This is a repository copy of *Defiance through many means : the urbanities of African universities. A commentary on Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey's 'Defiant scholarship: Dismantling coloniality in contemporary African geographies'.*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/186863/

Version: Published Version

Article:

Simone, A. (2022) Defiance through many means : the urbanities of African universities. A commentary on Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey's 'Defiant scholarship: Dismantling coloniality in contemporary African geographies'. Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, 43 (2). pp. 191-193. ISSN 0129-7619

https://doi.org/10.1111/sjtg.12424

Reuse
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography

Check for updates

doi:10.1111/sjtg.12424

Defiance through many means: The urbanities of African universities. A commentary on Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey's 'Defiant scholarship: Dismantling coloniality in contemporary African geographies'.

AbdouMaliq Simone
Urban Institute, The University of Sheffield, UK

Correspondence: AbdouMaliq Simone (email: a.t.simone@sheffield.ac.uk)

Accepted: 9 November 2021

Daley and Murrey (2022) in this critical intervention, reiterate the importance of African intellectual production as not only a long occluded register and a long-standing missed opportunity, but as acts of defiance. While certain radical political economy threads of African scholarship could in some quarters be seen as crowding out a more heterogenous actual canon, defiance here is not only in response to the positionality of African thought in a global arena but also in terms of what constitutes legitimate institutions and practices of knowledge formation and conveyance.

For African universities, which for long periods of time enjoined the self-defeating game of trying to prove themselves better than their European counterparts as the criteria for being taken seriously, which was largely never forthcoming, the subsequent spiraling down of motivation or, more commonly, contentment with just the capacity to get by rendered universities largely irrelevant to the elaboration of 'real economies' and social innovation on the ground.

Still, the inordinate efforts of many African academics who kept a sharp eye on all kinds of social and political processes underway, who never left for the greener pastures of Western academia, and who produced prolific bodies of work with their students remain a testament to the vision of African academia as a vanguard for social transformation. Particularly important are all of those archivists that painstakingly collected and maintained different kinds of writing, as well as audio-visual productions, many of which were never published or distributed, at least formally. These are witnesses to the often wild, unruly and intensely rhizomatic character of African reflexivity, indifferent to the conventions of empirical legitimation or normative academic niceties.

A critical question would seem to what extent African universities might exemplify an epistemological disobedience in its very institutional foundations, while still appearing as universities and their concomitant function as conveyors of knowledge and guarantors of particular knowledge practices. Where might the university go, and what might it become? These are difficult conditions given the inordinate effort expended in

© 2022 The Author. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* published by Department of Geography, National University of Singapore and John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd.
This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

simply trying to manage minimal levels of functioning, i.e. libraries that enable access to current publications, classrooms equipped with basic audio-visual capacities let alone smart technologies, or the consistency of academic schedules ridden frequently by labour disputes and politically-motivated closures.

While defiant scholarship 'attends to the ways in which coloniality effects forms of distortion, denial, negation, rejection and assassination of decolonial world senses and anti-imperial and anti-racist knowledges and projects for epistemic justice' (Daley & Murrey, 2022: 168) it also valorizes the albeit often ragged, tremulous attempts to stand aside, to risk all kinds of distortions in efforts to shift the terms of the hegemonic academic game. This is what many African universities ended up doing, at least by default. From the late 1970's to the early 1990's Fourah Bay University in Freetown was at the center of militant challenges to the prevailing political order and a context for intense contestation among different visions and points of view, and importantly, where the distinctions between students and non-students, and class backgrounds often fell away in practices that upended any semblance of normative teaching but that continuously experimented with the boundaries of pedagogy, which for some included revolutionary practice. In Khartoum during the 1980's, university classrooms were punctuated by constant jockeying for position among different political tendencies. While departments, dormitories and cafeterias were too frequently balkanized according to specific affiliations, at least there was sufficient co-presence among the student body so that divergent ideas would still have an impact on each other. At the university's theater school, which has an implicit affirmative action policy to include Communists, Baathists, Islamicists, Ansar and Christians from all regions of Sudan, intensive fights in the hostels were converted into conjointly run community theater projects aimed at sensing the 'real' political orientations of different neighbourhoods across the city. During several years of the protracted civil war in Cote d'Ivoire, the university, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, became the bastion of youthful militants, the Young Patriots, supporting Laurent Gbagbo, who problematically turned the university into a kind of mafia organization aimed at enabling the seizure of wealth from an older generation and its redistribution across the low income districts of Adjame Texas, Port Bouet, and Yopougon. The University of Kinshasa for years has functioned as one of the city's largest informal settlements, where if formal teaching has largely ceased, then scores of autonomous collectives intent upon learning proliferate.

