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Distinguishing the genuine from the fake in South African universities: Scholarly awards, books and academic credibility

Significance:

Universities and their academics are faced with increasing pressure to contribute to knowledge. These pressures produce conditions for shortcuts and, worse, the production of unreliable research that has little value. This is the world of the fake, where universities are corrupted and their integrity undermined. We argue that the scholarly book that reflects deep thinking and major commitments of time, energy and resource is a counterweight to the temptations offered by short, quick and often shallow outputs processed in predatory journals and often rewarded by national and university publication incentives.

Introduction

Jonathan Jansen's 2023 book *Corrupted: A Study of Chronic Dysfunction in South African Universities*¹ has ignited considerable debate around the conditions that render South African universities – regardless of their size, geography or historical genealogies – either dysfunctional or functional. This debate is not new, because, in the wake of #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, questions were asked about threats to the existence and purpose of universities.^{2,3} In his recent book, however, Jansen points out that one of the most potent resources for a university to remain functional is academic credibility. There are values and taken-for-granted norms that underpin the academic project.^{1(p.52,81)} An obvious point, surely. But not quite.

The moral economy of modern capitalism is closely tied to the idea of the fake. Fake news, fake goods, fake 'global collaboration', fake development. And fake academia. Fake academia looks like a commitment to academic credibility and the academic project – as a good fake should! – but it is in fact inimical to the kind of academic credibility that is one of the key foundations of a / the functional university. Jansen^{1(p.132-133)} explains the workings of fake academia, where rent-seeking by both individuals and institutions extracts resources from university research income, particularly funding from the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa. There is, for instance, a "subterranean economy of predatory journals"⁴. On the surface, publishing in journals identified as predatory appears quite legitimate, but it is really an academic corrupt practice of "enormous proportions"⁵.

The commodification and privatisation of knowledge and the technology of the Internet have revolutionised the dissemination and consumption of research. Whereas half a century ago, research was produced and packaged in journals and books, printed on paper and distributed and sold to a relatively small academic market, the Internet made possible very rapid dissemination of knowledge to large, global audiences. In the process, market-opportunities opened up for publishing companies and for smaller enterprises to enter a competitive market where one could sell knowledge to huge audiences.

Academics were increasingly pressured to 'publish or perish' by universities in order to compensate for decreasing state funding and to compete in the new global university ranking system.⁶ The incentives for academics to find outlets for their work thus grew, and so new outlets, often new journals operating from a variety of lucrative business models, were created to feed this market of desperate academics.⁷ Academics now paid journals to publish their work. The quality assurance of peer review was undermined when journals claimed to abide by this practice but actually just paid lip-service to it. The production of journal articles has rocketed but many of them are of poor quality or of little academic merit or relevance. Thus was born the predatory or 'grey' journal, an animal that is not always easily or definitively identified.

In South Africa, the generous subsidies paid by the state for each 'accredited' journal article and other form of academic output have provided huge incentives to academics to publish anywhere that will take their work. In 2021, the unit value paid to a university for a research output like a journal article was ZAR123 635, an amount which had grown by 65% since 2006. When there is low institutional capacity to cultivate quality research in significant volume, and low institutional ability or appetite for screening out these bogus journals, some academics opt for the easiest route where acceptance rates for submissions are essentially dependent on paying the journal. While academics debate these practices^{8,9}, institutions may overlook these cynical publishing practices because they are benefitting from the state subsidy. Similarly, institutions are incentivised by the state to engage in industrial-scale graduation of doctoral students. The compendium of fake academia is weighty.¹⁰⁻¹²

Academics and universities are not compelled to endorse dodgy academic practices and there certainly are better ways of contributing to genuine knowledge-production and by so doing, maintaining universities as places of enquiry, debate and engagement rather than as mass-production factories. We argue that the scholarly book acts as a counterweight to quick and cynical practices. Its production takes time but it is a goal available to all scholars in all disciplines. The scholarly book offers an alternative, we would argue the supreme, form of research validation.

In this short piece we reflect on the production of one sort of scholarly output, the book. We ask specifically what the ethnographic life of the book tells us about how seriously a university takes questions of academic credibility and the robustness of an academic culture at a university. We also consider how individual academics approach the question of producing this most time- and energy-consuming of academic outputs in the light of the incentives offered for quicker easier forms of output. Moreover, we ask whether the emergence of a book from a university, the



kind of book we discuss below, may be interpreted as one, important, fragment of university functionality.

Academy of Science's Humanities Book Awards

Thursday evening, 30 March 2023. The Vineyard Hotel, Newlands, Cape Town. A stunning view of Devil's Peak and the setting of the annual Humanities Book Awards Ceremony hosted by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). Lesley Green's *Rock/Water/Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa*¹³ is announced as the winner of the Established Research Writer Category. This is a story about the event, the book and the long journey of its production. It is also a cautionary tale, a polemic against the impulse for quick returns that fit university reporting cycles (usually annual) and fake academia.

