never left South Africa, not even during the boycott years, given the fact that Professor van Riessen accepted his honorary doctorate from Potch; following F.W. de Klerk's famous speech on 2 February 1990, VUA responded "snel en zeer positief" ("fast and very positively") by supporting a cooperative project with the University of the Western Cape (Schutte, 2005, p. 634) and relations with Potch intensified very quickly when the old Chairman of the Board of VUA, Harry Brinkman, became a consultant to Potch in 1996, which was later rewarded with Potch awarding him an honorary doctorate in 2000 (Thijs, 2005, p. 181).

One result of VUA's involvement with South Africa is that at this very moment in time (2016), there is literally no discipline, ranging from mathematics to theology, from chemistry to economics, without its contacts and joint programs with South African partners, be it student or staff exchange, joint research, or any other form of academic cooperation. In 2002, VUA started a South Africa Office, South Africa – Vrije Universiteit – Strategic Alliances, SAVUSA, with joint research and publications as its core activities (Schutte, 2005, p. 639), from 2007 anchored in the Desmond Tutu Programme (DTP). The DTP consists of eight Desmond Tutu Professors in six disciplines (one vacancy), and a joint doctorate program, partly financed by the National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa. In the joint doctorate, South African PhDs are jointly supervised by VUA and South African professors, and joint doctoral degrees are awarded to candidates from what are now seven South African universities with whom VUA has signed a joint doctorate agreement[18].

The VUA SAVUSA team is clearly aware of the ambiguities that come with the historic pride and shame in VUA's relations with South Africa, and this goes beyond mere awareness. These same ambiguities forces VUA to reflect on its complicities with apartheid in the sense that Afrikaner universities especially played a significant role in intellectually and academically legitimizing apartheid practices, and many Afrikaner staff members were members of the politically powerful, but at the same time elusive and secretive, Afrikaner Broederbond (Van der Waal, 2015). One can argue then that VUA has for a significant

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period of time been actively contributing to the safeguarding of white spaces in South Africa. The present day activities of the VUA SAVUSA program can now be considered as an attempt to break the silence on these complications by actively collaborating in the transformation of South Africa's PhD training program, which has come with a modest attitude of self-reflection. At the same time, the very DTP that is most visibly executing this collaboration only consists of white professors, of which only one is female, with all older than 50 years of age. The South African PhDs that the DTP is able to attract for joint doctorates so far are also predominantly white, and perhaps not surprisingly located at the previously white Afrikaner universities VUA is still partnering with. The South African government, and the NRF in particular, have on several occasions made clear that, even with its acclaimed DTP 22 years after the fall of the apartheid regime, VUA has not lived up to the transformation agenda of South African higher education. This led to an evaluation of the DTP in 2016. The culture of whiteness that Higgins and Steyn still see reigning in South Africa's formerly white Afrikaner universities apparently also colors the relationship with its Dutch partners, and VUA in particular.

This overview finally leads us to the second part of this paper, in which we reflect on the white spaces and levels of complicity that we as white and privileged academics from the Netherlands consciously and unconsciously, and often silently, display, but which we need to take into account and reflect upon when we study the kind of phenomena in which we ourselves are active players. Or, how Noam Chomsky (2016) formulates it more generally in his *Who Rules the World*: "Intellectuals are typically privileged; privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities" (p. 21).

#### *Part 2: breaking silences*

As authors of this paper we do have certain convictions that guide and direct our argument. We try, for instance, to be weary of "moral high grounds", especially the ones from "the global north", as white heterosexual men, enjoying middle-class positions in society. At the same time we do feel strongly about social justice but have never really been activists. We both have a religious upbringing and feel responsible to somehow contribute to "a better world." This is all pretty much mainstream and not special at all. When relating this background to "breaking silences," particularly in light of the South African higher education case, it does perhaps gain some relevance as it leads to what we might call a self-reflexive minefield.

