From Decolonising Sexual Violence Discourse to Investigating Primate Coexistence: A Discussion with Louise du Toit

Louise du Toit & Paul Joubert

Abstract

In 2021, Louise du Toit became the first woman in the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University to be promoted to full professor, giving her inaugural lecture in August 2025. In this interview, Paul Joubert asks Du Toit to recount her intellectual journey to this point, reflecting on the gendered dynamics of philosophy as a discipline, and the challenges of establishing an authoritative voice in a largely male-dominated field. The conversation explores Du Toit's work on sexual violence, discussing the catalyst of her philosophical investigation into rape and the intersections of sexual violence with colonial–racist politics and with the struggle for decolonisation. Du Toit discusses the complex legacies of colonial constructions of Black sexuality, the challenges of addressing sexual violence without reproducing racist harms, and the institutional racism and misogyny that continue to shape the treatment of Black victims. The interview concludes with a discussion of her current projects, including her research on primate (human–baboon) co-existence.

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In 2021, you became the department's first woman full-professor, giving your inaugural lecture in August (Du Toit, 2025). What was your journey into philosophy? Why did you choose philosophy over the alternatives?

Like all students coming to university, I did not know much about the subject. In school, I admired my English and History teachers for introducing me to the kind of thinking (conceptual interrogation) I would later understand as philosophical. My first introduction to Philosophy proper occurred when I was in standard nine (now grade eleven) and my brother was a first year at Stellenbosch University (SU), studying Theology. He had a class with Anton van Niekerk and invited me to one of his lectures, which I found fascinating — it was entertaining, but also spoke to things I had never had the words to express. My plan at the time was to study to become a high school English teacher. It says something about the sexism of the time that I didn't even consider the possibility of becoming a university lecturer. I had a bursary from the Department of Education, and took languages — Afrikaans and Dutch, English, German, and isiXhosa — with Philosophy as an extra subject.

This was the time of the two philosophy departments (see Van Niekerk, 2017), so there were a lot of philosophy modules on offer, ranging from ancient Greek and political philosophy, to film studies, to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and philosophy of language. I enrolled for all the philosophy courses I could, and that's where the love started. During my third year, Anton van Niekerk called me in and asked if I had ever considered becoming a philosopher. I wondered: can a woman do that? All my philosophy lecturers had been men. But the idea/dream had been planted — a gift from Van Niekerk. I paid back the education bursary and embarked on postgraduate studies in philosophy. I did my honour's and master's at Stellenbosch, after which I was employed at RAU[1] in my first teaching position.

The department is not as gender-unequal as some philosophy departments internationally, yet it has its first woman full professor only in 2021. Is it just that it took this long for the department to catch up to the times? How did you experience the change in the department?

As I said, in the late 80s and early 90s when I studied, I only had male teachers in the philosophy department, and the white male dominance was similar across the country. Conferences were very masculine affairs. It was different in the other departments, for example in languages — there I had some very impressive women lecturers like Louise Viljoen and Annie Gagiano, among others. But, of course, all the lecturers were white. In the philosophy department, I was probably one of the first women to be employed in substitute teaching positions, around 1990–1995. It would take another ten years before the appointment of the first woman in the department — Vasti Roodt, in 2001.

It was a daunting and pioneering time for me, becoming used to or growing into believing that my voice carried authority. I mean this in a very literal and embodied way as well; one could feel that a woman's voice did not carry the same weight or solidity in the classroom. It felt to me as if you had to have a moustache to be a philosopher (this was the early 1990s and everyone tried to look like Magnum PI!).

To start to believe in oneself as a differently embodied being with intellectual authority takes a while; it took endurance and some faith and ongoing support by others, too. This experience helped me to understand when young Black philosophy lecturers (using the broad political sense of the term "Black") started expressing the same corporeal unease around fifteen years later, in terms of race. They similarly had to clear a space for themselves and find their voices, their classroom authority. Looking back, it was good that my first position was not at Stellenbosch but in Johannesburg. Although my colleagues at RAU were also all male, they had at least not been *my* professors. I could establish new and more equal, horizontal, relationships with them, whereas I had experienced my relationship with the men at Stellenbosch as more vertical. It would have been much harder to be appointed at Stellenbosch from the start and *then* to have found an independent voice.

