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Book report

Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge by Jonathan D. Jansen (Ed.)

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Jonathan Jansen's signature is entwined with that of the postapartheid South African university or, more precisely, the enduring legacy of apartheid within the South African university. His signature inscribed on this collection, as editor, therefore inscribes it with complexity. However, his signature cannot be read in isolation because, amongst others, those of Achille Mbembe, Crain Soudien, and Mahmood Mamdani are equally saturated with the tensions surrounding (South) African intellectual traditions, colonial and apartheid legacies, and the university. With these names printed in alternating colours of orange, red, white, and yellow on the cover page, the collection cannot but raise high expectations as to the ideas contained within.

Central to the collection is the question of decolonisation. And this is a question, as Jansen outlines in the introduction, because there was a relatively sudden entrance of the concept in the idiom of university-speak during and after #RhodesMustFall; the book can, therefore, like Booysen (2016), Msila (2017), and Praeg (2019) be read as a form of #RMF scholarship. Decolonisation has not been made famous in our country by established academics but, rather, by activist students. And although it is no foreign idea, Jansen argues that its roots as a critical concept can be found mostly elsewhere, and decidedly more north, in our continent. He continues to frame the book broadly as concerned with knowledge and the relation between knowledge, decolonisation, and the university sphere. Overarching, it can be regarded as belonging to the field of curriculum studies, particularly the question of problematising and decolonising this field. The collection therefore situates decolonisation within the realm of knowledge and its double, curriculum, rather than regarding it as a broad and ill-defined abstraction.

Four sections structure the book: 1) arguments and motivations for decolonisation, 2) the politics and challenges facing decolonisation, 3) examples of decolonisation in practice, and 4) rethinking and reimagining colonial legacies and inheritances. There is a movement here from articulating the need to posing the challenges, from probing the realised to imagining the possible. It is satisfying to read a text that provides a critical overview of decolonisation, rather than an argument for or against it, grounded in ideology.

All contributors provide readings in support of decolonisation as an intellectual project. What is clear—particularly when comparing Sections 2 and 4—is that there are varied levels of conviction in the eventual success of such a project. Mbembe's contribution, coincidentally the final chapter, offers the

most optimistic account. Drawing on theories of cognition, computation, and planetary thinking, Mbembe argues that we are entering an age where Afrocomputation could be the change heralding a radical rethinking of the formation and distribution of knowledge. Jansen is, however, arguably the most sceptical. Arguing that the emergence of new "knowledge regimes" the world over always appears to be revolutionary, he warns that these regimes ultimately echo some, if not most, of the characteristics of those that preceded them. He questions whether decolonisation will, eventually, become another regime in this cycle—becoming a mere moment in time, rather than the ushering in of a new era.

These two chapters (almost) bookend the collection, and between them lie many different expressions and explorations. Amongst others, Mahmood Mamdani presents a critical reading of two "models" of universities in Africa, Brenda Schmahmann argues for reading the very landscape, specifically monuments, of university campuses as curricula, and Piet Naudé questions whether the discipline of business ethics could be saved from itself through a shift towards ubuntu as conceptual frame.

Whilst these, together with the other chapters, all amount to stimulating pieces, I cannot help but wonder what the book could have looked like had three things been taken into account: firstly, the contributors themselves. As I mention above, the book lies heavily under the signatures of its contributors. This points to both a presence and an absence. The presence is of influential and respected academics at the pinnacle of their field whose writings, such as these, promise and deliver highly saturated inscriptions in their fields of inquiry. In terms of absence, as mentioned, the very question of decolonisation in the realm of the university is not one that was uttered by the current body of senior academics nor, as Jansen mentions, has truly been engaged with by those academics until recently. This begs the questions: "Why the absence of younger voices?" "Where are the activist students to whom the very possibility of this collection owes its existence?" With the exception of two contributors (currently pursuing doctorates), the book comprises overwhelmingly of writings from deputy vice-chancellors, research chairs and senior directors.

This is perhaps not such a moot point, yet I would like to read it together with my second concern: the conversation within the book. All the chapters provide stimulating reading and a refreshing look at the realities and possibilities of decolonisation. When reading the individual chapters, however, I wondered what the response would be of the various contributors to the chapters next door. What would the conversation between Achille Mbembe's Afrocomputation and André Keet's plastic university lead to? How does Ursula Hoadley and Jaamia Galant's overview of the classification and codification of disciplines relate to Yusuf Sayed, Tarryn de Kock, and Shireen Motala's call for an ecosystems approach to change in teacher education? I would argue for such a comparative, conversational approach given that most chapters articulate the lack of theory in the existing curriculum or knowledge base. And whilst articulating this is an important step, the question as to the theorising of new knowledge is its only true answer. The book falls short of providing a truly meaningful overarching theory or framework as it pertains to the decoloniality of knowledge, and knowledge that is decolonial.

I am a child of #RhodesMustFall. It was during my second year at Nelson Mandela (then still Metropolitan) University that the call was first made, and in my third and final year that fee structures were radically changed. I remember one of the key articulations of decolonisation amongst us students was not merely for a change *in* and *of* knowledge, but a shift in the *approach to* knowledge. These two concerns therefore lead me to question whether a wholly different approach to producing and presenting knowledge is required—whether the presence of younger voices, those who have been at the forefront of the movement, those whose collective signature is decolonisation in the university,

could not offer a different reality, not merely a different vision for the future when combined with the voices in this book?

My own position towards #RhodesMustFall and activist studentship is not uncritical. I document elsewhere (Staphorst, 2019) some of my disillusionments with the movement, with these disillusionments mostly related to some of the conceptual schemes and languages that we expressed through movement. My third concern is that a number of these problematic conceptual schemes and languages appear, uncritically, throughout the collection. These include essentialised binaries such as "Western" and "African," "core" and "periphery." Whilst a few contributors do critique these notions, they nevertheless creep into the writing of others.

As I write this, five years after the first spark of revolution at the University of Cape Town, the world seems to be becoming a more precarious place each and every day. Not only are we facing the deadliest biological threat in a century, but we have to find our way to a new electronic normal; not only are there mass protests against systemic racism and police brutality in the United States of America, but the city council leader of Oxfordshire in the United Kingdom has moved to remove the towering statue of Cecil John Rhodes at Oxford University's Oriel College. Herein lies the true challenge for both extremes of the decolonisation conviction question in the collection. Will Afrocomputation truly be our salvation, considering electronic and internet connectivity is the largest challenge to student access and success across South African university campuses, as currently evidenced in an international time of crisis (Mzileni, 2020)? And is the imminent removal of Rhodes' statue at Oxford the proof of a deep decolonial turn, or simply window dressing? A moment versus a structurally effacing movement? These questions remain to be answered.

These concerns do not, however, detract from the clearly important and, which it will surely prove to be, influential work that Jansen's hand has brought together. He and his fellow contributors inscribe endless new possibilities. The book is undoubtedly a valuable contribution to questions pertaining to decolonisation, curriculum transformation, and the state of university institutions—both for, and beyond, South Africa. The chapters offer insights, ideas, and criticism that raise questions that must be addressed in the future, whilst they serve as a barometer of the decolonisation debate as it stood in 2019. I believe the collection will not only confirm its place as a cornerstone of scholarship in curriculum studies, critical university studies, and philosophy of education, but that it is of value to a wider audience including scholars and activists alike. Now, let's get to more theorising, let's get on with decolonisation. *A luta continua! Fluit, fluit, ons storie is nog lank nie uit!*

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