

Tokenised celebrations of Black womanist leaders negate their contributions to society

By [Nombulelo Shange](#)

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History has been made globally and here at home. In the US, Kamala Harris became the first Black woman to become vice president, while locally, we celebrate the appointment of Professor Puleng LenkaBula's appointment as the first Black female vice-chancellor of the largest university in Africa, the University of South Africa (Unisa).



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When both announcements were made, I was personally filled with hope and joy that transformation is possible and we are all living witnesses to it. But while celebrating these women in the media, in our communities, within academia and social media, we have done a disservice to them. Maybe without intending to, we have tokenised them, focusing more on the fact that they are Black women, instead of on their remarkable career achievements and victories that have built them up to the powerful roles they hold today.

Representation is important for young Black girls

Listen, I am not saying we must not celebrate when Black women make it into leadership positions. They have to be celebrated because representation is so important for young Black girls who are often told by the world that they are not important or will never amount to anything great. We have to celebrate them as Black women because they often have to work 10 times harder to get half the recognition. And this is the point that I am making. These women and many others before them who were/are "firsts" in their fields have worked much harder than male or White predecessors. They have had to work harder while also fighting the patriarchal whiteness woven into our systems and workplaces.

The systems constantly find new and creative ways to negate Black womanist labour and achievements, while trying to keep Black women at the same level. Many of us in these situations feel powerless and give up and become content with "just getting by". Or we end up skipping from job to job, often to find the new environment is more toxic than the last. So when Black women are successful in battling these aggressions while making remarkable strides in their careers, we have a responsibility to celebrate their accomplishments and list their endless achievements in the same way we do for men. This is also important because often when women and people of colour occupy positions of power, there is often the assumption that they are purely "transformation" or "B-BBEE" hires and are/were not the most suitable candidate for the position.



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Celebrate her work and scholarly contribution

So I want to take this opportunity to move beyond celebrating Prof Puleng, the Black woman, I want to celebrate her work and scholarly contribution. I have followed and admired her work, especially her scholarly contribution and leadership style. In her role as deputy vice-chancellor responsible for institutional change, student affairs, and engaged scholarship at the

University of the Free State (UFS), she has demonstrated the kind of leadership that encourages critical dialogue. She fights for the empowerment of all, while pushing the door open for others who are marginalised by violent epistemology that often limits the involvement of Black people, women, LGBT+ and disabled groups and individuals in higher education.

Prof Puleng encourages young people to transform the spaces they find themselves in while advancing themselves in their work and intellectual engagement. There are many instances where she has done this for junior colleagues and even students, but one example that comes to mind is the August 2019 Universities in Dialogues engagement. The dialogue was hosted at the University of Pretoria, with the UFS, University of Cape Town and the University of Witwatersrand skyping the debate and making contributions on the motion, “South Africa requires a feminist government to advance gender equity and equality across all sectors of society.”



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What really showed me she is a leader who not only cares for the discourse, but for people, was her insistence that we still work together beyond the engagement. As busy as she was, she pushed us to continue the discussion, meeting in her offices to write reflections on the process and share with them with stakeholders we identified as important within UFS and externally. We had long debates amongst ourselves long after the dialogue where she motivated us to make sense of this topic and how it links to our lived experiences, using the existing contributions by feminist scholars like Bell Hooks, Amina Mama, Audre Lorde, Mercy Oduyoye, and many others to help us analyse and build on our own theorising.

When it comes to her own strong scholarly contributions, she is too shy to recommend her own work as an important resource to draw from when we navigate systems. But within her scholarly contributions, she disrupts the status quo in similar ways to how she has created disruption by becoming Unisa’s first Black female vice-chancellor. Her contributions are disruptive because she intentionally cites black theorists and writers, not just because they are black, but because their contributions are the most important for the African context. She did this knowing that it could potentially have a negative impact on her career, as the academy will always question: “where are the founding fathers?” when scholarly work does not represent the works of White men writing centuries ago about their European contexts. Instead of trying to squeeze African experiences and challenges into western boxes, she draws from far more capable African scholars.



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Black women fought to get in

She also disrupts predetermined academic categorisations that confine scholars to their respective disciplines. She realises that life does not exist in the predetermined vacuum that academia creates. Life has complex intersecting systems that influence each other and people. This is how society should be researched and analysed, with the intersecting complexities in mind. This is reflected in many of her contributions. One example is “Beyond anthropocentricity – Botho/Ubuntu and the quest for economic and ecological justice in Africa”. This paper cuts across multiple disciplines, including ecological justice, the economy and the African humanist philosophy of botho.

Globally she has also made her mark. She has worked as a visiting professor at the University of Toronto and Emmanuel College. She has also acted as a consultant for global movements such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches and the Council for World Mission, which are at the forefront of progressive thinking about ecological, economic and gender issues.

This piece could easily turn into a thesis if I had to list and discuss all of Prof Puleng's accomplishments. So, as we celebrate Prof Puleng the Black woman, let us also remember to celebrate her journey, battles, victories and even losses. Let us also do this for other Black women who will break the glass ceiling to transform places which will also want to be celebrated for finally allowing Black women in when the truth is that Black women fought to get in and their institutional efforts are long overdue.

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