Actually we feel hardly in any position to say much at all. Not because we do not know what to say – we are always pretty "full of ourselves" – but because on an existential level we feel not really entitled<sup>[19]</sup>, nor are we being asked, to represent anything or anyone, let alone develop a legitimate discourse about "breaking silences." If we still are doing so below, this is in the first place because we are working at a university where we are professionally expected to write and present sensible papers at conferences, to show we are knowledgeable, and perhaps impress and compete intellectually with peers in the academic community. But maybe this is all meant to cover and protect ourselves against a legitimate reproach for our misinformed prejudice and innocence. How then do we think we can usefully be breaking silences?

In our presentation of the complex situation of South Africa's higher education institutions and their actors, we have focused on NWU and its complicated road toward overcoming the consequences of a segregated system. VUA's relationship with NWU forces us to bring up our own university's past and present. VUA's history as an emancipatory university for a Dutch Protestant minority group has made the institution, and many of its white, male, Protestant professors (often silent) sympathizers with their South African Afrikaner sisters and brothers. Mutual visits, which have often included going to each other's churches, have created bonds that last till the present day. A lot has changed since

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the days of VUA founder Abraham Kuyper and his relationship with the brethren from the Burgersdorp Theological Seminary, but the fact remains that VUA's oldest academic partners in South Africa lie in the regions with the strongest Afrikaner presence. With visitors from NWU, we speak Dutch when they come to the Netherlands, as we do when we visit Potchefstroom, except for the few occasions when a non-Afrikaans-speaking colleague joins the conversation – which does not happen all that very often. Even for the joint Desmond Tutu Doctorate Training programme, the first partners we signed agreements with were Stellenbosch and NWU. We not only understand each other's language, we apparently also “read” each other's culture – which provides the confidence and trust that we can “do business” together. The DTP is much acclaimed for being a partnership of equals – but what if these equals are indeed the usual – white! – suspects?

Of course we know all this, and we have gradually extended our personal and institutional networks – including the joint doctorate agreements – to “black” colleagues and non-white universities in South Africa, but the all-black universities are conspicuously lacking on the list of memoranda or, at best, only appear as a fig leaf in partnership networks. Furthermore, during the recent student protests we kept a safe distance. Of course, we invited NWU's black Vice-Chancellor Dan Kgwadi for our VUA Lustrum conference to share his views on diversity with us, but we did not invite his students who suffer from and struggle against the culture of whiteness[20], nor did we speak with NWU-Pukke[21] Afrikaans students who defend Potchefstroom as the only Afrikaans campus left for them[22]. Again, we can ask ourselves if we are actually doing much more than speaking with like-minded people instead of engaging with the actors who struggle over the real issues of transformation and change.

This latter dilemma is perhaps most visible in the recent debates on the societal role of universities, which are held almost worldwide. “Black Lives Matter” (USA), “The university of color” (the Netherlands), “Decolonizing the Mind” (South Africa) are themes that are discussed in meetings, but more intensively in internet communities. All these themes speak to our VUA university where the study body is becoming increasingly diverse (culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, and age), whereas the faculty is still largely uniform and monocultural in composition. In the context of the history of VUA in South Africa – which as we have shown is long, deep, and enduring – and given the empirical reality that no matter VUA's attempts toward a self-reflective attitude toward its history in South Africa, the end result as it stands now is that it is still a predominantly “white affair”, and a “white men's affair” for that matter (see the need for the evaluation of the DTP program above and the composition of the Desmond Tutu Professors).

Could this mean that the way forward, that is, to “break silences”, only means that all the individuals that are part of this configuration “have to search their own hearts?” Or is that too “soft” an attitude, given that the current South African student protests tell us that the “time of reconciliation is over?” Is it only possible to break the silences of status quo and power configurations by more forceful means than through this kind of “soul searching,” which is perhaps characteristic of people of our age, gender, and ethnicity? In our (written) research methodologies we have tried to frame this predicament by committing ourselves to a position of engaged scholarship, which we reflect on in what Van Maanen calls “confessional tales,” while in our hearts we would rather be academics who somehow contribute to the contestation of the “consuming university” by telling advocacy tales (Bauman and Donskis, 2013; Van Maanen, 2011). But would “breaking silences” perhaps not implicitly assume a more violent or even destructive attitude than the one we normally display in our academic spaces that are usually at a safe distance?[23] How do we ultimately reflect on our positionality in this configuration and how much remains of that “nobleness” of ours, which we have held so dear for the many years that we worked in South Africa?

