

BOOK REVIEW

***Being at home: Race, institutional culture and transformation at South African higher education institutions* by P. Tabensky & S. Matthews (Eds.) (2015). Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.**

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The question of transformation and more, recently, decolonisation, of South African higher education institutions directly challenges untransformed institutional cultures in higher education institutions. Transformation-resistant institutions continue to strew disproportionate barriers for students marginalized by social identities such as race, gender, class and disability. Despite its 2015 production, Tabensky and Matthew's book, *Being at Home*, is as compelling today as it was then. It provides a thoughtful and critical philosophical and theoretical exploration of what institutional culture means and how it may contribute to an understanding of the purpose of higher education locally, and beyond.

The book is divided into three parts consisting of 13 chapters. The first part comprises three chapters in which conceptual concerns related to the overarching focus of the book are explored. While I will not detail the content of each chapter, Louise Vincent's first chapter makes a pertinent point central to the book. Her argument that changing institutional cultures depends on telling different stories about institutions is key. This, she argues, can interrupt the reproduction of social injustice, and make the taken for granted "strange" by producing alternate and multiple narratives about institutions. It assumes the telling of such stories from the experiences of marginalized social locations, who traverse higher education institutions. The concepts of collective memory, understandings of "home" and whiteness in relation to institutional culture are explored in this section in nuanced ways.

The second part consists of four chapters, all case studies drawn from one institution, Rhodes University. Authors explore core philosophical and theoretical tensions that arise from transformation imperatives in a seemingly untransformed institution (at the time). These chapters grapple with "unconditional hospitality", race and power concealed under a "veil of politeness", the challenges of heteronormativity for queer staff and students, and of attracting next generation academics. While all the chapters in this section are required reading, Thando Njovane's chapter remains captivating after numerous readings since I first read it in 2015. She unveils politeness as keeping institutional racism intact in the academy and provides a damning critique of

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the concept of “tolerance”, so well-loved by many academics, as maintaining the status quo.

The third part consists of six chapters that consider the implications of this work for higher education locally and globally. In this section, a selection of emerging and well-established local and international authors reflects on a reimagined university that may be hospitable to all, and in which institutional cultures are unlearned and reimagined. As an example, Nigel Gibson, adopting a Fanonian lens, argues for a radical humanities which emphasizes the idea of the university as functioning for the public good with less emphasis on the university as a neoliberal factory for the job market. A radical humanities is one which focuses on creating spaces where marginalized voices that have systemically been erased from public view, are reinstated and knowledge is produced from the margins to develop new forms of critical consciousness.

This book still contributes significantly to understanding institutional cultures in universities. It was published just before the #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall protests that fundamentally brought into view the failures of hegemony in neoliberal higher education institutions. The book also serves as a model of how to include local and international, established, and emerging researchers. One potential shortcoming of Tabensky and Matthews’ book is its focus on one historically white institution. It may be interesting to do similar explorations about institutional cultures at historically black institutions. This seems to be a core shortcoming in other books, such as Pattman & Carolissen (2018), who despite expanding the discussion on transformation to nine South African universities, likewise did not include historically black universities.

Tabensky and Matthews’ book is a must read for all who are interested in debates on transformation and decolonisation in higher education since the themes it captures transcend the case study of Rhodes University in nuanced and thought-provoking ways.

## References

Pattman, R., & Carolissen, R. (2018). (Eds). *Transforming transformation in research and teaching in South African universities*. African Sun Media.

### How to cite:

Carolissen, R. (2023). Review of *Being at home: Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions* by P. Tabensky & S. Matthews (Eds.). *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 11(1), 149–150. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v11i1.4692