You are right to say our department looks good in terms of gender. But it took long to get here. As far as I know, Vasti Roodt was the only woman in the department until 2009, when Minka Woermann was appointed. From there on, the department's demographic changed drastically in terms of gender. In 2010, I took up a post here, Tanya de Villiers was appointed, and in 2013 I took over from Van Niekerk to become the first woman head

[1]Rand Afrikaans University, since 2005 the University of Johannesburg.

of the department. Two other things account for the influx of younger women and yet the first woman to become a professor only in 2021. First, a number of the (older generation of) men left the department long before retirement — Willie van der Merwe got a post in Holland, André du Toit left for UCT, Andries Gouws for UKZN, Wilhelm Verwoerd for Ireland, Johan Hattingh became Dean — or, in the case of Paul Cilliers, and John McCallum, died young. The other thing that has changed is that promotion trajectories have slowed down. I believe most white men in the "old days" expected to be promoted to full professor within about ten to twelve years of starting their academic careers. Due to different financial models and greater competitiveness, it now typically takes much longer to reach that level.

By now, the department is quite unique in its gender composition; I sometimes worry that we will run out of male role models for our students. In my first term as head of the department, a whole third of the philosophy department were pregnant at the same time! That was certainly something for the record books. In my experience, that's still not the norm in philosophy departments in Europe and in America.

But of course, our department still struggles with getting race right. Philosophers pride themselves on being radically critical, yet in terms of demographics worldwide, it's one of the more conservative disciplines, in terms of race and gender.

Do you think it might have to do with the fact that philosophy is — although perhaps not uniquely so — obsessed with its founding texts? Philosophers routinely read Plato, but geneticists more rarely read Darwin. Perhaps philosophy, being so deferent to the texts and figures of the past, is more open to those who still live in the past, as it were.

That's an interesting idea. I'm not sure that I would simply agree. Of course, there is a long tradition with many "authoritative" figures (mostly male and white, according to the historical arc that we still mostly teach) which weighs heavily on the present. We still tend to think you cannot call yourself a philosopher if you don't know Plato, Kant, and Foucault, but you don't necessarily have to know Charles Mills, Judith Butler, and Steve Biko. This is slowly changing, often through pressure from our students. But different philosophers relate in very different ways to the canon, often depending on their personalities. There are ways of reading even the "classic" authors irreverently, creatively and against the grain of the tradition — I have been teaching a course called *Feminists Read the Ancients*[2]. But it's possible that there is, in general, too much reverence for the canon and the tradition.

Philosophy often starts with an unanswered question or unexplored thought — did you have a question or concern that specifically motivated you?

Or, to quote science cartoonist Sidney Harris, with an unquestioned answer. Initially, I was just in love with all of it — maybe not every single module, but there was a lot that interested me deeply. From the start of my studies, I was excited about all the resonances between literature and philosophy. In my first year I wrote an essay on D.H. Lawrence and existentialism, for example. In my honour's year, alongside the Philosophy modules, I took two modules from English: on modern poetry and on African novels. My master's thesis was also still part of that trajectory; it had a very pretentious Afrikaans title: "Mite, metafoor en metafisika: stryd/spel op die grense 'tussen' poësie en filosofie"[3]. If your title has quotation marks within quotation marks, you must know you have a problem. But this was the era of high postmodernism.

Without abandoning my interest in the intersections between philosophy and poetry/literature[4], I started to move into feminist social and political philosophy with the transition from my master's to my doctorate. My paths crossed with feminist scholars in other disciplines, such as when Amanda Gouws returned to Stellenbosch from America and later introduced me to the Dutch feminist scholar Selma Sevenhuijsen. Annie Gagiano's module in African novels also shaped my thinking in a lasting way. I don't think she even called it feminist, but she prescribed mostly women novelists from across the continent. The module explored women's "writing back" to the early male tradition of novelists, the Chinua

[2] An article resulting from that class is published in this volume: Van Zijl (2025), p. 37.

