DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE: REFLECTIONS ON COLONIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND A HUMANITIES SEMINAR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar*, a seminar which I initiated in the Humanities Faculty at the University of the Free State's (UFS) Bloemfontein campus in 2017. The paper's opening sections present a rationale for the seminar. I maintain that there is considerable scholarship illuminating how colonial power shaped the knowledge which academic disciplines generated about Africa during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Much of it is focused on anthropology, the discipline centred on Europe's non-Western 'others' and implicated in late colonial government. Despite the influence of this and related critiques globally, with their focus on power-knowledge relationships, such work has not substantially permeated South Africa's Afrikaans universities. There, humanities disciplines were largely isolated from global knowledge flows during the *apartheid* era and continue to emerge from this insular past. The paper then discusses the seminar itself and what I see as its three main contributions: creating space for an open-ended exchange about colonial knowledge and its legacies, engaging critically with the language of decolonisation, and grounding discussion of decolonisation in scholarship on Africa's colonial history, including the history of anthropology. By tracing these dynamics, the paper offers a unique perspective on the unfolding conversation about decolonisation in South Africa, highlighting a specific initiative aimed at contributing to decolonising knowledge at one South African university. Moreover, the paper suggests how historical literature pertaining to anthropology speaks to decolonising knowledge at the UFS and Afrikaans universities generally, where questions of colonial knowledge and power have long been obscured. In

this manner, the paper moves the topic of decolonisation from highly abstract and/or politically symbolic claims into a specific context, where engaging certain scholarly texts may make a demonstrable intervention.

1. Introduction

In February 2017 I initiated a seminar on 'decolonising knowledge' for staff and students at the UFS. The impetus for the seminar was, first and foremost, the South African student protests of 2015-2016, which highlighted the enduring colonial character of South African universities established during the colonial and *apartheid* past. At the same time, the seminar enabled me, as the then newly appointed director of the UFS's Bachelor of Social Science Program (BSocSci), to create an intellectual space that might draw affiliated departments (Anthropology, Criminology, Political Studies, Psychology and Sociology) together around shared concerns as well as assert the programme's value within the UFS as a whole. Although associated with the social sciences, the seminar would be best described as a humanities seminar, which draws from postcolonial scholarship across humanities disciplines to open a conversation about research and teaching at the present-day UFS.

This paper discusses the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar* in three parts. The first two parts present a rationale for the seminar, drawing primarily from literature on colonial anthropology in Africa and South Africa's Afrikaans universities, respectively. As I note, there is considerable scholarship illuminating how colonial power shaped the knowledge which academic disciplines generated about Africa during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, much of it focused on anthropology, the discipline centred on Europe's non-Western 'others' and implicated in late colonial government. Despite the influence of this and related critiques globally, with their focus on power-knowledge relationships, such work has not substantially permeated South Africa's Afrikaans universities, whose humanities disciplines were largely isolated from global knowledge flows during the *apartheid* era and continue to emerge from this insular past. It is in this context that I initiated the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar*, which, I suggest, has intervened in the UFS's post-*apartheid* condition in three concrete ways: by creating space for an open-ended exchange about colonial knowledge and its legacies, by engaging critically with the language of decolonisation as it has manifested itself across time and place, and by grounding discussion of decolonisation in scholarship on Africa's colonial history, including how anthropology and other academic disciplines figure therein.

By tracing these dynamics, this paper offers a unique perspective on the unfolding conversation about decolonisation in South Africa. Like other recent

talks and publications focused on what it might mean to decolonise South Africa's universities (for example, Mbembe 2015; Pillay 2015, 2017; Goodrich and Bombardella 2016; Nyamnjoh 2016; Jansen 2017: 153-171), the paper focuses on how authoritative knowledge is created, disseminated and 'produced'.[1] Unlike most previous texts, however, this one focuses on a specific seminar initiated by the author, aimed at influencing teaching and research at one university, the UFS.[2] Moreover, it considers how historical literature pertaining to a particular discipline, anthropology, speaks to decolonising knowledge at the UFS and other Afrikaans universities, where questions of colonial knowledge and power have long been obscured. In this manner, the paper moves the topic of decolonisation from highly abstract and/or politically symbolic claims into a specific context, where engaging certain ideas may make a demonstrable intervention.

2. Colonial knowledge and anthropology in Africa

As historians of empire well know, colonialism has long been entangled with the production of knowledge. For at least 2 500 years, the empire has been the most common form of political organisation on the globe, drawing peoples and territories external to a given state under an imperial government. In so doing, empires have repeatedly justified their rule through asserting the 'superior' knowledge of those people at the colonial core and distorting and/or erasing the 'inferior' knowledge of those conquered people at the periphery. In turn, those under imperial control have been compelled to learn the languages, norms and practices of the imperial centre, fundamentally shaping how they and their descendants live. We all bear the marks of imperial culture (for example, Harari 2011: 210-232).

