



Being at Home

Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions

Pedro Tabensky and Sally Matthews (eds)
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Reviewed by George Hull (Philosophy, University of Cape Town)

Being at Home collects thirteen new scholarly essays that examine the institutional culture of South African universities and outline how it needs to change. This book will inevitably be read against the backdrop of 2015's protests over decolonisation and fees, but it was published last February and the essays were written the year before that. So the collection bears witness to the fact that many of the issues raised by student protesters had been causing anguish – and receiving serious attention from academics – long before they burst into wider public consciousness.

The editors, Pedro Tabensky and Sally Matthews, note that the volume focuses on problems having to do with race: racism, “habits of whiteness”, an atmosphere unwelcoming to students and staff of colour. The volume’s points of reference are the exclusively English-medium universities classified as white under apartheid. It is significant that the contributors’ expertise lies solely in humanities disciplines – largely philosophy, but also political studies, psychology and literary theory.

The contributors are agreed that the institutional culture of South African universities needs to change substantially, but the collection avoids monotony because almost all the essays have an exploratory rather

than polemical purpose. The best contributions articulate explicitly and with conceptual precision various positions on what a university’s institutional culture is; which aspects of it could legitimately be found objectionable, especially by people of colour; and what sorts of measures could appropriately be introduced to address those objectionable features. The best contributions help show us the way through, and beyond, a public debate that increasingly oscillates between two unsatisfactory alternatives: on the one hand, the quasi-mystical view that what is wrong with universities’ institutional culture cannot be fully stated but can only be known intuitively in the experience of “black pain”, and, on the other hand, a scoffing dismissal of calls for institutional change as narcissistic whingeing or empty sloganeering.

Samantha Vice contrasts being alienated from an institution with being “in one’s element”, where the latter involves a “fit” between person and institution that enables one to flourish. Thaddeus Metz’s essay shows clearly that it is possible to advocate “Africanisation” without sliding into either racial essentialism or vulgar relativism. Sally Matthews explains perspicuously how, even in the absence of explicit racism, “whitely” behaviour may do some damage.

The testimonials about institutional culture from junior academics collected in Part II are of more variable quality. Minesh Dass’s critique of “teatime” at Rhodes University as a “form of violence” is hedged with so many (well justified) reservations that in the end no critique is left. But Thando Njovane’s diagnosis of a “pathology of politeness” blocking open discussion of problems rings true.

Like the volume as a whole, though, these testimonials risk focusing our attention too much on the minutiae of social interactions and too little on potential concrete changes (in curriculum, say, or hiring policies). In their postscript, the editors invite academics to reflect on their “styles of academic being” in ways “analogous to the psychoanalytic method”. This type of hyper-reflexive attention to interpretative nuance is, of course, where many humanities academics are in their element. For others, a call for hyper-reflexivity is more likely to lead to paralysis and some degree of social withdrawal. Indeed, the “antiracism of the infinitely examined gesture” can have quite the same manifestations as the “pathology of politeness”: what needs to be said will be left unsaid lest it be said in the wrong way, what needs to be done left undone lest it be done in the wrong way.

Some of the essays here will prove to be of enduring value, but all the contributors make committed, sensitive conversation-partners with whom to work through one’s own thoughts about the call for transformation of South Africa’s universities. [NA](#)