[3] "Myth, metaphor, and metaphysics: struggle/play on the borders 'between' philosophy and poetry".

[4] Some publications that further explore this line of thinking include Du Toit (1997, 2008), Du Toit & Coetzee (2023), and my unpublished inaugural lecture, "Of Flesh and Ore and the Death of Birth" (Du Toit, 2025), where I work with an epic poem by Uhuru Phalafala, another colleague at SU, called *Mine Mine Mine*.

Achebes and Nuruddin Farahs. That was my introduction to African women's thinking.

I had my first child quite young, and the pregnancy was a surprising bodied experience. At that point, I was "all in my mind", as it were, and to suddenly be pregnant was very strange. I searched for philosophical sources that could help me orient myself in this novel experience. I was pleasantly surprised to discover feminist philosophers who took embodiment seriously (like Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, Moira Gatens, Iris Marion Young, Rosi Braidotti, etc.).

When I was appointed at RAU, they wanted me to teach feminist philosophy, even though that wasn't something in which I had been trained or knew much about. But I started to read myself into the field. I would say that it was despite the lack of female and feminist philosophical role models that, in the mid-1990s, I started to think of myself as a feminist philosopher.

How did this interest develop? Your first book is A Philosophical Investigation of Rape (*Du Toit, 2009*) *— how did you become interested in that topic?*

It was a specific time in my life. It must have been 2001; several significant things happened that year. I had three young children at the time (with the youngest born in 1998), I had to finalise my PhD topic, and it was also the year my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Then the Baby Tshepang case broke in the media (see BBC, 2002). It was one of the first rape cases that really shocked the nation. The media went into a frenzy, and there was a lot of bad reporting. I was completely thrown by this rape of a nine-months–old girl; it was highly upsetting, in that time of heightened emotions for me. I could not get out of that space of feeling shattered by it. I linked it to the political transition — was the nation itself a pipe dream? I decided: let's see if philosophy can help me, let's see if philosophy has the tools to make sense of this.

What was the question that you were trying to answer? Or, to what did you apply the tools of philosophy? You mentioned the bad reporting — or was it the law that was inadequate?

The one thing I just could not understand was what could possibly go through the head of a perpetrator — what motivates this kind of violence, and to what end? We were also still in the afterglow of the political transition. Promises of a free and open country, equality and all the nice-sounding words of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the new Constitution, and the international celebration about the successful transition to democracy, were all fresh in our minds. But if babies were not safe from sexual violence, what did it say about all that rhetoric, all those hopes? How should we read what had happened there?

Very often it is a single story that gets to you — the details of it: her age, how her mother had left her alone for just a while, that the rapist was the lover of the mother; the thick description. But behind it there's a massive statistic: she was only one out of about 20 000 children under 12 that had been raped that year (and every year since). She was a name that stood in for a very large group of victims. My question was: how do we make sense, how do we read this against the backdrop of our larger political story? That question occupies me still.

At that point, I was not yet critical about the reporting. When I read up on it again years later, I saw the racism of the reporting, the classism, and even a kind of magical thinking in the portrayal of the "horrible township", as if the place itself had agency that had caused this. I also noticed the decontextualisation in the reporting: how the number of victims was *not* mentioned, and how it was treated as a shocking once off, isolated aberration. As if something like that can be neatly contained in the figure of the male monster–rapist and does not also have a structural dimension.

In my book, I looked at different aspects of sexual violence. The first chapter is about the TRC and the quest for forgiveness, how women were sidelined and marginalised as victims, and how sexual violence was entirely left out of the discussion. This is in spite of the fact that women witnesses were in the vast majority, and testified on behalf of mostly male victims. The whole transition was couched in a symbolic order in which women did not yet have full political citizenship. Those were the kinds of arguments I was trying to make.