Nevertheless, there are aspects of modern European colonialism and its relationship to knowledge that are unique. Clearly, the global scope of the political order formed over the past 500 years of European expansion is historically unprecedented, drawing all the world's inhabitants into a shared world system (for example, Wolf 1982). Moreover, the manner in which the European powers governed their empires during the late 19th and early 20th centuries marks a significant shift in the uses of knowledge from prior imperial regimes. The key point here is the move made by the British empire, and later, to differing degrees, other European colonial regimes, towards modes of government centred on indirect rule via the construction of social difference (Chattarjee 1993; Dirks 2001; Mamdani 2012). Significantly, this shift occurred at roughly the same time as the formation of the social sciences and history as university disciplines. Although the

knowledge regime that undergirded indirect rule extended beyond academia, with various groups accessing social capital through claims to knowledge of 'the natives' (for example, Steinmetz 2008), academic disciplines played an important role in defining the forms of difference through which empires governed.

Africa, the colonial/postcolonial context that primarily interests us here, has a particular trajectory within this history of colonialism and disciplinary knowledge. From 1884 to 1960, the period when most of the continent was governed by one or another European power, most academic disciplines produced knowledge about Africa only indirectly, presenting the experiences of Africans merely as a foil to those of Europeans. For example, as late as the early 1960s, Trevor-Roper, then professor of Modern History at Oxford University, could proclaim:

> Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness … and darkness is not the subject of history (quoted in Grinker and Steiner 1997: xxiv).

Here it is important to note that Trevor-Roper not only denies the possibility of African history as a field of scholarly expertise (a striking claim given the emergence of African history as a sub-discipline at that time), but also claims sufficient knowledge about Africa's past to make his assessment. In so doing, he, like so many European scholars trained in different disciplines before him, associates the continent with timeless tradition and external agency, affirming powerful rationales for European colonial rule.

For anthropology, the one discipline in the colonial European academy directly concerned with producing knowledge about Africa, the relationship to colonialism was more complex. From its formation towards the end of the 19th century, anthropology sought "to identify what was universal about humankind, despite its varied cultures, and to trace the evolution of human society through its successive stages" (Moore 1994: 8). Initially anthropologists pursued this work by drawing from the writings about non-Western peoples composed by missionaries and explorers in the colonies. During the early 20th century social and cultural anthropology had moved decisively away from speculative reconstructions of societies based on sparse sources and towards prolonged participant-observation fieldwork, focused on assembling detailed, empirical data about research participants' lived experiences. Nevertheless, colonialism remained the backdrop to anthropology, not only enabling anthropologists to access their non-Western research participants in colonial territories,[3)] but also by shaping the social dynamics of the knowledge production process and the legacies of the knowledge so produced.

The latter points as they played out among anthropologists working in Britain's African colonies deserve particular attention here. The anthropology that emerged among British social anthropologists during the early 20th century worked with functionalist theoretical models that privileged the reconstruction of African ways of life as if they were self-contained systems, untouched by contact with Europeans. In so doing, their work reiterated dominant colonial tropes, voiced by Trevor-Roper among many others, wherein Africans were rendered as tradition-bound, living outside history prior to European intervention. Moreover, and more specifically, the British government's policies of indirect rule in Africa relied on knowledge of African political and legal systems — information that many anthropologists were collecting and which entities offering research grants, like the International African Institute, were keen to support. To highlight this link between anthropological theory and colonial government is not to say that anthropologists of this time and place sought to be an extension of the British government. Although many expressed wishes to be useful to colonial administrators, British functionalists and structural-functionalists tended to see their work as valorising African societies, by emphasising their "social wholeness, indigenous morality, and logical coherence" (Moore 1994: 23). Nevertheless, theoretical paradigms and research funding became intertwined in British colonial Africa, highlighting the extent to which anthropology as a field was shaped by a colonial milieu (Feuchtwang 1973; Kuklik 1978; Moore 1994: 18-24).

Even anthropologists who were critiquing colonial era paradigms were constrained by their position in a colonial system. To observe these dynamics, it is perhaps most useful to trace scholarship produced by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) during the mid-20th century. In many respects, the RLI pushed British social anthropology beyond its colonial theoretical foundations. Focused on engaging with the living Africa in their Northern Rhodesian surroundings, RLI anthropologists challenged anthropological writing that presented Africans in terms of timeless, bounded cultural units and rendered 'culture contact' between Europeans and Africans as fundamentally disruptive, resulting in a 'detribalised' native.[4] Rather, they emphasised the importance of seeing 'cultures' or 'tribes' within the broader, political and economic structure that shaped them and to observing how Africans were adapting to their changing circumstances, including through migration to urban centres. In so doing, RLI anthropologists offered a significant riposte to 'the native question', the dominant policy issue in Southern Africa at the time, presenting a sustained critique of segregationist policies across the region, including *apartheid* South Africa (Gordon 1990). Nevertheless, these critiques of colonial rule were addressed to audiences making native policy — not to the African nationalists, who were then mobilising themselves and seeking to

upend the system. This is a recurring trend in anthropology of the colonial era, which as Bernard Magubane (1971) first noted, consistently engaged themes that concerned colonial regimes, like culture and ethnicity, rather than those of primary interest to many Africans, like exploitation and resistance. Thus, the politics of writing and reading in racially segregated societies shaped how anthropologists could see Africa and conceive social change, even in contexts where anthropologists were developing new insight through sustained engagement with African research participants (Ferguson 1999; Schumaker 2001).

