Looking backwards: How to be a South African university

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the contemporary South African university cannot be understood and engaged with outside of an appreciation of its constitutive beginnings. “Race” is central to these beginnings but how it takes form, is worked with and deployed in the university is, to be historically accurate, not a deliberate teleological project. The approach I take in this work is to see it rather as a site of perverse ambivalence. I argue that this ambivalence is unable to impede the momentum of “whiteness” as a sense-making paradigm in which the university is to operate. It is not, however, a totalising apparatus. Contestation surrounds it, even in its most powerful moments. I suggest, in terms of this, that even as white dominance deepens there continue to be agents who both reflect on and act critically on the circumstances in which they find themselves. The first part of the paper provides a brief description of the inauguration of the higher education system. A second looks at the social conditions in which this inauguration played out. A third part then looks at how the universities in their engagement with this social context responded in determining who should come to it and what should be taught. Flowing from this, the paper closes with preliminary thoughts on how the South African university might begin to address its constitutive challenges.

Keywords: South African higher education, race, class, the sociology of knowledge, access

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Introduction

Recent protests at South African universities around the question of “race” and identity, particularly as they relate to the question of transformation at the Universities of Cape Town, Stellenbosch, and Rhodes, have brought into sharp focus the debate about the future of the university. What is the new South African university to be? How does the South African university work with its legacy—to continue where it is already engaged in socially transformative work, to begin new initiatives to transform itself in places where it is struggling, and to develop an agenda that shows clearly how it understands itself in relation to the social context in which it finds itself?

In this paper, I argue that the contemporary South African university cannot be understood and engaged with outside of an appreciation of its constitutive beginnings. Race is central to these beginnings. But how race takes form, is worked with and deployed in the university is, to be historically accurate, not a deliberate teleological project. It is not the case that every domain of knowledge in the university is inscribed and motivated by the racial conceits of “whiteness.” Necessary, therefore, as it is to acknowledge the deep racial influences that permeate the beginning of the South African higher education system and the persistent injustices these produce, the approach I take in this work is to see the early moments of the university in South Africa as structured in perverse ambivalence. Perversity follows almost every inflection of the making of the university system. The hallmark of this perversity emanates from the dominance of the racialised (white) elites who oversee the establishment of the university in South Africa. They come to see the university as a vehicle for the reproduction of their social and racial superiority. In making this the point of departure, my article begins with the proposition that race is never neutral. As a concept, it is inherently incapable of yielding anything but harm. In splitting humans into types it insistently, and arbitrarily so, distributes worth in always discriminatory ways. It is, however, always ambivalent. This ambivalence flows directly from the fact of its speciousness. Its speciousness makes it such that it is always in search of explanations. There is, about it, nothing that is either self-evident or self-explanatory. It cannot explain itself. It always has to be theoretically accounted for, from its initial ideological animations, which claim for whites superiority of both mind and body, through to its deployment in the changing socioeconomic contexts in which it is present, to its invocation and enunciation as a category of analysis. In none of this is it able to explain itself. It always requires, to justify itself, one explanation or another. As such, I seek not to use it symptomatically in this contribution. I argue, instead, that it is a site of work. This article focuses on the beginning moments of the university in South Africa’s engagement with the idea of race, and the ways in which this engagement shapes the core agenda of the university, particularly its research agenda.

The historian Saul Dubow (2006), who has written extensively on the racial character of the scientific project in South Africa, made the important point that regionalism, by which I assume he means place and context, is a “rather neglected aspect of the politics of unification” in the making of the Union of South Africa (Dubow, 2006, p. 7). He also said that “the hairline cracks that it left . . . can be readily detected in the complex internal histories of institutions such as museums, botanical gardens, and especially universities where conflict between ‘broad South Africanism’ and Afrikaner nationalism became acute” (p.7). I build on that approach in this paper to include into the idea of hairline cracks, the conflicts over race and class too, and argue that these constitute the new South African university in a state of internal ambivalence. Following the argument I make immediately above, this ambivalence is unable to impede the momentum of whiteness as a sense-making paradigm in which the university is to operate. It is not, however, a totalising apparatus. Contestation surrounds it, even in its most powerful moments. I suggest, in terms of this, that even as white dominance deepens, there continue to be agents who both reflect on and act critically on the circumstances in which they find themselves (see Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). That they do so in immensely complex and even contradictory ways is what comes to give the South African story of
higher education its particular interest. In contrast to facile renditions of the character of this system as a long-range project of dominance, structured in singularity and homogeneity (see, for example, Kasibe, 2015), the approach I take here is to acknowledge its constitutive ambivalence (see Hendricks & Vale, 2005). While the system is in an often complicit articulation with its broader social order, even as it largely reproduces this order, it does so in ways that provide opportunities for the instantiation of alternative ways of being, doing, and thinking critically.