Neil Roos, Chair of the ASSAf Humanities Review Panel and Dean of Humanities at the University of Fort Hare opened proceedings with an explanation of the origins of the book award and the importance of recognising scholarly books. In a way this marks the end of a journey, and not one enjoyed by every scholarly book that is produced. The process that we describe is largely hidden from view and one of which academic authors will be unaware when they begin their labours. Nevertheless we argue that it is part of a process that is critical to the life of the Humanities. In turn, the life of the Humanities is critical to the health of the country.

The adjudication panel which considered nominations for this year's ASSAf Humanities Book Award was quite diverse. All were South African scholars, from a variety of disciplines: literature, sociology, history, gender and queer studies. Some were seasoned, some mid-career. Some were from metropolitan universities, others from rural ones. Over the course of 6 months the panel deliberated over the books that were nominated for the two prizes awarded by the apex science organisation in the country, one for established authors and the other for emerging authors, broadly defined as scholars under 40 who would be eligible for an NRF Y-rating and whose submission was their first book, a 'dissertation book'.

The NRF rating system is a national system established in 1984 which ranks individual researchers in terms of their research output. The intention of the system was to promote national knowledge production. The system distinguishes between A-rated (internationally leading), B-rated (internationally recognised) and C-rated (established) researchers. It also has 'junior' ratings for early career researchers (having completed their doctorates in the previous 5 years) demonstrating potential: P-rated (likely to be international leaders and 35 years or younger) and Y-rated (likely to become established researchers and 40 years of age or younger).¹⁴

The panel had a formal set of criteria: is the book a scholarly book rather than, say a handbook or a textbook, has it been the subject of review by peers, and how was it received by these reviewers? The panel acknowledged that there were other criteria that were more elusive to codify, more difficult to reduce to an evaluation template. These included elements like the intellectual novelty of the book, whether it laid out new fields, whether it was written in a style of openness that invited dialogue and engagement with the book's major hypotheses. While the panel did consider whether a book might have a readership beyond its immediate field or discipline, it also recognised (and honoured) sheer scholarliness. One adjudicator pointed out that in one nominated book, not one sentence was frivolous, trite or superfluous; each one was 'heavy with meaning'. In other words, the search was for books that were scholarly, that pointed to new fields of enquiry in the humanities, that proposed new configurations of disciplines and knowledge, that changed how we conventionally receive fields and disciplines, or posed important new questions within these arenas.

Against these criteria the panel made two awards. The award for the emerging researcher was shared between B. Camminga's *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa*¹⁵ and Dariusz Dziewanski's *Gang Entry and Exit in Cape Town*¹⁶, while the main, open award for established researchers went to Lesley Green for *Rock/Water/Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial Africa*.

The labour: Making excellence

Green's book consists of a series of case studies powered by the conceptual resources of progressive global scholarship which collectively show how the long shadows of inequality, racism and colonialism in South Africa have enabled environmental destruction. It argues that environmental research and governance can help to address the country's history of racial oppression and environmental exploitation by challenging some deeply entrenched antagonisms. As critic John Higgins points out, one of the book's most significant imprints lies in its mode of thinking, where it seeks to establish grounds for engagement between the politics of lived experience and those of an "over-confident and belligerent scientism"¹⁷.

Lesley Green's book has many origins. We narrate one of them here. It is a story of how a university (the University of Cape Town, UCT) created the space for the writing of a scholarly book and how Green took that space.

In 2010 UCT's Research Office was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to promote interdisciplinary research and Africa research collaboration. This was generous funding that was administered through a programme called the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Capacity (PERC). A founder of this programme was Professor Brenda Cooper, a well-published scholar of English Literature who had been based in the African Studies Centre at UCT. Her interest was, and remains, writing and the support of African voices.

In that year Robert Morrell became coordinator of PERC at UCT and set about implementing the vision of the programme. One of the first things he did was to create the position of Associate for the programme, a well-funded position with teaching buy-out. The first PERC Associate selected was Lesley Green.

Green at that time had already demonstrated that she was an outstanding intellectual visionary with a startling ability to raise funding. She had been awarded monies by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to host the Sawyer Seminar series ('Knowledges, Ways of Knowing and the Post-Colonial University') which brought scholars from around the world to Cape Town to develop a set of ideas that would contribute significantly to the launching of Environmental Humanities [with colleagues from political ecology (Frank Matose (Sociology)), ecocriticism (Ian Rijdsdijk (Film Studies) and Hedley Twidle (Literature)) as well as environmental history (Lance van Sittert) and fine art (Virginia MacKenny)]. Over time the project has been built into a space where African and black environmentalism has found a strong voice, not least due to the nuanced integration of lived experience and African ecological thought. This ultimately led to the launching of Environmental Humanities, a funded interdisciplinary institute in the Humanities Faculty. Green's tenure as PERC Associate lasted 2 years (2010–2011) and featured a number of writing retreats, including one in 2011 titled 'Contested Ecologies: Multiple Natures and Democracies in the Global South' which brought together scholars from around the world: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Helen Verran, Mario Blaser, Harry Garuba, Elisio Macamo, Marisol de la Cadena, Laura Rival, Josh Cohen, Christopher Mabeza and Munyaradzi Mawere.