Since the 1960s, the global production of knowledge about Africa has shifted significantly. With the political independence of much of the African continent came sustained discussions about the future of societies emerging from colonial rule. African universities were central to these discussions, refocusing their disciplines around social issues concerning independent African nations and drawing globally renowned scholars into their scholarly work (see for example, Ivaska 2013; Mamdani 2016). This post-independence flowering of academic knowledge on the continent, in turn, cross-pollinated with interdisciplinary area studies programmes that formed in North America and Europe, where many talented scholars originating from Africa have studied and taught. Thus, within a few decades, diverse scholars trained in a range of disciplines were generating substantial bodies of knowledge about Africa for audiences in Africa and abroad. At the same time, scholarship focused on Africa produced during the colonial period — which by default largely meant colonial anthropology — came under sustained critique by many, perhaps above all by anthropologists themselves. This critique, which may be referenced broadly as the postcolonial turn, has taken various forms and had different emphases in different disciplines, drawing from several interrelated turns in the humanities (for example, the feminist turn, the post-structural turn, the postmodern turn). Nevertheless, it has repeatedly highlighted the relationship between power and knowledge and the manner in which interpretive frameworks, produced in a given power-knowledge nexus, shape our capacity to see the world. Moreover, some of the most empirically grounded and nuanced postcolonial scholarship, such as that referenced above with respect to the RLI, has engaged closely with the micro-politics of knowledge production and their legacies. In so doing, this work moves beyond claims about one discipline's complicity in colonial rule, to consider the limits and possibilities for scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds to push existing paradigms in the particular political contexts wherein they work.[5)]

To identify such shifts in knowledge production is not to say, of course, that the 1960s inaugurated a period of global equality in scholarship. Far from it, the decades since African independence have been marked by deep global

asymmetries, which, as Paul Zeleza (2016) has recently detailed, are reflected in the enduring inequalities in research outputs between Africa and the rest of the world. Questions about how political systems shape academic research remain pressing and debates about how disciplines figure in constellations of global power are highly contentious. Moreover, the very knowledge about Africans produced by colonial anthropologists has taken on a powerful life of its own, with the people objectified in ethnographic studies drawing from these representations as they seek resources on the basis of their ability to perform themselves as 'authentic' cultural groups to various audiences (for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Peterson, Gavua and Rassool 2015). Despite this increasingly complex terrain, a global conversation has developed about colonial power and knowledge in the humanities disciplines, including the social sciences, over the past 50 to 60 years. The critique of colonial anthropology in Africa has been a significant focal point within this conversation — not merely because it illuminates one discipline on one continent in the past, but rather because of its relevance for grappling with the social dynamics of knowledge production across disciplines in our unfolding postcolonial world.

3. South Africa's Afrikaans universities

Within the global conversation about colonial knowledge production, the UFS and South Africa's other Afrikaans universities inhabit a unique space. Founded in 1904 as the Grey College School in Bloemfontein, the now UFS adopted Afrikaans as its sole medium of instruction during the late 1940s, thereby aligning itself to an ethnically and racially defined Afrikaner constituency and to the *apartheid* government. This policy remained intact until the early 1990s when, following the collapse of *apartheid* and the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC), the university began to accept black undergraduate students and adopted a parallel medium Afrikaans/English language policy.[6] Thus, throughout the *apartheid* era, the UFS remained closely aligned with the *apartheid* project, training the loyal Afrikaner elite on which the regime relied. In so doing, it resembled three other Afrikaans medium universities of the *apartheid* era: Stellenbosch University, the University of Pretoria, and Potchefstroom University (now, following a merger, named North-West University).[7]

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, these four universities remained isolated from questions about colonial knowledge that were central to the evolution of the humanities disciplines globally and within South Africa. Whereas all three categories of *apartheid* era university — Afrikaans, English and black — were shaped by the *apartheid* project, faculty and students on several English and black

university campuses drew from the postcolonial turn in the humanities (among other influences) to critique the *apartheid* regime. The presence of critical staff and students did not prevent universities from acquiescing to *apartheid* regulations (see for example, Hendricks 2008), nor did it translate into thorough engagement with *apartheid*'s epistemic legacies at these institutions in the regime's aftermath. As Mahmood Mamdani (1998a and 1998b) highlighted in his polemic against the University of Cape Town (UCT) during the late 1990s, the tendency to separate the study of South Africa from Africa north of the Limpopo River, and to overlook scholarship produced in African universities, is shared by much of the South African intelligentsia. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that 'South African exceptionalism' under *apartheid* looked quite different at different universities. At the Afrikaans universities, it meant preparing graduates that would sustain South Africa's unique form of government orchestrated racial oppression. Moreover, it meant promoting a 'scientific' approach to knowledge that could sidestep the politics and other subjective dimensions of knowledge production — the very dimensions which postcolonial and related forms of critique have opened to intensive scrutiny. As a result, these institutions have generated a substantially different institutional legacy.