The first part of the paper provides a brief description of the inauguration of the higher education system. A second looks at the social conditions in which this inauguration plays out. It seeks to put into perspective the dynamic nature of the social formation of the country. A third part then looks at how the universities in their engagement with this social context responded in determining who should come to it, what should be taught, and what should be researched. Flowing from this, the article closes with preliminary thoughts on how the South African university might begin to address its constitutive challenges.

The Beginnings of the South African Higher Education System

It is important, for the record, to point out that the story of higher education in South Africa has a timeline that is roughly coterminous with those of its sister colonies of New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. The establishment of higher education institutions in the English-speaking world, especially those parts where English-speaking settlers came to put down roots, comes in the wake of the rapid class formation one sees in these countries. The first universities to be established in the Antipodes were the University of Sydney in 1850 in Australia and the University of Otago in 1869 in New Zealand.

It would only be in 1873 that the first autonomous degree-granting institution would be established at the Cape, the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH), later to become the University of South Africa. Even though the UCGH was established 23 years after the founding of the University of Sydney, it came to support, in terms of its accreditation responsibility, a higher education network that had been going for many decades already. This network began with the founding of the South African College School (SACS) in 1829, an institution that was both a high school and a university college that prepared students for the examinations of the University of London in the United Kingdom (Lulat, 2005; Maharajh, Motala, & Scerri, 2011). This was followed by the establishment of university-level facilities at institutions such as the Stellenbosch Gymnasium in 1866, and then Gill College in 1869 in Somerset East, Grey College in Port Elizabeth, and at the Graaff-Reinet College around about 1861 (Boucher, 1975), Diocesan College in Cape Town in 1874 and later, St Andrew’s College in Grahamstown in 1878 (Buckland & Neville, 2004, p. 2). Important for the narrative record about this network is that not all these institutions were able or allowed to continue their higher education functions beyond the turn of the 19th century. These functions were entrusted to a small number of institutions between 1874 and 1916, namely, SACS and Victoria College, the successor to the Stellenbosch Gymnasium, itself later to become Stellenbosch University in 1918. In 1896, a School of Mines was established in Kimberley but was transferred to Johannesburg in 1903 as the Transvaal University College (TUC). TUC changed its name in 1910 to the South African School of Mines and Technology and, later, would be incorporated as the University of the Witwatersrand in 1921. The name, Transvaal University College, was transferred to a new institution established in Pretoria in 1910 (Maharajh et al., 2011). This institution was to be formally upgraded to the University of Pretoria in 1930. The Rhodes University College was established in 1904 (Buckland & Neville, 2004), as was Grey University College (see http://www.ufs.ac.za/about-the-ufs/ufs-in-focus/brief-history). The Natal University College was set up in 1909 (Maharajh et al., 2011).
The evolving society into which the new university system came

Telling the story of these institutions simply in terms of their chronologies, however, misses the point about their significance. Their significance lies in and against the social context in which they found themselves. The South African situation at the turn of the 19th century took its dynamic, at one level, from the struggle between Afrikaans- and English-speaking South Africans. One sees this, for example, in the struggle over language in the major institutions. Much of the narration of the evolving system has focused on this language divide and, of course, that language divide carries with it important sociocultural orientations that result in real differences between the historically white Afrikaans universities and the historically English universities of the apartheid period. But the dynamic that needs more serious attention was, at another perhaps more fundamental level, about how institutions came to situate themselves in relation to processes involving the distribution of privilege and power. How did they manage themselves as modern knowledge producing institutions in a society in which the vectors of class, race, and gender were simultaneously so compellingly powerful and yet, strikingly, so incomplete and even contested in their formation and enunciation? Building on the work of Dubow (2006), I make the argument here that the emergent South African higher education system comes to be recruited behind, and to play to an important degree an authorising role in, what I shall call a complex race–class project. It does so, however, ambivalently.

