

DECOLONIZING AFRICAN STUDIES: LOOKING INTO THE GAPs

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This special issue of *Afrika Focus* brings together a selection of keynotes delivered at the international symposia of the Ghent Africa Platform (the so-called GAPSYSMs), as well as a number of the Mandela Lectures organised by the Ghent Africa Platform (GAP) (for an overview, see Table 1).¹ The motivation for compiling these papers was the 10th anniversary of GAP in 2017. The Africa Platform is one of the oldest UGent regional platforms, bringing together all relevant expertise at Ghent University concerning the African continent, and fostering academic collaboration with African universities. In 2017 we also celebrated the 30th anniversary of the scientific journal *Afrika Focus*, which is closely linked to, but predates GAP by more than 20 years. As this special issue aims to give an insight into GAP's scientific activities over the past decade, also the former and current (vice-)presidents of GAP were invited to write an article: respectively Marleen Temmerman & Karel Arnaut and Patrick Van Damme & Johan Lagae, who was replaced by Kristien Michiels in 2018. They were asked to contribute papers in which they reflect on the past 10 years of GAP, departing from their own research interests. In addition, we invited the Congolese photographer Sammy Baloji, who participated in GAPSYSM 4 (*[Un]disciplined encounters*), to develop a visual essay together with Filip De Boeck, making the special issue indeed something special.

At the symbolic 10th GAPSYSM (*Celebrating partnership with Africa*), held in 2016, the South African scholar Premesh Lalu gave a thought-provoking keynote lecture, which opens this special issue. Lalu's keynote is a convincing plea to decolonize African Studies following a new pathway, 'one that will give to Europe an escape from the inheritance of Eurocentrism as it will give to Africa its place in a planetary library' (p.20). When I started my work as guest editor in 2017 by contacting the potential contributors to this special

1 Whereas the academic GAPSYSMs are organised annually on one or two days at Ghent University (with the exception of GAPSYSM 4, which took place in Brussels), the public Mandela Lecture is a yearly evening event. At some of the GAPSYSMs we also had 'Annual Distinguished Lectures on Africa' (ADLAs) and these too were taken into consideration for publication in this special issue.

GAPSYMS (in Ghent, December, unless stated otherwise)

GAPSYM 1 | 2007

Heritage and/as reproduction in Africa. Outcomes and limits

GAPSYM 2 | 2008

Mobilities in Africa – Africa in mobility

GAPSYM3 | 2009

Gendering research in/on Africa

GAPSYM 4 | 2010, Brussels

[un]disciplined encounters: science as terrain of postcolonial interaction between Africa and Europe
— past and future

GAPSYM 5 | 2011

(r)Urban Africa: multidisciplinary approaches to the African city

GAPSYM 6 | 2012

Africa: (post-) development?

GAPSYM 7 | 2013

Africa and Food: challenges, risks and opportunities

GAPSYM 8 | 2014

Colonial memories at present: decolonizing Belgium?

GAPSYM 9 | 2015

Trading places: The role of trade with Africa

GAPSYM 10 | 2016

Celebrating partnership with Africa: Demonstrating the value of international collaboration on teaching and research

GAPSYM 11 | 2017

Health in Africa - an interdisciplinary approach

GAPSYM 12 | 2018 | September

GAP hosts Tropentag 2018

Mandela Lectures (in Ghent, November)

Mandela Lecture 1 | 2014

Lecture by Prof. Brian O'Connell: Global challenges for universities in a North-South context

Mandela Lecture 2 | 2015

Lecture by Prof. Iain Low: Space and transformation. Architecture in an age of radical transformation

Mandela Lecture 3 | 2016

Albie Sachs in conversation with Eva Brems

Mandela Lecture 4 | 2017

Tom Lanoye in conversation with Antjie Krog about the role of Nelson Mandela in South Africa and the world today

Mandela Lecture 5 | 2018

Lecture by Zelda La Grange: Nelson Mandela - the legacy

Table 1: Overview of GAPSYMS and Mandela Lectures.

issue, Lalu's keynote was given to them as an invitation to be self-reflexive about their work when (re-)writing their keynote talk into an article. Yet, Lalu's keynote also provides a good background for reflecting on (the production process of) this special issue, and more generally on GAP's scientific activities in the last 10 years. The following words of Lalu are especially inspirational in this respect: 'In pursuing new relations of research across hemispheres, we may need to rearticulate not only what is absent from our discourse, but rather the latent content that remains stubbornly unseen in what we see' (p.22).

I have been involved in GAP since GAPS₂ (*Mobilities in Africa – Africa in mobility*) in 2008. At that time, I participated with a poster presentation. This first presentation evolved into a lengthy association that has given me quite a good insider perspective. But even so, diving into the GAP archive from the last 10 years to compile this special issue has been particularly enlightening, but of course the intention was not to establish a complete genealogy of GAP. The outcome of my fairly intense efforts to track down keynote speakers and convince them to publish their texts, considering the fact that it was even for them often difficult to retrace their own papers – or sometimes even remember they had even been at a GAP symposium, is well summarized in the table of contents of this special issue. There is much to learn from this table of contents, but also from what is *not* in it, to refer back to Lalu's keynote, both when it comes to the merits and gaps of GAP. In the following I will discuss this in more detail.