**Auto-ethnographic impressions**

As a student from 1982 and, since graduation in 1986, an employee of VUA, I (Harry) consider myself very much a “product” of VUA. Jokingly I introduce myself sometimes as a “VU-clone”. With my research, right from the 1980s up to now, focused on southern and South Africa as it is, and with some of my students going to South Africa for their master’s research, and also with my involvement in the founding and development of VUA’s South Africa Office (South Africa – Vrije Universiteit – Strategic Alliances, SAVUSA) in 2002, being its director for eight years, I have had a lot to do with “Potch.” “To do” means that I have had quite a few students that went to PU for their master’s research, and deciding and negotiating the topic of research with the then Director of the International Office has always been an interesting process. As director of SAVUSA I have organized, together with my team, seven visits by the top brass of VUA to South Africa from 2002 onward, and visiting Potch and its vice-chancellor was always part of the program.

I have never been active in the Dutch anti-apartheid movement. As an active “soldier” in the Salvation Army at the time, I was not in an environment where that was either stimulated or even came to mind. The Salvation Army considered itself, like the International Red Cross, “politically neutral” (see Van den Akker, 2016). I may have prayed for South Africa, but did not participate in the political protests inspired by “leftist” ideologies. My political awareness about South and southern Africa came at a later stage in my life, when I was no longer part of the Salvation Army and started to see the world around me from different, and more political, angles. As director of SAVUSA, I felt that I had to almost “catch up” and “make up” for my many years of political “silence,” and put VUA and its relations very strongly in the context of the “New South Africa,” as it was often referred to after Nelson Mandela became its first democratically elected president in 1994 (Sparks, 1996). Let me briefly try to reflect on what that meant for some of “my” students going to South Africa and especially the topics they chose for their master’s research and for my interactions with the vice-chancellor’s office in relation to visits of our leadership to South Africa.

*VUA students to Potch*

Two “situations” come to mind. First, I had a Dutch white female student who wanted to research the level of integration of different ethnicities in women’s hockey at Potch. This student was not particularly politically savvy but had a keen eye for human relations. She stayed at the “koshuise” (female residence) on the Potch Campus in order to learn about this topic through participant observation. She herself was also a “sporty type,” so she mingled easily. Women’s hockey is big in Potch and is nationally considered to be one of the best teams, and the sport facilities are great. When I suggested this topic to the then Director of the International Office, he was not immediately keen. But as we knew each other personally, I was able to convince him that, if Potch was part of the New South Africa, it would show great commitment if they would be willing to allow this topic for research. And so it happened that “my” student entered the “koshuise,” only to find out that the level of integration had maybe not come as far yet or was as progressive as Potch wanted to believe it to be. Or, at least, this was the impression and analysis from the perspective of this Dutch master’s student. When the outcomes of her research were shared with the International Office, two things happened. First, I was informed that “my” student was seeing a young black man and that they may have been involved in “immoral acts” from the perspective of a university that stood for Christian Higher Education. Second, her ethnographic research approach of participant observation was questioned, casting doubt on the reliability and validity of the results (cf. Kamsteeg, 2011). I defended “my” student by complimenting Potch on their bravery to allow for this research, explained how outcomes of ethnographic fieldwork can be interpreted as meaningful, and welcomed them tongue-in-cheek to the

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global new world of the heterosexual relations of young people: no big deal, on the one hand, but significant for VUA-Potch relations nonetheless (cf. Schutte, 2005).

