

*Think Piece*

**Trust as a condition for “radical entanglement”:  
Radical entanglement as life-death inter-dependency**

Siphokazi Magadla  
*Rhodes University*  
S.Magadla@ru.ac.za

When I was teaching first year students the introduction to international relations in July 2023, the coup in Niger took place. Seven coups have happened since August 2020 in west and central Africa. I tell the first years that it is not farfetched to imagine that one day they might come out of class to broadcasts by figures in the South African National Defence Force that they have taken over the country.

I deliberately call the course the “personal is the international” to make clear that, for better or worse, the students’ dreams and gifts are defined by “the international”. Making this point is easier standing in front of a group of students whose lives have been radically redefined by a global pandemic that began in another continent.

As I write this think piece about trust, 6000 bombs have been dropped in the homes, schools, hospitals and universities in Gaza. As of 13 November 2023, about 1063 academics, including the Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sizwe Mabizela, have signed an open letter to Universities South Africa (USAF) and the Academy of Science of South Africa that calls on USAF to “issue a statement that unambiguously expresses solidarity with the universities in Gaza and the occupied territories and mourns the deaths of academics and students who have been killed during the Israeli onslaught”. Among other important demands made by these academics, includes the call for an academic and cultural boycott and the severing of ties with Israeli institutions.

What does it mean to think about higher education and trust at a moment of deepening political, social, economic and psychological crisis in South Africa and the world?

My own discipline of international relations emerged formally as an academic discipline in 1919, as a response to the devastation of the first world war. As J Ann Tickner explains, the focus of the discipline was ‘marked by a passionate desire to prevent another war’ (1992: 9). To think about trust in higher education at this moment requires us to reflect on the extent to which universities are able to speak honestly and bravely about the urgency of our current global radical entanglement.

By this I refer to the reality that the project of Western modernity, based on colonial conquest and the capitalist plunder of the planet, places us at the real risk of a climate-driven extinction.



This publication is covered by a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license. For further information please see: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

For Janine Jones (2022), this real possibility of an apocalyptic disaster presents us with an opportunity to think of our radical entanglement for social change. This means acknowledging this 'life-death inter-dependency' which means that 'your life depends on mine as much as mine depends on yours'. This requires that 'we work together so that we live and you and yours live – and live well, not just survive' (Jones, 2022: 42).

As it stands, we are dealing with record high failure rates across faculties while universities are complicit in selling the lie to students that a university education will guarantee them economic mobility that will help them and their communities to address structural legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Instead of making clear as Sylvia Wynter does that

as long as we continue to all want to be good men and women of the Western-bourgeois kind, wherever we are in the world, we will destroy the world. We'll destroy the planetary environment, and therefore our only possible habitat as a species! (in Thomas, 2006)

While universities and academics have to survive in the midst of crisis, my view is that trust is possible, only if we use this moment to illuminate the extent of the crisis and to have the courage to think about what is required to save the planet. All disciplines have this moral obligation. All life depends on this.

### **Trust as tragicomic hope**

This kind of courageous reflection requires tragicomic hope. Cornel West explains that 'the tragicomic is the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life's joy—preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair' (2004: 16). West defines the tragicomic as a 'blues sensibility—a black interpretation of tragicomic hope open to people of all colors' (2004: 19).

Neil Kramm and Sioux McKenna argue that 'a *higher* education is about transformation as students take on the powerful knowledge of the field or fields' (2023: 2176, emphasis original). They explain that 'as students are transformed in how they understand their field of study and even the world at large, they come to understand their responsibilities as critical citizens' (Kramm & McKenna, 2023: 2176). Powerful knowledges reflect the realities, the joys, hate and hypocrisy of people over time.


Questions about the purpose of the university at this time reflect the extent to which our teaching and research is alive to the nature, urgency and the agency that emerges from a global entanglement in destruction.

Powerful knowledges have ignited revolutionary change across time. The task of the university is no less significant right now. It means that the student is not only entangled in the destruction in and of the world but profoundly affected by our responses to this. They will look upon their lecturer

and their vice-chancellor to be outraged at genocide livestreamed for the global community to watch.

Trust means that we must have the courage to say, “not on our watch!”. Trust means that students will see by our actions and reactions how to use their knowledge to bring about the change we all need.

### Author Biography

Prof. **Siphokazi Magadla** is from Ludaka in Ngqeleni. She is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Political and International Studies at Rhodes University. She teaches and researches on war and militarism in Africa; armed struggle in South Africa; women and South African foreign policy; and African feminisms, gender and citizenship. She is the author of the book ‘*Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa*’ (UKZN Press, 2023). She is the co-editor of the Journal Special Issue *Thirty years of Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Revisiting Ifi Amadiume’s questions on gender, sex and political economy* (2021) in the Journal of Contemporary African Studies. She serves on the editorial boards of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and the *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*. She is a co-editor of the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. She is an academic mentor of the Social Science Research Council's Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Fellowship and the Harry Frank Guggenheim African Fellows programme. She was awarded the Rhodes University Vice Chancellor’s Distinguished Teaching Award in 2018. She served in the High-Level Review Panel of the State Security Agency. 

### References

- Jones, J. 2022. Imagining radical entanglement for social change. In Rosales, R. (Ed.). *Making Citizenship Work*. New York: Routledge, 31-46.
- Kramm, N. & McKenna, S. 2023. AI amplifies the tough question: What is higher education really for? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(8): 2173-2178
- Thomas, G. 2006. PROUD FLESH inter/views: Sylvia Wynter. *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness*, (4).
- Tickner, J.A. 1992. *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- West, C. 2004. *Democracy Matters: Winning The Fight Against Imperialism*. New York: Penguin.