Here again it is useful to return to the discipline of anthropology and its distinct trajectory within Afrikaans universities to highlight how differently anthropologists there related to the issue of colonial knowledge. In contrast to British social anthropology, which shaped the discipline as it evolved at South Africa's English-speaking universities, anthropology at Afrikaans universities worked within the paradigm of *volkekunde*. From its origins with Werner Eiselen and his students at Stellenbosch University in the late 1920s and 1930s, *volkekunde* rendered the social world through an essentialist notion of culture, subsuming individuals to distinct ethnic and racial groups and aligning itself with the Afrikaner nationalist project and, eventually, the *apartheid* government. From these beginnings, shaped by Eiselen's engagement with German approaches to *Völkerkunde* and other influences, *volkekunde* differed from social anthropology as it was developing at the British metropolitan universities from the start of the 20th century and at UCT from 1921 (Gordon 1988; Bank 2015). Nevertheless, for our purposes it is worth emphasising overlaps at this early stage: the focus within both traditions on bounded social groups and the importance placed within the two traditions on 'culture contact', a model which prefigured the disruptive potential of European-African interactions. Seen from these points of convergence, what is striking is how substantially the two traditions eventually diverge, with British social anthropology undergoing recurring questioning of its own paradigm and *volkekunde* systematically disregarding "alternative ways of seeing and say-

ing" (Gordon 1988: 548). To explain these different trajectories, Robert Gordon and Andrew Bank emphasise different norms that emerged within the two traditions around fieldwork and scholarly exchange. As Gordon (1988: 548) puts it, "by the 1960s, fear of pollution, perhaps the dominant characteristic of *volkekunde*, … extended from the fieldwork 'other' to the academic 'other"'. In their graduate training *volkekundiges* rarely conducted extended participant observation research and the isolation of *volkekundiges* from broader scholarly exchange became increasingly pronounced over time.[8)] Indeed, the *volkekunde* paradigm, which returned to surface level fieldwork descriptions applied to predetermined 'scientific' schema, could only survive by closing itself off from the fundamental questions about power and knowledge raised by the postcolonial turn.

It is further important to emphasise that *volkekunde,* and other inbred forms of scholarship that emerged within Afrikaans universities,[9)] did not form in a social vacuum, an imagined space wherein scholars made reasoned arguments about theory and methodology without reference to their surrounding environment. Rather, they were shaped by everyday life and the manner in which the everyday was ordered at these institutions. Jonathan Jansen illuminates this life and order in his monograph on the reproduction of the *apartheid* past among Afrikaner students at the University of Pretoria:[10)]

> There was an everyday character of normality in [Afrikaans] university life … The curriculum was never questioned, only obeyed. The authority of the leader was paramount … White lecturers taught white students about white society with a white curriculum. The whites were from the same cultural and religious base, broadly speaking, and so there was little concern or need to engage *difference*. Everybody communicated in Afrikaans, the textbooks and lectures were in the same language, Afrikaans-only symbols and signboards appeared everywhere, only Afrikaans students were admitted, and with few exceptions only Afrikaans-speaking lecturers were hired ... Those who made the tea in the faculty kitchen, tended the gardens, and removed the dirt were black. Those who gave orders, supervised their work and disciplined their labours were white. Whites were in charge and blacks were said to be happy (Jansen 2009: 13-14).

As he goes on to emphasise, in such a lived university space, it followed naturally that teaching and learning should appear "universal and scientific, unencumbered by and unconscious of the broader politics and pedagogy of Apartheid" (Jansen 2009: 14). And yet this politics and pedagogy systematically undermined more thorough appeals to reason and science, for their unchallenged, organising principle — the reproduction of a racially and ethnically defined social order — did not allow people to exercise them freely and be successful in the institution,

especially in the humanities disciplines with their more overtly political content. As Jansen puts it, the socio-political order came first; "the qualities of argument, the value of positions taken, the originality of ideas put forward" came second and were, therefore, beyond critical scrutiny. If one accepts that a university is an institution whose animating principle should be to move knowledge "from the narrow to the broad, from the closed to the open, from the fixed to the fluid", then Afrikaans universities under *apartheid* fundamentally undermined the "idea of a university" itself (Collini 2012: 137; Newman 1852).

Since 1994, considerable effort has been made by university managements, faculties and departments to re-align South African universities to meet the needs of a post-*apartheid* democracy. This transition has been fraught with particular challenges at the Afrikaans universities, many of them linked to the inbred quality of their *apartheid* era knowledge production and the social dynamics which reproduce this legacy. Although student demographics are now much more reflective of South Africa as whole[11] and theoretical models closely linked to *apartheid*, such as *volkekunde*, have come into disrepute, a large percentage of staff at Afrikaans universities have received their academic training at the institution where they now work or another Afrikaans university.[12] As a result, staff often lack the exposure to lead cutting-edge curriculum change or to publish in journals of international repute because both these activities require deep immersion in global academic currents which, in the humanities at least, were excluded from Afrikaans universities for decades. Moreover, staff may feel threatened by outside knowledge because it and those who wield it undermine the expertise and authority of those trained under the previous regime — a broader social dynamic within South African institutions in the aftermath of *apartheid* more generally (see for example, Jansen 2009: 24-50). Under the circumstances, there is considerable impetus for academics, among other constituencies at Afrikaans universities, to protect the *status quo*.[13]