In coming to terms with the idea of ambivalence, it is important to emphasise that the society of the mid-1800s, when the idea of the university in the country was beginning to arise, was at that point by no means completely settled on the question of race. Class, to be sure, was less of a question of contestation than it was in the city of Cape Town itself. There was no question in virtually everybody’s minds that that the image of the so-called refined upper-class gentleman, already a distinct figure on the South African social landscape, contained the ideal towards which the machinery of civilisation should work. But the modalities for getting to the making of this ideal, its content and representational strategies, were not so easily activated. The growing town of Cape Town demonstrated the challenge clearly. In the 1890s, as the Cape political elite came to the point of seeking to institute segregation in schools, the social conditions that they found on the ground were complex. This is usefully illustrated in the proceedings of a Commission of Enquiry into the possibility of establishing separate schools for children of colour (Cape of Good Hope, 1891). At this Commission of Enquiry, the Reverend T. Lightfoot, Archdeacon of the Cape, provided a little-known insider’s view of the society in which he operated (all the responses in italics below are his):

Sir Langham Dale (a member of the Commission) said to Lightfoot that he felt that it was desirable to draw a line between white children and children of colour and proposed a new class of schools for white children (fourth class undenominational schools). “Do you agree with that?” he asked.

I do not see how you can limit it to the purely white. There are cases where a man has married a woman who is a little off-coloured, and in their family, one child, will take after the father, and another, by curious law of reversion, will be more coloured than the mother. . . . In Cape Town I do not think you can draw a line of distinction in the matter of colour.

Dale: Is not the effect of having coloured children mixed up with whites prejudicial?—
Important about this picture painted by Lightfoot is the fact that the everyday social culture of the Cape, especially amongst its working classes, had within the variety of social, cultural, religious, and economic imaginations at its disposal, a real inclination to a trans-race position. It was against the possibility of this disposition deepening that the political elite of the Cape felt they had to act. Confronting them, moreover, was not just the visible example of the everyday but also the argument of the liberal lobby for a nonracial franchise. With the Cape having just abolished slavery, there were elements amongst its political order in the early 1800s, even conservative ones such as John Fairbairn to whom reference is made below, who were very mindful of the rights of all its subjects. In a “Memorandum . . . for the Advancement of Education at the Cape” to the Cape government for the appointment of the system’s first Superintendent-General, he urged that it should choose a person who would be “able to estimate at their practical value, or rather at their real nothingness, with respect to his office the microscopic differences of colour, Nation, Language, Rank and the Sectional distinctions of Religion” (Kies, 1939, p. 22; see also Cape of Good Hope, 1854, pp. 32–33).

This liberal mindfulness, however, was displaced, over a period of approximately 50 years by a crude form of white racial anxiety. By the time the outlines of a national higher education system had begun to emerge towards the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of race had solidified in the nascent country’s political imagination. James Rose-Innes at the start of this 50-year period, however, opened the possibility for a different path to be taken in the Cape.

Rose-Innes’ successor, Langham Dale, deliberately moved the educational system away from the possibility of this openness. When he took over the Superintendent-Generalship, he made clear in his very first annual report in 1860 that not only was he concerned about “the mixture of the sexes in so many of the established schools,” but that he was alarmed at “the greater or lesser intimacy into which European children, especially in the country, are thrown with the unrefined nature and habits of the native calls us to be watchful in regulating and maintaining a proper standard of morality” (Cape of Good Hope, 1860, p. 5).