If we consider the table of contents, we see that this special issue presents an engaging collection of texts from a wide array of disciplinary fields on topics such as (urban) development, African culture, African diaspora, health care and agriculture. This clearly represents the wide variety of topics GAP has been tackling at its events, and this from very interdisciplinary perspectives. I believe GAP can be proud of having hosted so many interesting and influential scholars over the last ten years, as well as being presided over by a team of committed and prominent academics. We are extremely delighted to have their contributions in this special issue, which is in fact also a book publication, something the special cover reveals. Two of the keynotes are not represented here by their keynote talk as such, but by a review of their work, as they either lacked the time to revise their keynote, or because it had been published already elsewhere.

Some contributors, amongst whom the two authors of the reviews, responded well to my call to keep the decolonisation debate in mind during their writing and did an outstanding job in being self-reflexive about their work and its position within African Studies. Other scholars replied that their research was 'more orientated towards the future', or that their research area 'has never been a colony'. This demonstrates that 'decolonisation' has not yet become a generally understood and well-established concept within the broader field of African Studies, particularly not in certain parts of the world and in certain scientific domains – again stressing the importance of universality and interdisciplinarity when it comes to our attempt to 'decolonize' the field.²

2 An informative reading list on 'decolonisation' can be found here: <https://theconversation.com/want-to-under->

	Authors	Sex author	Nationality author	Research area	Involvement
1	Luce Beeckmans	Female	Belgium	/	Guest editor
2	Premesh Lalu	Male	South Africa	South Africa	Keynote GAPSVM 10
3	Ray Bush	Male	United Kingdom	/	Keynote GAPSVM 6
4	James R. Brennan	Male	USA	Tanzania	Keynote GAPSVM 5
5	Albie Sachs	Male	South Africa	South Africa	Mandela Lecture 3
6	Iain Low	Male	South Africa	South Africa	Mandela Lecture 1
7	Johan Lagae & Jacob Sabakinu	Male	Belgium/ DR Congo	DR Congo	Vice-president GAP
8	Marleen Temmerman	Female	Belgium	Kenya	President GAP
9	Patrick Van Damme	Male	Belgium	/	President GAP, Keynote GAPSVM 9
10	Tesfaalem G. Asfaha <i>et al.</i>	Male	Ethiopia/ Belgium	Ethiopia	Keynote GAPSVM 10
11	Karel Arnaut	Male	Belgium	/	Vice-president GAP, Keynote GAPSVM 4
12	Lye Mudaba Yoka	Male	DR Congo	DR Congo	GAPSVM 4
13	Patrick Mudekereza	Male	DR Congo	DR Congo	GAPSVM 4
14	Sammy Baloji & Filip De Boeck	Male	DR Congo	DR Congo	GAPSVM 4
15	Simon De Nys-Ketels	Male	Belgium	/	Keynote GAPSVM 11
16	Gillian Matthys	Female	Belgium	DR Congo	Keynote GAPSVM 8

/ = no single country focus

Table 2: Interpreting this special issue of Afrika Focus.

It is precisely within this decolonizing spirit that there must be some room for critical remarks, even in this anniversary issue (for an overview, see Table 2). Firstly, it becomes very clear from the table of contents that women are severely underrepresented in this special issue. Out of 16 contributions, only 3 stem from a female author, namely this editorial, one of the reviews and the article from the former GAP president Marleen Temmerman. Indeed, looking back at all the GAPSVM programmes, GAP has had almost no female keynotes over the last 10 years. To complicate the matter even further, I could not find anyone from GAPSVM 3 (*Gendering research in/on Africa*) available to contribute to this issue. Considering the fact that a significant number of women are active within African Studies, I believe it is our task, if we ever want to break the glass ceiling in academia, to more actively engage them, this includes as keynote speakers on our GAPSVMs or as Mandela Lecturers.

Secondly, half of the contributors to this special issue are African. This in itself is an accomplishment, considering the fact that it was particularly difficult to retrace the African keynotes of the GAPSVMs: their email-addresses no longer functioned or they could

stand-the-decolonisation-debate-heres-your-reading-list-51279. A (non-exhaustive) list of interesting African-authored academic studies on Africa can be consulted here: <http://democracyin africa.org/decolonising-the-university-the-african-politics-reading-list/>