A second incident had more serious consequences, actually more for myself than anyone else; this entailed a joint research project on HIV-AIDS policies in the North Western Province. It was a project funded by Dutch development aid money, part of a program to stimulate Dutch-South African relations in higher education, South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD). The SANPAD Office in Durban did not have particularly warm feelings for former Afrikaner universities in general, and especially not for Potch, which was considered the most Afrikaans and conservative institution of them all. Nevertheless, I had convinced SANPAD already once before with a research proposal that had granted Potch a project. This was now the second one that also worked together with students from the UNW, their later merger partner (2004) from Mafikeng. The way that I felt at the time in terms of how Potch came to dominate the project, the interpretation of the data, its reporting, and especially how it excluded their (black) colleagues and participating students from Mafikeng in the analytical stage of the research process, led me in the end to withdraw myself and “my” students from the project. It created a slight stir at that particular moment in time perhaps, when I informed both my project colleagues in Potch and SANPAD about my decision. The project continued afterwards, though, without my participation (and it does not feature in my curriculum vitae).

#### *Vice-chancellor relations: VUA and Potch*

Before the merger with UNW in 2004, VUA institutional visits to South Africa always went straight to Potch and were always welcomed with not only the utmost proper protocol but also with a kind of “family warmth.” No matter that our universities have fought and maybe are still fighting their (ideological) battles, no one can deny our long-standing relations since the foundation of VUA in 1880. That long relationships comes with a certain level of shared sentiments in terms of history that are always mentioned when the leadership of the two universities meet each other. Once protocol is adhered to, informality is allowed for, and the VC shares the situations at their respective universities with remarkable frankness and openness. After the merger of Potch and UNW in 2004, I was able to convince the VUA leadership that it would be a proper confirmation of the equality of the partners in this merger if we did not visit Potch first but would begin our visit in Mafikeng at UNW. And so it happened, maybe to the surprise of both Mafikeng and Potch. At the time Mafikeng had a Soccer Centre, and we decided that it would be of great positive symbolism if the VUA delegation played a game of soccer with the students of the center. And so it happened (although the VUA side lost, probably because of the higher average age of the VUA players compared to the UNW student players). And the tour continued from there on. It so happened that the then Campus Rector of UNW became the first black VC of the merged institution, NWU, in April 2014. He has a hard time at Potch, not even daring to live at the VC residence because of threats he regularly receives, and still remembers VUA visiting him in Mafikeng, before going to Potch. This led to a remarkable meeting in Johannesburg between the very first “black” rector at VUA and a Dutch university, Professor Vinod Subramaniam, and Professor Dan Kgwadi, on the occasion of VUA’s visit to South Africa upon the visit of Prime Minister Rutte in November 2015. Professor Dan Kgwadi came to our hotel and had a conversation lasting two and half hours (!) with his counterpart from VUA. There was a remarkable level of confidentiality amongst the two rectors. Here a new family relationship was born, based on the often-contradictory trajectories of continuity and change! I felt emotional having the opportunity to witness the occasion. As one result of this meeting Professor Kgwadi made a memorable and historic speech at a conference at VUA in November 2015, “Science for Sustainability”[24]. And so the stories and the relationships continue ever since 1880.

**More auto-ethnographic confessions**

What follows is basically another auto-ethnographic tale, one that is as confessional as Harry's because of its focus on the ethnographer rather than on the ethnografied (Van Maanen, 2011; Tota, 2004). I (Frans) was the first in my family to study at university, and my Protestant family living in the Dutch Bible Belt[25] was happy I studied history and later cultural anthropology at Vrije Universiteit. Although my parents were not orthodox Protestants, I grew up in a tradition in which the Bible was omnipresent, which served me well when I spent my later teenage years in the Youth-for-Christ movement. Once at university, political awakening went hand in hand with religious "enlightenment": liberation theology became for years my spiritual home, and, with hindsight, it was only logical that in the early 1990s I would do my PhD research in Latin America on the political impact of Pentecostal church growth in the dictator Pinochet's Chile. In the evangelical atmosphere of these churches I was in my element (cf. Vice, 2015), as the religious language was so familiar to me that I could regularly accept invitations to testify and even preach in front of the gathering – for lay preaching was the norm. Back in the Netherlands, I became active in South American solidarity groups. Of course, the South African struggle and liberation did not go unnoticed, but even Mandela's release from prison was only registered by me almost as in passing. South Africa was hardly more than the stories my father read me from Lourens Penning about the heroic struggle of the Boers against the English at the end of the nineteenth century, a struggle in which their unshakable Protestant faith stood out as a firm beacon of determination, much in the same way as it later became the fundament of the belief in apartheid.