This attitude taken by Dale marked a decisive moment of change in the discursive economy around race. Firmed up in the conventional wisdom—the popular sociology—of South Africa was a racial certainty that had earlier been, speaking colloquially, on the back foot: people of colour were inferior by nature. Why this shift happened so decisively requires a great deal of unpacking. To do so would need a much closer analysis of the structural and the social factors taking shape in the Cape and in the rest of the country. But there is no doubt that the mineral revolution through which the country was going fundamentally altered the balance of forces. After the discovery of gold and diamonds, the country rapidly divested itself of its formal commitment to openness and began to institute the practice of formal segregation in public life and particularly in education (see Simons & Simons, 1985). Dale and Rhodes, for understanding the politics of education, were pivotal in this process. Dale was the Superintendent-General of Education at the Cape until 1892, and Cecil John Rhodes Prime Minister of the Cape Colony at the same time. They came to play important roles in the establishment of the colleges and incipient universities that emerged in the country. Dale saw the university’s purpose in narrow terms. He expressed himself against the “cosmopolitan view [which] carr[ies] no little popular favour” (Kidd, 1910, p. 42). Instead, he argued, the university should seek “the cultivation of an enthusiastic attachment to hearths and homes [and] to guide the destinies of the embryo African nationality” (1910, p. 42).
This nationality to which Dale appealed, however, was anything but African. It was premised on a political reading of the evolving society, which was acutely aware of the dangers that a united working class of people of colour and white people constituted for the emerging capitalist order (see Beinart, 1994, pp. 68–69). In order to understand this reading it is important to make clear what this new order constituted. The country was not unified yet. The Cape was politically separate from the Afrikaner republics in the north. Critical in the English-speaking elite’s imagination, however, was the question of the economy and its sustainability. In this imagination, and particularly for bureaucrats and politicians such as Dale, “race became an increasingly important category of social thought and races were ranked in a supposed hierarchy of civilization” (Beinart, 1994, p. 68–69). The idea of race provided the justification for how the defining conditions of prosperity in the country could be maintained. It was Rhodes who understood how necessary the supply of a cheap labour source was for the ongoing prosperity of the new society. As No Sizwe (1979, p. 34) argued, “the discovery and exploitation of diamonds and later gold (meant) that there was a giant leap in demand for labour.” Growing rapidly, as the white working class had in this time, it was not going to provide sufficient numbers of workers for the economic revolution unfolding in the country. To resolve this problem, the “native,” Rhodes would say, had to be taught the “dignity of labour,” and so he instituted the Native Reserve system that pushed African people off the land, herded them into reserves, and demanded from them the payment of a labour tax. The reserves enabled these people to maintain a small subsistence capacity but not enough income to pay their taxes. For that, they had to join the labour pool. While scholars such as Beinart (1994) argued that the proletarianising effects of the Glen Grey Act, which was responsible for the establishment of the reserve system, are exaggerated, it is nonetheless correct that Rhodes and the aggressive capitalists around him were influential in yoking the idea of race behind the class project of the emerging South African state. In terms of this, it was crucial that he and his administrators such as Dale did everything in their power to ensure the development of the labour pool in the country. Pivotal in this process was education. People of colour could not be afforded the opportunities that were being made available to white people. They had to be directed towards the labour market. The new African nationality in this vision had to be based on an essentially united white identity. The universities, for people like Rhodes, were central to this project.

How this project unfolds, however, is by no means linear or without contestation.

**The Constitutive Openness of the South African University**

As was the case in Australia and New Zealand, the South African higher education system took its form from the complex amalgam of desires, ambitions, and grievances that developed in the political orbits of the colonies. On the one hand, there was the ambiguity of the nascent country’s relationship with Europe. The image of *motherland* Britain loomed large in the politically hegemonic English-speaking white settlers’ imaginations. So too, however, did the aspiration to be independent of it. On the other hand, the conditions of conquest in the region, of Brit over Boer and of white over black, placed everybody in a tumult of anxiety. The rapidly industrialising landscape produced the kinds of class profiles one would see in other capitalist economies, but, as explained earlier in the discussion around Dale and Rhodes, the conditions of production on the mines, essentially those primed by the need for cheap labour, inflected these formations in racial terms. Exploitation of cheap labour required a justification. It was out of this that the South African race discourse was to firm up. The justification amounted to an approach to what it meant to be inferior and superior that began in the “look” of the body but, as science failed to prove the inferiority of the black body, evolved into a discourse about culture. In relation to this, it is important to acknowledge how much these first South African higher education institutions, in some ways more so than their counterparts elsewhere in the English-speaking world, take their sense of themselves, their mission, and purpose, from the exigency surrounding this social question. In this exigency there was, often but not always, a
disposition towards an openness on the part of the professoriate against a racial-closed-mindedness on that of university councils. The university councils would most regularly come to prevail. Representing the political mood of the period, it is largely from the decisions that they made that the image of the South African university as a colonial university is born. Every step of the way of this white supremacy, however, was characterised by ambivalence. Against the position that these councils came to represent, there were individual academics and administrators who articulated the urgency for the need of an alternative and open approach to thinking about the university (see Greyling, 2007; Hendricks & Vale, 2005; Oosthuizen, Clifford-Vaughan, Behr, & Rauche, 1981).