Despite these challenges, scholars seeking change at Afrikaans universities generally, and at the UFS in particular, do have leverage to respond to such issues. During Jonathan Jansen's tenure as the UFS Rector from 2009 to 2016, a large number of scholars were recruited to the UFS from outside the institution, including individuals from an array of South African and international universities, and literally hundreds of postdoctoral fellows.[14] Also, the UFS went through a process of reviewing each of its degree programme offerings as well as departmental reviews conducted by panels of experts from outside the university. In the case of the BSocSci Programme and the Anthropology Department, the two reviews with which I have had direct involvement since my arrival at the UFS in 2014, ambitious plans were made to develop a cohesive academic project, that

would position these entities in relation to their fields nationally and globally. Finally, the student protests of 2015-2016 pressured the UFS to undergo an extensive review of how it has addressed 'transformation' of the past 10 years. The resulting document, the UFS's Integrated Transformation Plan (2017), calls on the university's academics "to engage with the state of knowledge in their disciplines," including "the assumptions and orientation embedded in it", and sets out various measures to achieve these and related goals. Thus, despite the weight of colonial/*apartheid* era inertia, there is scope to pursue "the idea of a university" at present-day UFS.

4. Intervening at the UFS: The *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar*

The *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar* ran on a bi-weekly basis throughout the 2017 academic year.[15] During the first semester we discussed "Theorising Decolonisation," drawing attention to seminal texts. Readings included, in order of appearance: "Unsettling Paradigms" (University of Pretoria *et al* 2016), a funding proposal submitted to the Andrew Mellon Foundation by seven South African universities, including the UFS, Pretoria and Stellenbosch, "The Meaning of Our Work" (Diop 1974), "Europe Upside Down" (Appiah 1993), "The Invention of Tradition" (Ranger 1983), "Africa Observed" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), "On National Culture" (Fanon 1963), "Framing Fanon" (Bhaba 2004), "Delinking" (Mignolo 2007), "What are Statues Good for?" (Goodrich and Bombardella 2016) and the introduction and opening chapter to *#RhodesMustFall* (Nyamnjoh 2016). During the second semester we focused more specifically on "Decolonising Curriculum," drawing attention first on the UFS "Reitz affair" (Van der Merwe and Van Reenen 2016), then moving to the debate surrounding the proposed African Studies course at UCT (Mamdani 1998a, 1998b and other contributions to this debate), and concluding with "Post-Independence Initiatives in African Higher Education" (Mamdani 2016). Readings were pre-circulated to seminar participants at least a week prior to meetings, and participants were strongly encouraged to read texts in advance and to come to seminars with at least one question or comment grounded in a reading. Otherwise, discussions were open-ended and followed the interests of those attending any given seminar meeting. Attendance varied across the year with nearly 100 people participating in at least one seminar and 15 individuals attending the majority of the sessions. Participants were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality and gender and included a smattering of UFS lecturers, postdoctoral fellows and students. Although most of those who attended the seminar were based in the Humanities Faculty, the

participant-base was far wider than the constituent disciplines of the BSocSci Programme and included a regular participant from the Law Faculty.

Here I would like to highlight several points that emerged from our collective discussions and which, in my view, speak poignantly to decolonising knowledge at the UFS and other Afrikaans universities today. First, academic seminars, spaces where people discuss scholarship, are rare at the UFS and crucial to decolonising knowledge at this and other universities where knowledge has become inbred as a result of a colonial/*apartheid* past. The salience of this point, and of making it explicitly, became clear to me in the course of our first three seminar meetings. Although each of these meetings was organised around readings and the readings were of interest to all who expressed themselves to me inside and outside the seminar, conversations did not revolve primarily around the readings. Rather they revolved around meta-questions: Why are we here discussing texts about decolonisation? How does this exercise speak to us, our problems and our dreams? In some cases, these and related questions were posed in a manner which was open-ended and in search of a compelling response. In others, they were clearly posed from a position of scepticism, alongside critiques of how the UFS has responded to the demands of post-*apartheid* change or 'transformation' more generally. The latter perspective was especially common among students in the seminar. As one student put it, summarising the views of several, at the UFS "there is too much talk but not enough action. Will this seminar just be more talk?"

For me, this and related questions were a reminder of the colonial/*apartheid* past with which the UFS and other universities struggle and how its inertia is experienced differently depending on one's position within these institutions. Van der Merwe and Van Reenen (2016) offer a compelling analysis of this inertia and how many students have experienced it. Organised around a racist video created by four students in a UFS residence (Reitz) and the controversy that ensued after its screening, the text illuminates how attempts to transform aspects of student life at the UFS continue to flounder on certain discourses. These discourses repeatedly assert ownership of the UFS by Afrikaner lobbies, to marginalise the perspectives of others in a now diverse, public university, and to dismiss racial incidents as isolated and overblown. For black students, who continue to feel the brunt of policies and practices that resist change, despite repeated workshops on such issues over the last decade, it is hardly surprising that talk on the UFS campus seems cheap. An academic seminar, organised by a white, male lecturer around the reading of scholarly texts in a UFS Humanities boardroom, may appear an especially trivial, if not 'colonial', form of talk.[16]

Nevertheless, as several seminar participants asserted, talk is a form of

action, and through it and other modes of communication, people can change the world. Moreover, and perhaps more pointedly, the kind of talk promoted at the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar* has offered a significant contrast to much of the discourses on 'Reitz' and related issues that I have heard since my arrival at the UFS. Importantly, our seminar talk was not organised around a set 'transformation' or 'decolonisation' agenda, but rather an open-ended exchange about colonial knowledge — about how modern European colonialism has shaped the manner in which we, who live in its aftermath, see the world and how we may yet respond to this postcolonial condition. Given the extent to which members of the UFS community have been isolated from these epistemological conversations globally, to participate in discussions about the work of major postcolonial thinkers is to engage in a fundamentally different kind of talk.