*Entering a new, yet familiar-feeling world*

It was with this religious-cultural baggage that I first walked through the university town of Stellenbosch in 2004 and 2005 during a brief visit to teach a course in organizational anthropology. By then I had become a lecturer, again indeed at the Vrije Universiteit[26]. I taught the nearly all-white class of Stellenbosch students about culture, identity, and power from a European textbook, without bothering much about what these concepts actually meant in the South African context. Neither did I bother much about my observation that many a university building still bore the name of historic white male apartheid-preaching and practicing scientists and politicians. It was only in 2008, when Harry asked me to consider working for the SAVUSA program that I gradually started to see what such an institutional involvement could mean. During my visit to South Africa in the capacity of policy person, I ended up in a two-day SANPAD (see above) evaluation where the then Vice-Chancellor of the UFS asked all kinds of uncomfortable questions about Dutch-South African university cooperation, during one of which he questioned the strong bonds of VUA with the former Afrikaner and apartheid-supporting white universities of Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Stellenbosch, and Potchefstroom, the latter being the most disturbing.

It was at Potchefstroom University, in 2004 rebaptized as NWU after a merger with the previous homeland, and thus all black University of Bhoputatswana, that I really started my research on transformation in South African higher education. During my first visit to Potchefstroom, we met with the local NWU campus rector, Annette Combrink, in the Sport Stadium. While around us white girls and boys were physically practicing on a lush grass tapestry (many national and international track and field teams use the place for training camps), we agreed that I might perhaps study the progress made in the area of transformation on her campus. The restructuring of the university had more or less been finished, and now the culture was expected to follow suit. Feeling happy with a promising research subject, I went to the Venter Guesthouse at the main entrance of the campus, where the university's motto, "innovation through diversity," was shinningly projected. Entering the guesthouse, at the threshold of the campus, was like moving into

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the world of Afrikaner culture gone-by. Numerous cadres with Bible texts, religious music, and a traditional Afrikaner breakfast shared with the other (white) university guests gave me the feeling of having entered the world of my parents and grandparents. The owners liked their Dutch guests (VUA staff had been coming there since time immemorial) because with them “Ons kan lekker Afrikaans praat” (“we can nicely chat in Afrikaans”). Like most staff I was to meet on campus later, they knew everything about the Netherlands, and on Sundays they went to church in much the same way as in an ordinary Dutch Bible Belt town.

Walking on campus the next day again felt like wearing the cloak of invisible “likeness.” My skin color, language, cultural references, and religious background were approvingly recognized, wherever I sat and spoke to people, no matter if they were staff members or students. Within half a year, and without much ado, I published my first article on the merged identity of the multicampus university (Kamsteeg, 2008), with the help of two white academics from Vaal Triangle (the third university campus). This paper on NWU transformation results was not without critical comments, but most non-Potch academics and others I subsequently met during the regular institutional VUA visits frowned on me writing about NWU. Politely and sometimes less politely they asked, why of all places had I chosen NWU to study transformation. Did not I know that Potch really was still an apartheid-in-disguise stronghold? How could I walk, and wheel and deal with these people, who refused to acknowledge that nothing had changed for black students at NWU? At the same time, when I was talking to NWU’s academic staff, and even more so institutional staff, including the very energetic vice-chancellor, Theuns Eloff (all white people), I was impressed with the data and numbers proving the structural changes, managerial successes, and the prizes the university won for language policy and management, results that were all taken as proof of transformational excellence.