What were the sources for this ambivalence? Predictably, the new institutions imbibed much of their ethos and character from the high-minded discourse of the role and purpose of the modern university that was beginning to circulate globally. Local as the founding fathers of the universities were, they themselves could not be the knowledge patricians on which the institutions would come to depend. They had to bring in from outside South Africa the first wave of academics the country required. These academics, not unexpectedly, brought with them the debates and the controversies that were being played out in the places from which they came. Powerful in these debates were, on the one hand, people like Cardinal John Newman (1854) and his The Idea of a University, and, on the other, the thinking coming out of the Humboldtian revolution. In the Newman discourse, these academics would have been familiar with and would have articulated the idea that the university was meant to be a “place of concourse, whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge” (Newman, 1854, section 15). The university would be for them, in this framing, a generative social force, stimulating social and cultural formation. In the Humboldtian vision the idea was to yoke the university behind the pursuit of new knowledge to further the grand goals of progress. Science, knowledge, mattered in this vision. These ideas were to have deep resonance in the emergent South African academy, and would come to shape notions of academic freedom and the university as a vehicle for progress. When the discussion for the establishment of the University of Cape Town (UCT) began, for example, there was a pervasive concern about the need for a modern university that would respond to the growing economic and industrial revolution through which the region was going. All the higher education initiatives that came into being by the beginning of the 20th century carried, in the way they set up their formal charters and in the appointments of their first and founding academic members of staff, all the commitments to science and social progress one sees in the major universities elsewhere in the world. The first principal of the University of Cape Town, established in 1918, John Carruthers Beattie, explained that his new university:

would deliberately provide a broad undergraduate education to overcome the narrowness of school curricula and that at post-graduate level it would embark on research with a will: ‘No University was worth the name which did not make that one of its chief objects.’ (as cited in Phillips, 1993, p. 6)

The Constitutive Closedness of the South African University

The architects of the new country that was beginning to take shape, such as Rhodes, saw the university in a very particular light. The role of a university would be to build the nation by nurturing in young men the idea of being:

tied to one another by the strongest feeling that can be created. . . . these young men would go forth into all parts of [South Africa] prepared to make the future of the country, and in their hands this great question of union could safely be left. (Kidd, 1910, p. 42)
Clear in this imagining of the university was the patriarchal and masculinist idea and, indeed, place of the university in building the new South African nation. The university that he envisaged was to be placed at the service of the emerging white nation. How was this done? Two formative elements of this process are crucial and need to be explained. The first relates to who was allowed to come into the university, and the second to what the universities chose to privilege in what they taught and began to think were worthy questions of further investigation through their research.

The first five institutions that were established entered their lives as white institutions. In clarifying this question of race for themselves, interestingly, they were much more liberal-minded when it came to gender. Virtually all the institutions began to admit women early on in their histories. But they were unbridled defenders of a white sensibility. The examples of SACS (later to become the UCT), and the University Colleges of Rhodes and Natal exemplify this. Their admissions practices, formal policies not yet in use, were unequivocally discriminatory. SACS, and this is important in the institution’s narrative, had begun its life fully committed to an open approach. This ethos was a deep part of the institution’s self-understanding. But it was systematically undermined and ultimately eroded by Dale and his successors. The effect is that none of the institutions was able to commit itself to the high-minded openness professed by some of its members. The story of Harold Cressy, the first person of colour to be admitted into a South African higher education institution, is instructive. Cressy had applied to and secured admission to Rhodes University College in 1909. Having gained through private study the Intermediate Bachelor of Arts certificate, and with a bursary from the Cape Education department, Cressy applied to the Rhodes University College. Mohamed Adhikari (2012, p. 18), Cressy’s biographer, wrote that “Cressy set out for Grahamstown. There he intended to fulfil a burning ambition. . . . One can readily imagine Cressy’s anguish and frustration, when university officials, upon seeing the colour of his skin, summarily rejected his application.” Interestingly, neither the history of Rhodes University by Buckland and Neville (2004) nor the critical study by Greyling (2007) makes reference to this important episode in the institution’s history. Rhodes University College saw its role in the education of people of colour as putting its weight behind the establishment of South African College of Fort Hare, known as the South African Native College, and later as the University College of Fort Hare. Cressy himself, supported by the politician Abdullah Abdurahman, decided to apply to SACS. As Adhikari (2012, p. 19) said, “after much deliberation, and in the face of strong opposition within its ranks, the Council of the South African College finally decided to admit Cressy.” The Council would meet twice over a period of a month to come to this decision. Despite the constitution of SACS, which made it clear that “the departments of the College are open without restriction as to creed or colour to all applicants,” important members of the College’s Council such as F. J. Centlivres and W. T. Buissine argued that it “would be detrimental to the interests of the South African College to admit coloured scholars” (Adhikari, 2012, p. 16). Buissinne would write to Rhodes University College to establish that they had rejected Cressy’s application.