To talk over a reading among a group of peers seated around a table may be an equally significant change in modes of expression. To grasp this point, it is worth returning to Jansen's description of the Afrikaans university under *apartheid* and to consider it in relationship to Socratic forms of pedagogy.[17] As Jansen maintains, the *apartheid*-era Afrikaans university veered heavily towards the maintenance of social order in many domains, including curriculum where choices about who teaches what and how were 'never questioned, only obeyed'. Knowledge was, therefore, organised around deference to authority, a problem endemic to all societies, but especially pronounced in many colonial settings, where race and intersecting identity markers often become inextricable from the authority 'to know'. At Afrikaans universities, as they continue to emerge from their unique history of authoritarian pedagogy, it is an intervention to create a space where everyone is expected to express a personal view at the beginning of a seminar, where discussions follow the arguments pursued by participants, and where authority is wielded primarily through returning attention to a text, which all have agreed to study. Moreover, it is an intervention to draw scholars into the same room to discuss others' knowledge, for, as Randall Collins has forcefully argued, face-to-face interactions create the emotional energy and creative spark that drives intellectual movements, opening possibilities for change that do not exist when scholars read and write in isolation (Collins 1998: 24-37).

It follows from the aforementioned points about academic seminars, that the aim of the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar* was not to advance a definition for what 'decolonisation' means or a programme for how to achieve it at the UFS. Rather, I sought, through the Seminar, to illuminate how the term has been used to advance a range of positions across several continents for more than 60 years and draw them into conversation with contemporary uses of the term among members of the UFS community.[18] In so doing, I hoped that seminar participants

would develop a more complex view of issues surrounding decolonisation and draw on this perspective to engage critically with public discourse about South Africa's universities and related topics.

Of the major conceptual debates on decolonisation which we considered, the one which resonated most poignantly for me across the year was that between Cheikh Anta Diop and Kwame Anthony Appiah regarding "Afrocentrism" and "the Africanisation of knowledge". As we discussed, Diop was one of the forerunners of Afrocentric thinking not only in Senegal, where he was based, but also across Africa, Europe and North America. Through a deep commitment to historical research on precolonial Africa, Diop sought to highlight the accomplishments of African people and to place Africa, not Europe, at the centre of world history. Central to Diop's project was his painstaking research on ancient Egypt, whose cultural accomplishment he claimed for Africa and whose people he presented as black (Diop 1974; 1987). Appiah, by contrast, critiques Diop's Afrocentrism on two grounds. First, he highlights how, by claiming and valuing ancient Egypt, Diop adopted the Eurocentric instruments for measuring the accomplishments of civilisations — systems of writing, monumental architecture, and complex social hierarchies, including artisans and artists — thereby obscuring various non-literate African societies that were 'primitive' by common European standards but, nevertheless, were accomplished by many measures. Second, he criticises how Diop and others have presented Africa as one 'race', 'culture' or 'nation' in a manner which not only essentialises identity categories, but also inverts European uses of such categories to establish the common core of 'Western civilisation'. For Appiah (1992; 1993), if one is to work with the notion of Afrocentrism, then this must be done on different grounds: through attention to the colonial history and geo-political position which have created shared experiences across an exceptionally diverse array of people.

In working with Diop and Appiah's thought, I tried to steer our conversation in a manner that held onto the tension between the two positions, rather than collapsing them into one or another 'correct' Afrocentric view. This position, I should add, was challenging for me to hold, given my understanding of what is at stake in grasping that 'African' and related identities are socially constructed (more on this below). Nevertheless, student comments during the discussion were helpful for maintaining the tension: For several students, Diop's writing opened a world of precolonial African accomplishment to which they had not been exposed in their prior education — even as post-graduate students preparing for degrees in humanities disciplines at the UFS. In turn, we discussed the colonial and postcolonial dynamics which may have shielded them from such knowledge, including Mamdani's (1998a; 1998b) take on how academics at UCT responded to

his efforts to incorporate Diop and other African scholars into the curriculum. We also discussed the wealth of existing scholarship that does exist on precolonial Africa, including not only Diop's work, but also Paul Landau's (2015) landmark text among many others.