Of course I did have my doubts, and these were further substantiated by the Mafikeng campus rector, Professor Dan Kgwadi. He was part of the NWU’s overall management team and co-responsible for the governance of the institution, but he also led the all black Mafikeng campus. I had met him during the opening of the 2008 academic year in Potchefstroom – accompanied by much singing of psalms and prayers – and offered to drive him to his campus with my small rented car, when I heard his company car had broken down. For me this resulted in an unforgettable journey, as we had to drive the 250 km slowly – it took four hours – in a torrential downpour replete with spectacular lightning. Although we did not have much in common, he told me his life story from the time he became a Tswana student and activist in Mafikeng to the actual situation of having accepted the rectorship at that same Mafikeng, along with all the trials and tribulations in between. After having dwelt with whites and their stories for some time, his narrative was really revealing. For me personally this experience even had traits of Paul’s Damascene conversion – perhaps yet another proof of my limited repertoire as a white Dutch scholar entering a still largely racialized society. That night I ended up in a fairly uncomfortable situation on the campus stage during a huge student gathering in which rector Dan Kgwadi had to explain the NWU new fee policy and other issues that had caused student protests and a belated opening of the academic year in Mafikeng (in 2015-2016 violent protests were to repeat themselves[27]). Sitting among black university staff, I clearly did feel less in “my element” than I had in Potchefstroom the day before.

Back in Potch, my escapade to Mafikeng seemed like a voyage to a different planet. I had another appointment with the white Vice-Chancellor Eloff who told me his personal story where he as a white Afrikaner had played an important role in the preparatory phase of negotiations between the ANC and the last rulers of the apartheid regime.

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He emphatically stressed he was now playing a similar role in making a success of the transformation of the Potch Afrikaner university into a “rainbow” institution. This meeting was to become the dawn of my article on epic and tragic stories of transformation (2011) that I published after a period of ever more intense involvement in VUA’s institutional South Africa policy and scholarly research at NWU and other universities in particular. Both the institutional and scholarly visits brought me alternately to white and black environments, switching language from mixed Afrikaans and Dutch to English, with various grades of feeling in my element. “White communication” proved devilishly easy and alluring, and every time we signed a memorandum of understanding, or joint doctorate agreement, we realized how much easier this went if we understood each other’s language (grammatically as well as culturally). These agreements were signed over the years, and it was no coincidence that the old Afrikaner universities were the first we reached an agreement with. Till the present day, VUA has no agreement with any of the (formerly) black universities, such as Fort Hare. UWC, the previously colored university of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, has so far been the only non-white institution with which VUA signed such an agreement.

*Writing about whiteness*

My scholarly writing has, since these first encounters, slowly shifted toward the theme of whiteness (DiAngelo, 2016; Maré, 2014; Steyn, 2001; Vice, 2010). My experiences with South African student protests from 2014, and particularly after the rise of the Rhodes-Must-Fall movement in early 2015, have only further contributed to this. Whenever I come to South Africa, the awkwardly comfortable feelings when meeting white Afrikaners are still there, but meanwhile VUA/SAVUSA has institution-wise “discovered” its own whiteness – through the NRF as partner in the DTP. A visit by VUA rector Professor Frank van der Duyn Schouten to his colleague Professor Dan Kgwadi, after he had become NWU’s rector in 2015, was another eye-opener. During NWU’s yearly graduation ceremony, both leaders acknowledged that their institutions were not really as diverse as they were inclined to claim. The following year a study by one of my own master’s students on the color of the NWU PhD students convincingly argued (in line with NRF’s PhD Study, 2010) that the culture of whiteness still reigned strongly on the Potch campus – a conclusion not positively received by her local supervisor (De Groot, 2016).