It took me many years — now to my shame — to start to think about how to decolonise the discourse around sexual violence. Initially I thought that race was not relevant to the discussion, because it was clearly something that, generally, men do to women *within* communities. The perpetrators are usually brothers,

uncles, or other relatives; it did not seem to me to be an (inter-)racial issue. I even say in the book that race is not an important category in this discussion (p.3); this is about men dominating women in all the race, class and ethnic groups, about safeguarding inequality between the sexes. It is about women's citizenship, because the fear of sexual violence erodes all our basic rights — the Bill of Rights, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of association — all demolished by the threat of sexual violence, what Pumla Gqola (2022) calls the "Female Fear Factory". It took a student of mine to open my eyes to the racial aspects. I was teaching an honour's module in feminism and the law, in which sexual violence was a big component. A Black student asked: but where's the race in your analysis? I said that I didn't think it was relevant here, but she was adamant that it was. I was quite shocked at the time by her argument that my lack of attention to race meant my work was complicit with racism, but I started to read, and you can see that my later work engages this problem much more.[5]

What is *the racial component of the problem? How does one decolonise this discourse?*

It's not easy. I think that is why I resisted it for so long. A place to start is to look at our history of racist colonialism in South Africa. It was pointed out to me by another student that the first two laws promulgated by the National Party government after they came to power in 1948 had to do with sex, who can sleep with whom. The apartheid logic was obsessed with miscegenation and racial purity. If you look further back still, to the British "black peril" narrative and so on, you realise that Black male sexuality has been vilified on the continent for centuries. If Black men were portrayed as rapists, colonisation could be justified: if Black men could not control their sexuality, if their social orders and customs were inherently harmful, then it's for their own good that there's paternalistic interference in their lives. This led to the systematic dispossession of Black-owned land, destruction of families, and the suppression and erasure of indigenous epistemologies.

What I wanted to highlight is how central the racist depiction of Black sexuality was to colonial control and exploitation. At the same time, the sexual violation of Black women was completely ignored by rape law in apartheid and colonial South Africa. Black women were regarded, as Gqola calls it, "unrapeable" or "always–already raped" — meaning that they had no dignity to defend to begin with. The preoccupation of the law was not with every person's right to sexual integrity, but with racist population control. The sexual integrity of Black women's bodies fell beyond the pale and interest of the law.

My view (see Coetzee & Du Toit, 2018) is that we cannot tackle the problem of high levels of sexual violence against mostly women and children (but also against men) in our country, unless we face what Azille Coetzee and I call there "the sexual demon of colonial power". So, sexuality and all the surrounding anxieties are interwoven with our racial history, are indeed central to it in ways that too many scholars and activists still ignore. Kopano Ratele, a scholar at SU, also writes about how sexuality and rape (and rape discourses) *made* race (Ratele, 2009). His impressive œuvre is dedicated to decolonising the discourse around Black masculinities.

I have also in my work pointed out that, in international criminal law, sexual violence in armed conflict is often prosecuted in such a skewed way that it's mostly racialised men who are prosecuted for rape (see Du Toit, 2023b). Thus, many of the advances claimed for the prosecution of war rape by the International Criminal Court (ICC) must be scrutinised using a decolonial lens.

This sounds similar to the common criticism of the ICC, that it seems to prosecute mostly African or other racialised perpetrators.

Indeed. And yet, I still believe the world is a better place with, rather than without, strong international organisations such as the ICC. I learned from my daughter, Elsabé, who works in the field, that we must be careful with our critique. While I would love to see the ICC prosecute an American, Russian or a British general (and I don't see that happening soon), at the same time, we must keep in mind that people often bring cases to the ICC against their own governments. There are different mechanisms for bringing cases before the ICC, but one way of looking at the prosecution of war criminals on

[5]The following publications speak to race in relation to sexual violence: Du Toit (2014, 2023a), Coetzee & Du Toit (2018), and Boshoff & Du Toit (2021).

our continent is to say that African civilians and victims of war crimes have in fact benefited the most from the ICC, even as Western and Russian and other military perpetrators have escaped scrutiny. We obviously need a fairer international dispensation; what we have is systematically flawed through skewed geopolitics, but it is still much better than nothing.