This early work was pioneering in the sense that Green was using both her experience of doing her PhD in the Amazon forests and her theoretical curiosity to draw into South African scholarship new strands of work, mostly European and South American, which were largely outside the ambit of national debate at that time. She steadily built this field – she had outputs – including her 2013 edited collection, *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*.¹⁸ Good books emerge from bigger projects that involve more scholars than the singular author of a big book. These projects in turn draw on shifts, controversies, innovations and breakthroughs in a field or more than one field, even small, subterranean moves. Field- or discipline-building commonly involves conferences, workshops, and other scholarly interactions as well as the publication of essays or papers which test parts of a new set of propositions about a field or discipline.

Green's ability to gather together scholars from around the world was important for the way that, over time, she was able to address

central elements of the ASSAf criteria: how fields and disciplines are constructed. The key was also to pose important new questions within these arenas. It is by recognising the expanse of global scholarship and embracing its scholars (in this instance from the Global South) that major advances can be achieved and new fields such as Environmental Humanities energised. Indeed, the importance of such moves is now recognised in the work of Southern Theory and the geopolitical critique of knowledge-production.¹⁹

Green's journey is also a cautionary tale. This kind of work takes time, often a long time. Funder and university expectation is normally short term. Morrell was expected to demonstrate the success of PERC by referencing outputs. Yearly reports were expected to bulge with achievements, journal articles, conference attendances and so on. A funding cycle of 3 years was considered very generous. As a new audit culture emerged and settled itself in the corridors of university management, the focus on what could be counted in a unit of time (ever smaller) became the *modus operandi*.²⁰

Carnegie's funding was generous and sponsored two more PERC Associates before it came to an end. The second was Professor Sophie Oldfield, a geographer working on issues of the city, housing, planning and belonging with an emphasis on theory and community making in the Global South. Her year-long tenure as PERC Associate was in 2012. During this time her major occupation was a monograph. That monograph will finally emerge this year as *High Stakes, High Hopes: Urban Theory in Partnership*.²¹

Universities and funders are not renowned for their patience. Yet this and scholarly persistence and courage on the part of an author is a key ingredient in the making of scholarly books. The rise of audit culture if anything inhibits creativity and strengthens impatience. Time is counted, money is accounted. Lesley Green's book makes a critical point. When we see things only as objects we become the slaves of a modernist legacy which is with us still, which fosters fakes in the elevation of things over people. Lesley's book highlights the importance of relationships, between people, between people and nature. It calls for a new respect and care for the environment and warns of the dangers of ignoring warnings about imminent crisis and the delicacy of life.

Green's award of the ASSAf prize is an affirmation of the genuine, a triumph of endeavour, commitment, curiosity, and scholarship. As Lesley strode to the stage to accept her award, she had a smile that lit up the room. A laugh deep from within her erupted. If we take delight in Green's triumph, we can also tip our hats to UCT for supporting her work and conclude the cautionary tale that despite the logics of the new audit-culture and funding and resource constraints, it is still possible for universities to support groundbreaking work and in so doing, elevate the genuine above the fake.

Conclusion

We need big scholarly books to safeguard universities from the creep of commercialisation, from the temptations to take shortcuts and from the danger of becoming hollowed-out shells, closer to the fake version than the real one.

On the possibility, and indeed the value, of writing history on the basis of shards, or fragments of evidence, subalternist Sanjay Seth once commented that "we can learn big things from little things"²². We have suggested that if a university provides the ecology that both enables and supports the emergence of a book like *Rock/Water/Life*, with the necessary trial and error, slow and steady theory-testing and discipline-building, this is but one indicator that academic credibility and the academic project is intact at a university. There are similar markers in other reaches of the academy. Collectively these represent a riposte, a rebuke to the idea that the contemporary university, with its managerial and audit cultures and preoccupation with outputs, metrics and rankings, is necessarily built on the foundations of fake academia.

Funders are often critical, and unrecognised, supporters of research but they too are under pressure to deliver outputs. Can they be encouraged to take a longer-term view? Organisations like ASSAf should be lauded for their promotion of the scholarly book. The state and its higher education

agency, the Department of Higher Education and Training, should be supported to reward and encourage the production of the scholarly book. Together, these supports should provide space for scholars to think big and write big. They will need time and, often, administrative and financial support to complete the arduous journey.

Recognising the scholarly book as the pinnacle of research achievement in the humanities is one way of ensuring that universities protect institutional research culture.

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Competing interests

We have no competing interests to declare.

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