The breakthrough Cressy had achieved at SACS, strikingly, would not be repeated in the country until the 1920s when the University of Cape Town again found itself having to make a decision about admitting students of colour. Phillips (1993, p. 114), a historian of UCT, quotes a minute of a 1923 meeting of the university’s Council, which stated that “it would not be in the interests of the university to admit native or coloured students in any numbers, if at all.” He went on to say the following:

This it was felt was especially true with regard to its medical course, which was closed to blacks lest it lead to mixed classes and white patients being examined by black medical students. . . . A similar bar was put on Fine Arts courses in which white models posed for black undergraduates. . . . The handful of ‘coloureds’ who were admitted to UCT in these
years... were mainly teachers registered for Arts or Education degrees. Up to 1929 five had graduated... As difficult as blacks found it to get into UCT in the 1920s, so it was easy for white ex-servicemen to gain admission. Generous scholarships were offered to them... UCT also tried hard to ensure that able but impecunious white students would not be denied entry through lack of funds. (1993, p. 114–115)

The other institution in this trio of higher education establishments, the University College of Natal, had before it in 1916 an enquiry from a Mr Wahed, “an Indian resident at Pinetown... regarding admission to University classes” (Brookes, 1966, p. 43). The institution’s Council replied that it was “not prepared to entertain the proposal” (1966, p. 43). When it received a second application from another “Indian” applicant in 1921, despite some members of the Council invoking the spirit of Newman, the applicant was turned down and referred to the College of Fort Hare (1966, p. 43). It would take an order of the court in 1926 with the threat that it would issue an instruction for the withdrawal of recognition of the institution’s status as an institution of higher education for the college to admit its first two students of colour in 1926. The way in which this order was implemented was to establish a parallel class in the college for students of colour (1966, p. 44).

Physically debar students of colour as these early institutions did, it is also how they came to structure their curricula, which it is important to understand. What did these new institutions teach?

**The Curriculum of the New Universities**

Why is it important to make an issue of what these first institutions chose to teach their young subjects? It is important in so far as it gives one a sense of what they valued and, in shaping the leadership of the country, what they thought students should know.

To understand the curriculum, and to hold on to the idea of ambivalence I am seeking to use as a motif, how were the ideas of openness and closedness evident in the curriculum? With respect to openness, almost predictably, the character and range of disciplines that were prioritised in the first institutions were not unlike the institutions in the United Kingdom. It is a matter of some interest that the first wave of intellectuals drawn to the country were from the long established universities of Scotland, Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews, and Dundee. This continued a pattern of intellectual migration established by SACS. Phillips (1993) explained that of the first 42 men who took up chairs at UCT between 1918 and 1929, there were no women and only seven were born in South Africa. When the Natal University College was started in 1910, it had a total of eight professors. Five of these came from the United Kingdom and three from South Africa (Brookes, 1966). At Rhodes, the four “founding fathers” were all born outside the country. Three of them were English and all of them were educated in the United Kingdom. While it is interesting that these “founders” of the nascent South African university system were largely British, of more significance is what they taught.

In understanding what was taught, it is important to be clear about what the founding professoriate had in place when they arrived. There were already 14 professors in place at SACS in 1914 when it merged with the Diocesan College higher education section. These 14 professors presided over a curriculum that was essentially modelled on what would have been found in the British universities: the major European languages, classics, Hebrew, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, law, and engineering. Fields such as medicine and education were established in 1904 and 1911. Architecture and commerce were to come later (see Phillips, 1993). At Rhodes University College, the four founding fathers between them taught chemistry, mathematics, English, history, Greek, Latin, philosophy, modern languages, and Afrikaans and Nederlands (Buckland & Neville, 2004). The subjects taught at the Natal University College included, interestingly, technical ones such as sanitary
engineering, telegraphy, plumbing, and business training (Brookes, 1966, p. 4). Seen thus, the curriculum was indubitably European in its essential foundations. Confirmation of this is evident in the examinations that the UCGH conducted. In its Council Report for the year ended 1909, on the eve of Union, the UCGH issued results for the Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Philosophy, the BA in Science, for qualifications in surveying, mining, law (both the LLB and various law certificates), and in music (Cape of Good Hope, 1910).