Regarding the problem in South Africa, I now understand better that perhaps one of the key reasons for the lack of progress in prosecuting and properly addressing sexual violence in this country is because most victims are Black women and children. And unfortunately, our institutions are largely still colonial, classist, sexist and racist. Institutions such as the media, the police, and the courts are still likely to take a straight white middle class woman victim much more seriously than a poor Black woman victim or a queer person. This prejudice in our systems has survived the political transition — we have not adequately decolonised our state institutions. Moreover, most perpetrators (purely resulting from our demographics) are Black men, and Black men also dominate the spheres of political power. Shireen Hassim (2013) wrote illuminatingly about the fine balancing act of holding perpetrators to account, even if they are powerful Black men, without falling into the trap of portraying them in racist, colonial ways. The racist portrayal which naturalises or even expects violence from the Black male body is of course very harmful to the Black male psyche and to relations across the board.

I came across a similar problem for the first time years ago while reading a paper analysing in Nietzschean terms the phenomenon of the Christian equation of homosexuality with witchcraft in Cameroonian society (Roxburgh, 2018). I was frustrated, in my then-naïve position, because I cannot ethically stand by and watch injustice unfold, and yet simultaneously there are very few ethical avenues for urgent action. The only way that an African country can be made *to stop its persecution of queer people would be to use the same instruments that are used by (neo)colonial oppression. It seems that this is essentially the same dilemma.*

Yes, it is very similar. And we should be careful to note that there's a systematic and a longstanding, relentless onslaught of right-wing American Evangelical media on African societies, as a form of neocolonial imposition. Indigenous cultures have always been more fluid, multiple and changing than the powerful elites who wield such witchcraft accusations would like to acknowledge (see Du Toit, 2013). Sylvia Tamale, a legal feminist scholar from Uganda, has for instance done outstanding work to show how initiation practices of girls can be used as instruments of emancipation and empowerment rather than instruments of subordination. She writes in her 2020 book, *Decolonization and Afro-feminism*, that "if African women are to successfully challenge their subordination and oppression, they need to carefully and rigorously develop home-grown conceptualizations that capture the specific political-economies and cultural realities encountered, as well as their traditional worldviews" (Tamale, 2020:42).

In other words, the problem is that colonial imposition is alive and well, not that the society has somehow "naturally", or ahistorically settled on a homophobic consensus. Given my understanding of African indigenous metaphysics and cosmologies as fluid and therefore capable of working with complexity, multiplicity, and change (see Du Toit, 2015), I view strictly binary and heterosexist views to be incompatible with indigenous knowledge systems. The latter are more aligned with Christian and modern Western metaphysics.

Regarding the dilemma, in the 1990s, when people spoke out about the rape crisis in conjunction with the crisis of HIV, then-president Thabo Mbeki was very vocal in his defence of black male sexual dignity. He said that white people who speak like this think of "us" (meaning Black men) as barbarians, slaves to their sexuality (Hassim, 2013:178). He saw that racist–colonial trope in every attempt to raise awareness about the rape crisis. Of course, if you call every concern with sexual violence racist, then it stops the conversation and inhibits any activism around the problem. This makes it hard for a white person to find the right way of speaking about these things, i.e. without resurrecting racist stereotypes, and without being read in that way. One way to resist racist and sexist stereotypes is to include in our feminist theorising about sexual violence the male victims, including boys[6]. Despite the problems around framing, the problem of sexual violence simply cannot be ignored, and we have prominent black women scholars who have

[6]I published two pieces on this issue. See Du Toit & Le Roux (2021) and Du Toit (2022).

made arguments from which to draw. Pumla Gqola's work (e.g., *Rape: a South African Nightmare* and *Female Fear Factory*), for instance, has been very helpful for me.

After this period of academic interest, how did your interests develop?

It's difficult to make a neat narrative of it because I'm interested in so many things, and I constantly get distracted by what students and colleagues are pursuing. But an important development in my work on sexual violence after the book was to investigate how to decolonise our thinking around sexual violence, including in the sphere of international criminal law.