Thanks to engaging Appiah's work and related views, we did not collectively embrace one view of Afrocentrism, but rather considered multiple potential meanings. Moreover, we discussed the risks entailed when, at a given moment, an Afrocentric view reduces what it means to be African to one meaning, rooted in a hard, 'authentic' identity. In discussing the latter issue, nativist views expressed during South Africa's recent student protests entered the conversation, with their assumption that 'decolonisation' requires dismissing the knowledge of others, including 'Europeans'/'whites' and those deemed insufficiently or inappropriately 'African'/'black'. Such discourse affirms 'the logic of coloniality', by utilising the very labels through which colonial regimes exploited the labour of their subjects by making them less than fully human (Fanon 1963; Mignolo 2007).[19] Moreover, it presents seemingly contradictory political commitments, like attacking white supremacy and attacking black immigrants, as potentially compatible (Mbembe 2015; Nyamnjoh 2016). As Nyamnjoh (2016: 47 and 229) presents the issue: "we are all *amakwerekwere*" — all "undeserving outsiders" shaped by histories of mobility. To think otherwise is to accept the bounded notions of citizenship, modelled so violently in South Africa under colonial and *apartheid* rule, and to eschew the possibility of creating a future in which citizenship resides in "interdependent, inclusive and flexible … identities".

Beyond opening a free-ranging dialogue about colonial knowledge and power, these points by Appiah and Nyamnjoh also speak to a position that I did seek to advance through the seminar: namely, that any approach to decolonising knowledge at the UFS today should be grounded in scholarship that engages closely with Africa's colonial history and how it shaped social relations then and in its aftermath. Among the texts which we read in the seminar, the ones which engaged most closely with this past and its social legacy were seminal work by Jean and John Comaroff and Terrence Ranger, respectively. As the Comaroffs (1991: 15) maintain, summarising the work of many others: "The essence of colonization inheres less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming 'others' by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their own choosing". In their analysis, some of the key conceptual weapons formed during the 18th and early 19th century in the course of European debates about that trans-Atlantic slave trade. The gendered tropes through which Africa was represented in these debates — as irrational beings in need of external intervention — set the stage for formal colonial rule decades later and continue to

pervade representations of the continent today in appeals to humanitarian and development aid among other forms. For Ranger (1983), the focus is on the concepts of 'tribe' and 'tradition' as imagined by Europeans during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As he maintains, tribe/tradition presented African political and legal systems in terms that European colonial administrators and settlers could understand, even as it framed Africans as fundamentally different from Europeans. Moreover, as he emphasises, Africans gradually adopted these European understandings of themselves with elders and men often transforming highly flexible customs about intergenerational and gender relations into hard prescriptions for how subordinates should behave. Thus again, colonial representation left a conceptual residue which, in this case, not only shaped external representations of Africa, but also identities among Africans themselves.

There are two central reasons why these and similarly rich historical texts are valuable to engage in the context of present-day UFS. First, they illuminate the dialectical quality of the colonial encounter, tracing how what we now know as 'African' has been entangled with what we now know as 'European' for centuries. To engage such historical entanglements is not only to push again against essentialised notions of race, culture and nation, as discussed above, but also to illuminate how through the colonial encounter and its aftermath, these identities have become such powerful means of understanding, and wielding power in, the world. Grasping the recurring power of colonial era identities offers a crucial perspective for situating decolonial initiatives today. In short, decolonisation is not something which may be accomplished at a moment. Rather it is an evolving struggle in which people expose the colonially inherited contours through which we see the world and offer other ways of seeing and being. An academic seminar is but one kind of intervention that may contribute to such work, involving a relatively small group of people in an admittedly elite space. Nevertheless, it is a crucial domain of work at a university, especially at a university like the UFS, where, for years, seminars have not engaged how the colonial past affects its teaching and research.

Second, such historical texts lend themselves to deepening the conversation about the role of university disciplines in the production of knowledge, including the discussion with which this paper began about anthropology. Indeed, academic expertise is never far from both the Comaroffs' and Ranger's analysis. For the Comaroffs' (1991: 99), whose emphasis in this essay predates the formation of the social science disciplines, the focus is on the life sciences, which in presenting theories of "the great chain of being," contrasted the cultural cultivation of the European with the African "who marked the point at which humanity gave way to animality". For Ranger (1983), the discipline in question is indeed

anthropology, which is implicated in the constructions of 'tribe' and 'tradition'. Importantly, and in contrast to some arguments advanced during the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar*, the Comarroffs and Ranger do not project ahistorical claims about a given discipline or 'the university' as a whole. Rather, they, like many scholars of anthropology's colonial history cited earlier, consider how particular disciplinary schools produced knowledge in particular times and places. In so doing, they raise questions about how political systems have shaped knowledge in context, opening space for a more nuanced dialogue about the limits and possibilities of academic work.

As students and staff at the UFS push back against inherited knowledge in their departments, it is crucial to pursue this nuance. The UFS is not the South African university or the global university writ large any more than *volkekunde* is a full reflection of the entire discipline of anthropology during the *apartheid* era. If arguments are to be advanced about the university and the colonial pedigree of the knowledge that it has produced, then they should be made in relation to the postcolonial turn as it has evolved globally. Two-generations of scholarship on Africa's colonial history generally, and on colonial anthropology in particular, offer a rich body of work through which to explore power-knowledge relationships at the UFS and other institutional sites in South Africa which have remained largely outside the conversation. This scholarship, and the intellectual spaces that we create around it, should therefore be central to South African academics' current efforts at decolonising knowledge.