At the moment of writing of this text in 2016, Dan Kgwadi is about to finish his second year as vice-chancellor of the full NWU institution, suffering vehement, sometimes even violent, resistance to his efforts to push transformation one step further. VUA invited him to give a speech at its own 135th anniversary, which he had to decline because of urgent negotiations at the Ministry of Higher Education, exactly about the broad student movement for fee reductions and curriculum changes. The times had clearly changed since the days when our white male vice-chancellors could still meet in peace to discuss their institutions’ common roots and interests. Now these very common roots have become an issue that is being questioned. The effort at reconciliation by Jonathan Jansen – till August 2016 rector at the UFS – most prominently in his *Knowledge in the Blood* (2009), no longer seems satisfactory. Whiteness and white supremacy is severely questioned, change demanded, and the universities have regularly been brought to a standstill during the last months of 2016. Nobody knows what the academic year 2017 will bring. Slowly but steadily, my, our, own whiteness has become awkward, and even seen as standing in the way of all our “good intentions” to make a contribution. At the moment that VUA is adopting a policy driven by “the sense of serving” (Flikkema, 2016), its commitment to South Africa and its academic partners is declining. It is perhaps a stroke of irony that at the moment VUA has a colored rector for the first time; its own institutional culture is losing the taint of commonality with its South African academic brothers and sisters.



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As an individual, engaged scholar, as well as a VUA institutional partner, we feel even more that we are standing at the crossroads. Has our history finally reached the payback stage? Do our white friendships – once so comfortable institutionally and personally – in the end mean that our role is over?

### **And so the stories continue**

First, we thought that we would be ending this academic article with a “discussion,” as is common in these types of academic texts, but it feels that this is not the “proper” end for this text; it does not feel right. In its auto-ethnographic approach, this paper is not finished or able to draw “conclusions,” after which it can be published and be comfortably added to our publication lists. The discomfort that we write about does not allow for closure; auto-ethnography does not end with a publication but begs for a continued narration and sharing of these stories, impressions, tales (cf. Van der Waal, 2015), to keep this conversation alive and relevant for VUA’s ongoing relations with South Africa.

“Breaking silences” once in an article is not enough. What is exactly “enough” is, by the way, hard to define, but our “gut feeling” seems to indicate – also given the irony we described about our current rector being the first ever “person of colour” to hold that position at our university and in the Netherlands in general, and how that interestingly enough has slowed down our interactions with South Africa – that part of the discomfort of this text also has to do with the kind of “honesty” that we are putting into it. There are many more “honest” stories to tell, actually too many for an article of this size. We could continue story after story with more auto-ethnographic details about our involvement with this institutional relationship between VUA and Potch and South Africa in general. We could tell about the hugely symbolic role that Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has played at VUA since his visit to our university in 2007, and how a program with eight professors bearing his name has impacted VUA and its thinking about its history and relationship with Potch and South Africa more broadly[28]. We could tell the story of how Frans and Harry were interviewed for our university magazine, *Ad Valvas*, by the then Writer-in-Residence, Christine Otten, in relation to our South Africa program, about our personal discomfort about doing research in South Africa as VUA employees, while at the same time being almost the embodiment of what the VUA stands for in that country (i.e. “clones”). In that interview we already expressed this sense and wondered how to deal with this ambiguity institutionally (De Hoog, 2010, p. 13). Slightly ironically, one could say that we are now continuing that conversation in a peer-reviewed article. We could relate stories about how VUA, together with UNISA, organized a soccer program for township kids during the 2010 World Cup Soccer in South Africa and relate the little joke we made about where the word “VUVUZela” comes from. How we considered ourselves “noble” in our approach in turning our attention to township children, while we were accommodated in luxury hotels at every occasion across the country. And so we could continue.