I suppose I can divide my work roughly into three or four themes. The first one is perhaps feminist theory in general, because I've also published on other topics, not just sexual violence. Secondly, I have done some work in African philosophy — I recently gave a keynote at the World Conference for African Philosophy in Cameroon, with the title "Plunder: No decolonisation without sexual freedom". I also co-edited a volume called *African Philosophy and the Epistemological Marginalisation of Women* (Chimakonam & Du Toit, 2018). African philosophy is still a very male space, and this volume starts to address this problem. I have thirdly also worked for many years in legal philosophy. I have done quite a bit of work on, for instance, rape law and the issue of consent (e.g., Du Toit, 2007, 2012).

Since 2008 I have been a member of an international and interdisciplinary research group based in Hamburg, called *Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict*, where I learned a lot about international criminal law in relation to sexual violence in conflict, and what comparisons can be drawn between "war-rape" (so-called) and rape in domestic and peacetime contexts. I am also interested in the gender dimensions of political transition, memorialisation, and reparations. Over the years, my thinking has been shaped and enriched by this group, which includes historians, legal scholars, psychologists, literary scholars, activists, visual arts scholars — a very interesting group investigating different "theatres of war".

Recently (2022) I also became the head of the Unit for Environmental Ethics, which could be seen as a fourth philosophical interest. I have been teaching environmental ethics in the School for Public Leadership for more than 10 years, and supervising some theses in the field, including a PhD titled "The Value of Being Wild: a phenomenological approach to wildlife conservation" (Cruise, 2020) and more recently a PhD titled "Framed and Caged: Theorising the Vulnerability of ~~Animal~~ Bodies Before the Law" (Uys, 2025). I also gave a talk at the South African Society for Environmental Philosophy earlier this year, on primate conflict. There's always something new.

To conclude, which topics and interests are you currently pursuing?

I am currently busy with the primate conflict project, which is about human-baboon co-existence, or lack thereof. There are two neighbouring towns on Clarence Drive, Pringle Bay and Rooi Els, and apparently the latter is a paragon of peaceful human–baboon coexistence, while the former is a battlefield, both between humans and baboons, and among the humans, about the baboons. I am interested in the deeply ambiguous relationships humans have with species close to us (which is why I emphasise that these are instances of primate-primate conflict). Why can some human communities work and live with other primates, and others not? What is it about ourselves that we see in the mirror we understand other simians (apes) to be? Why are we so upset by the fact that they are so clever and adaptive and strategic in their pursuit of their own interests? How are these perceptions moreover inflected by imaginaries around race and sex?[7] I am busy delving into this more, with an exciting real-life connection to these villages.

Another project I call "the haunting of the ghost of modernity". Achille Mbembe (2017, ch. 5) calls the Black man "the ghost of modernity", which is of course a reference to slavery and colonialism as part and parcel of Western modernity and the Western modern world view. By asking how the Transatlantic slave trade and colonisation of large parts of the globe could coincide with the French and American Revolutions and declarations of universal human rights, we can see that the invention of race made of Blackness an exception to the universally human. In that sense, the Black man is the

[7] I am reading for this, amongst other things, Donna Haraway's book *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989).

ghost of modernity; some authors say that (Western) modernity entails the destruction of Black futurity.

My critical angle on the decolonisation debate — drawing on other work of course, especially by Black feminist scholars like Hortense Spillers[8] — is to claim that this ghost of the Black man is itself/himself haunted by the figure of the Black woman. There is a double haunting here, a haunting of the spectre (ghost) itself by "its" very own ghost — the ghost is thus not left in peace. Specifically, I mean to draw attention to the main body of decolonial discourse that is still very masculine and therefore skewed. The question is what it will take to correct that narrative, the couching of the project of Black liberation in masculine-gendered terms. I find in some of the key male thinkers like Fanon, Biko, and others, an equation of being oppressed with being "like a woman", while being liberated is framed as a revirilisation, a remasculinisation, as being restored as a man among men. But what does that say, then, about Black women's liberation? If being oppressed is to be like a woman and to be liberated is to be like a (true) man, virile, agential and fully alive, where does that leave Black women's liberation? There is an article on this that should be out soon.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

[8] See her classic article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (Spillers, 1987).

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