Endnotes

1. For reflection on knowledge, especially historical knowledge, as 'production' see Cohen (1994).
2. Goodrich and Bombardella (2016) speak to how the authors used the Totius statue in their teaching at North-West University. In so doing, they make a case for a specific pedagogical intervention at another Afrikaans University.
3. Each of the major anthropological schools of the early 20th century involved scholars working in their imperial backyards. American anthropologists worked primarily with conquered Native American peoples and the British, French and Germans researched people in the colonies that their governments controlled.
4. Theories of 'culture contact' within British social anthropology are associated primarily with Brownislaw Malinowski and his students. For Malinowski, each culture, or 'tribe' in the African case, functioned as an autonomous unit and was, therefore, resistant to change when it came into contact with other tribes or 'modern' society. By contrast, A R Radcliffe-Brown, the other key mentor of early British social anthropologists, regarded culture as subordinate to the social structure in which it formed. Although Radcliffe-Brown discussed tribes as well, he drew from a broader understanding of

structure to critique representations of culture that isolated the concept from extended social relations. In so doing, he opened the way for his students, especially Max Gluckmann at the RLI, to place 'tribe' and other cultural units within the social and economic context of Southern Africa.

5. Here, the evolving conversation between anthropology and history in African Studies should be noted. Not only has the history of colonial anthropology been written through collaborations across this disciplinary divide, but also African history, with its early focus on oral narratives collected through extended fieldwork, has developed through a deep conversation with anthropological literature. Seminal works include Cohen (1994); Moore and Vaughan (1994); Hamilton (1998); White, Miescher and Cohen (2001).
6. In practice, the dual medium language policy often meant dividing white students, who primarily attended Afrikaans lectures, from black students, who primarily attended English lectures. The UFS language of instruction changed to English in 2017.
7. To this list one might add Rand Afrikaans University (now the University of Johannesburg), which was also once an Afrikaans-medium university. But it's particular trajectory as a university for working class Afrikaners formed during the late *apartheid* period makes its trajectory considerably different than the four listed Afrikaans universities.
8. Gordon notes that by the 1980s, of 28 *volkekundiges* based at Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein and Potchefstroom, all had obtained their highest degree at their home university and only two had received a degree at a different university. Few had any experience of participating in international conferences and publications centred largely around the *South African Journal of Ethnology*, which despite some effort to solicit international contributions, had few of quality (Gordon 1988: 548).
9. For discussion of how various faculties and departments at Afrikaans universities contributed to *apartheid*, see Jansen (1991 and 2009: 180).
10. Jonathan Jansen served as Dean of Education of the University of Pretoria (2000-2008) and Rector of the University of the Free State (2009-2016).
11. In the late 1980s the UFS consisted of less than 10 000 students, all of them white. By 2014, there were more than 24 000 students on the UFS Bloemfontein campus, the majority of them 'black' (referring here to students identified as African, Coloured and Indian according to UFS statistics). If one includes UFS's South Campus and Qwaqwa campus, student numbers in 2014 exceeded 31 000 and the percentage of black students was 71 per cent (Van der Merwe and Van Reenen 2016: 7; Jansen 2017: xviii).
12. For example, according to the web listings of the 12 full or associate professors appointed to the BSocSci departments, six have received all of their degrees at the UFS, three have received degrees at other Afrikaans universities, and three have received degrees at other universities in South Africa. The trend is similar among junior faculty.
13. Related dynamics have often been discussed at Afrikaans universities in terms of student residences and language policy — two hot-button issues which have especially received public attention at UFS over the past decade (see Van der Merwe and Van

Reenen 2016). Nevertheless, they also apply to the everyday worlds in which academics produce knowledge and in which scholarly paradigms are reproduced and challenged (see Jansen 2009).

14. In 2011 the UFS hosted 33 postdoctoral fellows, few or none of which were based in the Humanities Faculty. By 2017 the UFS hosted 153 postdocs, 51 of which are based in the Humanities Faculty. Most of these fellows are on two or three year contracts (Mandy Jampies, UFS Postdoctoral Fellow Coordinator, E-mail on 22 February 2018).
15. At the time of writing, plans are being made for the future of the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar*. The 2018 iteration of the seminar is beyond the scope of this paper, however.
16. This view has not been expressed during meetings of the *Decolonising Knowledge Seminar*, but it was, in May 2017, when I was asked by the UFS Postgraduate Student Council to deliver a public lecture about the seminar. Following the talk, the first comment from the floor dismissed my point of view on the premise that 'white academics' should not speak about decolonisation. Later speakers opposed the first speaker's view, arguing that people need to discuss decolonisation across racial and other identities.
17. For further discussion of Socratic pedagogy as a means of advancing democracy in divided societies, see Nussbaum (2010: 47-78).
18. For a summary of different conceptual understandings of 'decolonisation', including "Decolonisation as the Africanisation of knowledge", see Jansen (2017: 157-163).
19. The irony of this nativist position is even deeper when one considers how, during the student protests, Frantz Fanon was used to make essentialist claims about African identity and to justify violence in their name (Mbembe 2015; Jansen 2017: 79-80 and 167-169).

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