

# Statement: The Impact of Academia on The Legacies of Slavery and Colonisation

Session: “The future work of the Permanent Forum: Feedback from participants.”

## **1st Session of the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent**

Madam Chair,

Distinguished guests and comrades,

I am Thandi Soko-de Jong, a Malawian-Dutch PhD candidate in Groningen, the Netherlands. My research focus is on African Studies and Liberation Theology. As a member of the World Council of Churches network, it has been an honour and a privilege to attend this historic event virtually.

This statement is a call for this Forum to consider prioritising research that provides an account of the ongoing role of academia in perpetuating racism and discrimination. The UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent provides a critical space to confront the role academia plays in sustaining certain philosophies, theologies, and more that underpin the idea of “race” and the systems of oppression based on it. Today, I wish to highlight the need for this forum to address the role of *Eurocentric* academia in maintaining the status quo of racism and discrimination.

### ***15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> Century***

The work of scholars and religious leaders from the 15th – 18th century – a period synonymous with colonial pursuits (i.e., the Doctrine of Discovery) and the race-based slave trade – continues to shape education. Consider the impact of French philosopher René Descartes’ (1596-1650) contribution to the question of the “soul.” He built on long-existing debates in Europe that had been shaping the position of Europeans as they expanded their influence around the world. In his *Meditations*, Descartes presents the “Cartesian” view of dualism.<sup>1</sup> He introduced the idea that a human has two separate states of existence – the mind and the body, whereas the body is a non-thinking extended body and the mind is a thinking,

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, H. 2020. “Dualism.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>

non-physically extended substance.”<sup>2</sup> The implications of this view relate to the question, ‘why was the soul (and the eternal) important in European Christianity?’ The answer is that, whether intended or not, Cartesian dualism - in the light of other discourses in Europe’s Christian history, helped define who was (a) human (i.e. European Christians) and therefore, (b) who had the right to dominate or be dominated.

Significant discourses include the *Inter Caetera* Papal Bull (1493 CE) that was about the rights of Spain and Portugal to colonise, convert, and enslave non-Europeans and non-Christians.<sup>3</sup> Its assumptions were clarified and revoked to an extent in the *Sublimis Deus* Papal Bull (1537 CE), which declared that people indigenous to the Americas were rational beings, with a soul, and could therefore be considered truly human.<sup>4</sup> However, as European empires expanded during the 1600s, some Protestant traditions were convinced that European Christians were God’s chosen people.<sup>5</sup> This view, coupled with their interpretation of dualism (St. Augustine), were to emphasise strict binaries between the dominant/dominated and the enslavers/enslaved. Furthermore, based on a good/bad moral system, domination came to be justified by the attachment of negative attributes to the colour black and positive attributes to that which is white.

Thus, Descartes’ work, among others, should be read within the backdrop described above. For example, his statement, “I think, therefore I am” should be considered in light of the popular debates of his time.

### ***Pseudoscience***

As ideas of the “soul” evolved in light of the Enlightenment, the concept of White supremacy transferred over time from a religious standpoint to other supposed indicators of “true humanity” to fit within the paradigm of scientific research. In the old paradigm, “soulless” had referred to humans deemed to lack independent thought, history, culture, etc. and therefore “less than,” “other,” and “sub/non-human.” In the newer paradigm, these

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<sup>2</sup> Skirry, J. no date. “René Descartes: The Mind-Body Distinction.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/descmind/>

<sup>3</sup> For a Native American perspective, see *Native Voices*. no date. “AD 1493: The Pope Asserts Rights to Colonize, Convert, and Enslave.” <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/171.html>

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion see for example 26. Dahre, Ulf J., 2020. *The International Discourse on Indigenous Peoples: A Compilation of Legal and Political Documents*. Second revised edition. Lund: Palmkrons

<sup>5</sup> See for example Grotius, Hugo. *The Freedom of the Seas (Latin and English version, Magoffin trans.)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1608. Available online: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/scott-the-freedom-of-the-seas-latin-and-english-version-magoffin-trans>

indicators included measures of intelligence (IQ), aesthetics (physical appearance and traits) and behaviour.

Scholars holding on to racism within the scientific paradigm influenced pseudoscientific justifications for slavery, colonisation, and other forms of dehumanisation. Examples include craniology, certain traditions within Anthropology,<sup>6</sup> and biological racism. This legacy includes the transferral of the skulls of Nama and Herero war prisoners to Germany for “scientific research,” the exhibition of Sarah Baartman’s remains at Paris’s Museum of Man, and the use of Henrietta Lacks’ tissue for cancer research without her consent.

### ***Representation in Knowledge Production***

The centre of academic power today lies in the Northern Hemisphere. As research focuses on themes like decolonisation and anti-racism, scholars of African descent find themselves pushed to the periphery. This situation is evident wherever gatekeeping (funding, publishing, academic positions, and others), tokenisation, and other forms of narrative control exist. The status quo persists in the absence of adequate representation in knowledge production.

To that end, please prioritize, via this Forum, the wide dissemination of existing and new research that provides an account of the ongoing role of academia in perpetuating racism and discrimination toward people of African descent. Please support researchers like me in sharing our knowledge through your platform. Thank you.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Kuljian, Christa, “Study Signals Enduring Racism in Science.” May 14, 2019. Available online: <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/opinion/2019/2019-05/study-signals-enduring-racism-in-science.html>