None of these stories embody a clear-cut ethically or politically progressive agenda. They are not defiant in terms of the content of curriculum or pedagogical practice. But they do indicate the various ways in which universities have become instantiated in the complicated landscapes of African urban and national politics. While universities such as Makerere are held up as exemplary instances of the ways in which academic departments and researchers are inserted across Uganda as technical advisors to rural collectives, designers of innovative sanitation systems for small towns, training parents as daycare personnel in low income settlements, to designing policy frameworks for local government finance, many African universities have found themselves maintaining porous boundaries, enfolding all kinds of legitimate and nefarious activities.

Organizations like the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, although heavily dependent upon foreign funding, have for decades attempted to pursue not only a Pan-African ethos in terms of curricula and publication, but also in practice, forging multiple opportunities for scholars from different African nations to work closely with each other on common projects; to always experiment with the

terms of what it meant to be African. While many of the key intellectuals Daley and Murrey cite were important members of CODESRIA, it was all of the convocations among young scholars, through national and regional working groups, summer schools and publication projects that continuously worked to circumvent linguistic, ethnic and disciplinary divides to both do what was needed to attain academic credibility *and* foster forms of collaboration and support that would be mobilized over the years to aid a broad range of individual cultural and political projects. Here, import was ceded to the formation of cohorts, of ongoing relationships that could be called upon to support a wide range of challenges to individual universities, multilateral donors and political bodies.

While organizations like CODESRIA usually shied away from discussions of blackness within the regional context, preferring to amplify a *pan* African identity that was united in struggles against imperialism and enduring coloniality, many universities were nevertheless sites of the kinds of intersecting discourses on racialism and black geographies that the authors point to. Far from dismissing the relevance of blackness in African contexts, it was often invoked in the sense of marking particular kinds of distinctions of eligibility, cultural practice, entitlement and social capacity within student bodies, with the proliferation of different vernaculars which may not have explicitly invoked ‘blackness’, but ended up doing ‘its’ work anyway. At the University of Khartoum, for example, blackness both connoted degrees of legitimacy, inexplicable wisdom, denigration, ineligibility and spiritual attainment, all across different, oscillating registers of use and according to different genealogies of the people being referred to. This was coupled to intricate and shifting hierarchies as to who owed deference to whom. In Abidjan, in the frequent pitched battles between university students from (Christian) Port Bouet and neighbouring (Muslim) Koumassi, battle cries incorporated frequent reference to American racial terms of derogation.

On the other hand, for some university students at Chiekh Anta Diop in Dakar or at the University of Douala, blackness was an ‘open field’, something to be engaged and appropriated for the realm of extraordinary endeavors. Perhaps refused at the level of self-attribution, it was nevertheless folded into everyday vernaculars as almost cosmological field of play and striving, a universe of considerations that were beyond the structuring of any political regime or historical moment, and thus generative beyond the available measures of efficacy and judgment. For university students who often needed to fail in order to keep a roof over their heads and ensure two meals a day, for students who worked hard to complete curricula they knew was woefully outdated, for students who always felt behind the rest of the world, blackness was something beyond all of that. Not a limiting condition; not a marker of ontological singularity, but rather as something extraterrestrial, defiant of any terms the earth might offer to ascribe value to their lives.

Reference

Daley PO, Murrey A (2022) Defiant scholarship: dismantling coloniality in contemporary African geographies. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* **43** (2), 159–76.