But how might one assess this curriculum in terms of openness? Did its European provenance automatically make it closed? The answer to this must be worked through the prism of the ambivalence, the racial anxiety of the political leaders who were sponsoring the universities, and the commitment to academic freedom espoused by some of the professors that marked the time. It is important to be clear that this curriculum and its knowledge points of departure in their fullness were not anti-African or even racist. In their content, the majority of the subjects were not conceptualised, invested with in their content and in their subsequent enunciation, projected as being against anybody. In this sense these bodies of knowledge, even in their most problematic form, an idea to which I will speak below, were not inscribed in hostile registers. But they were appropriated and presented problematically. This appropriation and presentation was problematic on two fronts. First, it came to be used as the creation and even the property of a pristine and virginal Europe. We can now emphatically show how the Europeanisation of this body of learning and wisdom was constructed around a falsehood (see, inter alia, Chinweizu, 1987; Davidson, 1974; Diop, 1991). The so-called Greek legacy, as Bernal (1987) would argue, depended on a complex multicultural, to deploy the term for another time, skein of influences. But what this appropriation as a European artefact made possible was a narrative for modern progress and civilisation that was ineluctably racial. The second way in which it was problematic was in the sense that it operated, and still does, on the presumption of the only defensible scientific base for the validation of knowledge. All other forms of knowledge were inferior precisely because of their unscientific foundations. African explanations of phenomena were incapable of being verified and, consequentially, imminently susceptible to falsification. Here was available to the less civilised people of the world, the European template for the making of modern progress. In it marched into the future the figure of the universal man—white, masculine, and able-bodied and, in the trope of the colonial ideal, dressed as a gentleman, in total self-control. It is in this sense that this knowledge could be held forth as the gift of Europe to the rest of the world and to which the “open-minded” and liberal Cape believed its darker-of-hue subjects were entitled as citizens.

In founding the essential curriculum with this repertoire, one comes to a sense of what the early institutions valued. This repertoire reveals what dominant thinking on what was important for young people to know was all about. But it does not go far enough in helping one understand what the sociological orientations around the society, in which these early academics found themselves, were all about. One sees this more clearly not in the classical curriculum but in the new fields of learning that were emerging in the social sciences. To be sure, older humanities or social sciences fields such as history came under some critical scrutiny in this time, with the UCGH, for example, requiring matriculation candidates to be “carefully prepared with a view to concentrating attention on South Africa and on those aspects of modern History bearing directly upon colonial development with special reference to South Africa” (Cape of Good Hope, 1910, p. 7). It was, however, in fields such as anthropology, sociology and psychology that the questions of race were to become the sites of intense contestation. Interesting interventions were being made in the new field of anthropology by administrators and academics. An administrative intervention was evident in the offering of one of the country’s very first research awards in 1909, the Chalmers Memorial Prize. The subject for the prize for 1909 was “Forms and Methods of Government among the Native Races in South Africa” (Cape of Good Hope, 1910, p. 6). Curiously, it decided that for 1909 it would not make an award because, and this is not explained, “neither of the essays sent in was deserving of the prize, and the
award was accordingly withheld” (1910, p. 6). Also interestingly, it decided that the next time the competition would be held, in 1912, it would have for its subject the question of “The Respective Spheres of White, Native and Other Labour Appropriate to the Development of South Africa” (1910, p. 6). There clearly was an interest in coming to terms with the sociology of the country.

These interventions were followed by a dispute between academics at the University of Cape Town that was more influential. The most significant aspect of the dispute related to the question of anthropology and ethnology and were to be seen playing themselves out in intense debates at the University of Cape Town between Reverend W. A. Norton, the founder of the Bantu Philology Department at UCT, and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, chair holder of Social Anthropology in 1921, about whether indigenous languages should be taught. The former insisted that there was a need “for the scholarly study of the indigenous African population” (Phillips, 1993, p. 21). He would make the argument that it was “incumbent on a new South African university to take up the study of the indigenous all about it” to enable “a sound Union ‘native policy’ to be developed” (1993, p. 21). He would say to the South African Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in 1916 that “many a fatal mistake not only in dealing with individuals but also of general policy might have been avoided by a grounding in ethnology and comparative religion” (1993, p. 21). Radcliffe-Brown, on the other hand, was contemptuous of the poor fieldwork techniques of his colleagues and insisted that “a trained anthropologist with no knowledge of the language will do work of infinitely more scientific value than an untrained man with a perfect knowledge of the language” (1993, p. 23).

Critical about this dispute was the question of method. Method, Radcliffe-Brown would urge, could not depend on the fluff of Norton’s collections of African folktales. It had to be rooted in science. He pioneered the methodology of structural functionalism, which was premised on the idea that social structures were reproduced through the obligations of kinship. He would, with this, write extensively on the specific “tribal” characteristics of the people he had studied. Much of this was “distributed to magistrates and missionaries” (Phillips, 1993, p. 24). The other universities would quickly follow UCT’s example (see Brookes, 1966; Buckland & Neville, 2004) in developing their own versions of this kind of knowing. Important about these developments is that they came to produce the functional(ist) knowledge needed about the native. In this knowledge, was the scientific authority for the “correct” ways in which to manage the native.