not be found on the web. Sometimes I lost track of them after an initial contact and felt compelled to use my network to bring them back into the project (mostly via *old school* telephone contact). My endeavours were, however, not always very fruitful. In order to have enough African voices included in this issue – which is the essence of what ‘decolonisation’ truly heralds – I decided to contact a number of African participants to the GAPSYMs who were not keynotes as such (especially those working in the cultural sphere, a prime area of African empowerment). Yet, compared to how easy it was to get in touch with the non-African keynotes, I can only conclude that there is still a sharp divide to overcome in terms of researchers’ visibility and approachability. Moreover, it is important to note that in this special issue we have contributions from African scholars from only three (out of 54) African countries: Ethiopia, DR Congo (a former Belgian colony, hence a strong post-colonial link) and South Africa (a country with a specific status within the continent also on an academic level). Hence, GAP is reaching only a very small range of nationalities, and the ones that we reach are very dependent on personal networks of the members of the board of GAP. Consequently, in some ways decolonization still has to start and certainly when it comes to involving scholars from Africa at our symposia and in our publications. More than ever, certainly in terms of accessibility, it seems time to finally put our ideas into practice and organize a GAPSYM on African soil. Meanwhile, more funding to cover travel costs for Africans to come to Ghent is necessary, as well as more encouragement and guidance for Africans to publish in *Afrika Focus*, taking into consideration the uneven access to academic resources.

Thirdly, the African countries or regions on which the articles, apart from the more general ones, focus, seem fairly representative of the areas where UGent researchers, and so GAP, are working: East Africa, with a prime focus on Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania; Central Africa with a prime focus on DR Congo; and South Africa, hence only five countries. It is difficult therefore not to notice that West Africa is completely missing from this special issue. More generally, I observed that French contributions are rare at the GAP symposia, with the possible exception of the successful special edition of GAPSYM 4 in Brussels. This is another working point, as French speaking areas in Africa seem doubly neglected in the Anglo-Saxon and Euro-American dominated academic world. Precisely because of this, and perhaps as opposed to current developments in academia, I would make a plea to keep the journal of *Afrika Focus* bilingual in the future, and possibly also add a French website for the submission of papers.

It is of course not entirely clear to what extent the above observations are representative for all the GAPSYMs and Mandela Lectures, let alone for the entire functioning of GAP or the complete *Afrika Focus* archive from the last 30 years – this was not the objective of my exercise. Yet, it is obvious that there is still much work ahead of us to ‘decolonize African Studies’, even within our own platform – even though it has always been the prime mission of GAP to criticize stubborn and longstanding stereotypes about the African continent. I strongly believe that some of the articles in this special issue will elicit a deeper sense of awareness in that sense. Moreover, I hope that my recommendations will be an inspiration to draw from in the future while rethinking GAP. It is only by continuously

questioning the ways ‘we define, distribute, and also deny, knowledge’ through our own research, that we will be able to break with the legacies of exclusion and oppression (instead of reinforcing them often unconsciously).³ It is also only in this way that ‘decolonisation’ will not become another façade for continuing what we already have been doing for decades, for instance within the framework of development cooperation (instead of fully-fledged international collaboration on equal grounds and without paternalistic motives). Ultimately, the fundamental question ‘For whom do we research Africa and for what purpose?’ always deserves legitimate answers.⁴

By now it has become evident that this is not a special issue replete in self-praise, which is well reflected in the title ‘Decolonizing African Studies: celebrating and rethinking 10 years of GAP’. Indeed, self-glorification has never been the spirit of GAP. Rather it is one of critical (self)-reflection with the aim of (scientific) betterment.

Finally, this is also the place to sincerely thank everyone who has, in one way or another, contributed to GAP in the past and those who will in the future. In particular we have to thank the GAP coordinators Annelies Verdoolaege and Dominique Godfroid. GAP would simply not exist without their driving force. In fact, as has often been the case during the GAP events, these two (female) persons are quite invisible in this special issue. Also here we might seek to decolonise the minds a little more, in particular because their commitment is far-reaching and transformative. An example of their behind-the-scenes engagement is their well appreciated involvement in the International Students Conference organised at Ghent University in November 2018. It is at this kind of occasion that we can see a new generation of self-confident Africans who, perhaps steered by the #RhodesMustFall campaign in South Africa, will no longer tolerate the structural inequalities deeply embedded in the academic system, and in the production of knowledge more generally, both in Africa and in the West. A special thanks furthermore goes to David Chan for tirelessly proof-reading our texts over the last decade and to Filip Erkens for taking care of the lay-out and design of our journal.

Thanks to all of you and please enjoy this very special edition of Afrika Focus.

3 For some interesting (academic) initiatives in that sense, see: ‘Decolonizing the Academy Conference’, University of Edinburgh, Centre of African Studies & Global Development Academy, 2016; The Conference ‘African Mobilities – Reshaping narratives and practices of circulation and exchange’, The Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden, 19-21 September 2018; the call for paper proposals on ‘decolonizing curricula’ for the African Studies Association Conference, forthcoming in November 2018; the call for papers ‘Decolonizing the Academy’ for the special issue of *Critical African Studies* (forthcoming); the recently published special issue ‘Decolonizing African Studies’, *African Studies Review*, vol. 61 no. 3, September 2018, pp. 1-7.

4 The two citations in this paragraph are derived from the conference abstract of the ‘Decolonizing the Academy Conference’, University of Edinburgh, Centre of African Studies & Global Development Academy, 2016: <http://imaf.cnrs.fr/LMG/pdf/decolonizing-the-academy-2016-call-for-papers2.pdf>.