This auto-ethnographic approach has provided a creative avenue to intellectually “break silences” that are as personal as they are institutional. Maybe one of the reasons for remaining silent is that these silences are considered too personal for an academic publication. At the same time these auto-ethnographic stories shed some light on how and why VUA’s institutional relations have developed the way they have. There is a personal touch to it, ranging from being “VU clones,” to a background in the Salvation Army and Youth-for-Christ, to continuing our ethnographic research in the country, teaching us time and again the importance and crucial angle of a political interpretation in trying to make sense of topics. Juxtaposing “the personal” with the “institutional” in an auto-ethnographic approach brings with it insights into relational processes that can hardly ever be traced in more official institutional texts or messages. In order to be able to do that, perhaps some reflective “VU clones” are needed. Only then can the personal tell you something about the institutional and possibly also the other way around.

## Notes

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10. [www.facebook.com/Reform-PUK-1644069202534401/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/Reform-PUK-1644069202534401/info/?tab=page_info) (accessed 5 November 2015).
11. [www.thedailyvox.co.za/did-nwu-potchefstroom-create-a-terrible-time-machine](http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/did-nwu-potchefstroom-create-a-terrible-time-machine) (accessed 4 November 2015).
12. [www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=288189277866742&id=285909011428102](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=288189277866742&id=285909011428102) (accessed 6 July 2016).
13. [www.nwu.ac.za/content/nwu-potchefstroom-campus](http://www.nwu.ac.za/content/nwu-potchefstroom-campus) (accessed 6 July 2016).
14. [www.nwu.ac.za/current-students-potchefstroom-campus](http://www.nwu.ac.za/current-students-potchefstroom-campus) (accessed 6 July 2016).
15. <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-09-25-potchefstroom-campus-still-apartheid-institution-nzimande> (accessed 6 July 2016).
16. [www.thedailyvox.co.za/black-students-dont-matter-at-nwu-pukke/](http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/black-students-dont-matter-at-nwu-pukke/) (accessed 6 July 2016).
17. He also founded a Protestant (“anti-revolutionary”) political party and a church of the same denomination.
18. [www.vu.nl/en/research/topresearchers-at-vu/desmond-tutu-chair/index.aspx](http://www.vu.nl/en/research/topresearchers-at-vu/desmond-tutu-chair/index.aspx) (accessed 12 December 2016).
19. The concept of entitlement is another “can of worms” (see for an example in the USA, Kenyada, 2009) that we could reflect upon in this South African context, but which we leave for another paper.
20. [www.thedailyvox.co.za/black-students-dont-matter-at-nwu-pukke/](http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/black-students-dont-matter-at-nwu-pukke/) (accessed 11 December 2016).
21. “PUK” or “PUKKE” is the popular short name and acronym for “Potchefstroomse Universiteits Kollege”
22. [www.thedailyvox.co.za/nwu-pukke-pukke-is-the-only-afrikaans-campus-left-where-must-we-go/](http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/nwu-pukke-pukke-is-the-only-afrikaans-campus-left-where-must-we-go/) (accessed 11 December 2016).
23. Bate (1997) reserves the term “jet plane ethnography” for those ethnographers who are only passersby in a given societal setting – avoiding becoming really deeply involved (beware of going native!). In VUA-South Africa terms, it could be the KLM late evening flight back to Amsterdam that regularly saves us from really becoming concerned and committed.
24. [www.vu.nl/en/anniversary/science-sustainability/report/index.aspx](http://www.vu.nl/en/anniversary/science-sustainability/report/index.aspx) (accessed 11 December 2016).

25. A geographical strip stretching from the Southwestern to the Northeastern tip of the Netherlands, in which to the present day orthodox Protestant churches dominate many towns and villages, including local politics.
26. In these days it was no longer a Protestant university except in name, but its organizational culture was still broadly labeled as such, and its leaders were still largely recruited from the old-Protestant-boys networks.
27. [www.enca.com/south-africa/nwu-ghost-town-after-student-protests](http://www.enca.com/south-africa/nwu-ghost-town-after-student-protests) (accessed 12 December 2016).
28. [www.vu.nl/en/research/topresearchers-at-vu/desmond-tutu-chair/index.aspx](http://www.vu.nl/en/research/topresearchers-at-vu/desmond-tutu-chair/index.aspx) (accessed 13 December 2016).

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