At issue, of course, at one level was what this knowing was all about, what was in it, and what it presumed. At another level it was the very subjectification of the body of the other as a site of knowledge, a site, moreover, over which the native had no authority. In this process, what came to be instituted in clarifying the role of the university with respect to African people was the deployment of knowledge of Africa in terms of extreme commodification. The African body was available to be assembled, scrutinised, and pronounced upon. Here was the fledgling university system at work in resolving its position with respect to the people around it. This was, in the constitutive dynamic of the modern South African university, a deeply determinative moment. The university put itself at the service of the social order. Race was about knowing the other objectively.

Conclusion

Two points about this constitutive knowing are crucial for understanding the process of transforming the modern South African university. The first is that the Dale and Rhodes’ project ultimately comes to prevail. It, moreover, not only prevails but sets in place the conditions for the management of racial discourse in the country. I will return to this. The second point to make is that to prevail as Dale and Rhodes’ white supremacy does, it does not do so without quite extraordinary resistance. The important insight to take away here is that even as this white supremacy entrenches itself, there
remains inside the universities the persistent expression of an alternative sociocultural appreciation of the other.

The argument can be made that the rapidly growing higher education system that emerges in South Africa maps constitutively onto the social morphology of the country. There is no doubt that it furthers the project of white domination. The ways in which it does so, significantly, are not simply through the imposition of crude power. That crude power is evident in the admissions practices of the emerging universities. They exercise a kind of physical violence on young people of colour seeking admission. These young people are told, repeatedly, that it is not in the interests of the university to admit them. What these interests relate, as was reflected in Dale’s crass racialised and gendered chauvinism, relate to an anxiety about bodies of colour and the fear of contamination they represented. That crudeness, however, required a much more sophisticated explanation. Fear itself was not a sufficient argument. It is here that the Radcliffe-Brown “knowing” intervention comes into its own. This intervention is premised on the objectivity of science and so one sees how, through this, the emerging university in the choices of what it seeks to include in its curriculum, and, powerfully, what it comes to understand as “good research,” comes to be lined up behind the project of white supremacy.

Crucially, however, there were always individuals who resisted these developments. At all of the new universities there were individuals who, from a range of disciplines and in very different ways sought to argue for other approaches than that of white supremacy. To this resistance they brought their disciplines, their moral convictions, and their political affiliations. As Hendricks and Vale (2005) make clear, lodged deep inside of these emerging universities existed, and sometimes thrived, alternative ways of seeing the world. Evidence of the presence of these alternatives made themselves felt throughout the first few decades of the growth of the universities when individuals and groups regularly contested and won challenges to the admission of students of colour, and, critically, in the ways in which they argued for curricula that were much more open-minded, and to be able to research in areas that they deemed to be important (Hendricks & Vale, 2005). Their approach to knowledge, to resist its racialisation, was evident, even as they lost the battle, over the course of the landmark New Education Fellowship conference convened by Ernest Malherbe in 1934. At this conference, progressives, buoyed by the presence of the American philosopher John Dewey, argued powerfully for anthropologies, psychologies, and educational theories and programmes for research that did not stigmatisate people (see Dubow, 2006, p. 229).

With this, I argue that the emergent South African university is constituted in a particular kind of Manichaean duality. It is unquestionably an important constituent member of the global knowledge production movement. But, as is also the case for its sister institutions in most parts of the world, and notably the United States and those other colonial outposts where the questions of race, culture, and class come together, it presents itself as a profoundly distinct version of the movement. Not unlike the situation in Australia, a particular dynamic that was to manifest itself in higher education was the question of race. It generally, and in some cases rabidly, defended its whiteness. It did not allow admission to people of colour. In response to this, one sees individuals and institutions themselves strategising to hold on to a commitment to openness and fairness. This involved manoeuvring on occasion to bring in students of colour. Individuals in the institutions would place themselves at great risk on occasion (Hendricks & Vale, 2005). John Tengu Jabavu himself would organise to establish the South African Native College at Fort Hare in 1915 (Buckland & Neville, 2004). Slight and tokenistic as these initiatives sometimes were, they revealed the ambivalence lodged inside of the system. It is this ambivalence that one needs to acknowledge and work with in seeking to restructure the university as it operates in the current period.
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